



DEPRAVED

*TRAPPED BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH, JUSTICE AND REVENGE,
WHILE A BEAUTIFUL MURDERER LURKS.*

WOODY P. SNOW

DEPRAVED

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ISBN:978-1-9422428-05-3

Cover and interior design by Kelsey Rice

To Jackie Johnson, for her patience and support
throughout the whole thing.



“Many research articles have been written about whether patients in a coma hear people talking to them. According to studies, hearing is the last sense to go when a patient becomes unconscious. Other studies have found that after regaining consciousness, some patients report that they heard and understood various conversations that took place while they were in a coma.”

—LYNN HEIDERMAN, JOHNS HOPKINS HOSPITAL IN *The Baltimore Sun*
MARCH 18, 2010



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Pen-L Publishing
Fayetteville, AR
Pen-L.com

PART ONE

“We experience a dream as real because it is real.”

WILLIAM C. DEMENT



ONE

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

Finley Bliss, in the forty-two-year story of his life, had never developed the knack for reading ahead, so he had no clue that his evening was already planned by someone who wanted him dead.

6:10 p.m.

He grunted his 230 pounds out of the car before the garage door touched the floor. Standing there, he glanced over at his father's mangled '72 Harley before walking into the kitchen.

His wife was out of town, and his bull terrier was at the vet. He would be eating supper alone.

A yellow stick-it note on the refrigerator informed him there was a delicious meat loaf inside. He knew this could not be true. A meat loaf would be in there, no doubt, but unless she brought it home from a deli somewhere, it would not be delicious.

At the bottom of the note was a P.S. *RB Trio tonight at Canoodles, if you'd rather.*

7:40 p.m.

Finley liked Canoodles, a small place with hardly any room for a band, but they always *had* one, and when the food wasn't very good it was at least pretty good—if you knew better than to order from the menu.

Beneath one of the twenty muted TVs, Finley was enjoying the Richard Brown Trio's version of "Rolling in the Deep" when the waitress brought his order, the evening's special: Southwestern prawns pan seared with orange cilantro, asparagus on the side.

The table just in front of his was vacant. It wouldn't stay that way, he knew, but he noted his luck in having an unobstructed view of Richard Brown himself, streaming his talent through the gleaming tenor sax.

He slipped the silverware from a blue cloth napkin and cut a tip from one of the five huge prawns. With closed eyes, he savored the flavor and thought about Eva—something disturbing from the night before. They didn't have sex. They always made love on the night before one of her business trips, but not last night. He'd given her all the signals but . . . nothing. In fact, the last time she had granted that golden honor had been three weeks ago in the hot tub after two bottles of his 2002 Contador Red Rioja, and she had teased him about being afraid to try a threesome. Then, this morning, as she was getting in her car to catch her flight to Little Rock, she had said something about finding the perfect girl.

These thoughts took all of twenty seconds and then were interrupted by a deep voice. He opened his eyes.

A huge middle-aged bald man was snarling and shaking a breadstick in the face of a young Asian girl who was, Finley guessed, about thirty. The man's muscles bulged under his black T-shirt as he brandished the breadstick and decreed, "You're going to do it because *that* was our deal."

The girl was not pretty. She was stunningly beautiful—almost in a class with his wife. As Finley focused on her face, he saw tears in her eyes and barely heard her response: "But I cannot."

The bald man, probably mid-forties, said, "We're talking about the law of reciprocity here, honey."

"I do not know of this law," the girl said.

"I give to you, you give to me, yeah? That's how that law works." He took a bite of the bread stick and started to rise. "Do you want to see your mother again or not?"

Tears slid down her face. She snuffled, "Yes, I am grateful for you to bring me to America, but . . . but I *cannot*."

"Yes, you can." He stood and started to leave, then twisted back. "Order me a Labatt Blue, yeah? I got to piss like a moose."

Finley watched him step into the flow of the room and burrow slowly through the crowd, forcing Finley's head to swivel some fifty degrees before the man disappeared behind a partition. "What a jerk," Finley said aloud, then looked back to check on the girl, who was no longer there.

This seemed impossible. Vanished within twenty-five seconds? He tried to scan the room, but his waitress stepped in the way with a glass of white wine.

"What's this?" he asked.

She placed a napkin on the table, the goblet on top.

"A lady at the bar wanted to buy her favorite dentist a drink."

His head drew back.

"What lady?"

"I don't know. John, the bartender, told me to tell you."

"What happened to the couple that was seated there?" He pointed to the empty table.

"They took off fifteen minutes ago," she said. "Left a nice tip too. Hint, hint."

"No, no—just a *minute* ago. A big bald guy and an Asian girl with broken English?"

She shook her head.

"It was *just* a minute ago," Finley pressed. "He got up and she . . ." He looked around the room again, then back to the table. A half-eaten breadstick was there. "Ah-ha!"

"I didn't seat them, so I didn't see them. Everything taste alright?"

"How could you not have seen them? Big bald guy . . . *big . . . bald . . .* with *breadsticks* and an Oriental girl with *tears* in her eyes?"

The waitress, who seemed to be processing this description, finally said, "'Breadsticks and Teardrops'—I like that. Good album title. 'Breadsticks and Teardrops.'" She wrote it on the back of her tab pad. "I like that a lot."

Finley rolled his eyes. She shrugged.

"Maybe they seated themselves and decided they didn't like the place."

"Did anyone order a Labatt Blue?"

She shook her head.

"That's a beer, right? We don't carry it." She turned away to resume her demanding Friday night duties.

Whatever appetite Finley had walked in with was gone, suppressed by the upsetting disturbance. He forced another bite into his mouth, but couldn't enjoy it. That man, the bald ruffian, had been so threatening, and she, the beautiful damsel in distress, had seemed so defenseless.

They were total strangers and none of his business; he knew that, but found himself prickled with worry. He slapped two twenties on the table, then rose to push his way through the crowd and out into the night.

8:13 p.m.

It was dark. The pole lamps beamed down into pools of light as he plodded across the pavement toward the back of the building.

Replaying the scene in his mind, he raised his fob and pressed a button. His car chirped, and then he heard something else. He stopped. A soft whimpering sound. For some reason, it made him think of a wounded rabbit, even though he could not remember ever having seen or heard one.

He looked around, saw nothing, opened his car door, and then there it was again. A whimper coming from behind. For a brief but too long a moment, he had a sickening vision of that wounded rabbit stuck under the arch molding above one of his back tires. He inched toward the rear of the car.

The soft mewling swelled into mournful sobbing, and then he recognized her immediately—the Asian girl from inside, crumpled on the blacktop behind his car like a dumped puppy. *Good Lord!* Finley, reaching for a handkerchief, knelt beside her.

"Hey," he said. "You okay? What happened?"

Tear tracks gleamed on her cheeks as she appraised him through eyes like black coffee.

"Are you to put me in the prison now?"

Had he heard her right?

"Prison? No, no," he assured her. "Why would you ask that?"

She sighed with a shudder.

"I'm a nice guy," Finley said. "Maybe I can help. Talk to me."

The girl wiped her eyes.

"I have no able to be responsible. My passport and my money and my clothes—my sponsor, he take them from me and say that police will arrest me."

Finley flinched with incredulity.

"That's not true! Here, let me help you up."

He offered his arm. She hesitated, then took his wrist. They rose together from the pavement.

"If I am in the prison, I cannot arrive to my mother," she said, the weeping starting again.

"Where does she live? I'll give you a ride," he offered, trying to sound cheerful. "I'd be happy to."

He wasn't prepared for her answer, but then he was Finley Bliss—a guy who learned long ago that, outside his own methodical disciplines, he was never prepared for anything.

"You would ride me to the California?" she asked, a ray of hope flickering in her eyes.

There is a California, Missouri, but he knew she didn't mean that one. He shook his head. "No, I can't drive you to California. I'm sorry. But we can call someone. Who should we call?" He guided her toward the passenger door and pulled his iPhone from its holster. The sight of the phone seemed to heighten her anxiety.

"I have nobody in your country except for my mother in the California, and now I have not a passport or money or clothes, and you will be calling the police to—"

"No, I'm *not*," he said. "The police wouldn't arrest you if I did call them, which I am *not*." He opened the door. "Here, get in. Go ahead. It's all right. We'll figure something out." He slipped his iPhone back into its holster, clipped just below his fat belly.

She allowed him to seat her. Finley secured her door, then crossed in front of the car so she could see that he was not sneaking a call to the police. He slid in with an encouraging smile, or what he hoped would pass for one. The word *forlorn* popped into his brain. *The poor girl.*

"You don't know anybody in Grand Bluff?"

She wrinkled her brow.

"Gland Bruff?"

"This town. Grand Bluff, Missouri."

She stared.

"Okay, well, let's . . . let's just drive." He started the car. "We'll talk. We'll figure this out. We'll figure something out."

As he pulled out onto Truman Avenue, the girl coiled herself and raised her feet, knees to chin, drawing her skirt high, revealing a thigh that flashed under the passing lights. Finley tried to keep his eyes on the road as he listened to her story.

"On the internet," she told him, "we write for one year maybe. He was very kind in his email for me to fall in love with him and—"

Hold it right there. "Wait," Finley said softly. "You fell in love with that guy on the internet?"

She shrugged.

"I love him for bring me to America for my mother, who is here for five years. In my country, I have no money and no family. He say he sponsor me, and it cost many U.S. dollars, and now I must get married to him but . . ." She looked around as if searching for the right words while Finley sneaked a glimpse of her thigh then bit his lip with guilt. "I think this is not right to do for me."

"Of course it's not," Finley agreed. "Did you even think of asking for his picture first? That would have stopped you."

"We exchanged photos. He had a gentle face."

"Whoa, whoa," Finley interrupted again. "A gentle *face*?"

"And I had big need to go so . . ." She shrugged like the rest was history.

He shook his head, unable to comprehend how anybody could trust the face of what had looked to him to be a white-skinned, bald gorilla.

"He is not a bad man," she explained. "He is just angry for the love he has that I wish not to marry."

"Not a bad man?" He couldn't believe this. "Not a bad man? He stole all your things *and* your identity. He abandoned you in a parking lot in the middle of a strange country, and you say he's not a bad man?" He smacked the steering wheel. "With all due respect, I think you misread that guy. He *is* a bad man. Here in America, he's what we call a thug."

The girl furrowed her brow and turned away.

Finley thought he had offended her, or that she was worried she had offended him. He wasn't sure, but here he was cruising Truman with an exotic babe—something he'd have traded ten years of his life for in high school or even in college. These days, he was overweight and had a bad comb-over.

He thought about his school days a lot since he had become a millionaire and sometimes wished that all those people who never gave him a second look back then could see him now.

Well, not exactly now. He was clueless now. What was he going to do with this girl? It would be the police who could be the most helpful in a situation like this, but she was terrified of that idea, and he'd already given his word that he wouldn't call them.

"So, here you are with nothing," he said, "and no place to go, and you're in my car, and I can't take you to *my* house. That wouldn't look right." He shook his head. "What am I going to do with you?"

She glanced at him, but remained quiet.

He drove through the streets of Grand Bluff as though he might spot a building with a neon sign flashing "ABANDONED REFUGEE CENTER, WEeping WOMEN WELCOME." No such luck. His mind grappled and clawed, but came up empty. It would be fine now if that smart-aleck inner voice of his wanted to spout off. *Hello, little bigmouth inside? You got anything?* Nothing. Either sleeping or hiding. She broke the silence.

"You are very kind man."

He looked over. It took an effort to keep his eyes on hers. His wanted to fly south for another taste of those thighs, but, for whatever faults he carried, Finley Bliss had the discipline of a monastic monk—well, until it came to food, anyway. Or wine. He did have a weakness for fine wine. One of the pitfalls of sudden wealth.

"I guess I could buy you a motel room," he said.

Gratitude seemed to illuminate her face. She looked at him with what he construed to be not adoration exactly, but the kind of appreciation that a knight in shining armor might garner from a lady like Guinevere. He, fat and balding Finley Bliss, might on this night be a beautiful damsel's hero.

He peeled his eyes away and fixed them back on the road to mull over the motel idea.

"No, that wouldn't look right either, and what would you do in the morning? You'd be in the same situation you're in tonight. New day—same way. I wish my wife were here."

"I cannot hear you," she said.

"Oh. Sorry," he apologized. "I said I wish my *wife* were here. My wife, Eva. She's very good at crisis management."

The girl didn't seem to understand.

"My wife," he elaborated. "Her name is Eva, and if she were here she would know what to do. It's her specialty. It's how she makes her living. She tells people how to handle crisis situations."

The girl struggled to repeat the words, "Cri-sus manj . . ."

"Cri-sis *manage-ment*," he broke it down slowly. "Never mind."

She gazed through the windshield for a few seconds, then asked bluntly, "What *would* she do?"

And what would his father do? he wondered, as Finley often did in the crosshairs of a dilemma. His dad had been big on keeping focused on the goal and working through life's challenges on one's own. "That's the only way to get the prize," he had lectured. "Keep your eyes on the prize. Set your goal, and do what it takes." The prize, Joe Bliss had told his son, was a satisfied mind. Finley had gradually learned that this was not as simple as it sounded.

"But the braces tear up my mouth, and food is always getting stuck in my teeth that people can see when I don't even know it's there," he had lamented to his father. "There's got to be a better way, Dad."

"Oh, there always is," his father had said. "There's always a better way. Are you interested in dentistry?"

He wasn't. Then he was. And that's when Finley set his course, although he'd been thinking, since his invention, that he should have stayed that course another three years to become an orthodontist.

He wished now that he *had* a course to set because his mind, with this situation—the dumped damsel in his car with nowhere to go—was not satisfied. His mind tonight was troubled. What would his father do? He would take her home. Of course he would.

9:50 p.m.

Nervously, Finley entered his kitchen and listened for his bull terrier, then remembered the dog was at the vet for neutering. It would be just him and the girl: a confounding situation.

He swept into the living room to close the drapes as tightly as possible so that no sliver of the outside could edge through. He wasn't doing anything wrong, but this was nobody's business but his and hers, whoever she was.

"What would Eva do?" she had asked. This is what she'd do. This is what anybody would do. Anybody with a heart. *What else is there to do?* he wanted to yell. *We're not barbarians.*

He looked around, checking the room for . . . for . . . what, he didn't know, then stepped back into the kitchen to open the door to the garage.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside.

The ceiling lights made her tawny skin seem to glow. He knew that many a woman's beauty diminished in a glare, but hers prevailed. He stared at her with no clue what to do next. *I'm an adult, and I'm an American, and I'm a good Samaritan. Why am I so nervous? You find a puppy with a broken leg, and you do what you can. What good American Samaritan wouldn't?*

"This is most beautiful home," the girl said.

"Thank you," he tried to say, but had to clear his throat to be understood. "Yes, I've been very fortunate."

He studied her. She had that kind of heart-tugging beauty, like a kitten in the rain—so cute, but so sad. There was awkward silence as he wondered, *What next? What next? What now?*

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She grappled for an answer as she gazed at the wonders of the modern kitchen—the glossy black floor tiles that bordered the hardwood, the smooth countertops, the sleek range hood, the under-cabinet lighting.

"I am too dirty for to sit in your house."

"No, you're not," he said but then realized that being a lady she might have a code of standards that a male guest would let slide. "Okay," he said, "hold on. Let me think."

"These clothes I have on for seven days," she said.

"My God," Finley granted, "you want a bath then, and something to wear. Follow me." The situation was getting worse. What was he doing?

She followed him up to the master bedroom, seemingly flabbergasted every step of the way, which made Finley feel blessed to be living in America. Did he deserve a house like this when half the world's population lived on less than two dollars a day and all of those, *all* of them, with horrible dental problems? He wondered about the status of his invention. Surely he would hear something any day.

In the bathroom, he took Eva's robe from the hook on the door and held it up.

"Put this on when you're done," he instructed slowly and for some reason loudly. "Then we'll find something for you to wear, and I'll make you something to eat."

"When I am . . . *done*?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "You know, when you are finished with . . ." He supposed she had no idea of what kind of facility she was in. He'd have to show her. He slid open the glass door to the combination Jacuzzi tub and shower and turned on the water. She jumped back, startled. Finley toggled the lever to the shower position and the spray sizzled down.

"You stand under that water," he said, "and get clean. You know, *wash*? Then turn it off." He showed her how, then turned it back on. "See? On. Off."

She smiled, seemingly amazed.

"Then come back downstairs," he pointed down, "and we'll *eat*." He raised his eyebrows to ask if she understood.

She nodded.

9:55 p.m.

In the kitchen, alone for the first time since he entered Canoodles, Finley's mind raced around his skull with a searchlight looking for something, *anything*, that might reveal a sign for what to do with this poor girl in his house. Would she be spending the night? Could he let her do that? Of course he could. That's why she was here. There was nowhere else to go. Not without calling the authorities, which he *would*

do in the morning, and she would just have to get over it and learn that in this country the police are not the enemy, unlike in her homeland of . . . wherever it was, where they didn't have modern showers. He would have to ask.

Food. She needs food. He opened the refrigerator door, and there it was—the meat loaf that had inspired him to leave home for dinner. It was all he had other than some pickles, some cheese, and half a head of browning lettuce. Maybe she'd be hungry enough to appreciate it or at least eat a few bites. He removed the meat loaf on its plate and slid it in the microwave for what, two minutes? That sounded about right. He figured two minutes.

9:58 p.m.

At the sound of the beep, he was engrossed in his predicament to the point of thoughtlessly reaching in for the plate with bare fingers. When the burn registered, he yelped and dropped it. The plate fell to the marble tile and shattered, scattering into countless pieces. The meat loaf plopped into the center of the porcelain shards like a centerpiece of dog poop.

Finley ran his hand under cold tap water for a minute, then grabbed a hand broom and a dustpan from the utility closet. He had just started to clean up the mess when he heard a voice—that little trembling Asian voice.

"You are cleaning?" she asked.

10:00 p.m.

How could she be done already?

"No," he said. "I mean, yes, I had a little . . . uh . . . So, you're done already?" When he looked up to say, *That was fast*, all he could say was, "Whoa!" It wasn't like a Keanu Reeves "whoa." It was more like a "whoa" from the *City Slickers* movie: loud and desperate.

The girl was wearing the robe he had offered upstairs but was apparently unfamiliar with the American custom of tying the belt to pull it closed. She stood there with a strip of her body exposed down the front. Her black hair was wet and pulled back, and she was, as he noted before, strikingly lovely—more so now, clean and wet, glistening in the light.

"I clean for you," she said and knelt beside him, eager for some way to show her gratitude, he supposed.

"No, I got it," Finley said as he scraped the mess into the dustpan. "Nothing to it. You wouldn't have liked it anyway. It *belongs* in the trash, believe me." He talked as he corralled the last bits of porcelain and meat, then rose to take the mess to the trash. "Some people can make meat loaf, and some can't." He turned with a smile. "My wife can't."

She stared. He stared. *Awkward.*

"Why don't we order a pizza?" he finally said. "You like pizza?"

She squealed and clapped her hands.

"I have heard of this," she said, her eyes shining. "You call on the phone and say you want pizza, and then boy bring pizza, yes?"

Finley picked up the cordless from its countertop cradle and nodded. "Sometimes a girl."

He thought he should order something basic, something that a person from any culture would like, so he asked for the garlic chicken and spinach with extra cheese. He hung up, pinched the bridge of his nose, sighed, and then gestured for the homeless girl to follow him back into the living room.

"Could we watch your American television?" she asked excitedly.

He seated himself on the couch and nervously grabbed for the remote while she apparently was waiting for an invitation with a pose that offered full advantage of her face and body.

"Please, sit down," he said. "Sit down, uh" He didn't know her name.

She lowered her body onto the far left couch cushion, then made a quarter turn toward him, the robe slipping open more, revealing more—much too much more.

Finley aimed his eyes at the TV and said, "By the way my name is Finley. What is your name?"

He could feel her gaze on the side of his face. He would have to face her. You can't introduce yourself without looking at the person. He did but kept his eyes at a respectable level.

"I'm Finley." He put his fingertips to his chest. "Finley." He splayed his palms. "And you are?"

She nodded and smiled. To smooth the introduction, he offered her the remote, thinking they would fill time by him teaching her how to use it like he had done with the faucets upstairs. Surprisingly, she snatched it from his hand and said, “My name is Mali.”

It sounded like May-lee, but she corrected him when he tried to repeat it.

“No, *Mali*.”

It still sounded like May-lee, but he nodded and said it was nice to meet her although, in truth, it was not. She made him tense—more than tense—she made him panicky.

She hit the power button and started channel surfing like a pro, like the cable guy when he’s making sure all the channels are up to spec.

Finley was inclined to stare at her. He was just a man, after all, whose glands were properly connected, but prudence, which he’d always had an abundance of, mandated he keep his gaze fixed on the TV channels flashing by. This in itself was maddening, making him even more nervous, so he decided to close his eyes, maybe give his mind a little break. It had been a long day. A *weird* day.

He thought about Eva. He thought about Rammy, his dog. He thought about one of his patients, little Nancy Metzger, and her critical case of malocclusion, her teeth so crooked she could probably make it into the Guinness Book of World Records. Then he slipped into a dream state and found himself talking with actor James Earl Jones, who was trying to explain something. The old black man was pointing and warning him about . . . something. Finley couldn’t grasp it.



TWO

10:41 p.m.

On TV, Jimmy Kimmel had said something funny and Finley's eyes shot open at the sound of laughter. He had drool on his chin. The pizza box sat on the coffee table, but where was the girl? He looked around.

"May-lee?"

"I'm coming," she called from the kitchen. "Can we open the box?"

Finley rubbed his eyes and wiped the slobber from his chin, embarrassed that he had conked out like he had, then leaned forward to open the pizza.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Let's dig in. I'm kind of starving myself."

"The wind of it blows big in my nose," she said.

"How did you pay for this?"

"Girl say you long-time customer and you get her next time. And I think it good idea to bring this wine."

Concentrating on opening the box, Finley had not observed his foreign guest come back into the room. *Wait. Wine? What?* He looked up and was astounded. Not by the two glasses of red wine that she held. He would like to have been consulted on that, but it was all right. It was the fact that she was totally nude.

"My God," he gasped, struggling to look away but failing this time.

With a sparkle in her eye, she inquired, "Is this wine wrong idea?"

He could only nod, his eyes paralyzed by her dazzling rawness.

"Yes," he said forgetting to breathe. "Yes, wrong idea."

Though his eyes were frozen, maybe his neck would still work. He forced it to twist away, to look around and get his bearings. He was still in his own living room. *His* living room. His house. His rules. He would have to be firm with the girl. And he would, he would. He would explain the meaning of propriety as soon as he could settle his nerves a little. He needed a drink. Well, she had just brought him one.

She placed the glasses next to the pizza box, then scampered around the coffee table and plopped onto the couch.

"The air of the pizza is good in my nose," she said, staring at it excitedly.

Finley started feeling guilty about his own hunger. God knows how long this poor girl had gone without food, and here he was worried about appearances, decorum, and trappings like that. *Who cares if the pizza girl saw a strange naked woman in his house? Good Lord. Had she?*

"I hope is okay that I pour wine for you," she said.

Finley wondered about that as he watched her reach for a piece of pizza. Had she gone down to his wine cellar while he catnapped and had that weird dream about James Earl Jones?

"I'm glad you did," he finally said. "Thank you, but how . . . ?"

"I saw bottle, and I think I want to serve you."

"No, you do not have to serve me," he said as he reached for the glass nearest him.

She raised the first slice to her face, studied it, and then chomped down. Finley held his wine up and swirled it for a quick inspection.

"You're a *guest*." He took a small taste and then, because of his anxiety, gulped three swallows. He started to set the glass back on the table but held onto it instead. Maybe if he just started talking it would deflate the tension from the air. She, he noticed, didn't seem to feel that tension. He felt it big time. He was feeling something else too—an unauthorized tingling south of his belt. "I'd have a cigarette with this wine, if I smoked," he said, "but I don't smoke. Never have. Do you smoke?"

Her mouth was full, but she didn't move her head either way. Maybe she hadn't understood the question.

"Probably not," he continued. "Did you know that smoking triggers the accumulation of bacteria in plaque which leads to inflamed gums?" He paused to wonder why he was telling her this, but then rambled on.

"You'd be surprised by how many ways cigarettes are bad for you. People trying to quit say that without a cigarette they don't know what to do with their hands."

Where was this blabber coming from? He took another chug. No way to drink a fine wine, which he thought it was. A very fine wine, in fact. Layers of black cherry and plum, with a hint of vanilla. It was probably one of his bottles of Tommasi Amarone, but wait. No, at the finish . . . there was too much . . . what? Tannin? It was bitter, too acidic.

He glanced at May-lee at the very moment a sliver of mushroom jumped off the pizza, down to her breast. It landed and stuck just above her left nipple. *Oh, God.*

He turned back, looked at his left hand, and continued yammering, his plan for the moment being to fill the thinning air with conversation. Conversation always made things better, didn't it?

"I never knew what they meant until this very moment—the people trying to quit smoking, I mean. Now I don't know what to do with *this* free hand. I guess I could hold a piece of pizza in it, but all of a sudden I'm not so hungry. That's weird, isn't it? I was. Now I'm not. I don't know why. I *should* be hungry, but I'm not, so I can hold my glass of wine in this hand but this other hand . . ."

"It wants to touch me, yes?"

Finley was baffled. He stared, trying not to look at the miscreant mushroom on her breast, took another drink, then looked back at his left hand and said, "No, I was going to say that *this* hand is the one that wears my wedding ring." He held it up. "See?" He wiggled his fingers.

"Yes, I see," she said. "It is beautiful ring."

"Well, it's just a plain band," he said "but, uh . . . well, what it represents—*that's* what is beautiful. Do you understand?"

She smiled like a child who gets his first joke.

"Yes, I understand," she said, then cleaned her front teeth with her tongue.

"Good."

"I understand that *that* hand is wanting to feel me."

"No," he protested, "I'm not like that. Really! You can trust me." He raised his right hand for another gulp of wine, which he thought now was beginning to calm him, or cheer him, or . . . what *was* it doing? He

wasn't sure, but he told her, "You should probably put the robe back on. In this country we, well, *this* would be considered, uh . . . impropriety." *Impropriety? Was that even a word?* "Not a good idea, I mean."

The girl looked crushed.

"You do not like to see the appearance of me?"

"No. I mean, yes. I do. That's not it. The appearance of you is very fine—very, *very* fine. Beautiful." *Did I just tell her she was beautiful?* She was, but it was not like him to say that to a naked stranger in his . . . *Wait, what was that?* Just above her left hip, he spotted a tattoo. A tattoo? Two letters. IP.

"What does the IP stand for?"

"I tell you later," she said. "Right now I ask you . . . which eye thinks I am beautiful?"

"What? Oh. Which eye? Both of them."

"And which nose?"

"Both of them," he said without thinking. "No, wait. What?"

The abandoned-puppy girl was watching her Good Samaritan American knight in shining armor spiral down the brain drain into a puddle of senselessness. She kept it up.

"Which ear?"

"Which *ear* thinks you're beautiful? That's ridiculous," he said, then suddenly found himself laughing uncontrollably and trying to talk at the same time. "All my eyes and noses and ears and . . . *everything* thinks you are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, all right?"

She made a quarter turn, leaned in, reached out and took his left hand in her right. She held it high.

"Everything but . . . not this hand?"

Finley tried to focus on that hand as she pulled its fingertips to her shoulder and then pressed them to her skin. His thought at that moment was to snatch that little pervert of a mushroom from her mammary flesh and toss it back into the box or . . . no, into his mouth. Yeah. Why waste it? He reached for it.

Then he heard the word *no* shouted by that inner voice of his, which now seemed far away—coming from some canyon deep in the ridges of his brain, so muted by distance that whatever it wanted, well, he didn't

care. He knew that voice. He knew it well. He'd heard it all his life, and it was always negative, so tonight it was not welcome to tag along. He was off and running down an exotic, erotic road, on a fun trip to a new land, and he didn't want to stop or be stopped. He couldn't stop. He *had* to cross the border into this new land because that's what a brave and adventurous man would do, and that's how he was feeling now—brave and adventurous—so that's what he did. He trekked into that new land, a savage frontier, lecherous and lawless, where a real man stands tall to get whatever in the Wide World of Sports his dick wants.

Her skin was like nothing he'd ever felt before—soft but firm, hot and vibrating with energy. It was sweet smelling and musky like . . . like apple cider, he thought. With deep breaths he inhaled her red-brown scent into his lungs and savored its power. *I want to taste this cider. I want to jump into the vat.* Then somehow it was like the cider was singing through his veins.

11:07 p.m.

His dignity crushed beneath the forge of lust, the man lunged for the girl but grabbed only air. Nimble as a squirrel, she slipped over the armrest with a shriek of laughter, then turned to bend forward. Teasingly, with impish glee, she taunted him with dangling breasts. Unaware that his eyes were glossed over, Finley whooped and crawled after her.

"Come here you little lost Oriental female vagabond in my house." He jumped up to chase her and knocked both wine glasses over, his empty, hers full, spilling the burgundy onto the carpet. *So what? Big deal.* He didn't care. He *had* to catch her. He had to have this girl in his arms.

She giggled, staying just inches from his reach as he chased her in circles around the room till he knocked over a stained glass lamp near the front door. It hit the entryway marble floor and shattered. They froze while breathing hard and gawked at the lamp shards on the floor.

"Oh no," the girl said. "What is cost of lamp?"

Finley realized it was Eva's Tiffany Golden Lotus Leaf Lamp and regained his wits for three, maybe four seconds—just long enough to say, "Uh-oh. We could be in trouble." As a moment of sobering reflection, if it was one, it passed with his next heartbeat because why cry over spilt

lamps? “I don’t care!” he shouted. “I *love* trouble.” He took advantage of the pause to grab for her, but missed again.

Dang, this girl is zippy! Zippy skippy, bet your bippy she is swift, and now I’m miffed. I gave her a lift as a gift, and she set me adrift. Why am I doing this? Finley had never heard of word hallucinations before. He would never have believed that such a phenomenon was possible, but it was happening to him now. Rhyming words were gushing through his brain like a fountain. *She scampers away, and the chase resumes. The chase resumes, and one assumes that danger lurks throughout the rooms. These silly rhymes keep popping without stopping as I’m hopping after her. Around the living room we race. I chase but can’t keep pace till she leads me to the staircase. I’m right on her tail, but I fail as she scrambles up each step with pep, then halfway to the top she slips. Zippy skippy had a slippy.*

May-lee had faltered just long enough for Finley to grasp one of her ankles and then wriggle up for the full capture.

“Now I’ve got you. Now I’ve got you,” he said.

Laughing, she turned to face him as his hands came down to flank her shoulders, his arms straddling her. A drop of sweat fell from his nose to her upper lip. Seductively, she licked it off.

“Now, you got me,” she said. “What will you do?”

He had no idea.

She grabbed the back of his head and pulled his face down to force his lips onto hers, kissing him tenderly at first but then harder, and then harder. Suddenly it seemed to Finley that their mouths had melded into a single spineless organism, writhing in the ecstasy of eons of male-female fusion. He had the sensation that they had become one—a living creature, a wild animal on a rampage, the only one of its kind that ever lived.

Finley never noticed how she had loosened his clothes and flung them away piece by piece. He was riding the greedy flesh of the passion stallion—the bronco of lust, grabbing and groping and slobbering—until he was naked except for one navy-blue sock and then, bang, it was like his horse got shot out from under him. The kiss was over. The girl had squirmed away and slipped up the stairs and once again was out of reach.

He growled like the starving animal that he was and looked up, straining his vision to find her. *What had happened? Where’d she go?* He

zeroed in on a figure at the top of the stairs—standing there, looking down and seemingly waiting for him as if in a dream. *A dream. That's what this is.* He rubbed his eyes.

"It can't be real," he said out loud. "I'm having a dream, right?"

"Yes, it's a dream," she said in a soft voice.

"It's all okay then," he rationalized. "A man can't help what he does in his dreams."

She nodded.

"You are innocent when you dream," she declared as though it were a quote from the Bible—or maybe from a Tom Waits song.

"And since it's *my* dream, it's over now, right?" Finley asked, his voice weakening, becoming raspy.

"How could I know?" she replied. "Do you want it to be over?"

"I don't know. My brain is . . . is . . ."

"Do you want to make love to me?" she asked, shelving her breasts in the palms of her hands like an offering of sacrificial peaches.

Forbidden fruit, but then . . . he was dreaming, right? So what was the problem?

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"You do what? Say it."

"I want to make love to you."

"Then don't wake up on the stairs, Finley. The bed is better." She beckoned him with curling fingers.

11:38 p.m.

With gleeful grunts they dove onto his iron-post bed and coiled around each other. Picasso would envy their contortions, Finley thought—the way their bodies twirled, like crazed wolverines, thrashing their way up an enchanted mountainside. So alive—so alive and so sensitive. He had never felt anything like it before. Every hair on his body was twerking. Then . . . there it was, from the depths of the planet, a volcano.

He was hurled from the mountaintop to the outer edge of the exosphere where he floated for a moment and then slowly U-turned back down to Earth where he landed—somehow—back in his own bed.

His head bolted up.

11:42 p.m.

He opened his eyes and looked around, trying to get a fix on his world. *What was real? What was dream? What was hallucination?* They seemed jumbled together and wrapped around him like a bed sheet.

"I *am* in my own bed," he said aloud. "What just happened?"

As he scoped out the room, his eyes landed on the Guy Buffet sketch of his wife, hanging on the wall.

"Oh, Eva."

He stared at it until he felt a swarm of octopuses closing in around him. *How weird. Octopuses? Octopi?* He wasn't sure, but he shook them off. Where was the girl? Where was that lost-puppy girl whom he had rescued and fed? *Was it really all a dream?*

No, there she was. May-lee. What was she doing?

She was stooping, reaching for something under the bed. When she straightened up, he saw what looked like a Polaroid camera in her hands. Did they still make those? Where'd it come from? He didn't have a camera under his bed. Not that he knew of. What was going on here? He tried to ask, but discovered he had no voice.

Then he thought he saw her smiling. Then he thought he heard her say, "You're innocent when you dream—you know that song, don't you, Finley?"

He thought maybe he did, but as he tried to recall it the octopi managed to engulf him, and Dr. Finley Bliss fell into unawareness of life on Earth.



THREE

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

10:40 a.m.

Birds chirped, rabbits hopped, and the sun shone down on a beautiful early autumn weekend in Lakewood Heights. Lawnmowers around the neighborhood were joined in unison, a cacophonous drone, for what some thought might be the last cut of the season, but probably not.

At the end of Lakewood Street, a yellow sixteen-foot Penske truck backed into the driveway of 6813, the home of Finley and Eva Bliss. The hubbub disturbed Finley, who, even unconscious, easily identified the noise as a sizable truck, seemingly just below the front window of his bedroom where he lay naked under a sheet on his bed.

Was he dreaming or had he ordered a load of breadsticks to be dumped on his lawn? He wondered about that and then worried that maybe he had ordered too many. A truckload? What would he do with them all?

His eyelids fluttered open. His lips were dry and puffy. His face, his whole head in fact, felt swollen. He tried to focus but something was very, *very* not right. He tried to sit up, but was confounded by a shocking, bizarre surprise. His hands and feet were chained to the bedposts—his Chuck Berry garden gate bed posts, as strong as steel because they *were* steel. How could this be?

Okay. The first thing he had to do was squirm out of the chains. He would shake them free and then . . . *What the heck?* He was in

handcuffs—serious, shiny, heavy-duty handcuffs—the kind you see sometimes flashing from the hip of a police officer. He wrenched and writhed to no avail, then paused to assess his situation.

As unlikely as it was, he had to admit that it seemed as though he was a prisoner chained to his bed with no way to escape. Since that made no sense, logic dictated that there had to be a misunderstanding. Maybe he was misreading the situation and an answer would come any moment. He waited. He waited longer. No answer. “Crap!”

His head fell back to the pillow, and then he felt the arms of something—what was it?—something caressing his body. The octopuses? Some kind of drug is what he suspected, and it was gathering him—not just his body, but his mind and maybe his soul—pulling him back into the crease between here, where he was now, and wherever it was he had spent the night. He could feel the touch of what felt like tiny paintbrushes stroking his entire being. His body hairs were dancing again.

It was not an unpleasant feeling, and his eyelids were so heavy he let himself drift off a little, but just a little, not completely. He decided to keep one foot in the now, in the here and now, so that when he regained his strength and clarity of mind he would have a foothold from which to spring for freedom, but for now . . .

Suddenly he was in a museum, looking at framed photos on the wall—not stills, but active pictures like in Harry Potter stories. Photographs of an Asian girl crying in a parking lot behind his car, a meat loaf sliding off a plate held by his own hand, a naked woman in his living room holding wine goblets, and then a picture of himself chasing that woman up the stairs. The last image was of her leading him by the hand across the sky-blue carpet of his own bedroom, Eva’s and his, where he had just left one of his feet.

If he could get out of that museum and back to his own room, he had a foot there waiting, ready to go. Then he could figure out what was going on.

11:17 a.m.

His eyes shot open as he remembered the sex. *A dream. It had to be. But what about the handcuffs and the chains?* These didn’t feel like a

dream, unless he had just floated out of the museum-dream and fallen directly into the shroud of another—one of those dreams tucked inside a larger one. A dream within a dream that felt so real, so real that the metal chafed your wrists and ankles.

Then there were voices.

He bolted up, or rather he tried to. The chains were real, and they were tight. No slack.

“Hello?” he called out. “Hey! Who’s there?”

Silence.

Was panic causing him to hear things? No. He was sure now that he’d been drugged. Somehow. Maybe he was he experiencing sound hallucinations. Maybe not.

“Hello? Hey, who’s down there? I’m upstairs in the master bedroom. I need help. Hello?” Nothing. He tried to yell again, but then fell back into oblivion.

11:35 a.m.

He heard them again. Real voices—those of a man and a woman, muffled, unintelligible. The bedroom door was half open, but it was a big house. To hear them at all meant that someone had to be standing near the bottom of the staircase near the living room phone. Then bumping sounds, like the clamor of furniture being moved.

“I’m Dr. Finley Bliss,” he yelled. “This is my house. Can anyone hear me? I don’t know what’s going on here but . . .”

A disturbing thought struck—the girl. Was she in danger? Was she chained up like he was? Maybe gagged? He shouted, “If you harm that girl I swear to God you’ll, you’ll . . .” *What?*

He shouldn’t have mentioned the girl. Maybe, if that were a burglar down there, the guy didn’t know about her, and now, because of his brazenness, the intruder would start looking for her. If only he could whisk the cobwebs from his head and think clearly. He tried to imagine a mental broom sweeping the trash from his brain, shoving it out through his ear canals, but somehow this effort, as simple as it was, overtaxed him, zapping his mind again back to numbness.

11:47 a.m.

Stairway thumps. He knew the sounds of his house, and someone was coming up those stairs. He stared through the half closed door and held his breath, almost too scared to breathe. *Where's my gun?*

Six months ago, Eva surprised him on his birthday by announcing that his gift would be a new baby. Finley was over the moon with this news because he always thought he would be a good father, like his dad had been. He wanted a family, but had given up after he turned forty, and Eva didn't want to ruin her figure or get stretch marks. But now . . . well, oh my gosh, he was overjoyed.

She laughed and held it out with a ribbon tied around its barrel. He stared at it.

"I don't get it."

"You don't get it?" she asked, like he had to be kidding. "It's a baby Glock. Isn't it cute?"

"It's a gun."

"For when I'm out of town, and you're here alone. Personal protection, so I won't have to worry about you so much."

"Why did you call it a baby?"

"A Glock 26—that's what they call it."

"Oh." He shook his head, disheartened. "I didn't know that."

He had never fired it, and now he didn't even know where it was, but Eva should get a point for that one. Not for the dispiriting gag, but for the personal protection idea. Apparently, she was right, but—

Slowly, an arm pushed open the door, the sound of its bottom edge skimming over the carpet like a distant waterfall. A head appeared. A big, bald, ugly head, eyes peering around the doorframe, followed by a big, flat nose and a hair-rimmed mouth that said, "Hello, Dr. Bliss. Remember me?"



FOUR

11:48 a.m.

Three seconds was all it took to recognize the breadstick bully from the night before and another second to conclude that he, Finley, was in deep kimchee. Astonishment, then fear, then nausea surged in divergent torrents through his body, then flowed together into his gut.

Like a neighbor stopping by to check on a garage sale, the man looked around the room and asked, “How’s it going so far?”

Finley’s mind churned for an answer, something shrewd and powerful to knock the guy off his feet, but he was flummoxed. *How’s it going so far?* He wished he could clack his heels, like Dorothy, since this situation was every bit as bizarre as hers, but she had been in the Land of Oz, not one of the circles of hell. And his ankles were chained, spread eagle.

The man stepped into the room with a smile stretched across the hole in his beard.

“Did you get the wine we sent you last night at that place?”

Finley stared for a panicky moment, then mustered the courage to ask, “Why are you in my house?”

The man looked like he wanted to explain, but Finley popped off another question.

“What kind of man dumps a helpless girl on the street and steals her only possessions?”

“Really?” The man shook his head. “Is that what she told you?”

Finley wanted to tear into the Neanderthal with a verbal assault that would bring the thug to his knees. That's what he wanted to do. That's what he *should* do, of course. Let that guy know what was what in this house. And that's what he would have done too, but somehow the very next thump of his heart squashed his courage. He couldn't speak. He could only gawk.

"First of all, she ain't no friggin' immigrant," the man said. He turned his boulder of a head and called, "Honey? Honey, come in here, would ya?"

After an interminable ten seconds, she was there—the Asian girl—alive and well, healthy, wearing jeans and a gray Springfield Cardinals T-shirt. Finley couldn't have been more shocked if she'd put a Taser to his head. She tossed him a lackadaisical smile, then turned with a look of disapproval to her . . . whatever-he-was.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Just checking on our host," Mr. Bald-thug said. "Did you tell him that I stole your stuff?"

She sighed and fingered some black hair strands aside.

"It's none of your business what I told him."

The man glared at Finley.

"And second of all, *doctor*," he snarled, "*she* is my *wife*!" He turned to embrace the girl, May-lee, or whatever her name was, but she pulled away.

"Oh, come on, honey," Bald-thug said. "Give daddy some sugar."

"We've got work to do," she said.

"Wait a second here," he said. "Hold the phone." He scowled at Finley, then back at the girl, and then scratched his hairy chiny-chin-chin. "You know, doctor, that being an older man with a hot young wife—that can make a guy feel jealous sometimes." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure if what I'm feeling here is piddly insecurity or spot-on gut instinct, yeah?"

"Come on, would ya?" the girl said, getting perturbed.

His eyes stayed on Finley, and his voice got guttural.

"If I ever found out that you tried to put the moves on my wife, I'd have to kill you, doctor. You know that, yeah?"

Finley wanted to declare his innocence but surmised that anything he said, anything at all, would sound like guilt. And surely he did *have* some guilt, which could get him killed here. He just stared back.

"Well," the bully drilled. "Did you? Did you hit on my wife?" He was waiting for an answer.

Finley wondered: would the man strangle him or beat his brains out or shoot him? How would it happen? He cleared his throat and searched for his voice.

"Why don't you ask her?"

Mr. Bald-thug's scowl turned into another smile.

"Because," he said, "she's a liar." Then he laughed.

May-lee rolled her eyes.

"I fucked him, you big dope. You know I did. I literally fucked his brains out, okay? Now can we *please* get back to work?"

Finley's eyes closed with disbelief. He tried to swallow, but couldn't. His mouth was parched. He waited. Nothing happened. His eyes reopened.

"Well, doctor," Mr. Bald-thug said, "it's a good thing for you that she is a liar, eh?" And again he laughed, sounding like an apneic struggling for air.

For a monster, Finley thought, the guy was quite the laughter. It was crazy, absolutely crazy. He didn't know—he couldn't know—there was no way for him to know—that the real craziness hadn't even started. He was encouraged, though, by signs that his death was not imminent, at least for the moment, and so . . . why shouldn't he ask the big question: What in God's name was going on?

"Could one of you tell me, please, what's happening here?"

The Asian girl answered.

"Relax, Finley. We're just taking your shit. That is, if I can get this Canook back to work."

It dawned on him that this poor little foreign girl, who could barely speak English last night, didn't even have an accent now. Well, she did, but it was a small one, like somebody from Minnesota maybe. She ducked back out the door.

The big Canook, whatever that was, looked at him apologetically.

"You're a dentist. We're burglars." He shrugged. "Thank God we all got jobs, eh?" He pursed his lips and looked around, impressed. "I guess having a dentist's diploma is like having a license to steal, eh?"

Finley got an idea.

"You'd be amazed how much I rake in," he said. "To tell you the truth, I've got enough to make you and your wife comfortable for the rest of your lives without you having to lift a finger." He saw that he had the man's attention. *Good*. "Now think about this," Finley coaxed. "The longer you stay in my house, the more likely it is that something will go wrong. Right?"

"Like what?"

"You tell me. My dog starts to howl. The neighbors get suspicious. A police cruiser decides to stop by. I don't know. It's *your* line of work. Don't you think of these things?"

He was thinking of them now. Advantage, Finley.

"Why don't we get in the car, yours or mine, it doesn't matter, and go down to the bank. I'll withdraw an amount that you think would match the value of the stuff you're having to load up here, and you're on your way—no muss, no fuss, no heavy lifting."

Bald-thug seemed intrigued. He nodded.

"Sweet." He imagined it for a few seconds, then shook it off. "I'm not as dumb as I look, doc. Your dog ain't gonna howl."

"Now wait," Finley said. "If my plan isn't better than yours, you tell me why."

"I'll see what my partner thinks," Bald-thug said, then raised his finger to point. "Who's that?" He was looking at the Guy Buffet portrait of Eva on the wall. "That your wife?"

"Yes," Finley said, then paused. "Excuse me. You just called that Asian girl your *partner*."

"Yeah. She's actually the one who worked out the plan."

"Your wife, you mean?"

"Oh, yeah, my wife." He winked. "Yeah. And your wife will be back on Sunday, yeah?"

Now how would he know that? How could he possibly know that?

The girl reappeared, obviously aggravated.

"Are you in on this or not?"

Bald-thug didn't respond, his eyes stuck on Eva's image hanging on the wall.

"If she's anything like that drawing there, she's very beautiful."

"Thanks," Finley said.

"What do you think of *my* wife?"

Finley thought for a second.

"She's a liar?"

Bald-thug laughed again, then turned to May-lee and said, "Honey, the dentist here has got a plan to make this whole thing easier on all of us."

She rolled her eyes, but answered carefully.

"I don't think we should start improvising now, do you? The plan is working, isn't it? We'd better stick to it, don't you think?"

The man shrugged.

"You're probably right."

"Thank you," she said and then reached up, put her hands on the man's shoulders, and physically turned him around to shove him out the door.

"Wait," Finley said. "Sir, how did you know my wife would be home Sunday—tomorrow?"

The man turned his head back around.

"You told her. She told me."

Had he told her that? He remembered telling her in the car that he wished his wife were here, but he hadn't said a thing about when she'd *be* here, home. He was pretty sure he hadn't.

"No, I did *not* tell her that."

Now May-lee's head spun around.

"You just don't remember," she said. "It's the jugo, still playing tricks on your brain." She pushed her accomplice out the door and closed it behind them.



FIVE

12:03 p.m.

Finley studied his chains. They were new ones, general purpose, from Home Depot maybe—straight link coil chain, the links about one-and-a-quarter inch by a third, and each chain about four feet long—the kind of chain a less enlightened dog owner might use to tether some poor animal to a doghouse. Finley hated doghouses. A dog's place was with the rest of the family. The chains were locked around the bedposts with stainless steel link connectors.

All his life, the feeling Finley hated most was of being ineffectual. Here that feeling was. He was shackled with two sets of handcuffs that were connected to chains locked around his Chuck Berry iron bedposts that he bought on the internet when the hall of fame rock 'n' roller was remodeling his place in Wentzville, Missouri.

And where does somebody buy handcuffs, anyway? Not at Home Depot, he didn't think. And what was it that fettered his ankles? He could barely see the tips of his toes. Same thing, he guessed, wound around and secured with link connectors or U-bolts. Yeah, probably U-bolts.

And although he knew his efforts would be ineffectual, he could not keep himself from exploding into a fit of rage. He had put this bed together with his own two hands, fashioned its distinctive iron features with his special talents, and by God . . . by God, he would tear it apart if he had to, if he could, maybe, by jerking and thrashing and cursing himself for having been so stupid, falling for that helpless immigrant act. At the time,

of course, he hadn't realized he was being stupid. Or had he? Yeah, he kind of remembered feeling stupid last night, but Good Lord! Hadn't that situation called for the benefit of the doubt? Hadn't that situation called for compassion? He had been compassionate—an American-Samaritan.

He twisted and yanked until again he was exhausted and felt himself fading back into unconsciousness. What did she say the drug was? Hugo? Zugo? Whatever it was, he fought it, but it was still too potent, and it squirmed onto his bed like a huge mamma octopus, surrounding him and sheltering him in her garden. *The Beatles?*

"There, there," the motherly octopus said softly, "you should rest now."

1:17 p.m.

He awoke and focused on the ceiling fan for a sense of orientation, then tried to check his watch. Clank. "Ouch."

It was painful now, and his wrists were showing signs of ecchymosis, black-and-blue coloring, beneath the metal cuffs. *How can I make this not be happening?*

Brump. Brump. Brump. Someone was climbing the stairs. Which one would it be? How would he play it? He held his breath and watched the door.

It opened, and May-lee bolted to his bedside with a panicked face.

"He's going to kill you," she said, a tear mustering in one eye. "He's going to kill you."

Fresh from the octopus's garden, Finley responded by saying, "I need a bathroom break."

"Didn't you hear me?" she whimpered. "He's going to kill you."

"I have to pee."

Her panicked expression turned to one of carnality with a wicked gleam.

"Okay."

"My bladder is about to explode."

She lowered her head to his and began sprinkling hot kisses around his face.

"Let it go, Baby. Come on, let it flow."

"What? Wait. Let me up, for God's sake."

She started singing, “Let your love flow, like a mountain stream. Let your love flow, innocent when you dream, with all living things—”

“Those aren’t the words,” Finley protested.

“Shut up. Kiss me.”

“No,” Finley spat, and turned his head away.

“Kiss and piss,” she cooed. “Chicks dig that, you know. Let it go, Finley.”

Disgusted by the utter vulgarity of the moment, Finley could not flee—not even in his mind—and he wondered if the sheer perversity of such a memory would cause lasting damage to his psyche. The dam broke then, and his personal reservoir drained into the sheet that covered his groin. As the stream tapered off, she raised her head.

“Now *that* was romantic! You liked that, didn’t you? I could tell. It’s so much more exciting when you’re tied up, isn’t it?”

Finley stared incredulously.

“That tattoo on your hip, IP. Insane pervert?”

She shook her head. “Nope.”

“You are insane. You do know that, don’t you?”

Her concerned expression returned.

“It’s not *me* you have to worry about.”

“Where is he?”

“Beer run.”

“He’s not in the house?”

“The thing is, he’s going to kill me too.”

“Unchain me, and he won’t kill anybody.”

She massaged her forehead with her fingertips.

“Last week in Little Rock, I was hitting on this mark in a club, kind of like Canoodles here in Grand Bluff, but they had this photographer taking pictures of couples, you know, to sell them after they got drunk.”

“So?”

“So, somebody has a picture—me and the victim together.” She stared at him. “Don’t you get it?”

“No.”

“I’m a liability!”

Finley struggled for context.

"When you say *victim*—"

"He *killed* the guy. He always does. Can't leave any witnesses."

"May-lee, do you understand that right now we could be running through the woods out back? I've got friends around here. Well, neighbors, anyway."

"He forced me into this. I hate it, but he has total control. He can't be stopped."

"If you'll unlock me, I will show you that he *can* be stopped."

"I probably deserve it," she said, then lowered her head sadly. "But you, you shouldn't have to die for my sins."

Was she the most ridiculous woman on the planet? He was sure that she was, yet he had no choice but to coax her toward rationality if possible.

"Last night was wonderful," she said. "A man who can make love like that has a lucky wife."

"I wasn't making love. I was tripping on drugs, and I know I didn't tell you when she would be back."

"Jugo," she said. "Makes you forget shit."

"What is it?"

She shrugged. "A little ecstasy, Viagra, Valium, a dash of sodium pentothal. I put it in your wine."

"My God," he said, feeling lucky to be alive. "I should have tasted that." Then he remembered. He *did* taste it. He knew there was something off with that wine.

"You're innocent when you dream," she reminded him.

"Listen," he said, "I saw the way your husband looks at you. He's crazy about you, but, just in case, why don't we get out of here, right now, while we can?"

She seemed like this had not occurred to her, which in itself made Finley want to strangle her, but he took a breath, then methodically pushed his case for pragmatism.

"Okay. Here's the thing, May-lee. We can, A, stay here and die or, B, run for our lives." His eyebrows arched. "It's what *normal* people, no wait, let's say *smart* people—you're smart, right? It's what smart people would call a no-brainer." He waited.

She frowned. "He's got the key."

"The key?"

"To the handcuffs."

His head fell back to the pillow, his eyes closed. Oh, how amusing his groveling must have been. Well, he wasn't going to play anymore. He was drained—dignity, energy—all gone.

She said something then, but he blocked it out. He would not be a party to this insanity anymore. When she repeated it loudly, he heard the word *gun*.

"What?" He opened his eyes.

"Do you *have* one?"

He stared.

"You know, bang bang?"

Now what was she up to?

"Somewhere," he said. He heaved a sigh. "I have no idea where."

"Is this it?" She held it up. He looked. As calm as sunshine she was holding it, the baby Glock, in her hand.

Finley's mouth fell open.

"How in the world?"

She pointed to the closet.

"Top shelf, underneath your porn stash. I found it last night after you passed out."

"It's not *my* stash, if you could even call it that," he said, embarrassed.

"Your *wife's*?"

"None of your business."

"She's kinky, huh? You're a lucky man."

His anger flared. "I've been drugged, raped, and robbed, you tell me I'm going to be *murdered*, and I'm a lucky man? Yeah. What a lucky man. Sure glad I ran into *you*!"

She hushed him with a hand to his mouth. "Shush." And there it was, the unmistakable sound of the heavy front door. "Shit," she said, "if he finds me in here he'll kill us both right now."

"Honey, I'm home," the man's voice came from below.

May-lee shoved the gun under Finley's pillow.

"I'll leave it here for you."

"Wait. How am I supposed to . . . ?"

"I'll try to come back," she whispered and then scurried out the door, leaving it ajar.

Sometimes, his father once said, you just have to put all your thoughts in a basket and set that basket down. Let things settle.



SIX

2:24 p.m.

The sound of feet on the stairway petrified Finley. The steps were heavy, clomping higher and closer. Mr. Bald-thug, the murdering maniac who killed a guy in Little Rock, was ascending. Little Rock. That's where Eva was tonight.

Slowly, the rotund head slid into view and on its face was, of course, a smile. The man's ridiculous grin was proof to Finley that he *was* a lunatic.

"Can I come in?" the lunatic asked. He stepped into the room with one hand behind his back. Finley's heart pounded like an animal trapped inside his rib cage, the roar of blood surging through the chambers of his inner ear. "I brought you a surprise," the bald thug said.

"No, don't do it. Please," Finley begged. "You don't want to do this," he groveled, like the coward he knew he was and always had been.

"Don't do what?" the man asked, then held out a six-pack of beer. "Oh, you thought I had a knife or something, yeah? Nah, I wouldn't hurt you, doc." He maintained the smile. "Thought you could use one of these. It ain't Labatt Blue, but at least it's a Molson, yeah?" He noticed the soaked sheet. "Oh." He pointed. "You pissed yourself. That's disgusting. No beer for you."

He twisted the top from one of the bottles, set the rest on the floor, grabbed the vanity chair from the dresser and pulled it bedside, spinning it around to plop himself backwards, his huge legs straddling the chair's back. He took a long pull from his beer, then cleared his throat.

"Can't say's I blame you, I guess. You been tied up here, what, since one or two in the morning?"

"I really am thirsty," Finley said weakly.

Bald-thug leaned over to grab a Molson.

"Not beer," Finley said. "Water. I need water."

The man looked shocked and huffed.

"That'll be the day when I take water over beer," he said, rising. He headed into the bathroom. "That'll be the day."

Finley heard the faucet running, then the man reappeared with a glass of tap water, still yammering.

"Man, can you imagine what it was like to be a hostage back in the old days, like the seventies or whatever, when the terrorists took over your plane?" He paused to reflect, then shook his head. "That had to be some scary shit, yeah?" He sat back down holding onto the glass to finish his rumination. "I mean, think about it. You're sitting there in one of them god-awful plane seats for . . . three days? God almighty! Your bodily functions got to happen right there in your pants, in your seat, and you ain't allowed to fucking *move*. Can you imagine?" As he paused to update that scenario in his mind, he started to reach under the pillow to raise Finley's head.

Finley could not let this happen. The Glock 26 was under that pillow. The man paused.

"Of course, back in them days," he continued, "that's when your hijackers still wanted to be *alive* at the end of the day, you know? These days, holy shit, they want to kill everybody, including their owned fucked-up selves, as soon as they can. Damned terrorists. I'd like to put a gun to their heads and . . ." His finger went to Finley's head. "Bang." Again he stretched his arm to reach under the pillow.

"No!" Finley protested.

"I'm just going to help you drink the water."

"No. On second thought, I'm feeling kind of queasy," Finley said. "I don't want to throw up, you know, what with the mess I've already made. Spare me the indignity, please."

The man stared, then shrugged. He placed the glass on the nightstand.

"You were thirsty, now you're not."

"How many people," Finley dared to ask, "have you killed?"

"Whoa!" Bald-thug said, taken aback. "Why the hell would you ask me that?"

Finley held firm with a glare.

"Oh, what I said to you awhile ago? That I'd have to kill ya? Ha! I was messin' with you, doc. Shit. I never killed *nobody*." He shrugged. "I'm a bad man, I guess, but murder? Come on." He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

They stared, each trying to figure out the other.

"Trust me, doc, I'm just a harmless B&E guy from the Great White North, yeah?" He reflected for a moment. "At least I *was* until I met that China doll downstairs." He sighed. "That is one scary broad, my friend."

"Your wife?"

The man boomed with laughter and nodded.

"Yeah, I *did* tell you that, didn't I?" He took another swig of beer. "Aw, just more bullshit, I am happy to say. Did you really think she was my wife? Really?" He shook his head. "Next to that little lotus flower, I look like an onion, don't I? You didn't notice that?"

Finley had noticed, of course. The incongruity of them as a couple was appalling, but was he going to say so?

"I was thinking at first, you know, that I might get lucky with her, yeah?" The man was going to tell a story. "It'd be the finest piece of ass *I* ever had, for sure, but now? Uh-uh. Too damned scary."

"I don't get it," Finley said, prompting.

The man sat his first empty on the floor, then popped another and took a long swig.

"Ahhh," he belched. "Ain't beer just the greatest invention?"

Beer wasn't an invention, was it? More like a discovery. Finley—now, *he* had an invention. Or maybe not. Maybe his teeth straightening procedure was also a discovery. Actually, it was both. He allowed himself to think about that for a moment. He had discovered the way and then had invented the means. *Pay attention to the man*, he told himself.

"I was coming out of the courthouse, just last week up there in Moose Jaw, yeah?"

"What?"

"Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Canada? You've heard of Canada."

Finley nodded.

"I got an acquittal for breaking and entering." He leaned in close. "Do you know how surprised I was?"

Finley shook his head. In a secretive voice, the man confessed.

"I fuckin' *did* that job. I did it, but get this, the state didn't have their evidence-ducks in a row because—now this is what I heard—I heard that their records room burned down, the room with all the fingerprints and shit, but they don't want anybody to know." He shrugged. "Talk about your miracles. You believe that shit?"

"No."

"Yeah, well, anyway, there she was on the courthouse steps, and I swear to God she comes up and asks: can she buy me a drink. I turn around to see who it is she's talking to, and there's nobody there. So I'm thinking: Okay, I'm a free man. I'm a thirsty man. I'm a horny man, *yeah?*"

Finley remembered another piece of advice from his father: *Listen when people want to unburden themselves*. He listened to the bald thug but suspected what he was hearing was a load of bull plop. His father's contention had been that the more a man tells you about himself, the more power he hands over to you. But what if the guy is just sitting there spinning a yarn?

"So we're sittin' in this bar, The Yellow Dog Saloon on Caribou Street, and she lays out this scheme on the table, and I'm thinking, no fucking way, not in the States, right? But she keeps buying me Blues, and pretty soon, damned if it didn't seem like a foolproof plan."

The story was starting to sound, maybe not plausible, but almost—*almost*—imaginable.

"Go on," Finley said.

"That's it," the man said. "And, well, yeah, I liked your idea better about just going down to the bank, but I got to tell you, her plan is workin' out exactly like she said." He shrugged, then leaned back. "But the bitch is evil, doc. That bitch *is* evil. Trust me on that one, yeah?"

"*Trust* you? You're a kidnapping thief robbing my house, and you say, '*Trust* me, doc?'"

The man drew back.

"Hey, it's not the poor slobs like me that's got the world in the jam it's in—the economy and gas prices and shit." Mr. Bald-thug seemed genuinely offended. "It's guys like *you*, you rich sombitches, who get to make all the decisions, and it's always, *always*, screw the little guy. Let's just cover our own asses so we don't miss our fuckin' tee time. Well, shame on *you*, doc." He took an angry swig of beer.

The sudden hostility startled Finley. He tried to look apologetic for having provoked it.

"Listen, the sooner I'm done with you, the sooner I'm done with that little gook bitch downstairs, and I can't wait. This thing is starting to freak me out."

"Where is she?"

"Down on the couch, snoring like a fat man." Bald-thug leaned back in then with another apparent confidentiality. "You asked if I ever killed anybody." He paused for a second. "I'm pretty sure she plans to kill *you*."

Finley was fed up.

"No disrespect, Sir, but . . . well, no, check that. With complete disrespect, Sir, I think you're full of crap."

The man nodded, leaned back, and belched.

"Burrup. Fine. You ready to die?"

"No, I'm not ready to die, you lowlife Canadian weasel."

Bald-thug studied Finley, checked his watch, then belched again.

"Better get back to work. You really do have some nice stuff."

"Fuck you." Finley surprised himself. Never in his life had he uttered those words, but now they felt fitting. They felt right and powerful on his tongue as he fired them at the lowlife Canadian weasel staring at him, and so he said them again. "Fuck you."

"Like you're not insured."

Finley wondered what his insurance agent would say.

"Cut a lowlife Canadian weasel some slack, yeah? We'll be gone in a couple hours." He rose from the chair and headed for the door.

Again Finley felt some relief, realizing he was not going to be murdered—not for the moment. If the maniac was going to kill him, it would probably be right before they, he and the girl, left the house. He still had some time.

"How'd you pick me?" he asked.

"What?"

"Me. Why me? How'd you pick me?"

The man stopped at the door, looked back.

"She pointed you out when you pulled into that parking lot last night. Caboodles?"

"Canoodles."

"Faggot name for a pub," he said, then scratched his shiny head. "I guess she, I don't know, Googles rich guys who look like easy money. I don't know. I can tell you this though, the lady knows her business."

Finley, completely exhausted, thought he saw a flicker of pity in the brute's eyes, evoked, he guessed, by some pathetic pall over his own, Finley's, face.

"Hey, you want the TV on?" Bald-thug asked. "Maybe get your mind off your troubles, yeah? I'll get that later." He whistled when he studied the flat screen recessed in the wall. "Nice. Sony high def, 1080P? 60 inches? You rich bastard." He turned it on. "Oh, by the way, she takes pictures, did I tell you that?" He picked up the remote from a small stand below and started scanning channels.

The camera. He wasn't sure he had actually seen it, but maybe he did.

"Why does she take pictures?" he asked.

"I don't know—probably to blackmail you with your wife. Ahh, ESPN. Here ya go. Oh yeah, it's basketball all day today, in September. Ain't that nuts? The Tournament of the Americas. Go, Canada. Looks like first quarter for this game. Ought to time out just about right." He laid the remote on the dresser and headed back through the door. "We'll finish up, then I'll come back to tell you goodbye, yeah?"

"Forever you mean?"

"I certainly hope so. Enjoy the game. Root for the Canucks!" Then he was gone.

From the canyon in Finley's mind, the inner voice spoke up with something he hadn't considered: unprotected sex with a total stranger. He thrashed again and twisted and yanked. Maybe, just maybe, the last time he tried, he had weakened the chains enough that *this* time something

would give. His eyelids felt heavy. That stuff she used to spike his wine, the jugo, had a way of returning in cycles.

The crowd cheered. Somebody on TV had just made an amazing three-pointer. He hoped it wasn't a Canuk, whatever or *whoever* that was or *Crap!* He felt himself being swept back into the arms of the octopus.



SEVEN

5:50 p.m.

He opened his eyes. A golden spear of sunlight stabbed through his darkening room, the light from the television flickering against the wall—the Tournament of the Americas. The uniforms were different now. How long had he been out? He wished the man had left the television on TV Land. He'd rather be in Mayberry. He didn't care much for basketball. *Did they have a dentist there, in Mayberry?* They must have. He couldn't remember Barney or even Otis ever complaining about a toothache. The whole town seemed to have pretty good teeth. Maybe not Otis.

Suddenly, she burst into the room—May-lee, the pathetic lost Asian girl he rescued from the parking lot, who could barely speak English at all but now sounded like Ellen DeGeneres.

“He’s going to do it,” she said as she rushed to his side. “He’s going to do it. He’s going to kill us both.” She doubled over and cried with heaving sobs. “Oh, God.”

Finley was groggy and unwilling to play along. He yawned. She slapped his face.

“Damn it, wake up if you want to stay alive.” She held up a key. “Here.” Presto—his alertness was back.

“I managed to get this from him,” she said, “but we have to hurry.”

Wait. Managed to get it from him? How? When? What does it matter? It’s something.

"All right," he said. "You're doing the right thing. Hurry." She leaned over the bed and unlocked the cuff from his right hand. *Oh, my God, that felt good*—to actually be able to move his right arm. "Hurry."

"I'm trying. I'm nervous." She started to tremble. The key slipped through her fingers and fell to the floor.

Again the sound of the front door—ka-brump. Terror filled her eyes.

"I've got to get out of here."

"No, wait. Unlock me, you idiot."

She shot a quick scowl.

"I've got to hide." She spun around.

"No, just . . . May-lee?"

She ran from the room leaving Finley stunned, yet again, by the extent of her derangement.

"Crap!" He thought he'd been close that time. Well, now wait. He was better off than a minute ago. He had a free hand.



EIGHT

6:12 p.m.

He exercised his right arm, bending it, and making circles in the air while he clenched and released his fist. He saw now the extent of the bruising around the wrist, purple and swollen, but nothing to worry about, and, thank God, he could scratch his numb butt now and massage his left shoulder and arm. He could pinch the bridge of his nose, rub his eyes, and reach that glass of water. He could squeeze his penis and scratch his testicles and, best of all, he could reach under the pillow for his Glock 26. *I've got the baby. Happiness is a warm gun. Beatles again. Last cut, side one—The White Album. 'Happiness is a warm gun . . . When I feel my finger on your trigger, I know nobody can do me no harm.'* He'd never understood that song before, not until this moment. *Man, them Beatles were something.*

He took the Glock, held it up, and aimed at the open door. *Yeah, good.* He couldn't raise his body much, but his gun hand was free, and it would have a clear shot at whoever came for him. And wasn't that about to happen?

There were those footsteps again, the heavy ones, the unmistakable ones, ascending, coming up.

How soon would the man notice Finley's free arm? He didn't want to shoot at first sight; the guy could duck back. He could hide the gun beneath the sheet and pretend that his arm was still manacled. No, no, he couldn't. Not with his luck. He wasn't about to release his only hope from

his grip. He slid his gun hand under the sheet and waited, his fear like a hypodermic injection of liquid panic. *Oh, my God. Somebody's going to die. Probably me.*

As for God, Finley was a doubter. Not an unbeliever. He wanted to believe, but as a child he would test the prayer hypothesis to see if it held water. As he was sending his prayer up, he could feel it bouncing off the rafters back down into his faithless brain where it actually seemed to echo around the mineshafts in his head. His prayers never made it out of the basement, which is where he conducted most of his scientific experiments. Years later, he conceded to his inner voice that praying for testing purposes was probably not appropriate. Why do people wait till they're about to die before they call on God, who would certainly appreciate a prayer of praise, of thanks, at least of acknowledgement, along life's way? Finley realized that now, but there was no time to mull.

"Dear God, please help me. I confess that I am a sinner, and I ask forgiveness." The approaching feet hit the top floor. This prayer had to go speedy express. If it fits, it ships. "I need your help right now to shoot this man. I don't want to but—"

At the sound of a thump he flinched, his heart pummeling his ribcage, his eyes starting to water and to blur his vision. *Why have I always been such a coward?*

As if in slow motion, Bald-thug's head protruded from the edge of the door like the other two times, then he stepped in, a tool belt slung low on his hips.

"Hey, doc, almost done. Just one more thing to do." His hand swept to the side of his belt to reach for something. "Thanks for being a good sport," he said, "but now it's happy trails time."

Finley shut his eyes tight to squeeze out the tears, his body quaking as the man stepped forward. He didn't want to do this, but he had to. He had to do it now—now or never—now or die. *It's him or me.*

He pulled the gun from beneath the sheet and aimed it, reminding himself of Don Knotts in a movie his dad brought home one night on a VHS tape: *The Shakiest Gun in the West.*

Bald-thug looked disoriented.

“Happy trails to *you*, Mr. Bald-thug,” Finley said, and then pulled the trigger.

The report of the bullet’s discharge was the loudest noise Finley had ever heard, a cracking thunder raging through his ear canals as he watched the man pull a pair of wire cutters from his belt. Bald-thug held them up for Finley to see, his other hand clutching his chest. Then with a look of sudden comprehension, he sputtered, “I told you . . .” The light in his eyes went dim, and the big man crumbled to the floor.

Finley’s instinct was to rush to the man, doctor the wound, and save his life, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t even see him, the man with the bullet in his chest, whose last step had been forward, had fallen below Finley’s hobbled view.

Dear God. What had he done? If there had been any food in his system it would be spewing from his guts right now, so sickened was he by this unbelievable turn of events. It had to be done though. It had to be done, didn’t it? Maybe the guy was only wounded. It happens a lot on TV.

He started to fling the gun across the room, but some primordial instinct stopped him. What if he needed it again? What if the guy *was* only wounded and got back up to stab him? *Dear God, no.* He was safe now, right? *The girl.* He called out, “Hey, you can come out now. It’s all right! May-lee, you’re safe! May-lee?”

Silence.

“No need to be scared. I need you to come in here. I shot him.”

Ringin’. The phone at the base of the stairway was ringin’, but not the bedroom phone. They must have unplugged it. Finley wondered if he was the last in the neighborhood to still have a landline. Maybe, but doctors had to have them because batteries could always go dead.

It rang twice, then a third time, and then a voice. She answered the phone! He was pretty sure it was her, May-lee, and she had answered the dad-gummed phone! *What the heck?* He strained to hear, but couldn’t make out anything, the distance and the sound of the basketball game on TV muffling her voice.

“Hey, what’s going on down there?” he called. “I know you can hear me. Hello?”

No answer.

“He’s dead, I think. Your husband or your . . . whatever. I shot him. Hello?”
Nothing.

The gun was still in his hand. *Well, let’s see if I can get her attention with this.* He held it high, pointed it up but forward so the ceiling chips wouldn’t fall on his face, and then squeezed the trigger. Click. No discharge. He tried again. Click. And again. Click, click, click. The so-called Baby Glock was empty. *The insanity continues.*

Outraged, he twisted to use the gun as a hammer to batter the cuff off his left wrist. The second swing struck his metacarpals, and he screamed in pain.

“Yahhh! Why is this happening to me?”

It was one of three questions that began to loop in his brain during this particular stretch of consciousness. The other two were *Why only one bullet?* and *Where was May-lee?*

The term “wracking your brain” became an actual, physical thing to him—tormenting and agonizing, shunting the sentience from his head. With his willpower depleted and his body’s fuel gauge well below E, gloom, or more likely the remnants of the jugo, washed over him like a red tide and floated him back to the octopus out in the sea of nullity.



NINE

8:55 p.m.

He came around in complete darkness. The sun had clocked out for the day, and he had to pee again. *So what?* People have been trapped in worst conditions—under collapsed buildings, buried in avalanches, out lost on lifeboats. This wasn't so bad as far as hopeless situations went. He could survive this. He could talk to that voice in his brain until Eva got back in the morning. Where was that voice, his smart-ass inner critic that had all the answers?

He wished the TV was off, or at least that ridiculous basketball tournament. Tournament of the Americas? What was that? He'd never heard of it. On the other hand, wasn't it proof that the world was still turning? That was good, he guessed. If he could just kill the sound—the announcers, the buzzers, the cheering, and the schlocky pep bands.

Well, I killed Bald-thug's sound, didn't I? Oh, my God. I killed a man.

He decided to think about something else. His dog, Rammy. Where was he? *Oh yeah, at the vet's. Poor guy's wondering where the heck I am.* He wondered if the vet clinic was open on Sunday. Sunday—church day. Maybe it was a good time to contemplate the Lord. He revered the Christian notion that God takes every living thing personally, but that song lyric: “His eye is on the sparrow, so I know he watches me.” He couldn't accept that. He appreciated the implication but knew personally of several instances where the neighbor's cat had killed a sparrow in the days before the sneaky tabby became deprived of his advantage by getting

a bell tied to its rhinestone collar. *Where are you right now, God? I could use a miracle right now.* In the dark, he prayed aloud this time.

"Lord, I'm not asking you to turn water into wine or for a pillar of fire or anything like that, but if you raised the lame to walk and restored sight to the blind, I tell you what, I won't even ask to be set free. But if you could give me just one little sign, just to let me know you're there."

A noise then—just like that. Brump-brump-brump. Feet coming up the stairs. Probably not the Lord's. Probably the girl's. Probably May-lee. It was about time. He sensed that the whole phantasmagoric ordeal was nearing a conclusion, at last. He sensed wrong.

"Hurry, get in here," he said. "I killed him, I think. I can't hear him breathing, but I don't know. Maybe it's the TV noise. Hey! Come on. Did you call the police?" He squinted through the darkness and saw her silhouette in the doorway. "Thank God. Where have you been?"

Her arm reached around to flick on the light. It was blinding. Reflexively his eyes slammed shut, and he turned his head.

"Whoa, that's bright," he said, almost starting to giggle with the relief that someone was finally here with him—a live human being, at last, to put an end to this horrible, ludicrous nightmare.

His eyelids opened slowly to allow slits of light to leak in. He squinted to see the girl. It was not the girl. He couldn't believe it, but it was Eva, his wife.

"Thank you, Lord," he said.

"What?" Eva asked.

"Nothing. I was just praying and . . . Oh, Eva, thank God, you're here. You are not going to believe this."

Eva looked around the room.

"What happened here, Finley? What's going on?"

"Did you see a girl downstairs?"

"What girl?"

"An Asian girl, Chinese or something."

She looked perturbed.

"I'm gone for, what, thirty-six hours, and you cheat on me in our own home . . . in our own bed, with a Chinese girl?"

Finley was aghast.

"What? Eva . . . *listen!*"

"Was she good?"

"Eva!"

"She's Vietnamese by the way."

"I did not cheat on you! Now, please—"

"Liar," a voice sang out from the hall. "He's a liar, a liar." She stepped in behind Eva holding a wad of latex gloves in her hand and said, "He cheated on you, all right, with all his might. That man is *nas-tay!*"

Eva looked surprised, then amused.

"Dr. Finley Bliss?" She swiveled her hips. "Nas-tay? No way."

"Yes way. This way and *that* way," May-lee giggled.

Dumbfounded, Finley could not absorb the fact that they were having fun *together* because it would mean that they were in cahoots.

"He was amazing," May-lee said.

"Finley?"

"I'd prove it to you—give you a little show right now—but mm-mm-mm," she pointed, "he's messy down there. Yick."

Eva laughed.

"Baby-man, did she make you sleep in the wet spot?"

Finley closed his eyes and rubbed them with his free hand. This could not be happening. The phantasmagoria continued.

"Let me see the pictures," Eva said.

"Oh, yeah," May-lee said. "Got 'em right here."

Finley reopened his eyes as the girl produced a handful of Polaroid prints from somewhere and handed them to Eva. The women were calm and seemingly complicitous.

Eva thumbed through them, laughed, shook her head.

"Well, I don't think we'll be needing these."

"They're pretty bad. Stupid old-fashioned camera."

"I told you to use the tripod."

"I did. But that one leg—"

"I'll burn them," Eva said.

The Asian girl tilted her head.

"Make sure you do."

"I will. Don't worry."

It occurred to Finley then that he had somehow been beamed into a parallel universe, an evil alternate reality. He remembered it happening once to James T. Kirk and Mr. Spock. The *Enterprise* looked the same, but was completely different—brutal and wicked. It was surreal—the oddness of the two women standing there, talking like he wasn't there. Like there wasn't a dead man on the floor.

"Eva," he garbled through something like a bubble, the mucous in his throat, "what the hell are you doing? I shot a man. Call the police."

She assembled an expression of being half wounded, half annoyed.

"I will, Finley, but I just got home." She puffed a testy breath. "I'd like to relax first."

"Relax?" he regurgitated the word. "I'm chained to the bed here, if you didn't notice, and I killed a guy today. You don't see him?"

She looked down.

"I see him. What else?"

What else? If that weren't enough, would she even care about their house being ransacked?

"I'll tell you what else," he said. "That girl is a bona fide succubus." He pointed at May-lee. "Her. Her."

"She is a little devil, isn't she?"

May-lee smiled impishly.

"I told you I found someone, and that I found the perfect girl."

Dumbstruck, he could only gape.

"You do like her, don't you?"

"No," he rasped.

"You're the one who brought her home for sex."

He gasped. "What? No, I was only—"

"And what is so bad about my meat loaf?" she huffed.

"Eva," he implored.

"Damn," she said. "You live with a man two years, he never utters an opinion about anything, then one day you find out from his other lover," she sniffed, "that he badmouths your meat loaf."

"Sorry, Finley, but I had to tell her what you said," May-lee confessed, shaking her head.

"My other lover?" Finley bawled. "She's a slut from hell."

"Hey!" May-lee objected.

"You fucked her. I just saw the pictures," Eva said.

"I was raped," Finley said.

"*Raped?*" May-lee shrieked. "Who was chasing whom?"

Eva's eyes lowered to the floor.

"And this poor guy—why'd you kill *him*?"

"It was him or me," Finley said, and then paused to recall the moment.

"I was the lucky one."

Eva bent over, then straightened back up with a pair of metal pincers in her hand.

"He was going to shoot you with a pair of pliers?" She exaggerated an expression of incomprehension.

"He was going to kill me," Finley mumbled. "I was the last thing on his list because I could identify him."

May-lee snorted a laugh and swung a glance toward the Tournament of the Americas.

"That TV was the last thing on his list. He told me he really wanted it, a Sony 60 incher." She shook her head. "The poor schmuck thought he'd be watching it by now, back in Canada."

"Ah-ha!" Finley blurted. "Did you hear that, Eva? For God's sake, call the police."

Eva took a thoughtful breath and sighed with a look of pity.

"That's part of the plan, Finley. I will. I'll call them."

No more astonishment. No more. This nightmare had been stretched so far beyond incredulity that now he suspected maybe his wife had been drugged.

"Eva, what is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" She stepped to the chair by the bed, twisted it around, and sat. "Well, let's see. I'm married to a fat man with an atrocious comb-over who also happens to be the most boring man on the planet. That could be what's wrong with me." She thought for a moment. "And you're a Republican, let's not forget that." She grimaced.

"I'm not a *registered* Republican. My father was because he believed in self-reliance, but I don't see—"

"The *good* news," she interrupted, "is that you're rich, so I guess it kind of balances things out for me." She thought for a second, then shrugged. "It's all good." She turned her head. "Right, Mary?"

Finley stared at the succubus who was fidgeting with the latex gloves, slapping them from one hand to the other.

"Your name is Mary?"

"God," she said, insulted, "how could you make love to me the way you did and not even know my name?"

"Oh, Finley," Eva scolded, "really? Really?"

"You know what," Finley said with a new spasm of anger, "you've had your fun. Unlock me right now, or there *will* be hell to pay, I swear."

They gawked with amused faces, then Eva said, "That's my guy. You go, Baby-man. Better step back, Mary."

He glared. "I mean it, Eva. Game over."

She leaned toward him.

"Finley, you should feel so alive right now—the desperation, the not knowing." Her beautiful cerulean eyes locked on his, which were bloodshot and dreary. "You look half dead, Baby-man, and yet suddenly I think you're more alive now than I've ever seen you."

"Look," he said, "I'll take a shower, get something to eat, then we'll sit down and figure this whole mess out."

Eva rose and stepped back to Mary.

"It's already been figured out." She raised her arm and held out a flat hand.

Mary took one glove, then another, then another, and laid them across Eva's palm.

"What do you mean?" Finley asked.

"Just do it," Mary said.

Eva thought for a moment.

"I want him to know," she said.

Mary scoffed. "That *never* works out in the movies."

Eva gave Finley a look of tenderness.

"Finley, I'm sorry. I've got new plans for my life and . . . well, they don't include you. Not directly anyway."

"Not physically," Mary amended.

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Not *physically*," Eva said.

Finley's eyes filled with a wet burn.

"Eva, I thought we had a great marriage but . . . all right. If you're unhappy, we can work it out amicably."

"A great marriage?" she shrieked. "For *you*, maybe. You've got a hot, young trophy wife. What do *I* have?"

He had no answer.

"So, that's what I'm doing." She took the top glove, stretched it out, and then slipped it onto her right hand. "I'm working it out amicably." The second glove she pulled onto her left hand.

"I don't understand."

She gave the third glove a stretch, then tugged it over her already gloved right hand.

"You don't want a divorce, do you?"

"No." He barely squeezed it out.

"Divorce is so pathetic—the drama, the angst. Who gets this, who gets that?" She knelt and reached under the bed.

When he watched May-lee or *Mary* do that, she had pulled out a camera.

Eva, with her double-gloved hand, pulled out a gun. Another gun. Not the Baby Glock.

"Eva—"

"Mary thinks this is going to be like one of those James Bond movies where the bad guy explains the plan to 007 then walks away stupidly, assuming that James will be killed by some rigmarole."

"Actually," Mary said, "I was thinking of Austin Powers."

Finley could not appreciate their banter. He couldn't hear it. The gun was the thing now. Where had it come from? How could he not have known that there were cameras and guns under his bed?

"Eva," he pleaded.

"Here's the plot, Baby-man, and I hope as an intelligent fellow you'll appreciate this—my ingenuity."

"Eva—"

"When I get home from my trip tomorrow, I will find my home ransacked and my poor husband *dead*."

"Eva—"

"I'll be horrified, of course, and I'll call the police just like you want me to do."

"Eva—"

"Shush," she commanded. "I'm in a moment here. Please!" She paused for a beat. "When the cops process the scene, they'll find the dead homeowner *and* the dead burglar." She shrugged proudly. "One and one make two. Case closed. You like it?"

"It won't work," Finley said. "Fingerprints."

"Oh, please," she scoffed. "We've been working on this plan for three years." She looked at Mary.

Mary nodded. "About that long, yeah."

"Now, I have to get going, Finley. I've got a long drive ahead of me tonight for a breakfast meeting with the Arkansas Board of Poultry Processors." She rolled her eyes. "Don't get me started on *that* buffoonery. Anyway, you're going to have a first-rate funeral, I promise you that." She tilted her head. "I was going to say I wish you could be there, but . . . you will be."

Mary laughed.

Eva raised the gun and aimed it at Finley's heart.

"Wait, wait," he said, grasping for a straw of a flaw in her scheme, but he had nothing other than common logic. "A lot of great men have been boring," he said. "Boring men have achieved amazing things that left the world a better place. Me, for example. You know about my teeth straightening innovation."

"Actually, I don't," she said. She twisted her mouth. "Neither does anyone else."

"I know," he admitted. "That's been a disappointment for me too, but we can't give up. If we give up—"

"Please, no more of your father's stupid quotes."

She puckered her lips and kissed the air. She pulled the trigger and the gun reported.

Finley didn't notice the noise this time, but he thought he saw a spurt of orange at end of the new gun's barrel.

PART TWO



TEN

From the time she was eleven, Eva Ann Bullock was raised in the Hodge Podge Flea Market on the edge of Branson, Missouri, by her great-aunt Wanda, her mother's mother's sister. Her parents, Eddie and Annie, were entertainers, backup singers and dancers, with Mickey Gilley's Family Theater. When Mickey failed to give them the recognition they deserved, a foolish oversight in *their* minds, they skipped across the strip to work for Andy Williams in the new Moon River Theater, which opened in 1992.

Disappointment followed them. They sang and danced their hearts out, knowing in their guts they were worthy of a spotlight feature, but Andy was as blind as Mickey and failed to recognize the star potential right under his nose.

The Bullocks decided they needed to work with the *real* pros in Las Vegas.

A week after Eva's eleventh birthday, the Bullocks pulled their green Taurus wagon up to the Hodge Podge, unloaded their daughter and her things, then summarily drove away, back through their own dust, and disappeared.

The plan, Eva was told on the way over, was for mom and dad to become feature performers in Las Vegas, get a nice home, and then send for her.

But why, Eva wanted to know, couldn't she just go with them now?

"Too many variables," her mother had said.

Whatever those things were—variables—Eva was not nearly as afraid of *them* as she was of being left behind.

Standing in the dust in front of the Hodge Podge, she wailed as the car pulled away.

“Please, please, take me with you! Don’t leave me!” She cried like she had never cried before, the dust and tears mixing into muddy streams down her cheeks.

Welcome to the flea market and palm-reading world of your mother’s crazy Aunt Wanda.

For months, Eva was always first to the mailbox with hope for news—a letter, or a postcard, something, anything. Nothing ever came.

Sometimes, when the phone rang, her heart would leap with joy, and she would snatch it up and sing, “Hello,” just knowing she was going to hear the voice of her mom, maybe her dad, probably her mom.

“Baby,” one of her parents would say, “we did it! We’re big stars out here now, and we got a new house right next door to Wayne Newton. We can’t wait for you to get out here. You’re going to love your room.” Invariably, she was disappointed.

She started recording her feelings in a journal and discovered that she had a knack for creative writing.

When she entered a poem entitled “Love” in a school competition, she won first place. It surprised her because although the poem at first seemed brilliant she decided, after it had already been published, that it was stupid and made no sense.

Love

by Eva Bullock

Love is all there really is.

It’s all that there can be.

For love is God and God is time

And time is life, you see.

And anything that isn’t love

Is really only waste

Resulting from the absence of

A love that’s been misplaced.

Eva hated her room in the living quarters behind the shop. It was squalid. The shop did not do well, not well at all, one reason being that it wasn't on the strip. It was on a gravel road leading into Fall Creek Road—real estate which would become quite valuable fifteen years ahead, but not then. Her great-aunt Wanda barely made enough to buy beer and groceries and beer and . . . beer. *Apparently, nobody wants to buy any of the junk in the store, and, apparently, Aunt Wanda is a terrible palm reader.*

The living area of the Hodge Podge was small, dismal, and far too embarrassing to have friends over after school. In fact, Eva felt that she did not fit in at school at all. If your own parents don't think you're interesting enough to keep around, how could anybody else like you?

By the time she was thirteen, she had decided she was a worthless person living in a worthless world. Nothing really mattered, so why not have some fun?

Her womanly features blossomed ahead of schedule, and she discovered the power of boobs. That's what Jeanie Auckley had called it, and she, Jeanie, had learned it from a male cousin who told her: "If girls only knew the power of boobs, they could get anything they want."

"What do you mean?" Jeanie had asked.

The cousin said, "Well, I'd give anything just to see your boobs right now."

"So I told him," Jeanie conveyed to Eva—this was in the eighth grade—"that I would let him see them for twenty dollars. You know what he did? He went and stole twenty bucks out of his mom's purse and came back and gave it to me."

"Did you show him?"

"Had to."

"Oh, my God!" Eva shrieked. "Wasn't it embarrassing?"

"Well, duh. Yes, but twenty dollars. Like, hello?"

What Eva never knew was that several times while she was in class her great-aunt Wanda really did try to find out what had happened to her parents, Eddie and Annie. Wanda learned, that first year in fact, that their car had been found in the desert on the northern split of East Vegas Valley Drive, but the Nevada Highway Patrol had found no trace of who had left the car there, nor any prints, tracks, or clues as to why.

Since subsequent calls yielded no further information, Wanda reasoned that her niece and her husband had been abducted by aliens and should be presumed gone from this planet, at least for the time being.

Wanda never shared this news with Eva, about the abandoned car and all. She thought it would be too upsetting for the girl, although she should have realized that even the slightest scrap of information would have been better than the bottomless pit of nothing.

By age sixteen, Eva had learned to use the power of boobs and had abused the hearts of many boys and had even seduced two of her teachers: Mr. Bryant, her math teacher, and the woman who introduced her to orgasms, Mrs. Maddox, her computer science teacher. She spent many hours at Mrs. Maddox's house discovering that she was a natural with computers *and* with sex. Mr. Bryant was eventually fired for his predilections, but no one ever suspected a thing about Mrs. Maddox.

Her senior year, she was a prom queen runner-up and an honor graduate with no fewer than five full scholarships offered from as far away as Nevada. Nevada?

UNLV was on a campaign at the time to recruit outstanding computer students for their new computer science building, and Eva leapt at the opportunity, thinking it was a sign that she would be reunited with her parents.

She decided she would spend all of her spare time looking for them, and, if they had a show, she would sit in the front row and wait for them to recognize her. She would applaud politely, but not say anything. Sooner or later they would realize who she was. They would break down with remorse and rush to her with tearful apologies, explanations, and overwhelming happiness that they finally had her back again. Maybe she would forgive them, maybe she wouldn't, but it would be a great moment for sure. Oh, yes.

At the age of nineteen, she married a young theology professor who was also an up-and-coming TV evangelist. He promised her that, in exchange for her devotion, he would give her anything she could dream of. The television-preacher industry was a gold mine if you could get a slot on cable's Daystar, and he could. He had the charisma.

“All you have to do,” he said, “is inspire viewers to plant their seeds,” which meant send him money so that God would bless them with a financial harvest.

During her first year of marriage to J. D. Revis, he had a revelation that he was a prophet because the real money was in starting your own religion. That’s what the Lord had revealed to him. When she was twenty-one, J. D. got shot three times in the chest in his home office, presumably by some disgruntled flock members.

It was Eva who found his body then called the police without so much as a teardrop. Her obvious indifference made her a suspect, but since forensics determined that the three bullets in J.D.’s body were fired from three different guns, none of which were found, she was in the clear without having been brought to the station even once.

She was dismayed to end up with only seventy thousand dollars after the whole ordeal but decided to take a cruise. She bought her high school friend, Jeanie Auckley, a ticket from Branson to Vegas, and the two young women caught another flight for Seattle where they boarded a ship for an Alaskan cruise.

The final port of call on the way back down was Victoria, British Columbia. The girls decided to use their shore time to check out a strip club, the Peek and Poke Sports Lounge. While watching the dancers, drinking, and giggling, a man named Aaron Rabbit offered them a thousand dollars each if they would just *look* at his plan for a business opportunity.

“The power of boobs,” Jeanie whispered to Eva. “Remember that?”

The business plan turned out to be an operation of beautiful women seducing “boat-trash”—that’s what Aaron called them—men who could be lured into compromising situations then fleeced or blackmailed with the evidence of damning photos. The beauty of the plan, according to Aaron, was that those schmucks had to be back on their ship by 7:00 p.m. and would blame themselves for being such idiots.

“They never say anything to anybody.”

Jeanie declined the opportunity, but Eva was intrigued and game for adventure, so she stayed in Victoria. Her friend was to explain to the ship’s officials that Eva decided to rent a car and visit relatives in Vancouver. What could they do?

Jeanie Auckley vanished from the ship before its return to Seattle and was assumed by the crew to have jumped overboard—a suicide. You just never know the torment some people are going through when they take a cruise to get away from it all. With skillful handling by the cruise line's legal department, the disappearance was kept quiet, and Eva never learned of her friend's death.

Two years later, Eva was arrested in an undercover sting operation and was convicted of prostitution based on the testimony of Aaron Rabbit, who went free—the result of an unspecified plea bargain with the prosecutor.

The closest prison with room to take her was two thousand miles to the west, the Stoney Mountain Correctional Institution for Women, where Eva met and began a relationship with Mary Sann.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

9:37 p.m.

These two women stood together now and stared at the man Eva Lynn Bliss, formerly Eva Ann Bullock, had just shot. The other woman, Mary Joan Sann, spoke first.

"Damn, bitch."

"I aimed at his chest," Eva said shakily. The bullet from the Beretta .22 caliber pistol had gone high and wide and right through Finley's right eye.

From the demolished eye socket, blood streamed onto his face and down to the sheets. It was mesmerizing.

Mary checked her watch.

"You'd better get going."

Eva realized she was still holding the gun, then tossed it on the bed.

"Yeah, okay. You're going to have to help me with this," she said as she raised her doubly gloved hand.

Mary, whose hands were also gloved, took Eva's right wrist and carefully peeled back the cuff of the top glove. She used gentle side-to-side tugs to avoid any undo stretching and patiently pulled it free.

"So far, so good." She knelt down. With her left hand she raised the right arm of the dead giant and cradled it between her thighs. "Uhk, he's

really stiff.” She stretched the cuff of the gun-powdered glove and pulled it over the dead right hand of the man Finley thought of as “Bald-thug,” a task more onerous than removing it from Eva’s slender living hand.

“I guess he wasn’t *always* boring,” Eva said, staring at Finley.

“Don’t think about it. Just go,” said Mary.

“I mean, in the beginning there, we had a few laughs. He was nice; I’ll give him that. He was one of the kindest—”

“Eva, listen to me.” Mary paused and looked up, her chore only half done. “If you don’t leave now, you’ll have to speed, and if you get a ticket . . .”

“How could I speed in that piece of crap car of yours?”

“I’ll be getting a new one that’s not a piece of crap very soon, right? *Right?*”

“You want Finley’s car?”

“No,” she said, miffed by the suggestion. “I want a new car. My choice—that’s what you said.”

Eva shrugged. “Whatever.”

Mary managed to pull the glove snug onto the massive hand of the corpse, then stood up to work on Finley.

“Eva, go. You can’t help me here.”

“The chains,” Eva said.

“Oh, yeah. Damn. What are you going to put them in?”

Eva wheeled a large black suitcase from the closet.

“Good,” Mary said, then started unlocking Finley’s chains and heaving them into the suitcase. “*You* don’t touch these.”

“I know, I know.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“The Arkansas River. I stop on the bridge—no traffic at two in the morning. Boom. They’re gone.”

They zipped the suitcase. Eva kissed Mary on the cheek, then grabbed the extended handle of the suitcase, rolled it out of the room and clomped it down the stairs, through the living room, and out the door to the piece of crap car parked behind the rented Penske truck.

9:54 p.m.

Mary grabbed the Beretta from the bed, knelt again to the big man, and placed it in his now gloved hand. His stiff fingers, resistant with onset

of rigor mortis, meant she had to squeeze them hard and hold them in a curled position for what she figured would be twenty minutes. It took longer. At thirty minutes, her own fingers numb, she gave up. If it didn't look like he was holding the gun, at least it looked, in her opinion, like he had held it.

Now to arrange Finley's body. First, she wrestled his slacks back up over his legs and buttoned them. The next chore was to arrange his arms and legs to look right. She found the Glock 26 under the sheet and decided it should be next to Finley's hand. On an impulse, she also decided to close Finley's remaining eye. She sat on the bed, bent over his head, and reached for the upper lashes to pull the eyelid shut. She paused, reconsidered, and left his good eye open.

The ripple motion caused by her rise from the bed resulted in Finley's head shifting slightly to the right into a position that resembled the way a one-eyed man might rest his neck and watch a game on TV.



ELEVEN

Finley Bliss was baffled to find himself in the bleachers of a basketball court. It made no sense because the last thing he remembered was . . . what was it? Checking his dog in at the vet's to be neutered.

It was a basketball court. He was pretty sure of that because, although he couldn't see very well, he could make out the blurry forms of what he assumed were basketball players down on the floor. But why was he here? Whose place was this?

"Hello, Sir."

Finley turned to see an elderly black gentleman, familiar looking, playing solitaire a few bleachers up. The man slapped a card down.

"Hey," Finley tried to sound nonchalant.

"You're Finley Alan Bliss."

"Guilty," Finley said. "And you are?"

"Well," the man replied, "you seem to have made me an elderly African-American male.

This made no sense to Finley.

"What is this place?"

The black man looked around.

"Appears to be a basketball gymnasium, doesn't it?" He smiled. "Go ahead on down and play if you want. Kind of boring just sitting up here, I guess."

"No, that's okay," Finley sighed. "I happen to be a boring man." He waited. Nothing. "Look," he probed, "do you have any clue why I'm . . . why *we're* here, what we're doing here?"

The man nodded. He knew.

"Is this a dream?"

"I'm afraid not."

Finley nodded suspiciously.

"But you might say that in a dream, wouldn't you?"

"You might say I might say that in a dream."

Finley waited as he wondered where he had seen this guy before, but the man offered nothing more.

"Okay, uh, well, have you been down on the floor to play . . . uh . . . ?" The simple word suddenly eluded him.

"Basketball," the man said as he laid down another card.

"Yeah, basketball."

"You're in shock," the man said. "You need to unwind. Don't want to short-circuit your cerebrum."

"What?"

"When you get your bearings, I'll help you figure out where you're supposed to be." He pointed to the far end of the gym. "You might be called through that door down at the end there. You see that?"

Finley strained his eye to see.

"Where does that lead?"

"I say, you might be called to go through that door, but you might not. You have to understand that. It's very important."

"Where's it lead?"

"To the judgment seat."

Finley considered this.

"Well, thanks, but you've got the wrong guy. I don't believe in that."

The man nodded.

"People often think that what they believe or do not believe somehow has a bearing on the truth."

"Please don't say *it is what it is*."

"How will you explain yourself?"

How would he answer to the Lord for his doubt? Is that what the guy was asking?

"I'll just say he didn't give me enough evidence."

The old man rubbed his chin with a musing gaze.

"Is it possible that you *ignored* the evidence? Or maybe suppressed it?"

Finley was not going to have this conversation.

"Look, am I dead or what? I'm dead, aren't I?"

The man shrugged.

"We'll find out soon enough." Then he leaned down. "Man, what happened to your eye?"

"My wife shot me."

His bleacher companion nodded knowingly.

"You remember now."

Finley lowered his head.

"I can't believe I just said that."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Talk about it?" Finley flared. "*Talk* about it?"

The man's comportment was starting to annoy him, and then there it was, a surge of anger like lightning through his veins, completely unlike him, completely not him, but it was him. Right now it was him, and he was not just annoyed but infuriated—not necessarily with the black man here but, holy crap, something awful had just happened, something horrible. He couldn't remember what. A car accident maybe? No. No, it was something about his wife. Weren't they just talking about his wife? He had just said something about her to this guy, but what was it? Why was everything so jumbled? His head felt like it was splitting. And who was this guy anyway? Whatever. Whatever. Here he was. He was here now, in this place, this . . . where was he again? The lights in the room started to flicker. Wherever it was, they seemed to be having electrical issues.

"Stay with me," the old man said.

Finley stared.

"Are you a movie star?"

"Do I look like a movie star?"

Finley smacked his forehead.

"What is this, hell for boring people? Is that where I am?"

"Stop it," the man commanded. "Don't get all stormy on me." He steepled his fingertips together. "Please," he coaxed. "Easy. Easy."

Finley was anything but easy. He was outraged.

"So I'm boring; so shoot me." The abundance of impulses now discharging from the nerve cells in his brain generated a power surge. The circuit breaker was tripped, and those flickering lights went out.

James Earl Jones shook his head, started another game of solitaire, and waited.

There was no time clock in this arena, no measurement of time to speak of at all, so the question of how long Finley's brain remained offline was moot. Eventually, his head jerked.

"Oh, crap. Whoa. What is going on with me?"

The elderly black man watched as Finley struggled to refamiliarize himself with his surroundings.

Below him somewhere he heard air-filled balls bouncing on hardwood and saw ghostly people-shaped forms doing . . . something. Shooting hoops, that was it. His dad used to ask him to go out into the drive and shoot hoops before dinner. *I'm in a basketball gym*. He started to look around.

"Don't be lookin' 'round now," a voice from behind said. "You've got to watch something here."

Finley could not help but turn to see who had spoken.

The man smiled.

"You look like you're surprised to see me."

What a strange way to start a conversation.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked.

"We've been talking for twenty minutes."

Finley struggled for context, but had to settle for *déjà vu*.

"Twenty minutes? You and I?"

"Maybe twenty hours," the man said.

Déjà vu, big time.

"You need to watch something here," the man said.

Finley wondered now if he had stumbled into some insane person's LSD trip or maybe onto the set of a bad Hollywood movie. Yes! A movie!

That would explain the guy sitting just above him. Morgan Freeman? No, that wasn't right. Well, hey, this might be fun.

No, it wouldn't be. For one thing, his head ached like a train wreck, and, for another, he had no script. Had he lost it? He didn't know his lines. He didn't know his part. He was probably just an extra, but where was the director? None of this made sense, any sense at all, and, yet, somehow it all seemed familiar.

At the far end of the room, a blinding light poured through a door and a voice called out names: "Brinley, Brywell, Deffenderfer, Lewis, Reed, Taylor, and Vanaman."

Finley watched seven figures drop their basketballs, hustle into the luminescent tube, and start for the door.

"Head for light, right?"

"Only if you're called," the man admonished. "That's what I've been trying to explain to you."

Finley stood up. "I'm going."

"No, you're not," the old man said. "Sit back down."

He didn't care if his name had been called or not. Finley wanted out. He hopped down the bleachers and headed for the river of light.

The man rose with alarm as Finley sprang down the bleachers.

"Don't be a fool!"

That nagging voice that Finley had argued with all his life, the one in a back room somewhere in his brain, shouted, "You should have listened to that guy. You know who that was?"

The eighth and uninvited soul, Finley A. Bliss, trudged up the light-stream, followed the others through the door, and then tripped into oblivion. Total darkness. No light, no people. No floor. Just suddenly falling through emptiness like a grain of sand somewhere in space beyond the Milky Way.

Finley Alan Bliss ceased to exist. Almost.

Somehow, one rogue carbon atom just below one brain cell's ectoplasm stayed animate, harboring one last rod of light which, for some divine reason, did not fade out, but remained living long enough to become a glint. Over time the glint became a twinkle, which sprouted into a flicker, and then expanded into a spark that developed into a flash that ignited the

generator that supplied the electricity that enabled Finley's brain to fire up and reach sentience.

Sentience. It was a word he learned watching *Star Trek* as a boy. *I'm sentient because I have thoughts. I think, therefore I am. Descartes was right.*

And what he thought about was his own brain. How marvelous that he was able to stand back as an observer and witness the functionality of his own homeostasis as his neocortex began its own accounting service, automatically compartmentalizing everything, like a robot designed to collect and separate specific pieces of debris after an explosion—this piece over there, that one over here, and total mystery-pieces over there—three piles, which he then perceived as columns.

Column A: Things that were surely true, like the names and faces of his late parents, Joe and Naomi Bliss. He missed them. They were good parents. He could see their faces as they were in their twenties, their thirties, and then in their early forties when they were lost to him. It was certainly true that they had been killed in a motorcycle accident, and so it was definitely true that they were dead. Known truths went in Column A.

Column B: Things that he suspected were true but didn't really know for certain, like God. Is God real? If so, is he an involved God interested in justice and mercy? Finley hoped so, but he could never quite get his mind to accept that. This he knew was a lack of faith, but faith and his own intellect could never seem to unify. He wished he could put God in column A, but, for now, column B.

Another thing he thought was real but had begun to doubt was the love of his wife. Had she really just picked him out of the yellow pages three years ago and fallen in love with him the moment he entered the room to check her teeth? That's what she told everybody.

Column C: This was a long list of things he wanted to know but had no clues to go on. A new one that shot to the top of the chart was whom had he killed? Who was that guy? *I killed a man, and I don't know who he was. Will I be able to find out? Am I a murderer?*

Too much thinking overpowered his surge protector again. There was a buzz, his power went back out, and his brain fell into darkness.



TWELVE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

2:03 p.m.

At the end of Lakewood Street, an unmarked car sat with three city of Grand Bluff patrol cars nosed together and splayed at the end of the driveway, occasional garbled police chatter crackling from their radios.

A few neighbors peered from their yards. One walked his basset hound, Oprah, to the edge of the woods, business as usual, maybe.

Two uniformed officers gazed through the open doors of the Penske rental, trying to determine how best to process its contents. They wore rubber gloves and evidence preserving Tyvek booties, as did all the officials at the scene, including the rookie stretching yellow tape around the property.

In the bedroom upstairs, Mrs. Bliss, weeping softly, leaned on her friend Mary, and watched as a detective knelt to study the dead burglar and then the blue carpet, its blood stain thick and dark. He looked up.

“The M.E.?”

A young forensic technician checked his watch and shrugged.

“He should be here.”

Detective Ray Dieckmeyer was forty-seven with wavy salt-and-pepper hair and an unusually fine-featured face for his otherwise burly proportions. He’d been assigned the case at 1:20. It was now 2:05 by his

watch, and the medical examiner was late. Sunday traffic shouldn't have been an issue.

A CST was documenting, with flashes of light, images of the scene onto an SD card in his Canon PowerShot camera. In each shot, he included a battery powered digital ruler—standard procedure.

The detective—"Just call me Ray," he had said—stood up and looked sympathetically at the distraught wife.

"You don't have to do this now, Mrs. Bliss," he said, "but . . ."

"It's alright," Eva said.

Ray nodded and pulled a note pad from his jacket.

"You told this patrolman,"—he couldn't remember the guy's name—"this officer in uniform, that your plane from Little Rock arrived at 11:05." He looked up. "You got home around noon, discovered your husband and this other man here, just like this?"

"Yes."

"And you called 911 at," he checked the notepad, "12:09?"

"I guess so."

He jotted something down, then looked back up.

"Would you happen to know if that's your husband's gun by his hand?"

Eva looked at the gun next to Finley's body and winced.

"It could be," she said. "He got one for his birthday once, but I didn't know he still had it."

Ray looked at Finley's body.

"Well, for what it's worth, at least he didn't let the bad guy get away, right?"

"He should have though, don't you think?" Eva asked with an expression of torment. "Why?" She started to break down, but stiffened when her friend placed a comforting arm around her. "Why lose your life over . . . *stuff*?" she said. "It's just stuff, damn it."

Ray nodded agreement and rubbed his neck.

"Would you mind if I run a scenario by you and you tell me what you think? Would that be all right?"

Eva nodded. "Okay."

"Maybe your husband panicked," Ray said. "He was sleeping here, oblivious to the fact that his home was being burglarized, and—"

The detective's hypothesis was interrupted by the arrival of the medical examiner, Dr. Lawrence Cotner, who brushed in with an apology.

"Sorry, Ray. Believe it or not, we had a flat tire and no spare."

Ray shook his head.

"Well, don't let the dog eat your homework."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cotner asked as he went to work.

"Anyway, Mrs. Bliss," Ray continued, "your husband's asleep. The bad guy doesn't realize someone's in the house. He comes up the stairs. Your husband wakes up" Ray shrugged like he had no finish.

Eva took the bait.

"He woke up, saw that this burglar had a gun, so he grabbed *his* gun and . . . what? They shot each other?"

As Detective Dieckmeyer watched the M.E.'s accompanying medical technician remove the glove from the big corpse's hand, he replied to the trembling widow, "Well, that's the way it looks."

Eva's relief was disguised by a slow wag of her head and a grievous sigh.

"It looks that way *exactly*," Ray said, then scratched his head with a face of doubt.

"What?" Eva asked.

"To be honest with you, Mrs. Bliss, exactness at a crime scene is something I'm just not comfortable with."

"Well, excuse me if *you're* uncomfortable, Detective," Mary broke in, "but the *victim* here needs to go lie down."

Ray wrote something on his notepad again, then studied Mary.

"The victim's wife you mean," he said. "You're her friend, Miss," he checked the notepad. "Miss Sann? How did you find out?"

Mary answered smoothly.

"She called me after she called the police, at my apartment. I came right over."

"Do you need to lie down, Mrs. Bliss?" Ray asked.

"No," Eva answered, clearing her throat. "Go ahead."

"What do you drive, Miss Sann?"

"Pardon?" Mary asked.

"You came right over, but I didn't see—"

“Actually, I went and got her,” Eva said. “She came right over when I went and got her. I just couldn’t face this alone.”

“I can understand that,” Ray said, nodding, and then explained to the ladies that it was his job to assume that things at a crime scene were *never* what they appeared to be. Well, almost never.

Eva and Mary swapped glances, and then nodded that they could understand that. Sure.

“For instance,” Ray said, “with the way we just figured it, your husband’s gun would have been within reach of the bed, but you said you didn’t know he still had a gun.”

“That was just Finley,” Eva said. “He was like that—a very cautious man. Maybe when I’m away, he gets it out.”

Ray just stared—his technique for prodding.

Eva shrugged.

“What *I* wonder,” she finally sputtered to fill the silence, “is, why didn’t that guy just take our things and leave? Why did he have to come back up the stairs and shoot Finley?” Fresh tears welled in her eyes.

If the tears weren’t legit, she was good, Ray thought. Very good. But who calls the police and then leaves the house to go pick up a friend?

“Is there anything missing from this room, Mrs. Bliss?”

Eva dabbed her eyes with a tissue, sniffed, then looked around.

“I haven’t really had time—”

“Because you just said, ‘Why’d he have to come back up the stairs?’ *Back up the stairs?*”

Mary suddenly felt the room temperature shoot up.

“What?” Eva said with a face of confusion. “I thought that’s what *you* said.” She broke down with a quarter turn and wept into Mary’s chest. Her dear friend stretched sheltering arms to reach around and administer comforting back pats.

Distracted by his camera screen, trying for the best angle to photograph Finley’s bruised wrists with the digital ruler, the photographer inadvertently bumped into the M.E.

The coroner looked up.

“I’m trying to work here! Do you mind?”

The surprised CST stared. “But—”

"Get back," Cotner ordered. "Please."

The tech obeyed, and no more photographs were taken.

Eva sensed a change in the room but kept sobbing.

"I can't believe that my brilliant, beautiful, funny husband is dead."

"He's *not* dead," the M.E. said, hovering over Finley's body. "Not exactly. We've got asystole but . . . hang on."

All eyes darted to the coroner.

"Excuse me, Doctor?" Ray said, bewildered.

"Didn't anyone check him?" Cotner asked. He looked around and barked, "Wagner, the Dash4000, *statim!*"

"Right." The med tech bolted out.

"I think we can resuscitate this man," Cotner said.

Ray was baffled. "The first thing I *do*, Larry, the first thing I *did* was check for signs of life. He had none. Zero vital signs, period."

"When was he shot?" Cotner asked.

Ray turned to the uniformed patrolman, whose name he could not remember.

"Officer, take Mrs. Bliss and Ms. Sann where they can rest, and get them a cold drink, please? Thank you." He was straining to keep his exasperation confined.

But Eva and Mary would not budge.

"I want to hear this," Eva protested. "If he's alive—"

"I have to insist, Mrs. Bliss," Ray said. "Please. I'll get right back to you, I promise."

With the women resistantly herded out of earshot, Ray spoke sharply.

"When they were shot, Larry, is your job to determine and *not* in front of possible suspects. What the hell is going on?"

Wagner, the med tech, returned with the portable lifesaving unit and a multi-parameter monitor, then helped the M.E. secure the technology to Finley with a saline drip, adding mannitol to reduce brain swelling.

"I don't know what's going on, Ray," Dr. Cotner said as he worked. "I didn't feel a pulse either, but his skin . . ."

"It felt normal to me, too," Ray said, "which made me think he had just died within the hour, when Mrs. Bliss admits that she was here."

Cotner twisted dials and flipped switches.

"The spouse is always your best bet, eh?"

"You know that."

The GE Dash 4000 came to life with little lights and little sounds and a total of six waveforms. Dr. Cotner looked up.

"A gurney, Wagner?"

"Right behind you, Boss."

They maneuvered Finley onto a gurney, and then four patrolmen carried him with his life support machine down the stairs.

"What about that guy?" Ray asked, nodding to the corpse on the floor?

"Eighteen to twenty hours for him, subject to revision, of course. Cause of death, my tertiary guess, bullet to the heart." They were silent for several seconds. Then the coroner shook his head as if amazed.

"What?" the detective asked.

"Ray," he said, pointing out the door, "that man—what's his name, Bliss?"

"Yeah."

"You ever hear of the Lazarus phenomenon?" The M.E. scratched his chin.

Ray thought for a moment, trying to grasp the implication.

"Can't say I have. What's it about?"

"That man, I think, just survived . . . *death*."

2:26 p.m.

Watching from a second story window, Eva turned to Mary.

"You said he was dead."

"He was," she answered. "I swear to God. No heartbeat. No breath. No pulse. He was *dead*."

"He was dead but . . . now he's not?"

Mary shook her head, flummoxed.

"Pretty damned weird."

"God! Three fucking years we worked on this! Shit!"

"It'll be fine. Stay frosty."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one who murdered him."

"Well, neither are you, apparently. Why'd you shoot him in the eye?"

Eva huffed, backed away from the window, and started to pace.

"I told you I aimed at his chest."

Mary twisted her gaze around. They were in the guest bedroom.

"You were only ten fucking feet away, and you couldn't—"

"Shut up," Eva snapped. "I'm trying to think."

Mary rolled her eyes, then turned back to the window—the cops, the police cars, the yellow crime scene tape, the neighbors, the dogs.

"Wait, wait, wait," Eva said.

Mary's gaze pivoted back.

"Even if his body is somehow still alive, he's got to be brain dead, right? I shot him through the fucking head!"

Mary thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah. Shit! Duh!"



After Finley followed the basketball players through the gymnasium door, the world disappeared. Finley fell through nothingness for what may have been miles or days or light-years, plummeting through space and time until the darkness lightened and became more of a gray mist. Then he was slammed onto the rocky shoal of a foggy river where he could not move or think or breathe.



THIRTEEN

MONDAY, JANUARY 7

10:30 a.m.

In his private chambers, Judge Wade Greyfield, with his clerk-recorder, Ivan Stein, sat looking down at five people to hear arguments concerning the future of the petitioner's husband.

With Mary Sann by her side, Eva Bliss had come with her attorney to plead for consent to terminate the life support systems attached to her husband, Finley Alan Bliss.

A no-nonsense older gentleman with closely cropped white hair and matching Vandyke beard, Judge Greyfield was known, at least by Ray, for his egalitarian attitude and his impatience with anybody, especially attorneys (or cops for that matter), who considered themselves shrewd.

"Good morning. I'm Wade Greyfield. This odd looking fellow to my left is my long-suffering clerk and recorder and usually the only person in the room that I trust. How long now, Ivan? I was just trying to think."

"Eleven years, three months, Sir." Ivan was short, with wavy brown hair and a large nose.

The room was austere, with nothing on the walnut-paneled walls but military appointments in framed glass cases—medals, ribbons, commendations, and certificates. The only photo on his desk was of his late wife, Kay.

In his current seat since 1989, Judge Greyfield enjoyed hearing motions in this office that related to matters of procedure.

Ray Dieckmeyer was one of the other two attendees this morning, and he was sitting next to a prim, blonde neurologist from Riverside General Hospital, Dr. Christine Shepherd.

It was fourteen weeks and two days since Finley Bliss and an as-yet-unidentified man had been shot in the upstairs bedroom of the Bliss residence.

The judge, nearing the end of his days on the bench, made an effort to be extra careful in listening and comprehending because, while he found himself caring more about everything these days, he was aware that he was actually grasping less—two conditions in conflict he realized, but he had his pride. So, he demanded from himself exceeding caution to waylay any rhyme or reason for reversals on appeal. Not at this stage of the game. No, sir.

The attorney reminded the judge of an actor named Hugh . . . Hugh something, whose movies his wife had loved but he—well, not so much. Attorney Anthony August, known in some circles as “The Ladies’ Lawyer,” was thirty-four, smart, and, for his attractive female clients, as resolute as a bedbug.

August told the judge that it did not matter what the detective suspected or imagined.

“This is a right to die issue, your Honor,” he said. “My client’s husband is in a persistent vegetative state without hope of recovery, and in Missouri the wife has the authority to terminate artificial support. I would sight Quinlan V. Newton Memorial Hospital as—”

The judge held up a hand.

“I’m familiar with the landmarks, Counselor.” He turned his gaze to the medical expert, slender and attractive without makeup—*probably a jogger*—and in her upper thirties with short-cropped hair. He had seen her before somewhere. On the news, he thought. *Oh, yeah*, he remembered. “Dr. Shepherd?”

She dipped her head. “Your Honor.”

“You were the local brain specialist called to Arizona to consult in that congresswoman’s shooting?”

“Congresswoman Giffords. There were several of us.”

The judge nodded his respect, then took a breath to get back to business.

“Is Mr. August right? Is there no hope for Dr. Bliss’s recovery?”

Christine Shepherd shifted in her chair, uncomfortable with simple questions regarding the human brain.

“Alexander Pope said, ‘Hope springs eternal.’”

For the reaction this got, she may as well have burped.

“I mean,” she continued, “there are new breakthroughs every day regarding the regenerative capabilities of the brain clusters, the amygdala and—”

“Gobbledygook,” August cut her off. “Judge Greyfield, my client’s husband is unresponsive to stimuli and is not breathing on his own.” He turned to the neurologist. “Isn’t that right, Dr. Shepherd?”

Christine tilted her head.

“He’s not breathing on his own for now. As for being unresponsive, that’s not exactly true.”

The judge sighed. “No living will, I presume.”

“No, Your Honor,” the bereaved wife said, tears in her eyes.

The cynical detective rolled his own eyes but knew from experience that with this judge you wait to speak until spoken to.

Christine said, “Judge, if you’re asking me if I could, in good faith, terminate his ventilation.” She paused to choose her words carefully. “It wouldn’t be unprecedented by Missouri’s revised medical standards, but I think we’re far from that right now.”

“He must have a bottomless well of long-term medical coverage,” August said.

The judge shot a sharp glare at the attorney.

“Are you going to tell me, Mr. August, that you are unfamiliar with the terms of Dr. Bliss’s insurance policy, or is that off point?”

The lawyer yielded an apologetic nod.

“It’s off point, Judge. I beg Your Honor’s pardon.”

Judge Greyfield shifted his eyes to Ray.

“Okay, Detective, tell me why *you’re* here. Can’t we let the man die with some dignity?”

“A man murdered twice does *not* die with dignity.”

The judge winced. The temerity of this particular officer had agitated him on occasions in the past, but, for the most part, he respected Ray for several heroic deeds in the cop's career record.

"Twice?" the judge asked. "We don't even have once, do we?"

"He's brain dead, Your Honor," said the attorney, "so, yes, he was murdered once. If Detective Dieckmeyer is implying that Mrs. Bliss's legal right and moral responsibility to terminate artificial support is tantamount to him being murdered again," he threw up his hands with outrage, "that is repugnant and grossly irresponsible."

Judge Greyfield intertwined his fingertips and thought for a moment as he studied Ray.

"I'm inclined to agree. Detective, what is your problem?"

"Judge," Ray said, "there are things about the crime scene that flat out do not make sense. For instance, he had cuts and bruises on his wrists and—"

"Inappropriate, Judge!" The lawyer was on his feet. "If Detective Dieckmeyer has evidence of culpability against anyone other than the apparent assailant, he needs to make that case through proper legal channels."

The judge again had to agree with the attorney, but motioned for August to reseal himself.

"Where's the prosecutor, Detective Dieckmeyer?"

Ray had been dreading this question. It was a dicey one because, yes, it certainly should have been the prosecutor here today to argue against these proceedings. Not him. Not a cop. He shuffled his feet, looked up, and tried to explain.

"Things are crazy over at the P.A.'s office right now, Judge Greyfield. He's short-handed, but he knows I'm here."

The judge raised a silver eyebrow.

"He knows you're here. What does that mean?"

"The Prosecuting Attorney doesn't feel as strongly about this case as I do, Judge, but he said I could, in fact, he said I *should*, stay on it until I was satisfied that my perceived loose ends were tied up."

August shook his head.

"Pitiful."

“My captain went along with that too, Judge,” Ray added, as if to say, *Everybody’s doing it*. “I’m here on solid ground because my perceived loose ends are significant—what you might call censorious. That’s why the case is still open.”

“That’s the problem right there, Judge,” August barked,” his loony censorious perceptions. Does this one detective have the right to badger this poor woman interminably?”

Judge Greyfield shuffled through some papers, peered through his reading glasses, then raised his head to Christine Shepherd.

“It’s been over fourteen weeks, Doctor,” he said. “Is Dr. Bliss brain dead: yes or no?”

Christine Shepherd was not a woman to be relegated.

“His EEG test is not good, but the term ‘brain dead’ is, with all due respect, old-school. The wonders of the brain and nervous system are infinite. We saw that in the case you mentioned—the congresswoman in Arizona.”

The attorney cleared his throat rudely.

“The human brain,” Christine continued, “is immeasurably more complex than anything else in the known universe, and advances through neuroscience research are . . . well, ongoing. President Obama has authorized a hundred million dollars for a new brain mapping project. I expect to be part of that project.”

“And your point is?” demanded Attorney August.

“If you want me to say there is nothing going on inside the patient’s mind, I simply cannot. True, he is not breathing on his own, but his heart is pumping.”

“Only because of mechanical ventilation and hydration,” August countered, “and nutrition, which we also beseech the court for the right to withdraw.”

Judge Greyfield massaged his forehead with a thumb and two fingers, put his elbows on the desk, and his head in his hands. He was quiet for several seconds, then mumbled to himself, “Whatever happened to the days when people died at home in the realm of family life? That’s the way it should be.”

“Pardon me, Your Honor?” said the lawyer.

The judge looked up, realized he'd been thinking out loud, then cleared his throat.

"Nothing."

Ray couldn't resist.

"He almost did die at home, Judge. That's where he was shot."

"I didn't mean like that," Greyfield said, then turned to Eva. "Mrs. Bliss, do you want artificial life support withdrawn from your husband?"

Ray blurted, "That's like asking Elmer Fudd if—"

"Stop it, Detective," the judge interrupted sharply. "When I want your opinion—"

"You'll ask for it," Ray said.

"You want to tangle with me today, Detective?"

"No, Your Honor. I'm just trying to see that—"

"Hey, I'm trying too. Everybody here is trying. That's what we do in these chambers. We try." The judge took a breath and waited for Ray's rejoinder. After some seconds of silence, he turned back to Eva. "Mrs. Bliss?"

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

"Well, Your Honor, I think that's what *he* would want. And, yes, maybe it's selfish on my part, but I don't know how to start living my life again without . . ." She broke down and sobbed.

"Closure, Your Honor," the lawyer filled in. "Please. That's all we're asking for. The paperwork is done. It just requires your signature."

The judge was surprised.

"My signature? For what?"

Ray raised his hand.

Greyfield glared at him.

"What?"

"They need your signature because the case is still open, Your Honor, like I said. It's an active investigation."

"Only by this rogue detective," said August. "If the P.A. doesn't think it's worthy of his time to be here, surely there is no legal impediment to concluding this sorrowful matter here and now."

"Does the court have the authority to tell the police when to close a case?" Ray asked. "I don't think so. That's what they're trying to trick you

into doing, Your Honor—to force the case closed by terminating the life of the only witness. Talk about your legal impediment!”

The judge shook his head disbelievingly and turned to his recorder.

“Ivan,” he said, “this will be off the record.”

The surprised court reporter seemed uncomfortable with this, but withdrew his hands from the stenotype machine and folded them in his lap.

The judge nodded his thanks, then turned with a scowl back to the detective.

“Ray, you’re an asshole.”

“There’re all kinds of assholes, Wade.”

“I know there are, but you’re a pain-in-the-ass asshole. Unless you’ve got a new law degree I haven’t heard about, sit down and shut up.”

Ray shrugged and sat back down.

“Good Lord,” said the judge, then nodded to Ivan.

Ivan returned his fingers to his twenty-two keys and waited as he watched the judge dip his head back under his arched fingers, thumbs against his temples. Again, the judge went silent for a long time. Finally, he spoke after nearly half a minute but still with his head down.

“All right. Here’s what we’re going to do.” They waited, but that was it.

This time the silence went bizarrely long—almost a full minute. The group shifted in their chairs, then stared at Ivan for some kind of sign. Ivan did not oblige them or even look their way. He sat staring at his machine, calmly waiting.

“I am going to issue a grant for the right of Mrs. Bliss to withdraw ventilation,” the judge finally said, raising his eyes at last.

August squeezed Eva’s hand victoriously.

“But *only* ventilation, at least for the time being. The patient is to remain on nutrition and hydration.”

“Your Honor,” Ray dared, “shouldn’t the patient be assigned his own advocate?”

“A lawyer, you mean.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“No, for two reasons. One, Mrs. Bliss is, by the laws of Missouri, his legal guardian, and two, another attorney would drag this thing out ’til kingdom come. Let’s get this thing settled while I’m still old.”

“One more thing, Judge,” said August. “We entreat the court to forbid Detective Dieckmeyer from commenting to the press or to the public on anything regarding this case . . . for my client’s personal well-being.”

Judge Greyfield was growing wary of the Hugh Grant-looking attorney and *Wait. Grant! That was it—Hugh Grant.* He didn’t want to give this smarmy Hugh Grant look-alike the satisfaction of a gag order, but what could he do? He had backed himself into a corner now and felt he had no choice.

“Detective Dieckmeyer,” he said, “you are prohibited from making any extrajudicial comment other than ‘no comment’ to the press. Do you understand?”

Ray’s eyes fell to his shoes.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Christine patted Ray’s arm and whispered, “Admirable effort, Detective. Really.”

He raised his eyes to hers, leaned closer, and whispered, “It’s a crappy day for justice.”



FOURTEEN

FRIDAY, JANUARY 11

2:50 p.m.

At Riverside General, Finley Bliss lay in the Respiratory-Coronary Critical Care Unit in the North Site Complex on South Riverside Avenue, atop the hill that rose above the Chickasaw River. Founded in 1861, incorporated in 1919, the hospital, present day, was as clinically advanced as any healthcare system in the Midwest, boasting 1,671 beds and over thirty specialties.

His room was crowded with those who'd come to say goodbye or, more accurately, to send him off. There was his grieving wife, Eva, with her friend Mary. There was Eva's attorney, Anthony August, the neurologist, Christine Shepherd, and two nurses—one clearly female, the other indeterminable.

As they gazed at Finley's life-sustaining technology with its mysterious lights and sounds, Eva hung her head and started nodding to no one, as though recalling and affirming the good times—forever gone now but for the reruns in her precious memories. She was jolted out of her performance by her own name being whispered from behind. She spun around to see a man who was not on the guest list, nor, as far as she knew, had any right to be there—the contemptible constable, Ray Dieckmeyer.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said, apologetically.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Cops need closure too," Ray said.

Eva shook her head slowly, with a smile of pity.

"I get it now. Bless your heart. You're retarded, aren't you?"

Ray pulled folded papers from his jacket.

"Here."

"Go to hell," Eva said, "and get the hell out of this room right now, or I will call the police."

The detective made a face of confusion.

"I *am* the police."

"I'll call them anyway, and someone, hopefully with a brain, will be dispatched, and he will be informed by these witnesses that you are here harassing me during the final moments of my husband's life and, whether he's one of your cronies or not, police procedure will require him to file a report, and you will look like the rogue bully that you are."

"You're experienced with police procedure, then?" Ray asked.

August snatched the documents from his hand.

"What now, Detective?"

"I figured your client would want the body cremated as promptly as she could after this little ceremony, so I filed for a stay order." He smiled. "Voila!"

"What?" Eva grumbled. "Why?"

"Rogue bully, huh?" Ray nailed her with his eyes. "Mrs. Bliss, you have no idea." He knew that she knew it was a bluff, but for today it was all he had. "There's going to be an autopsy."

With a quick puff of disdain, the attorney turned back to Eva.

"Nothing to worry about." Then he nodded to the doctor.

Christine Shepherd ignored the nod and stood by the ventilator, waiting.

"What's the hold up, Doctor?" August asked.

Christine looked at Eva.

"Mrs. Bliss, are we waiting for a priest or a rabbi or—?"

"No. Just do it," Eva said. "Jesus Christ!"

Christine couldn't hold back a scornful glance, then turned to the ventilator.

“I’m going to turn off the mechanical oxygen supply to Dr. Bliss’s respiratory system,” she said. “His other systems will close down quite soon afterwards.” She shrugged. “Well, more than likely.”

The group watched and then waited for Finley’s life to become his death.



FIFTEEN

Finley Bliss lay where he dropped on the bank of a misty river, thinner now, and with fourteen weeks of beard growth.

The only noise was the river gurgling its way through cattails and babbling over stones until, from a distance, another sound was fading in—footsteps approaching—someone walking on the gravel, coming closer, getting louder. Were Finley's eye open, he would have seen a man's shoes become visible through the fog.

The feet stopped at his head. The knees bent. The body knelt.

"You got to get up now, Finley. Come on."

No response.

The man's dark hand reached out and shook Finley's shoulder.

"Come on now. You can't lie here any longer."

Finley's eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened upon the face of an old black man who looked strangely familiar—from a movie, maybe? The face spoke again.

"You got to get up right now, or this river is going to float you away. Going to float you down and out to sea."

Finley wanted to ask the man what was going on, but he couldn't speak. He had no air, no wind on which to sail the words from his mouth. His lips moved, but no breath.

"What's that you say?" the man asked. "I can't hear that. I can't hear you at all. You're going to have to speak up, and you better do it right now. Come on."

Finley felt his heart pound, beating harder, then harder, and then too hard. It was starting to hurt.

"Listen to me," the man said. "What you need is air, okay? Your body needs air right now. The good news is, it's all around you. It's free. You just have to suck it in. Come on now—*breathe*. Take a breath. Do it."

Finley gulped.

"That's it," the man said. "Do it again."

Finley gasped. Then he gasped again. Then again and again until he coughed.

"There you go," the man said. "Now breathe."

Finley did. He sucked air in, and then let it out. He inhaled, then exhaled. He drew, and he blew five more times till he coughed again, then breathed in and out again, the process becoming more steady and smooth with each succession.

"Good," the man said. "Now what was it you were trying to say?"

Barely audible, Finley said, "I know you."

The man smiled.

"We met, yes, up in that basketball court you had us in."

"Right, right," Finley remembered. He coughed again and wheezed for another chug of air. "Where . . . where are we now?"

The man looked around.

"You ever heard of the valley of the shadow of death?"

He had, yes. The *Bible*. "Psalms something."

"Well, that's where you are, okay? So you got to get up right now and get moving. Come on. Stand up. You can do it."

Finley tried to rise, but he was too wobbly.

"The basketball court?"

"We'll talk about that in a minute. Let's get you up first."

"I followed those other guys through that door and everything disappeared," Finley said as he struggled to get his feet under him.

"Let me help you," the man said and rose from his squatting position. "Take my hand. I'll pull you up."

Finley grabbed the extended hand and, together, they managed to get him on his feet. Still, he had to lean against the man to stay upright.

"Yeah, about that door," the man said. "Didn't I tell you to sit down and wait, that you had to wait to be called through that door?"

"I don't remember." He was starting to stand on his own now.

"Yeah, well I did. Nobody called your name. You remember, you asked me if you were dead?" He let go of Finley's arm.

"Yeah, I do. What's with all this fog?"

"Did you want to be dead? Do you want to be dead? You want to go before that judgment seat you don't believe in? You can do it right now."

"No, I don't. I thought about all kinds of things when I was falling and . . ." He looked around. "Yeah, I fell here, didn't I?"

"A consequence of ignoring my counsel," the man said. "I wouldn't do that again."

Finley nodded. "Roger that."

"It's going to be tough."

"What?"

"Crossing that river." Finley waited for details, but the man stepped backwards. "You're standing on your own now. Good start. Are you feeling all right?"

"What did you mean about the river?"

"You've got to find a way across this river, here. Do you understand that?"

"What, like with a boat?" Finley asked. "Or what?" He looked around. Nothing but fog. "Is there a bridge?"

The old black man turned to walk away.

"Where're you going? Sir? Hang on."

The man called back, "Don't be afraid to explore different paths. You might have to go back a ways."

"Explore different paths? I can't see anything. Is there a bridge? Where are you going?"

The old man's form was being swallowed by the murk as Finley heard him say, "You should be able to find what you need."

"Wait!" Finley tried to follow, but his knees buckled, and he foundered to the gravel.

"Keep breathing. That's the main thing. Oh, and keep your ears open," the man called back as his silhouette melted into the mist and his voice faded away. "Keep your ears—"

"Open," Finley finished. The man was gone, which he felt was not in his best interest—unacceptable, in fact. A third alternative to fight or flight

popped into his head—follow the fellow! Accompany your counselor. Go with your guide. Move with your mentor, your . . . your . . . what was that guy? Who was that guy?

He rose back to his feet and tried again to pursue the man, but still he was too weak. He collapsed again to the rocks, and it hurt. He groaned.

“Keep my ears open? For what?”



For the rest of what he decided was an afternoon, Finley practiced his breathing, then standing, then walking.

He walked along the river’s rim, hoping for a break in the fog to get some idea of the task he’d been assigned. When he had asked the man about a bridge—in fact, he remembered asking twice—the man had not said *no*. Maybe there was a bridge, but how far was it from where he was? How far could he or should he walk to search for it? On the other hand, the man hadn’t said *yes* either. The helpful mystery man had really not been all that helpful. Why bother to wake him, then stand him up, only to walk off and leave him stranded in this gray soup? And where was that sea the man had warned him about? *Why don’t I just take off walking and see where this stupid river leads?*

Because you’re a coward, the inner voice answered. Always condescending, that one—always.

But Finley knew it was the truth. Where he stood now was safe, he assumed—a safety patch, a security zone.

Another option to fight or flight was to sit tight. *Fight or flight or just sit tight.* At least it rhymed. Afraid to leave his position, he sat back down and hugged his knees. He sat and he sat until he dozed away.



When he woke to what he assumed was morning, he felt better, stronger, a little braver even, but was disappointed that the fog had

not dissipated, not in the least. Come to think of it, though, he had not observed nighttime. No darkness. Maybe he'd slept through it. He suspected he hadn't and began to sense that this place, wherever or whatever it was, did not turn days into nights nor nights into days. No light, no dark. Just fog. Depressing.

After he rose and walked up the river, he broke a low-hanging limb from a tree. He studied it. It felt good in his hands. He sat to clean the branch of its offshoots. It went well. Now he had a staff.

"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." *Yeah, that's it—the twenty-third Psalm.*

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . . Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

The voice from the canyon in his brain startled him, but it shouldn't have. Every time he had an elucidating moment, it whined, all his life. No exception here, informing him that what he held in his hands was just a stupid stick.

"At least it's a sturdy stick. A walking stick." And it did comfort him. "So there!"

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. He thought about that playground chant as he collected sticks and stones to build a hut. It wasn't true. Its theory: If you allow someone to upset you with words, you forfeit your personal power. Why would you do that? Make another choice. Sounds logical, doesn't it?

But sometimes there is no other choice. For instance, if it's the woman you love—your wife, say—and she tells you that you're the most boring man in the world, and that you should die because of that, and for being a fat Republican, well, those are words that hurt, no two ways about it. Your personal power is shop-vacked right out of your very being.

He stepped back to assess his makeshift shelter and decided it was, well, okay. Not pretty, probably not long-lasting, but okay—a lean-to of branches covered by cattail leaves bordered by a ring of the largest rocks he could manage. The rocks were to keep the walls from slipping.

He didn't know why he built this hut or if he would need it, but it felt good to have a little place to crawl into. Maybe just to get out of the damned fog. He wondered if Mrs. Beckham would have liked it.

When Finley was ten, he was a Cub Scout. His den mother, Mrs. Beckham, Gary's mom, was an attractive woman who taught them how to make fire without matches. He wondered back then why his own mother wasn't cool like that. He remembered now that, while he did grasp the concept, he and another boy named Malcolm were the only two of the eleven scouts in their den who were unsuccessful at generating even a spark.

Since then, though, he had witnessed this skill demonstrated on the reality TV show *Survivor*, and he had watched closely.

He tried it. This time, unlike thirty-five years ago, it worked. *Holy smokes!*

Now he remembered Tom Hanks dancing around his first self-made fire in a movie he had watched on cable just recently, or not—depends on one's concept of recently, he supposed. When was that? What was that movie? "I have made fire," Tom Hanks had shouted, so Finley shouted the same.

"I have made fire!"

But why? Why had he made fire? He didn't know. He wasn't cold. He wasn't hungry. Maybe it would burn some of the fog away.

He danced around his fire till he felt drained.

"*Castaway*," he said. "That was it, with Wilson the volleyball." He crawled into his hut, lay down, and went to sleep.

He dreamed, then. He dreamed that one of his patients, little Nancy Metzger with her crooked teeth, was his daughter, and she needed help with her homework. The assignment was to write the equation for Einstein's unified field theory. Finley knew that he knew this, but couldn't quite bring it to mind at the moment. Rather than admit his memory lapse to little Nancy, he said, "Forget about that for now, my sweet daughter. Let's go see Grandpa's new motorcycle."



SIXTEEN

The riverbank seemed brighter when he woke again, but he was certain now that here, where he was, *wherever* he was, held no distinction between night and day. There was only foggy and foggy.

He crawled from his makeshift dwelling out onto the gravel, stood up, and walked to the water's edge. He was feeling stronger than the last time he remembered feeling stronger, which was when? Yesterday?

He meandered up and down the river with his walking stick, then spotted an old log. It looked comfortable. He squatted and sat.

For sport, he decided to see if he could still skip stones. He found some flat ones, good skippers, and threw one, side armed, across the water.

Not bad, as he counted two good skips before it disappeared into the mist. The second fling went three hops before the turbulence of the river gobbled it down. He kept working at it, refining his delivery like a pitcher in the bullpen. How far was it across this water? How could he get there? Time for crucial thinking.

"Where is that remarkable brain-voice now?" he asked. "Hello, brain-man? Are you there? Any insight on our situation like, oh, I don't know, where we are and how we find the portal out of here?"

Then he heard something—the honking of geese high above. That's what it sounded like. He looked up. No geese, at least not that he could see, but he couldn't see anything, just fog. No, it wasn't geese. It was voices. Human voices. Women's voices. A conversation. Was this why he was told

to keep his ears open? He hoped not because it sounded like an audiotape playing backwards. Gibberish. Still, something seemed familiar.

Since his hearing machinery felt like a block of wood, he would have to whittle it down and sharpen it like a stick to poke through the din. No, not a stick. A rod would be better—a hollow rod like a tube. Yes, a conduit.

With all the mental strength he could muster, he chiseled his auditory perception to an attenuated scope and worked on channeling in. Honing. That was the word. Honing.

Then, there they were—words. Here a word, there a word. Suddenly, one of the voices speaking those words rang a bell as clear as his name. It *was* his name.

It sounded like—could it be? Eva.

He tried to call to her, but realized his own voice had no resonance. Why expend the energy, which, to tell the truth, he felt low on now? What could he do? *Keep your ears open*, the old James Earl man had said. Was this the reason?

If he applied himself to fine-tuning the openness of those ears, maybe . . . maybe he could amplify the voices. It was a matter of honing, honing, and more honing. Honing in.

Until this moment, Finley was willing to consider the possibility that Eva had been under some kind of spell, bewitched by the Asian girl—her charms, her cunning, her drugs—but now. *Oh, my God.*

“The sonofabitch won’t die,” he heard his wife say. “I mean, come on!”

The responding voice was, of course, that of the succubus, the girl he tried to help only last night, or whenever it was, Mali. No, Mary.

“We could kill him again,” she said.

“How?” Eva asked.

“A little shot of sodium azide under a fingernail and, boom, cardiac arrest in an hour. Game over.”

“Never heard of it,” Eva said. “Where would we get it?”

“Any auto salvage yard in the country. The I.P. used to use it for snuffing turf poachers on the DL.”

“Auto salvage yard?”

“Yeah. It’s the stuff they put in cars, in the canisters to set off the air bags.”

Finley was dumbfounded. *What in the world? Eva!*

"Maybe," Eva said. "What about the autopsy?"

"Totally untraceable. That's the beauty of it."

"Sodium . . ."

"Sodium azide."

I can hear you, Finley bellowed, his voice trapped in his head.

"They expect him to die anyway," Mary said. "Why would they bother with an autopsy?"

Finley held his breath to hear the answer.

"That damned detective. What's his name, Dieckmeyer? He's been bird-dogging me like a fucking pit bull."

Mary snickered.

Finley sprang from his log, grabbed a stick, and wrote in the gravel the name he thought he heard. D-e-e-k-m-i-e-r.

"Detective Dieckmeyer," he said. "Thank you, Sir. Stay on her."



SEVENTEEN

Felicidad Health Care Center, once a seventy-five-bed nursing home, was on the same street as Riverside General, but hardly in the same world—fifteen blocks down the Chickasaw in a district that had atrophied with the loss of the Zenith plant in the late '70s. Once, there were rumors that Samsung was going to take over the factory and bring fresh prosperity to the neighborhood, but it never happened.

There was some new investment, though. A group of large private firms bought Felicidad Health Care Center, along with thirty-nine other nursing homes around the country, in 2004. Within months, the number of nurses at the home was one-third of what it had been before the acquisitions. Budgets for supplies and activities were slashed, and residents, it seemed to some, started dying just to get out of the place.

Regulators repeatedly warned the facility that staff levels were below mandatory minimums, and families of the deceased filed countless lawsuits contending negligent care. The new owners, however, had seen to it that neither the plaintiffs nor the regulators, with their authority to impose fines or sanctions, had the time or resources to succeed—accomplished with corporate structures so complex that who controlled what was diabolically obscured.

Control of Felicidad was spread among fifteen companies and five layers of firms—a configuration that allowed the managers to continue

bypassing the rules, including the requirement to report when they, in effect, paid themselves from Medicare and Medicaid.

Finley wasn't on either of those government programs. His legal guardian always paid cash.

Now, with only twenty-five beds and barely a staff at all, the residents of Felicidad were crammed, as many as possible, into as few rooms as possible for the convenience of the multi-tasking employees.

Nobody was housed there whose family had an ounce of concern left for them, so nobody at Felicidad ever had visitors—well, hardly ever. Nobody was there who wasn't expected to die soon. Nobody was there with any capability to cause any trouble or even to complain. The strong arm and swift hand of the meds could summarily smack down any rebellion that might arise. But that wouldn't happen. Not there.

FRIDAY, MARCH 15

1:52 p.m.

Finley Bliss had the middle bed in a room with two other patients: an old mahogany-skinned man with nappy, smoke-colored hair near the window, and a shriveled up gray man with wispy white hair on the other side, next to the wall. By means of clear plastic tubes, some concoction of blue liquid flowed through holes in their abdomen walls into their emaciated, distorted physiques.

In the long ago painted room—some shade of taupe—were two chairs and one table with a *Bible* and a landline phone. On this day, the chairs were pulled to Finley's bedside by his wife, Eva, and her friend Mary, here to check on his progress—more accurately, changes, if any, in his condition. They sat and stared at his face, gaunt now with a beard, long and straggly. Eva shook her head.

"Can you believe I married such an unattractive man?"

"A guy with that kind of money looks hot to me," Mary said. "Well, not like he is now, but, you know, if the man makes the money, it's the money makes the man."

"I wonder how much more there'd be if his teeth straightening invention would have worked?"

"It didn't work?"

Eva raised her hands and shrugged.

"Poor schmuck. He actually believed he had come up with something that would change the world because it could straighten everybody's teeth quick and cheap."

"Cool," Mary said.

"He thought he'd be invited to the White House and go on Letterman and . . . on and on."

"What happened?"

"He trusted the wrong people. Ha! Imagine that."

"Made a pile of money though, right?"

"The bullshit contract stipulated that he wasn't even allowed to talk about it."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" Eva turned with a disparaging glance. "Sweetie, you're as dumb as Finley. The power brokers of the world do not like miracles in the public market place." Her gaze returned to her husband. "Poor bastard couldn't grasp that. He kept thinking 'any day now, any day now.' He thought there'd be a huge launch and some massive marketing campaign." She shook her head. "Buffoonery."

They stared at Finley a while longer, then twisted their necks to gawk at his vegetative roommates. Mary shivered.

"Why here? This is a fucking rat hole."

Eva tilted her head.

"Hello? He's a vegetable?"

"But—"

"Why waste money on a vegetable?"

Mary nodded.

"A *rich* vegetable."

"Actually, the money is the property of his estate." She smiled and shrugged. "That would be me."

Mary looked piqued.

"You mean *us*."

Eva offered a reassuring smile.

"You'll get yours."

“What if he hangs on like this for . . . say, years?”

Eva laughed.

“Here? Why do you think I picked this place?”

Mary scrunched her face, nodded.

“Got it.”

“Let’s go,” Eva said. They rose from the rickety chairs and headed for the door. “Sleep tight, Finley. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

“God, I think they’re crawling on me,” Mary said. “Shit.”



On the wrong side of the river, Finley heard the door open and close. He had, in fact, heard the whole conversation, and it broke his heart.

He tried to rise from the log where he’d been sitting, but toppled forward onto his knees, his palms to the rocks. He cried, “I am not a vegetable.” Then he screamed it. “I am not a vegetable!”

What hurt the worst was the thought that his wife had apparently never loved him. Never? What about that poem?

How could she have written that poem?



EIGHTEEN

FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 1975

9:20 p.m.

Six weeks after turning 21, Karen Ann Quinlan was at a friend's party where she drank five gin and tonics on an empty stomach. A dyed-in-the wool Catholic, she was pretty and smart, five-foot-four, with long brown hair.

Some of the guests had broken off into smaller groups—some in the kitchen, some on the back porch, some retreating from the living room into a guest bathroom where they reemerged with sniffing noses.

When Karen was invited into that bathroom to “do a couple lines,” she declined. Although she knew two of the people in that particular subgroup—well, sort of, not really that well—she wasn't familiar at all with the others, and even with the alcohol in her blood she knew what was going on in there. It was cocaine, and it was illegal. It was everywhere, though, and she had been curious. But the thought of trying it for the first time with strangers made her feel uptight. What if one of those people turned out to be a narc? She had heard rumors.

When a young man whom she liked, Jerry Loniel—she liked him a lot—offered her a couple of “ludes, pharmaceutical grade,” he said, “to mellow you out,” that sounded good. She wanted to mellow out. Karen

smiled, took the tablets, and swallowed them with the last half-inch of her drink.

Feeling woozy after that, she decided to split and go home.

SATURDAY, APRIL 15, 1975

12:13 a.m.

When three of her friends stopped by her house to make sure she was all right, they discovered, to their horror, that Karen was not breathing. One of them, Lance Babcock, called an ambulance.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 1975

On a respirator, in a vegetative state for four months, her parents, Joe and Julia, who had adopted her as a baby, requested the hospital discontinue active care and allow her to die with dignity. The hospital, St. Claire's in Danville, New Jersey, refused. The conventional medical and religious wisdom of the day held that withdrawing life support amounted to murder. Two of her doctors said they wouldn't do it, even if they were ordered to.

Although she grimaced, made chewing movements, uttered sounds, and maintained normal blood pressure, Dr. Fred Plum wrote that the patient no longer had any cognitive function which would support breathing.

The state promised to prosecute anyone who terminated her life support as an act of homicide. After losing in superior court, Joe appealed to the New Jersey Supreme Court.

"We just want to remove her from the machine, bring her back to her natural state, and let God's will be done," her petite, red-haired mother told reporters.

It cost \$450.00 a day to keep her alive. Since she was 21, unemployed, and without medical insurance, the state of New Jersey was obligated to pay the bill.

The opinion rendered by Chief Justice Hughes stated that the individual's right to privacy outweighed the state's interest, stipulating

that freedom of religion did not refer to life-and-death decisions for an incompetent person. Such choices could and should be determined by a surrogate decision maker.

A tribunal was assembled.

MARCH, 1976

The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that, if the hospital ethics committee agreed that Karen would never recover, her respirator could be removed.

Karen's ventilation was terminated.

To everyone's astonishment, she did not die. She caught her breath and breathed normally.

She was moved to Morris View Nursing Home where she managed to survive for another nine years with flexed joints and chronic bedsores.

Karen Ann Quinlan was vanquished by pneumonia June 11, 1985.



When the petition to withdraw the feeding tube from Finley Bliss fell again in the legal lap of Judge Wade Greyfield, he felt cold-cocked. Fourteen months from retirement, and, wham, out of the blue, an honest-to-God, life-or-death decision—one that no single man should have to make—would now become part of his judicial legacy.

The decision to withdraw ventilation from Finley had been relatively easy—an acceptable ruling by modern standards—and everyone expected the man to die. But he didn't. Why not? Was there a power whose care kept the man alive for some reason?

Wade Greyfield had never been especially adherent to his parent's Methodist religion, but now, in his white-haired years, he had been noticing more and more how amazingly complex the simplest things actually were—things like the navigation system of birds. He read that each new generation of golden plovers flies from Alaska to Hawaii without parental leadership and without any landmarks below. Scientists do not know how they do it.

On the Discovery Channel, which his wife, Kay, used to love to watch, he learned that the wombat's pouch opens backwards so as not to fill up with dirt and kill the babies as it digs. That had to be by design, didn't it? Waiting for evolution to fix that problem would have smothered the species out of existence.

A question he especially liked was: "If language comes from intelligence, and DNA is the language of the cell, what intelligence does DNA come from?"

Hoping to reunite with Kay, like Fred Sanford and his beloved Elizabeth—he loved those reruns—Wade Greyfield became convinced that his current life was not all there was. There had to be an intelligent divinity above all things of man's understanding.

So, who was he to rule on a man's life, which had already been spared once, maybe twice, by his Maker? How could he interpret the law in a way that would safeguard the legal rights of the citizen in question, Finley Bliss, when that man had no way to make his "clear and convincing" wishes known?

On the other hand, who was he to deny the legal rights of the man's poor wife, who only wanted to let the man go in peace?

He was glad now that he had imposed a gag order on the detective because the less publicity on this thing, the better. Something like this could cause a public furor, like it had in the Nancy Cruzan case.

After a car wreck, Cruzan's body was found in a ditch with no vital signs of life. Paramedics were able to resuscitate her, but she never regained consciousness. Being in a coma for thirteen years in Mount Vernon, Missouri, her parents were ready to move their daughter to the state of Oregon.

The U.S. Attorney General at the time, John Ashcroft, stepped in and threatened prosecution of that state's Death with Dignity Act.

Subsequently, the family submitted, in writing, three of their daughter's friends' statements that Nancy would not like being kept alive artificially.

The court accepted these opinions as "clear and convincing" evidence that the girl's wish would be to die, and so, in December, 1990, the feeding tube was removed. Fifteen members of Operation Rescue, including a

nurse, appeared at the hospital to reinsert the feeding tube, but they were arrested.

Nancy starved to death eleven days later.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16

1:45 p.m.

Now, with the same group as before in his chambers, Judge Greyfield took a deep breath and said, "All right. Who's first?"

Eva's lawyer, Anthony August, pounced.

"Your Honor, before we get started," he said, "I'd like to point out that Detective Dieckmeyer has no right to be included in this hearing."

"In this room," the judge replied, "I can have anybody I want." He raised his eyebrows. "You're the one that requested this forum, Mr. August. I didn't see a guest list."

"But it's inappropriate for—"

"Also in this room," Greyfield cut in, "I, the judge, get to determine what's appropriate." He waved a hand. "Now, do you have any arguments to add to the written petition that would support you having the patient's best interest in mind?"

"I do represent the patient, Your Honor, as well as his wife."

The judge nodded. "That's why I just asked you—"

Ray cut in. "Judge, how can he represent a man who's never met him and whose life he wants to end?"

"Because," the judge answered, "as has already been established, Mr. August represents that man's wife, who is his sole legal guardian." He cast his gaze upon the neurologist, Christine Shepherd. "Doctor, do you have anything to contribute to this persiflage?"

Christine cleared her throat.

"I think what we're talking about is passive euthanasia."

The judge dipped his head and squinted.

"Explain."

"It's for Your Honor to decide, I guess, if there's a distinction between *passive* euthanasia—withdrawing a feeding tube—and *active* euthanasia, which would be like administering a lethal drug."

August sprang to his feet and roared, "Of course, there's a distinction! Give me a break."

"I'll give you a break like you won't believe, Counselor," the judge snapped. "Sit down, and speak when you're spoken to. Them's the rules." He looked at Ray. "Right, Detective?"

Ray nodded.

Eva started to weep, but the judge had seen about enough of that.

"Would you like to discontinue, Mrs. Bliss?"

"No," she sniffed.

"Then please get control of yourself."

Eva gasped as though she'd been slapped.

"Now, Doctor Shepherd," the judge returned to Christine, "is Finley Bliss in a vegetative state or not? And I don't want to hear 'that depends' or 'hard to say.' I need a definitive answer."

"His body is functioning normally for a forty-three-year-old male," she said. "Breathing, heartbeat, digestion, even some reflex activity."

August broke in. "He can't swallow on his own."

The judge raised a halting hand.

"What kind of reflex activity? What is that?"

"He has some reflexive responses to sound and to painful stimuli," Christine said.

"Painful stimuli? How do you do that?"

"We pinch his nipples."

Eva would have giggled, but her attorney quashed the impulse with a quick fingernail into her wrist.

"Your Honor," August said, "the poor man is oblivious to his environment. Reflexes are entirely physical. There is no behavioral evidence of awareness whatsoever."

The judge bowed his head for a longer time than they had seen before. What was he doing when he went stone still like that? Was he praying? Was he dozing?

Finally, he spoke.

"Terri Schiavo. Anybody remember her?"

They all nodded.

"Her husband, legal guardian, petitioned the court to remove her feeding tube. Her parents opposed, arguing that she *was* responsive to their voices, kisses, hand holding, that sort of thing. That case ended up going through fourteen appeals, a ridiculous number of motions, petitions, hearings—"

"And a subpoena," Ray cut in, "by a congressional committee to qualify her for witness protection. That's what Finley Bliss needs, Your Honor—witness protection. He's *alive*, and he knows what happened. He's the only one who does know what happened, if you don't count the—"

"There he goes again," August blocked.

The Judge shook his head.

"Ray," he said, "I can appreciate your passion on behalf of this man, and I know you've got doubts about the crime scene but, all things considered—"

"All things have *not* been considered!"

"Then tell me what I'm missing. Has anyone . . . *anyone* . . . been charged with *anything*? What am I missing?"

"The Missouri standard of proof by 'clear and convincing evidence' of the patient's desire to die."

"I am *not* missing that," the judge declared. "The lawyer speaks for the wife, who speaks for the husband, whom we are assured would not want to be kept alive by artificial means." He paused to look into the eyes of each of them. "Medical advances have interrupted the natural conditions of death in ways that, frankly, I find disturbing. The melding of body and machine, in my opinion, is more like an insult to life rather than its salvation. I mean, if we don't have an appreciation for mortality, how can we understand the significance of our time here—each of us—here on Earth?"

Ray started to speak. "But Judge—"

A "hold on" finger shot up. The judge went on.

"Another drug, another machine, another procedure—how far should we go?" He dropped his eyes to the notes on his desk with a deep sigh. "There is clear precedent for this, and so," he wrung his hands, "that's my ruling, God help me." He paused for a response. There was none, not outwardly, so he concluded his adjudication as though it were a sermonette. "What reason is there to doubt that any person in his circumstance would want,

if they were even capable of wanting, feeding to be continued? None!” He shook his head again and looked down as if studying his own fingerprints.

“Fourteen days from today. Petition granted.”



NINETEEN

On the other side of the river, Finley had been working on a raft with branches he collected and strapped together with cattail leaves. The launch spot he had in mind was upriver a ways, marked by a huge tree, where it seemed to him the water was smoother. *A good place to put in*, he thought, *although smooth could mean deep.*

He would need a paddle. His walking stick might work as a pole, but only if the water was no deeper than the stick was long. As he drug his raft along the shore, his eye fanned the undergrowth to his left for something that might be used as a paddle.

As he trudged, some lyrics to an old Doobie Brothers song popped into his head. *Well, I built me a raft, and she's ready for floatin'.* Those were the only words he knew till it got to the part about “some funky Dixieland,” but he remembered that the song was about the Mississippi, so, hey, if the Doobie Brothers could cross the mighty Miss—.

He froze. His eyes did a double take. There it was. Not a paddle, but a path. A path? It looked like a path—a trail leading through the tangled riverside thicket into the woods.

“What the heck?”

He stared at it, almost hoping it was an illusion because, if it were real, a decision would have to be made. When a man comes across a path that leads in a new direction, a choice is inexorable. He could ignore it and pretend it wasn't there, but that, in itself, would be a decision. A cowardly one.

No, now wait. To think in terms of cowardice or bravery? Ha! *A trap for many a man*, he rationalized. Candy-ass or hard-ass? Was that the call here? He didn't think so. Wise or unwise? That was the question. Logical or illogical? Smart or dumb? He had a plan. He had a raft. Rafts float. Paths can lead to quicksand or a covered-up well or something, you never knew. One of his father's favorite sayings was: You win or lose by the way you choose. Finley chose to walk on past the path, but he did so cursing his fear.

He would love to have departed the bank and followed that bare strip of ground into the forest, but he couldn't, he figured, because of a character flaw—insufficient spine. So he told himself it was perfectly normal, not cowardly, to feel insecure in a strange land. Cowardice may never be useful, but fear often is, he surmised, as a survival instinct. Besides, the goal was to cross the river, not go traipsing off into the woods like Little Red Riding Hood. Taking an unnecessary risk like that would be idiotic. He dragged his raft beyond the path and did not look back.

By the time he reached the giant tree, he still had not found a suitable paddle but did find a much longer and stronger pole, so he revised his plan.

The first thing would be to nudge the raft—he decided to call it a skiff—into the water, little by little, till it seemed opportune to climb aboard. Then, with his new pole, he would shove off and guide himself through the fog and across the river, if that pole was long enough to reach the bottom for the breadth of the journey. If not, well, he could be in for the float trip of his life, to the end of his life, out to that sea he'd been warned about—the dark fathomless sea of eternity.

Until Finley managed to get three-fourths of the skiff's dimensions onto the water, things went according to hope, like the raft was going work, like it was going to hold him and float him nicely across the misty divide. The Doobie Brothers would be proud. Then, in the time span of a bull terrier's yawn, the craft fell apart, like a pack of flimsy lies.

Finley's Folly, the voice in his brain taunted, as he watched his raft dissolve—sticks and leaves separating and floating away. It was a crushing blow. The project had represented his hope for a future across the river.

"But, *no!*" he yelled despondently. "Not today, I guess. Not today."

He backed out of the water, collapsed on the bank, and sat in the mud, disheartened.

He hadn't heard his wife's voice, or anybody else's, other than some distant mutter, for quite some time, but he was sure, if he could cross that river, he could find her. He would find her and strap her in his dentist's chair and let her know just what was what. But now, what if he couldn't cross the dad-gum river?

Damn, Eva. She was the crux of the situation—the humiliating, heartbreaking crux. Damn. And she was trying to kill him. He knew that. Damn.



TWENTY

10:40 p.m.

Eva Bliss and Mary Sann lolled on the couch in the Bliss house, drinking some of Finley's good stuff to celebrate their victory—the end of Finley's life, coming soon to a date and time just around the corner, guaranteed by a bona fide lawful order.

They were on their second bottle of 2004 Sori San Lorenzo, and Eva was just refilling their glasses.

"Not bad, huh?"

Mary sniffed and mimicked what she thought a professional connoisseur might say.

"Hmmm, the bouquet has a hint of chocolate, raspberry, and . . . oh, something else. What is it? Ah! Dirty socks."

Eva laughed, then took a sip.

"A dark, brooding beauty, I would say," she said, then sipped again and smacked her lips. "Yes, oh, yes, a drop-dead gorgeous wine. Simply gorgeous."

They wore white terry cloth robes, one of which Mary had used to seduce Finley her first night there. On the table was a mound of marijuana and several rolled joints, one smoldering in a marble ashtray.

Mary took a sip.

"Remarkably refined."

Eva took a hit, held her breath, and coughed out, "Yes, remarkably refined with an awesome balance of power, elegance, and dirty socks." They cracked up.

Mary asked, “How do you come up with that shit?” She reached for the joint. “I mean, just like that. That is so cool.” She sucked the pot smoke into her lungs and held it.

“Have bullshit, will travel,” Eva said, then took the joint back and hit it again. She pinched her words out while still holding her breath. “It’s what I do for a living. I have my own consultancy business, you know.” She blew out a pungent plume as Mary leaned down and laid her head in Eva’s lap.

“You’re amazing,” she said. “How?”

“I owe it all to Canada,” Eva said, “and the marvelous Stony Mountain Correctional Institution for Women.”

“I think I’ve heard of that place,” Mary yawned.

“Why, I do believe I did see you there,” said Eva, “in the shower, if I’m not mistaken. And I said to myself, ‘Self, look there at that pretty girl. I think I must have her.’” She giggled, gave Mary’s breast a squeeze, then said, “Wow, this is some good weed. Good score, Baby.”

“Smells like dirty socks to me,” Mary giggled as she rose onto an elbow for another gulp of wine. “But I’m glad you like it. Actually, my dear lady, I find it to be . . . robust with a tinge of whimsy.”

Eva laughed. “Hey, not bad. Not bad. See, you can do it. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah. When I saw that they were offering courses, I decided to take computer science.”

“I remember that,” said Mary, “but how did . . . I mean . . . what did that have to do with—”

“Everything,” Eva cut in. “In no time at all, unbeknownst to the RCMP, I became a whiz with Adobe’s Creative Suite. That would have been CS6 back then,” she said.

“Which means?”

“Oh, God, I could create websites, resumes, documents, and any kind of counterfeit credentials I could dream up. I didn’t actually make those things till I got back to the U.S., but I learned how, you know?”

“What?” Mary was nodding off.

“So, I came back to Missouri and snagged Finley—that was an easy one. I made him fall in love with me while I was in his dentist’s chair. You believe that? I wrote him a poem, and he flipped.”

“What?”

"I had him buy me a computer, then I developed my own website as a business consultancy firm."

"I hate your dog."

"I started getting calls the next day, the very next day." Eva nodded with pride. "Of course, it was a great looking website, if I do say so myself, and I had some wonderful quotes from companies that I took credit for saving. The thing is," she paused for another draw on the joint and continued with an exhaled stream of smoke, "I'm actually very good at it."

Mary yawned again.

"Okay." She mumbled something about something, and then turned her head into Eva's abdomen.

"What you do," Eva continued, "is you have meetings with the CEOs. You listen to them like you think their problem is totally unique but that, like, you get it." She took another hit of smoke and blew it out. "You're the only one who understands them, and you make them believe that, with just a few tweaks here and there, boom—problem solved, issue resolved." She leaned over Mary for her glass of wine.

Mary groaned and mumbled.

"Well, that's the easiest part," Eva said, answering a question that wasn't asked. "You talk to the employees. They always know what needs to be done. Hell, *everybody* does. But to cover their ass, management hires me to have someone to blame if things go south. Nine out of ten times, there's some lowlife supervisor stifling initiative, making people's lives miserable, and smothering innovation. Boom! Get rid of that guy. Replace him with the guy who's been there the longest, unless he's just an idiot survivor, in which case you find the sharpest guy out on the floor—it's not hard—case solved. Thank you very much. Well, there are variations, but . . . same theme almost every time. You know what I mean?"

No, Mary didn't. She was snoring. Eva raised her knees and toppled her onto the floor.

"What the fuck?" Mary howled and looked up. "Damn, Eva. Fascinating story. Thanks for sharing. You're a genius. I get it. When do I get my new car?"

"Be patient, Sweetie. Two more weeks, and we are home free, and there's nothing that that bastard, Detective Dick-breath-meyer, can do . . . bitch."

“No, you bitch.” Mary smiled.

“No, you bitch.”

“No, you bitch.”

“No, you bitch.”

Mary faded and started snoring again where she lay between the couch and the coffee table.

Eva poured the last of the four-hundred-dollar-a-bottle Sori San Lorenzo and raised her glass for a silent toast to her sleeping significant other.

“No, you bitch.”



TWENTY-ONE

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28

9:40 a.m.

The Grand Bluff City Hall was built in a time when architecture for government buildings was taken seriously, to look and feel monumental, with classic columns and eagles in the stonework. The first floor housed the public officials—the mayor, the city council, the council chamber, and a few bureaucratic agencies, such as the administrative and planning departments.

The second floor, with more standardized window patterns, was where the prosecuting attorney and the chief of police had their offices and where, in a small conference room, they had agreed to meet with Detective Ray Dieckmeyer, who was accompanied, at his request, by Dr. Christine Shepherd.

The prosecutor, Charles (Chuck) Fellows, a short but trim man with a black flat top, was not pleased with Ray these days, but, like Judge Greyfield, he had learned to respect the detective's grit.

"It's your show, Detective," he said.

Ray paced the office for a moment, then stopped.

"They're going to pull the feeding tube from Finley Bliss."

"In two days," the prosecutor said. He rose from behind his desk and walked around to lean against its front. "We heard."

"It's downright wrong," Ray said.

"Ray," the chief of police said, "it's signed, sealed, and as good as delivered. Deal with it." The chief, Tom Mattingly, was a pudgy man of sixty. He was standing near and looking out the window.

"Just hear me out," Ray prodded. "Dr. Shepherd is here to answer your questions."

There was silence as the prosecutor wriggled his butt onto the top of his desk where he sat and looked at the chief, who turned from the window. They gazed at each other and then back to Ray.

"We don't have any questions," Chief Mattingly said.

Ray turned to the doctor.

"Dr. Shepherd, how long has Finley Bliss been in a coma? Not long, right? I mean, by medical standards?"

Christine cleared her throat and responded, "Well, it's not the length of the coma so much as what part of the brain was, or is, damaged."

"But he could regain consciousness at any time, right?"

"It's not inconceivable," she said.

Ray turned to his bosses with a "told you so" nod. They remained unreceptive.

"Those are medical considerations, Ray, not legal," Fellows said. "I don't know what you expect here today."

"Well," said Ray, "if we could get this guy to talk—"

"That's not likely," interrupted the doctor.

"Why not?" Ray asked, disappointed.

"Because," she said, as though it needed no explanation, "he's in a coma."

"But you just said—"

"I said it's not inconceivable that he could regain consciousness. That doesn't mean he'll be able to talk, or even remember anything, if he does," Christine said.

Ray had been counting on the doctor to make a case for saving the poor man's life, but she had just thrown them both, Finley and him, under the bus. Christine read his mind.

"Look, Detective," she said, "people have been known to come out of comas after years. Yes, it *is* possible. But even if he woke up today, brain damage changes a person forever."

"Like how?" Ray wanted to know.

"It's not uncommon for negative traits to become amplified and turn into explosive aggression. TBI victims often become hostile, sometimes very violent."

"I think he's got every right to be," Ray said. "I would be."

Chuck Fellows spoke up.

"None of this matters though, does it, Doctor?"

She met his eyes. "Pardon?"

"You're talking about how his personality will change in the future. If he doesn't wake up in two days, he has no future." He looked at the detective. "That's a settled issue, Raybo. Sorry, man."

The chief had a question.

"Were you able to find any other relatives?"

Ray shook his head.

"He was an only child. Parents were killed in a motorcycle accident when he was twenty-two."

"So the wife is legal proxy," said the prosecutor. "It's her call."

"Come on, you guys. You don't smell a rat? Think about it again. Why would the burglar rob the place bare-handed, leave prints all over the house, then put on a glove just before he meant to leave? Hmm?"

The prosecutor rolled his eyes. Here we go again.

"You tell me, Ray. You tell me. You're the detective."

"Because," said Ray, "*he's* not the one who fired the gun that killed, I mean shot, Finley Bliss."

"But he is the one—the only one—whose prints were in that glove," the chief said, "and that glove *did* fire that gun. Forensic Evidence 101, Ray. Shit! And the wrist and ankle bruises you say were on Bliss. Did you get even one picture of those? No!"

Ray shook his head, disgusted.

"The M.E. ran the camera guy off so he could resuscitate the victim. Seemed a little more important at the time," he said with dispirited sarcasm.

"And what about the Penske rental truck?"

"It was all bogus—license, credit card—"

"A counterfeit credit card?" the prosecutor shrieked. "And it *worked*?" He swallowed hard.

"That's what brought the feds in," Ray said. "Scary, huh? But did that dead guy look like a tech wizard?"

Blank stares. Ray shook his head with dismay.

"So, we're just going to let them pull the plug and waltz away with his estate worth millions? Is that the plan?"

Christine's eyes turned to observe how the head honchos would respond to the tenacious detective, but Fellows's gaze strayed to her.

"Doctor," he said, "do you have anything else to say?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Thanks for coming in. Raybo, I'm sorry, buddy, but there isn't a damned thing I can do." His eyebrows arched in a silent plea for understanding. "Go get drunk. Go to the fitness center. Workout or something. You need to get past this." He turned to the chief. "Thank you, Chief Mattingly, for your time."

The meeting was over.



TWENTY-TWO

On the other side of the river, Finley had been busy weaving cattail leaves again, this time into a rope, which he figured now to be about twenty feet long.

His idea was to tie one end to the big tree near the water and anchor the other end with a stone. If he could repeat this process, adding extra length to his chain of twisted fiber each time, logic dictated that at some point he would end up across the river.

He found stones heavy enough, about the size of a basketball, but how would he keep the rope attached to the rock? He would have to weave a bag for each stone.

That's ridiculous, the voice deep in his brain bellowed, *and it would require an ungodly amount of time.*

"Then we'd better get started," Finley said.

He wondered if the concept of time in Foglandia was one of importance. He decided that it was. When someone is trying to kill you, time, as a period of existence, would indeed be important and warrant haste in efforts to change that outcome.

The problem, accepting that he was in a different space/time continuum, was that he could not know how time on this side of the river could be measured against time in the outer world. How does one quantify what may or may not be circular or may or may not be linear? There were no reference points—no day, no night—only the river on one side, the forest on the other, and fog and more dang fog everywhere.

So why would it matter how long it took to weave the baskets to hold his boulders? Maybe it would. Maybe it wouldn't. Since it was the only thing now that he could think of to do, he did it, hoping that time here was non-dimensional.

Nor was he sure how many times he would have to weave a rock-holding bag to get his plan to work. Why make more than one, though, until the principle of the idea could be proven workable?

He held the bag open on the ground and nudged a large basketball-sized stone into it. Then he interlaced the loose ends of the rope with the fabric of his bag and stood up.

The plan was to drag it up the river to where his raft had failed and to use that tree as the pillar for his main tether. If his rope held together, and the bag was strong enough to hold the rock, there was a chance the plan would work, and he would weave more rope and more bags as required.

He grabbed the loose end of the rope and stepped backwards to pull its length out straight. Once it was taut, he decided to continue backing up to tug the stone along the shore. This way he could keep his eye on things, to avoid any snagging of the bag on a jagged rock or whatever and gauge its strength.

As he passed the path he had seen before but decided to ignore, the rope and the bag were holding together surprisingly well. "Optimally," was the word that came to his mind. He gave only a passing glance to that damned path that led off into the woods to somewhere or nowhere. He didn't want to think about it, but somehow it irked him.

When he reached the big tree where the river seemed slower, he remembered that calmer water probably meant deeper. *Still waters run deep*, he heard the voice say. Well, he could at least test the merit of this latest idea.

He tied the loose end of the rope around the trunk, then knelt down and slid his hands and forearms under the bagged rock.

With a hefty grunt, he straightened back up, holding the boulder in his arms. He inched his way into the water with careful steps—didn't want to slip—and waded in up to his knees, then to his waist, which was as far as his makeshift rope would allow.

Gently, he let the rock slide from his arms and into the deep. If this worked, he would use the first rope to add a second, then a third, and so on, till he could pull himself across the river.

Not bloody likely, the inner whiner said in a pathetic British accent.

In a heartbeat, he realized that the idea had been ridiculous. Underwater, the rock bag broke loose and, on the surface, the loose end of the rope of cattail leaves started to float away with the current. Finley grabbed it, pulled his way back to the tree, and crawled onto the bank.

He collapsed into a sitting position, wrapped his arms around his knees, and stared at the water.

“Not bloody likely.” He shook his head and wondered what to do. “Who else but me gets an F in basket weaving?”

Then something on his leg caught his attention. It was a lesion on the side of his thigh.

“Now what? How’d I get that? It was the dumbest idea I ever had anyway,” he said as he examined the sore. Suddenly, he heard a voice—a man’s voice.

“Hello, in there. Anybody home?”

Was it the annoying voice that grumbled snide remarks from some distant cave in his brain? No, it was not. This voice had come through the fog from the other side of the river. He was sure of it.



TWENTY-THREE

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29

11:10 a.m.

Detective Ray Dieckmeyer pulled up one of the metal folding chairs and seated himself beside Finley's bed.

"Knock, knock. Finley?"

He studied Finley's gaunt appearance, then looked around the room and shook his head with revulsion.

"Good Lord. Why didn't she just check you into a crack house?"

He noticed the two other patients—same set up as Finley—percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (P.E.G.) tubes under the sheets, inserted directly into their stomachs. He knew about this, but was glad he couldn't see it. The thought made him queasy.

"Yoo-hoo, Finley! Can you hear me, buddy? Knock knock. It's Ray Dieckmeyer. Can I come in?" He waited and watched and watched and waited for . . . nothing.

He put his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, and wondered why he was even there. He closed his eyes. He knew. He knew why he was there. He felt guilty, that's why. He had botched this case, and he wanted to apologize personally.

When he opened his eyes, he saw a cockroach casually crossing over his shoe.

"Oh, for God's sake." He kicked his foot, got up from the chair, turned, and walked to the window.

"I sure have lots of questions for you, Finley, about what happened to you," he said, staring out the grimy glass at the river some 300 yards below. "Questions like: Why you were lying in your own urine?"

He went back over the scene in his head as he had done a thousand times.

"I think I know by the bruises you had, but how did you shoot the big bald guy? And who was that guy? We still haven't found out. Can't seem to get an ID on him. Lost records, damaged files—something like that. Who knows?" He turned back around. "We're thinking he wasn't American. Whatever." He shrugged. "So what? Right?"

Ray walked back past the ebony-skinned man and reseated himself.

"I'm afraid I let you down, partner." He sighed. "I'm sorry. When they pull those tubes, you're just going to flat-out starve to death."

He took another guilt-ridden breath and stared up at the discolored ceiling. Then, on a hunch, Ray decided he should take a peek under the sheet after all. If he was going to commiserate with the guy, he might as well see it all.

He took the edge of the sheet and raised it up. Then he wished he hadn't. Huge bedsores shocked and sickened him.

"Oh, shit, good God, have mercy!"

He leapt from the chair and returned to the window. He stared out at the river.

"Damn, Finley."

He stayed silent for nearly two minutes, then, checking his watch, felt the need to take another deep breath. What was with the air in this room? Had they found a way to skimp on that?

"My boss says the case is closed. I say there are loose ends, and, if there's anything I've learned about loose ends, it is this: that's where evil hides."

He studied the river below and watched a half-submerged, rotting wooden doghouse float by.

"Yup. Evil hides in loose ends. Did you know that? Like that river out there. Evil can just dive in and float away without a trace . . . in the river of loose ends." He thought about that a few seconds. "And I'll tell you

something, Finley,” he said as he turned again to see the three patients, “I can recognize evil the minute I see it. It works through charm, doesn’t it?”

He walked back to the middle bed, Finley’s.

“You probably didn’t know that, did you? I bet you know it now, though. I bet you know it now. Evil’s number one M.O. is charm. Am I right? Tell me if I’m wrong.”



On the other side Finley nodded affirmatively as he remained seated in the mud by the big tree.

“Charm and drugs,” he said. “Jugo.”

“I just wanted to come by and introduce myself,” he heard Ray say, “and wish you luck. I’m afraid I’ve done all I can do, at least till . . . well . . .”

Finley heard the door open.

“I’ll be watching the paper,” Ray said. “Godspeed, Doctor Bliss.”

Finley sprang to his feet, infuriated.

“The *paper*? For my obituary you mean! Thanks for nothing, Detective.”

The portent of the sound of the door closing shut was a wrecking ball to Finley’s spirit, and he would have launched into a screaming rage and pounded his fists against the tree and kicked gravel into the air, but what would be the point? He was tired. He was defeated. He would die here.

What would that feel like? What would it *be* like? How would he know when it happened? Would he see death coming like a falling star? What should he do until then? Just sit back down, watch the river, and wait?

He sat back down. He watched the river. He waited. He hated waiting for anything. Always had. But the work he put into that stupid rock and cattail leaves idea, totally fruitless, had left him drained physically and mentally. He unfolded his body and lay back, looking up to where he wished he could see a sky. Some white fluffy clouds—that would be nice. Or stars, if it were dark—the Milky Way.

He contemplated his weariness and deduced that, in a battle or in a race, the loser, with the added weight of defeat, would axiomatically be more depleted than the winner. Would there be a winner in this case?

Eva? What could she hope to win? He'd already given her everything, anything she wanted. How could anybody want more than anything they wanted? Was it the life insurance—what—two million dollars? Why?

He managed to sit up. It was a strain to get back on his feet, but he wanted to trudge back to his hut, crawl inside, and go blank.



7:20 p.m.

Ray Dieckmeyer had a conundrum of his own. He was sitting at the bar in the Brass Beaver, drinking Jack Daniels to ease the load of his own despondency. It wasn't just the Bliss case. There was something else.

He should have been home with his girls, he knew that, but lately his own house had become too strange a world to feel . . . well, at home in.

He knew also that he was becoming way too much like a stereotypical TV detective—a dark, brooding character consumed by the case, battling the evil that the system ignores, while brushing off his own human failings.

He wondered if maybe he was suffering from the physical or psychological symptoms of male menopause, if there was such a thing. He hoped there wasn't—that he was just going through a weird phase—but, lately, he seemed depressed all the time.

The Jack Daniel's helped for about forty-five minutes, then he looked into the mirror behind the bar and shook his head with disappointment. He didn't like himself. Hell, he didn't *understand* himself.



TWENTY-FOUR

In his hut, Finley awoke with his mind working on something. As he tapped his temples with his fingertips, his eye shot low and to the right as he tried to remember what the old black man had told him before disappearing, the guy who looked like—who was it—James Earl Ray? No, that wasn't it. James Earl . . . Jones, that was it, the actor. Was he still alive? Anyway. What was it exactly that James Earl told him? *Don't be afraid to explore different paths.* Yes. Yes, he was pretty sure those were the old guy's exact words, but, at the time, he had been more concerned with getting left behind than with taking notes.

Now, his eye darted up and to the left as he tried to figure what that statement meant, if anything. The rest of the words dripped in as though from a leaky faucet. *You. Might. Have. To. Go. Back. A. Ways.*

He crawled out of his shelter, grabbed his walking stick, and headed back up river, this time keeping his eye peeled for that path. Why hadn't he thought about this till now? The guy had actually used the words "different paths." He had spotted it twice before on separate failed expeditions, and both times the sight of it had taunted him.

Well, nothing clears the mind like a lack of options. The path went in the opposite direction of the river he was supposed to cross, but what did he have to lose? He was no longer afraid. At least he hoped he wouldn't be when he found it, *if* he found it, that trail, if it was still there. Why wouldn't it be?

"Don't be afraid," he quoted the man to himself, "to explore different paths. You might have to go back a ways." That's what the man—

There it was—the mouth of the path that led from the riverweeds into an entangled thicket, then on into the enshrouded woods.

Finley gaped fearfully, then recalled that the man had added a third sentence to the other two. *You should be able to find what you need.* He hated that one.

"Should be," he grumbled. "*Should* be, but maybe not?"

He could have gone into a tirade about all the things in life that should be but bit his tongue, realizing that it was just his fear wanting to pick a fight with nothing. His scaredy-cat, chicken-shit, sissy-boy brain was stalling, trying to put off taking the first step. More song lyrics popped into his brain—"far from the peaceful shore"—a line in a religious song from his youth.

From the safety zone to the danger zone—it's an easy crossover if you're high on jugo. Wouldn't it be nice if they made courage pills? Not like alcohol or narcotics, but a pill that could give a guy a clear head of confidence. What was there to lose? Fear be damned.

"Let's go find out what 'back a ways' means," he said and forced his right foot onto the path. And then his left.

It was slow going at first, each step shaky, apprehensive, but he was doing it. He was wandering off the reservation, and he started to feel a sense of pride sidle up alongside the fear.

"I'm doing it. Look at me. I'm exploring. I'm marching boldly into the new frontier, fraught with unknown perils and—"

Spare me, please, the voice in his brain wailed.

"No, *you spare me.*" He picked up the pace till he reached the tree line beyond the riverbank's brush and then stopped. He could still see the river from this point, but a few steps further would put him inside the back country. A tipping point. Testicular fortitude. That's what he lacked, he knew, and yet, now, Finley forced his feet forward and stepped into the murky wilderness. He was fed up with fear. Sick and tired of it.

That cloying voice, though, was now in the panic room—pounding buttons, throwing switches, and barking orders. *Stop, turn around, run back to the river!*

No. His determination had gotten a toehold and managed to step into the alpha position, becoming dominant. Suddenly it was honor over dread, and it was an exhilarating sensation, one that he knew he would never forget. He had never listened to that nettlesome voice anyway. Why start now? Fear may be a lifesaver in some situations, but in most cases it was a disabler, a crippler.

Thinking about this transformational moment, he followed the path until he saw something so astounding he froze in his tracks, his heart literally skipping a beat. It was a clearing. In that clearing was a yard. In that yard was a house.

His mouth fell open. He dropped his stick. Both hands rose to cover his mouth as he gasped in awe. Recognition was immediate and powerful, with absolutely no doubt. He was looking at the house he grew up in. That's where he was—*home*.

What could this mean? he wondered, but didn't care, as he stepped into the clearing and started for the house.

In amazement, he studied the modest two-story, white, aluminum-sided structure. Walking reverently, slowly, across the yard, he surveyed the green shingled roof, the large wooden porch, the gray shuttered windows, the attached garage, and—a lump materialized in his throat—the black basketball hoop above the garage door. It was orange when his dad brought it home, but Finley himself had spray painted it black. He couldn't remember why.

"Oh, God, oh, God," he whispered as he stepped onto the porch and up to the door. Now what?

Should he ring the bell? The button was right there. Should he knock? He'd never knocked before, never in his life. What if no one was home? That would be sad. He could go in and wait, and maybe they'd be home later. But how could that be? They were dead.

Finley reached for the doorknob, gave it a twist, and pushed his way in.

Everything looked exactly as it did when he was sixteen, but he saw no one. His heart started to sink, then . . . there she was, his mom, coming down the stairs with a plastic basket of laundry. So common, so awesome.

Instinctively, he covered his right eye with his hand to shield her from the horror, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Hi, Fin," she said. "How was school?"

His mother's beautiful normalcy astounded him—a thirty-something, dark-haired homemaker doing laundry, asking about school, as though his whole life, from high school on, had been a dream, and he had just awakened at the front door of his house at age . . . what was his age?

She passed him on her way to the laundry room, then stopped to wait for an answer.

"What is it, silent day?"

"What?" Finley asked, his voice dry and raspy.

She turned. "I asked you how school was today."

"Oh, uh, well . . ."

His mom turned back then to face him. She sat the laundry load on the floor, concern blooming on her face.

"What is it, honey? Did something happen?"

Finley shook his head.

"No. Nothing. I hurt my eye."

"Oh," she said, classically motherly. "Let me see. Take your hand down. Let me see."

"No, it's not bad," Finley said, "but I need to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"How old am I? I mean, to you, right now?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," she huffed. "Your dad and I are perfectly aware of how old you are, but, honey, turning sixteen does not mean the world owes you a car. Let me see that eye."

"No. I mean, not now. I'm fine. Is he home? Dad?"

"He's in the garage. Did somebody punch you? Were you in a fight?"

Finley knew this wasn't possible, but it was so, *so* perfectly dead-on right and real.

"No, nothing like that," he said with a wave of his hand. "It's nothing." He stepped around her and headed toward the kitchen for the door that led to the garage. "You know I'm not a fighter, Ma. I'm a lover."

"You'd better *not* be a lover," she said. "Take those clothes on your way, would you? They're mostly yours, anyway."

“What?” He picked up the basket and gazed down. The shirt on top was his all right, or had been. He recognized it, then another and another—shirts he hadn’t seen in twenty-six years. Why would she still be washing his clothes?

He set the basket on top of the Kenmore dryer, next to the Westinghouse washer, then opened the door and stepped into the garage—the garage of his teenage years.

His Dad was kneeling by his pride and joy, the ’72 Harley-Davidson FLH 1200 Electra Glide, the same motorcycle that was in Finley’s garage in Lakewood Heights, rusted and mangled.

In this garage, though, it looked assembly-line fresh, the way it was supposed to look. The way his father kept it looking.

“Hey, Dad,” Finley said, wondering what his dad’s reaction would be. His father was as nonchalant as his mother.

“Hey, Fin, how’s tricks?” He didn’t even look up, but kept tinkering with a screwdriver in the motor, probably detailing the machine.

Finley wanted to run and hug him and tell him how much he had missed him and that he loved him and appreciated him for being such an outstanding parent. He had wanted to do that with his mother but realized that, in this setting, they would get suspicious by that kind of strange teenaged behavior, and he didn’t want to upset them.

Again, like in the house, the garage seemed perfectly right, perfectly normal, which for this garage meant orderly and immaculate.

His dad was the same age as his mom but slightly overweight, like Finley was, or used to be, and balding. So, so, so right.

“Uh, well,” Finley muttered, “I’ve got kind of a problem.”

His dad looked up.

“Big or little?”

Finley stepped down onto the garage floor.

“Well, it seems kind of big to me,” he answered.

“Alright,” his dad said, grabbing a rag. “Anything I can do to help?” He rose to stand and wiped his hands. “What’s up?”

If Finley told the truth, it might shatter the whole illusion. Who knew how fragile this encounter was? He was enjoying it so much that words could never, ever, describe the thrill.

Here he was visiting his dead parents, with no religion involved. He knew he was not in heaven, and he knew he was not in hell. He was home. He was sixteen years old and at home with his parents, whom the other kids used to mock as “the Cleavers.” Well, Wally and the Beave never had better parents than Finley A. Bliss. He had never realized that—never *thought* about it—till now.

On the other hand, what was he doing here? He was on a mission, right? That detective, what was his name, Dieckmeyer, had practically told him he was scheduled to be killed, and Finley had assured the mysterious old black man that he did not want to die. He still felt that way, more than ever now.

“I need to cross a river, Dad,” Finley finally answered.

To his surprise his father responded casually.

“How big a river? How wide? How deep?”

“I don’t know.”

His dad did not scoff.

“Okay, well, what’s the bottom like? Mud, rock, sand?”

Finley shook his head sheepishly. “I don’t know.”

Still his dad did not scoff, just kept cleaning his hands with the rag.

“Not much to go on, son.”

“I know.”

His father thought for a moment, then asked, “Any big trees nearby?”

“Yes,” Finley said, his heart delighted that he could give a positive answer. “Got that, yeah, a big tree, right on the bank.”

“Okay.” His Dad draped the rag over the handlebars. “Cut it down.”

Finley waited for more, but that seemed to be it.

“Right,” he said, nodding like it was a good idea. “Cut it down, and then?”

“You’ll want to whack into it, just so, so it falls across the river.”

Finley thought about that. It was an awesome idea, but . . .

“Uh, Dad? How would I do that exactly?”

Mr. Bliss pointed to his white styrene tool board, where every implement he owned hung in perfect order against its black painted profile.

“Use my ax.”

“Really?” Finley asked, surprised.

“Sure.”

Finley walked across the cement floor to the opposite wall, took the ax from its hook, and studied it, turning it over in his hands. He thought about that tree and imagined it crashing down through the fog across the river. Then he imagined it falling the wrong way. Then he looked up to his father and said, "You sure about this, Dad?"

"You'll have to do it just right."

"No, I mean . . ." He lowered his head for a moment, then looked into his Father's eyes. "I should tell you, I won't be able to bring it back."

His father gave a loving nod and smiled.

"I know." Then he winked and said, "Go save your life, son." He pushed a button on the chopper's dash. The garage door went up, and he jerked his head toward the opening. "Go do it, Fin. Hurry."

Finley looked out and across the yard of his youth, then back to his dad.

"Go," the father said. "Daylight's a-burnin'."

The son obeyed, ran out of the garage, across the yard, onto the rough, into the woods, and down the path that led back to the river.



TWENTY-FIVE

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30

4:30 p.m.

Over the years, the front lobby of Felicidad Health Care Center had been aesthetically maintained for the appearance of respectability. The grouted ceramic floor that Eva paced was clean. The limestone plaster walls had a warm pinkish pastel glow that anyone would assume to be indicative of the rest of the facility's interior.

As Eva checked her watch for the umpteenth time, Mary sat in one of the oak chairs across from the receptionist's counter and thumbed through a months-old edition of *People Magazine*.

The attorney, Anthony August, also seated, was conversing softly on his phone, trying to set somebody straight on something or other.

Eva didn't like it and halted at his chair.

"Excuse me," she said with mock politeness. "I have to ask. Are you working on another case while you're billing me for this time?"

The Felicidad phone rang as the lawyer spoke through his phone.

"Hold on a second." He looked up. "What would you have me do, Eva?"

"Something. How about that? Do something!" She checked her watch again. "It's going on five o'clock, for Christ's sake. Call Greyfield. Tell him his three o'clock order has been contravened, and we'll just have to have one of the nurses here pull the tube."

August told the party on the other end of his call that he would get back to him or her later, slipped his cell into his pocket, and said, "It has to be a doctor."

"Well, she's not here, is she?"

"Excuse me," said the woman behind the desk. "That was Dr. Shepherd who just called. She says she got held up. She's sorry, and she'll be here soon." It was a plump, red haired, freckled-face woman, about forty, who Eva thought should have stayed out of the sun, but it was too late now.

"How soon is soon?" Eva wanted to know.

"I don't know," said the woman.

"Stay frosty," Mary murmured.

"Right," August agreed. "Really. Stay cool, Eva."

She ignored them both and marched toward the hefty redhead behind the counter.

"Look, I've got a court order," Eva said. "You're a nurse. Do we really need a doctor just to pull a hose out of a man who's going to die anyway?"

The woman smiled with derision.

"I am not a nurse. I am a nurse's assistant."

"Oh, for—"

"I am also the housekeeping director. I am also the medical records director, the day-shift food services director, oh, and, as you can see, I am also the director of visitor relations." She tilted her head and arched her eyebrows, daring Eva to reply.

Eva declined. The woman returned her attention to her computer screen. August came up behind his client and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Eva, I know you're anxious to get this behind you. Lord knows Finley will be much better off too, but believe me when I tell you it is not prudent to make waves at this point or challenge the system even in the slightest."

She huffed and shook her head. Why did buffoonery follow her everywhere? All her life, she thought, nothing but idiots.

He gestured for her to take a seat.

"Please," he said. "A few more minutes?"

Eva stared at him, took a deep breath, then acquiesced. She sat.

Finley was standing in two feet of water, examining the tree he hoped to fell. It seemed to be weighted in his favor since its lean was toward the water. There was no wind factor to consider and no other trees or power lines to worry about, so he felt pretty good about his chances.

He had never felled a tree with an ax before, but he reminded himself that he was a smart man and so should be able to do it without killing himself. But if he did kill himself, he wondered if he would notice. What would change? His parents were dead, and they seemed fine.

His plan was to start with a forty-five-degree opening on the river side, the side he hoped the tree's falling direction would be.

Standing in the water, he would cut the bottom notch first, about one-third of the way through the diameter. Then, on the other side, the high side, the dry side, make a second cut at a forty-five-degree angle down to meet the depth of the first—the forward notch, if there were such a term. Forward notch, yeah. What else would you call it?

More to it than that? Sure, he knew there must be, but he was eager to get started on the forward notch. He waded into the river with his father's ax, pivoted around, and took his first swing.

He wanted a wielding style of *rhythm*, *power*, and *accuracy*. Those would be the three words to describe his technique. After his seventh swing, he realized those three words required discipline—the kind of discipline that he did not possess. Every whack he dealt landed mismatched from the one before, either in angle, height, or cut.

Precious energy was being squandered, but Finley reasoned that it would just take some warm-up time to get his move into the groove. *My motion hooked up with my notion.*

By his fiftieth swing, he collapsed to his knees, exhausted. He tossed the ax onto the bank, then leaned in to study his work.

It was a messy gash, but he had made some progress. The thing was, instead of having his first notch penetrate deep and narrow it was more the opposite—kind of shallow and wide.

He might have become discouraged but for the fact that his visit with his folks had buoyed his spirit more than he could have imagined. How

incredible it was that he got to see them. It was motivating.

He decided to learn from his chopping mistakes, slow down, and work more deliberately. Concentrate more on precision than forcefulness.

He replaced the words of his mission statement—*rhythm, power, and accuracy*—with one word: *efficiency*.

Yeah. That's the ticket. Efficiency.

4:50 p.m.

In the lobby of Felicidad Health Care Center, the plump, red haired woman picked up a phone to alert someone as she watched Dr. Shepherd come through the door and greet the Bliss party with apologies.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Bliss," Christine Shepherd said. "Emergency. I hope you understand."

Eva sighed her consternation while her attorney slid in smoothly.

"Of course, Doctor," August said. "What do we do now?"

They turned to the woman behind the desk, who was about to announce that someone would be right with them, when that someone entered from the hallway and held out a hand to introduce herself.

"I'm Sharon Jaras," she said, "the assistant director of nurses, and you are . . . Mrs. Bliss?"

"I am," Eva said, with no inclination to relay the introduction, "and I'm kind of pressed for time, Sharon, if you don't mind."

Nurse Jaras glared analytically at the rude wife, but again the attorney took over with an outstretched hand.

"Nurse Jaras," he said, "Anthony August. As you can imagine, Mrs. Bliss is under an enormous amount of stress—has been for months—and just wants an end to the misery of her ordeal and, of course, that of her husband's, his tragic situation being so pointlessly unresolved."

"Of course," the nurse nodded. She was a small, thin woman of fifty with a jet-black dye job and dark red lipstick.

The doctor cut in without offering her hand.

"Nurse Sharon *Jaras*, is it?"

"That's right."

"How do you spell that?"

"J-a-r-a-s. Why?"

"I'm Dr. Christine Shepherd. If you'll just show us the way."

A cloud crossed the nurse's face as she turned to lead the assembly through the door, into the recesses of Felicidad.

Eva and Mary had been here before, but Christine and August wondered if they had just stepped through a portal into another dimension.

The dark world on the far side of that lobby door was eerie. The poor lighting could not hide the fact that the only paint the walls had seen in years was from a spray can in the form of graffiti. The floor was tacky. The ceiling had crusty curls of plaster stalactites.

It was unnerving enough for Christine to stop and say, "Wait. When was this institution last inspected?"

The nurse kept walking. She knew the drill and casually spoke over her shoulder, "We do the best we can here, Doctor."

"I want to see the administrator immediately," Christine said as she resumed walking to catch up.

Nurse Jaras made a quarter turn, smiled professionally, and answered, "The administrator is at another of our homes in another state, I'm afraid."

"The D.O.N., then," Christine demanded.

"The director of nurses is scheduled to be here next Tuesday. If you'd like to wait?"

"No," Eva blurted. "*Wait?* Hell, no."

"Mrs. Bliss," Christine probed, "please tell me you did not see this place before you signed your husband in or . . . did you?"

"What's the difference?" Eva shot back. "So it's not the Ritz. So?"

"Do they even have therapy programs here or a stimulation agenda or rehabilitation—"

The Nurse interrupted. "Dr. Shepherd, I am a member of A.R.N." She arched her brows to wait for the assumed relevance to sink in, and then tilted her head with an expression that read, *so screw you*.

"I'm sorry," Christine said, "help me with that one, would you? A-R-N?"

Nurse Jaras was insulted.

"The Association of Rehabilitation Nurses? How could anyone not know that? And, yes, Doctor, I would love to be able to do more and provide more in the 'long-term care continuum,' but we have to follow the guidelines of the HCFA."

Christine remained silent.

"Need help with that one too?" Jaras asked. "The Health Care Finance Administration." She stopped at door number seven. "Mr. Bliss resides here in seven, but"—a stern pause—"there are two others in here as well."

It was an implied directive of some kind, Christine supposed, but she was more annoyed with Eva having not corrected the terse nurse. It wasn't Mister Bliss—it was *Doctor* Bliss. You'd think the poor man's own wife would have—

"Before I open the door, I must have everyone's assurance that this affair will be conducted with quiet and dignity."

Christine turned to Eva.

"Mrs. Bliss, are you sure you want to do this?"

Eva rolled her eyes.

"It should have been done long ago. Open the door, Nurse."

The nurse waited long enough to establish who it was that decided when doors got opened, then the five of them entered.

Again, the doctor and the attorney could not believe the wretched squalor.



Finley paused his chopping when he heard the voices come into his room and strained his ears to catch what he could. The first voice he recognized as his wife's who said, "That's Finley, in the middle. Could we make this as quick as possible, Doctor? It's breaking my heart."

"Yeah, right," Finley said to those who could not hear him.

"This is sickening," he heard the next voice say. It was Dr. Christine Shepherd. He had heard her voice before, but only in snippets, which he

could not recall other than . . . Wait. Yes, he did remember now. She was the doctor who, on several occasions, had called to him to come back.

"Come back, Finley," she had urged. "Come on. You can do it."

He remembered that this had been encouraging up to the point where somehow she caused extreme pain to his nipples and also to the bottoms of his feet. She had barely talked at all, but, when she did, he found he liked her voice. His attempts to comply, though, had failed.

He stepped onto dry land, leaned the ax against the tree, and sat on the gravel to take a breather but also to try to monitor what was going on over there, through the fog, on the other side.

4:57 p.m.

Dr. Shepherd stepped to the middle bed while glancing at the patients on the opposite sides—the ebony-skinned man near the window and the gray man on the other side against the wall, neither any better off than Finley.

As she raised the clipboard tied to the metal rail near Finley's feet, she asked, "Why is he here in this . . . hovel?"

"Don't start, Doctor," August intervened. "He's in a persistent vegetative state. This hovel, as you call it, is a member, in good standing, of the Midwest Association of Homes and Palliative Care, and my client, as his guardian, has the right to quarter him where she thinks best."

"There are new coma-recovery programs."

"None of which has provided any scientific documentation of success," Jaras asserted.

"That's not true," Christine said as she noticed the phone and the Bible on the table. "Who's the phone for?"

"Visitors," the nurse said, then forced a smile at Christine. "I don't want a conversation with you, Doctor."

"No, I'll bet you don't," Christine said, reading what was attached to the clipboard. "Where is the rest of his chart?"

The nurse's brow furrowed.

"That's it," she said.

"There's no mention of his regimen—his formula, the ratio of proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins." She looked up. "Little things like that." Her voice was sarcastic.

Nurse Jaras was not intimidated.

"It's the same as Ensure," she said. "Same thing. We make it ourselves so we can keep residency at Felicidad at an affordable price."

Christine squeezed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger.

"And everybody gets the same regimen as everybody else?"

"Doctor," August cut in, "am I going to have to call Judge Greyfield? Because I most certainly will."

"I'm about to demand that you all leave," the black haired, ruby lipped nurse warned, stabbing them with her eyes. "I have that authority. You're in my world now. It's a sad world. It's a short-handed world, but you will conduct yourselves with the solemnity befitting these gentlemen's honor."

The "Bliss party" nodded agreement—all but Christine, who shook her head, incredulous.

"If you have unresolved issues, take them somewhere else and get them settled," the nurse said. "Not here. Not now. Do you understand me?"

August answered, "No unresolved issues, Nurse." He turned to Christine. "Doctor, please. You have a moral and legal obligation."

Christine made her way to the side of Finley's bed where she raised the sheet then winced at the sight of his long-ignored, scaly body.

"Just as I suspected," she said. "My God!"

"Excuse me, Doctor?" the nurse challenged.

Christine ignored her, and went quiet for a moment. She was thinking that this was the second time she had stood by this man's bedside to terminate his life. She wondered what kind of man he was, or had been, then forced herself to snap out of it.

"The procedure is simple," she said. "I'm going to deflate the balloon that holds the P.E.G. tube in his stomach, then simply withdraw it from the abdominal wall." To shock them—because, by God, they needed shocking—she threw back the sheet for all to see.

August and Eva turned away, aghast.

Finley's body, once 230 pounds, was barely more than a hundred.

Mary's eyes were riveted with gallows curiosity until she saw the tube get slowly pulled out of his abdomen. Then she threw up.

Christine's eyes locked with Nurse Jaras's then. Nodding to the vomit on the floor, she said, "I doubt anybody will notice."

The nurse just glared.

"Is he . . ." Eva was choking back her tear-sodden grief, ". . . is he gone now? My sweet, funny husband?"

"Gone now?" asked Christine as she discarded the tube into a wastebasket. "Gone now?" She studied the woman. "Are you going to wait until you're sure he's *gone*?"

"I should, shouldn't I?"

"Would it be all right?" asked August. "It's her last request, you know, to be with him during his dying moments."

"Better make yourselves comfortable then," Christine said. "Your husband won't be comfortable but . . . whatever. Your court order has been effectuated, so let me explain what's next."

Neither Eva nor August liked the sound of that. Mary was nauseous and sat in one of the metal chairs near the table.

"It is likely that in the next seven to fifteen days he'll go into seizures as he loses the fluids in his body."

"Seven to fifteen *days*?" Eva sniveled. "What?"

"His skin will crack. His tongue will crack. His lips will crack, and he will probably have nosebleeds and vomiting as his mucus membranes and his stomach lining dry out."

"Oh, Doctor, *really*," August tried to interrupt.

"His blood pressure will drop, which will cause his heart rate to go up and shunt most of his blood to his heart and other organs from the peripheral parts of his body. You'll know when he's only got a few days left." She paused for effect. "His hands and feet will turn cold and blue." She stared into speechless faces. "Any questions?"

Mary threw up again. Nurse Jaras looked away. August and his client stared back at Christine.

"Seven to fifteen *days*?" Eva moaned, her aggravation blatant. Buffoonery. More buffoonery.



Finley was devastated.

"I'm being killed *again*?" He leaned against the tree and continued listening. Whose was the male voice, he wondered, that asked, "Is that normal?"

"For death by dehydration?" the doctor responded. "It normally takes one to two weeks. His fluids, like in his stomach lining, will have to dry up and—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Doctor," the man's voice protested. "This is a routine medical procedure that happens every day all across America."

Finley could not see Christine nod as she said, "I suspect it's also an extremely agonizing way to die."

Oh, great, Finley thought.

"Suspect whatever you want," the male voice castigated.

Finley correctly guessed that this voice must be that of his wife's lawyer, whom he could envision now turning to console her, the poor dear. *There, there now. This too shall pass.*

"Don't listen to her," the lawyer said. "She's got an agenda. Probably writing a book or something. Rest assured that a cognitively disabled person—your husband—has no feelings whatsoever."

Finley leapt up angrily.

"No *feelings*?" he shouted. "No *feelings*? I've got feelings, you freaking shyster. And as for you, Eva, I'm across the river for now, but I'm coming. I swear to God, I am coming for you, and I swear to God that retribution is at the top of my new to-do list."

It didn't sound very scary, he realized, but she couldn't hear him anyway. He knew what he meant, and he could have planned her punishment right then, but that would be a foolish use of his time and energy.

He would use the rage for ax wielding. He grabbed it, waded back around to the water side of the tree, and resumed his chopping, ignoring the voices.

He did not hear Nurse Jaras order everyone out of the room and tell them that his vital signs would be checked hourly and the appropriate phone calls would be made when the time came.

He had no way to track time, but Finley was aware now that, even on this side of the river, time was definite, and it was passing. One measure, he sadly realized, was the degrees by which his thirst was growing, little by little, getting bigger and bigger.

It occurred to him that he would be the perfect guy to do a Gatorade commercial. If he could have just one swig, he would say wonderful things

about that product. He would stick with the original Gatorade, not the orange or the red or the blue. No, the original green. That's the ticket. On the other hand, he thought, if the sponsor insisted that he sing the praises of one of the other flavors, the orange, for instance, he could do that. Sure. Why not? And he would do it convincingly, too, if he could just have a sip, just one little sip.

He stopped swinging for a moment as he realized the Gatorade would not be coming. Dear God, he was thirsty.

As Finley chopped, he tried to engage his mind with his to-do list—things to do when he got back to the real world. Not the grim things. The other things, like buy a chainsaw. He would do that for sure. He wondered if his dad had ever owned one. He couldn't remember ever seeing one.

What else would he buy? Something for his beautiful bull terrier, Rammy. *Oh, Rammy. You probably think I've abandoned you, don't you boy. No, you know me better than that.*

He wondered why he'd never had children. Although he had gotten better at talking with women by the time he turned thirty, and actually did date some of them, he always felt like a geek, like the nerd who could never say anything that didn't sound goofy, even to him. He would have liked to have had a son or a daughter, but when he started gaining the weight and losing the hair, he consigned himself to the theory that some guys just weren't marriage material, and he was one of those.

But then, one day, this incredibly beautiful woman had declared that they were soul mates. It happened right there in the chair at the Bliss Family Dental Clinic.

He wasn't sure he believed in the soul mate concept, but, gosh darn it, the poor lady was so head-over-heels in love with him she even wrote him a poem—a beautiful love poem. Eventually he succumbed to her charms and gave in to all her romantic notions.

He realized one day that, if there were such a thing as love, this was as close to it as he'd ever felt with any woman, and, since she was more than willing, he decided to marry her.

He hoped they would have kids. He thought they would.

That was Eva.

“Evil Eva,” he spat out loud as he took another swing of the ax. “Evil Eva.” Whack, whack, whack.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1

5:15 p.m.

Christine was working on notes for an upcoming lecture when her doorbell rang. It was Detective Ray Dieckmeyer. His first words, like those of most first-time visitors, were “Wow, nice place.”

She knew that. She had picked it out and bought it with her hard earned money because she had always wanted a nice place—a traditional Beverly colonial with giant rooms. What did they want to hear? *Yes, it's too nice for the likes of me, but, since I'm an acclaimed neurologist, the real estate agent pushed me into it.* She opened the door.

“Thanks. Would you like to come in?”

“Just for a second,” Ray said. “I was wondering if you'd heard anything about the Bliss case.”

Christine shook her head.

“No. There'd be no reason really.” She led the detective into her massive home office. “If he's not dead yet, my understanding is that Oak Hill Funeral Home will get the call.” She gestured toward a chair. “Sit down.”

Ray flipped out his small notebook and wrote.

“Oak Hill Funeral Home,” he repeated as he lowered himself into an Old Hickory Tannery leather chair. “Then the feeding tubes were withdrawn?”

Christine leaned against her desk, her palms cupped around the edge.

“Two days ago.”

He made a note of that, then looked up and noticed curiosity on the doctor's face. He smiled, “What?”

“Just wondering,” she said. “Are you like the detectives on *Law and Order*, or do you have a life?”

He smiled.

“If I could work just one case at a time like those guys, maybe I would have a life.” He shook his head and rubbed his chin. “I wish I could deny that I fit that stereotype,” he said. “I've been thinking about that.” He shrugged. “But what are you going to do? People shouldn't get away with murder.”

"Got family?"

He looked at the walls.

"A wife and two daughters. My wife's a public school teacher. It's made her insane. Literally. I mean she's . . . well, I love her, but she's nuts." He inspected his fingernails. "My girls are in high school at St. Dominic's, but please don't ask me about that—the girls, I mean. Good God. I should be home right now, but those . . . what's the term for . . . ?"

"Teenage girls," Christine supplied. "Enough said."

"I swear I'm going to end up having to arrest both of them someday."

"So your escape is working on the Bliss case?"

"You're familiar with the term 'having a screw loose,' like somebody's crazy, right?"

Christine nodded.

"We back to your wife?"

"No," Ray said. "It's me. This case. That's how it feels, like a loose screw in my head, and I can't tighten it down." He ran his fingers through his hair. "If those women get away with this, that screw is going to fall out."

"Then what happens?" she asked, smiling. He'd never seen her smile before.

"You tell me. Can a man function with a missing screw?"

"Lots of things get by just fine with a missing screw," she said. "Maybe it'll help you relate better with your daughters."

Ray laughed. "They're missing more than screws, I'm afraid." He looked at the carpet. "You'd like to think that most crimes are solved through investigative skill and diligence on the part of the police, wouldn't you?"

Christine pursed her lips and nodded to relay that, yes, that made sense.

"The truth is, it's usually because the bad guys slip up somewhere—make a mistake. Oh, they made some, those vixens did, don't get me wrong, but nothing I can put in a box, you know?" He scrutinized his shoelaces.

"Another thing," she said, "and this is none of my business, but when I was in the prosecutor's office with you, you guys hadn't identified the dead man that Dr. Bliss shot. I was just wondering."

Ray raised his head and rolled his eyes.

"This is a good one," he chortled. "Yeah, we found out. Oh, yeah. After striking out with the NCIC, the WOIA, and the LEAC, the INTERPOL

data base finally matched our guy's prints to one Catherine Cunningham, currently serving seven years at Dochas Center in Dublin, Ireland." He shook his head. "Can you believe that?"

Christine gave the appropriate dubious expression.

"So we're all relieved at the department that we got that one solved."

"Identical prints?"

"Shame on you, Doctor, for even imagining such a thing." He winked.

"Fingerprinting isn't infallible then?"

Ray shook his head.

"But that's a secret, okay?"

Christine twisted an air key to lock her lips.

"Well, sorry to bother you," Ray said as he rose from his chair. "I was just wondering about poor Finley Bliss." He walked back toward the front entrance.

"No bother at all," Christine said as she followed. "By the way, technically he's still my patient till he dies. I could check on him, but I think we're both going to have to let this one go, Detective." She opened the door.

Ray stepped out onto the porch, stared down at his shoes, and muttered, "Yeah, you're right." Then he just stood there.

Christine stepped out, rose up on her toes, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Go save the rest of the world, Detective. Better yet, go home and save *your* world. Surprise your wife and kids with some ice cream. My sister and I used to love that."

"Thanks for your time, Doctor." He handed her his card.

"Sure," Christine said. She took the card, then stepped back into the house. Ray finally turned and walked to his car.



Finley had weakened considerably, and, for the first time, he thought he noticed a difference in the lighting, as though the sun was setting after all.

The notch in the tree was roughly how he had planned it—the bottom cut about one-third through, and the top cut angled down to meet the first. It was good.

If he could muster the strength, he would climb back onto the bank and cut another notch just a little higher on the dry side of the tree, the idea being to leave a hinge in the middle.

He crawled onto the bank and fell flat on his back. It felt good not to move. His body ached all over—his muscles, nerves, bones, and joints—everything hurt. Everything was starving. Everything was dying for water. Dying for lack of water.

He wanted to lie there and not move, just rest, but as his eye stared up he realized for certain that he was indeed losing light. The sun in foggy Finley-land was going down.

He rolled over, grasped the ax handle, and crawled to the point of the tree opposite his forward notch.

He forced himself to his knees, then to his feet, and began swinging with all the might he had, which was not much.



TWENTY-SEVEN

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8

5:55 p.m.

In the lobby of Felicidad, Nurse Jaras and the multi-titled redhead always enjoyed the arrival of the night-duty nurse who came on at 6 o'clock. While moaning and bitching were the woman's routine, they could never guess from one night to the next on whom her misery would be blamed.

Jaras would ask the same deadpan question, verbatim, every evening. "Arlene, is something wrong?"

On this Friday night, Arlene blamed herself.

"It's me," she said. "I'm insane." Norwegian looking, a buxom blond with pale eyes, she was thirty-nine years old, or at least claimed to be. "I can't believe I do this."

"Do what?" Jaras asked.

Arlene swept an arm around the lobby.

"*This*," she said. "I'm thinking about getting a position on a cruise ship."

"Oh, that would be nice," Jaras said, handing her the log containing the patients' records.

Arlene took the log and thumbed through the pages.

"Anything new?"

"Nope."

"Medications? Wounds to dress? Bodies to turn?"

"All done. Did you bring a good book?"

"Got an audio book on my iPod. Patricia Cornwell. Did you know she was gay?"

"I did," the hefty redhead said as she rose from behind her desk and dug through her purse for her keys. "I don't know how I know though; I've never read any of her books. Fiction seems like a waste of time to me. There are so many true things to read about, aren't there?"

"Oh, Arlene," Jaras said, "there is one thing. The DNR in seven. He's checking out tonight."

"What's the name?" Arlene asked, scanning the log.

"Bliss."

"The one-eyed guy. Oak Hill Funeral Home, right?"

"They're expecting the call. Check him every thirty minutes or so. We don't want rigor setting in before he's out of here. Administrator's orders."

"Got it," Arlene said as she yawned and went around to sit behind the reception desk. "Who is our administrator anyway?"

"Damned if I know," Jaras said. "Good night, Arlene."

"Good night, ladies," said Arlene. "Have fun with your normal lives."

As the day crew left, the night nurse pulled her iPod from her purse, hooked up her ear buds, and searched for the point in the story where she had left off. She found it, hit pause, then pulled a bottle of Mojito from her bag.



Finley was beginning to think that after everything—his basketball gymnasium experience, the encounters with the old black man, his fall to the river, and his existence here since then—it was all for nothing.

With as big a gash in the high side of the tree as he had strength to impose, the tree did not topple or even teeter, and the atmosphere was darkening fast. He let himself collapse to the mud, stretched his ulcer-infested legs, and leaned against the tree.

He thought about his parents. It had sure been great to see them. For some reason then he thought about the little girl who had been his patient

in the real world, Nancy Metzger, and her sorrowfully crooked teeth. His had never been that bad. He should have helped her. He should have said, "To hell with that contract with Laurel Labs, and to hell with the rules that say dentists can't do orthodontic work. That child needs help, damn it."

Then there it was—the rope he had fashioned by weaving cattail leaves together. He had left it coiled on the gravel bar. The bag had come loose, but he remembered that his rope held strong when he pulled himself back to the bank.

He looked at the rope, then at the tree. Yes! It wasn't perfect, and a low limb did reach out—not parallel with the water line, more like a forty-five-degree angle to it—so it could work. Maybe.

If he were about to make a fool of himself again, who would know? Who would care? And what did he have to lose but his life? He was going to lose that anyway by doing nothing, so why not do something? Go down swinging, as they say. In fact, *swinging* was exactly what he had in mind.

Finley took one end of his rope and tied it around a fairly large stick. With a little luck, he would catapult the stick over the limb, it would come back down, and the rope would be looped over the limb. He would have both ends in his hands.

With all the energy he could summon, he heaved the stick into the air.

It worked. The stick arched over the branch and came down exactly as he hoped. Barely able to stand upright now, he fashioned a slipknot, manipulated the stick through it, and pulled. The knot rose to the limb.

Now he had a swing, which, even as unworkable as it was likely to be, gave him another little spurt of adrenaline.

He backed up as far as the rope would allow, then ran to swing out over the river. He felt good about the distance he achieved forward, but not so good about the return as his body slammed against the tree.

"I will not give up," he said to no one. "I will do this till I die." On the second try, the same thing happened.

Before the third effort, which he calculated would be his last, he prayed.

"Please, God, please."

This time at the furthest point of the swing, the rope broke, plunging Finley into the water.

Assuming it was over, that he would drown and float out to the boundless sea, he gave up. Then things got worse.

He heard a violent cracking sound—the resonance of wood splitting—the unmistakable announcement that a large tree was coming down. He looked up. It was coming down directly onto him.

Even if he had any strength left, which he didn't, there was no escape. His notching calculations were proving accurate. The gigantic tree crashed upon the water with a thunderous impact right where Finley had meant it to fall. Then he disappeared.



TWENTY-EIGHT

Fighting with his last gram of responsiveness, he battled his way to the surface of the river and grabbed for a branch. He gasped for air and looked around. Still nothing but fog, but now neither end of the tree was visible. That was good, he reckoned. At least he had left his side of the river. It was disorienting though—difficult to discern which way was which. A tree falling on your head can affect your bearings.

Still, his father's idea was in play. He had felled that tree. Neurons of hope began to spark in his brain. Now to get out of the water and on top of his timbered egress.

“Get up on it,” he ordered himself.

He inched his way up, using every branch he could grab and every bough that would afford a foothold, until he was aboard.

He thought he was facing the right direction because the tree's trunk ahead seemed to taper a little. It was hard to tell, but there was no time for deliberation. It was getting dark, and he was tired of thinking—just plain tired of having thoughts or rationalizations or theories or notions or assessments or whatever. Hope? No, he wouldn't let that go. Not now. Not yet. Vengeance? He would hang on to that too, but it was go time. Now. Go or die time. Maybe both. He crawled carefully forward to maneuver his way between the branches. Across his branched log, through the fog, he caterpillared himself—bending, twisting, wriggling, squirming,

and scooting—till he departed from, and left behind, the wrong side of the river.

10:09 p.m.

In the Felicidad Health Care Center, the eye of the middle patient in room seven opened.

PART THREE



TWENTY-NINE

SAME DAY: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8

10:10 p.m.

In her home office, Christine clicked on “save.” She turned her bleary eyes from the computer screen, rose from her chair, stretched, and yawned. The lecture notes she was working on when the detective had stopped by—what, five hours ago?—had turned into something else—a full-fledged article for *Scientific American Mind*, a magazine she had promised a piece for over a year ago.

Her hypothesis was that the popular theory that the right side of the brain was creative and the left side logical was substantially flawed.

“The reality,” she wrote, “is that the right side of the brain was made to see the big picture while the left concentrated on details, thus creating a complementary division of labor. One side sees things in wide angle, the other, zoomed in for detail, sharing information with a million new connections every second.”

When the melody of “Fur Elise” pierced the silence, she looked around for her phone and then grabbed it.

“Hello?”

As she listened to the voice on the other end, she collapsed back into the chair.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s conscious,” she said, feeling a rush of excitement. She listened more, then sprang to her feet again.

"Are you sure?" she demanded. One second later she said, "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

10:33 p.m.

The night nurse, Arlene Gorski, did not see the headlights of the black Volvo XC90 as it parked at the front door because her eyes were closed. She was kicked back, her feet on the desk, in another world—the world of her Patricia Cornwell novel—the experience enhanced by several drinks of pre-mixed Mojitos.

Christine peered in and saw Arlene's feet on the desk. With her car keys, she thwacked on the heavy glass door.

Nearly half a minute later, Arlene finally raised her head and looked around. When she saw the woman banging at the door, she bolted upright, stared for a moment, then yanked the ear buds from her head. She paused her iPod, walked around the desk to the door, and pressed the talk button.

"Yes?"

Christine held up her official ID.

"Dr. Christine Shepherd," she said, assuming prompt admittance.

"What can I do for you, Doctor?" Arlene asked.

"I'm Finley Bliss's doctor. I told you I'd be here in twenty minutes." She dipped her head. "Well? Let me in."

Arlene blinked with confusion.

"You told me what . . . when? What?"

Christine had had enough.

"Let me in, *now*!"

Arlene buzzed the doctor in with her apologies.

"I'm sorry. We weren't expecting any—"

"You called my house."

"No, I didn't."

"Then who did?"

"Nobody from here, Doctor."

Christine leaned in and sniffed Arlene's breath.

"Oh, my God," she said, then brushed past the night nurse to open the hall door. Arlene followed.

"Where are you going?"

"To check on my patient."

"I was just going to do that," Arlene said.

"I'm sure you were," Christine said, treading down the dark hall. At room seven, she turned. "But maybe you had a little buzz going and forgot."

"What? No," Arlene said, "of course not." She reached past Christine to open the door. "But it is time to check the patients in this room, so if you'll excuse me."

"No."

Arlene felt thumped.

"Pardon?"

"I want to be alone with my patient."

"I'm sorry, but our policy—"

"I'll just be a few minutes."

Arlene didn't know what to do but remained resistant to allowing Christine to enter the room alone.

"The funeral home is expecting a call."

Christine leaned in and spoke softly.

"Nurse?"

Arlene waited.

"Do you really want to get deeper in shit than you already are, if you catch my drift?" She inhaled. "I'm certainly catching yours."

Arlene, mortified, humiliated, and guilty as sin, had no response.

Christine entered room seven and closed the door.

10:55 p.m.

When Christine stepped back into the lobby, Arlene was dutifully working at the computer, updating patients' records. She tried to act interrupted. She tried to read Christine's face. She tried to enunciate.

"Is everything all right, Doctor?"

"Not everything, no," Christine said. "You can make that call to the funeral home now."

"Oh. I'm sincerely sorry."

Christine nodded stoically.

"Make the call." She pulled her own phone from her jacket. "I've got a call to make too."

She set her purse on the receptionist's desk and reached in to search for a business card.

After finding it, she dialed the number, handwritten on the back, then grabbed her purse and pivoted back to reenter the underworld of Felicidad. At the threshold, she looked back.

"You may want to call your administrator and your D.O.N. too," Christine said as she opened the door. Then she spoke into her cell. "Guess who?"

Arlene was flummoxed.

"Call who? Why?" The door swung closed without an answer, just Christine's voice trailed away down the hall to hell.



THIRTY

11:23 p.m.

The neurologist watched as two “mortal remains transportation coordinators” (MRTC’s) zipped the body into a black TCP-1B disposable body bag. One of them was tall and thin, the other short and stocky. The stocky one said, “Feels like advanced rigor to me.”

“My guess—about six hours worth,” Christine said.

“*Six hours?*” Arlene gasped, gaping in from the hall. “No! That can’t be. Nobody told me. I came on at six. Nobody told me.”

Christine studied the bleary-eyed nurse.

“So there could be other dead bodies lying around here, but you wouldn’t know because nobody *told* you? When’s the last time an epidemiologist inspected these premises?”

Arlene could only gawk, open mouthed, till she cleared her throat.

“I called the assistant D.O.N. She’s on her way.” Her voice was weak and trembling. Her concern wasn’t entirely about how this might look on her record to the cruise ship employers. She was actually shocked that Finley had died before she had even come on duty. But that was good. It didn’t happen on her watch. But she hadn’t checked on him either. That was bad.

“The assistant director of nurses,” Christine said. “That would be the assiduous Sharon Jaras?”

Arlene nodded.

The transportation guys lifted their load onto a gurney, and then the tall one reached for Finley's chart.

"Finley Alan Bliss, check. Age forty-three, ch—" He stopped. "*Forty-three?* What the . . . ? Ninety-three, maybe."

Nurse Sharon Jaras arrived just in time to hear Christine say, "Coma patients lead a rough life in a place like this where, apparently, staph cellulitis is ignored."

Jaras charged in.

"Out! Get out of here now, Doctor, or I will call the police."

Christine leveled a chilling glare.

"Good evening, Nurse Jaras. Don't worry. I've already done that."

The eyes of the funeral home employees tennis-balled back and forth.

"You . . . you called the police? Why?"

"Because I suspect criminal negligence here," Christine said and then turned to the mortal remains transportation coordinators. "Sorry guys. You've got the wrong chart. My fault. I had to do some rearranging to get my patient hooked back up to a G-tube. The charts got switched."

"You did *what?*" Jaras gasped.

Christine handed the stocky transporter the gray man's chart.

"Your victim, and I do mean *victim*, is one Loren Owens."

Detective Ray Dieckmeyer stepped into the room with bloodshot eyes and bourbon breath.

"Hey, sorry. I know I look like sh . . . bad, but . . . did I hear you right on the phone? Finley Bliss is *conscious?*"

All eyes swung to the face on the pillow in the bed next to the wall. It was Finley Bliss. His eye was closed.

"Yes," Christine said.

"Impossible," Jaras sputtered.

"Nurse Jaras, this is Ray Dieckmeyer. He's a police detective, if you'd like to file a complaint of some kind."

"He's in a vegetative state," Jaras protested as she headed for Finley.

"He doesn't look conscious," Ray said.

"Detective," Christine said, "please refrain this woman from interfering with my patient, and radio for an ambulance."

"He's a D.O.N.," Jaras said, "and in this house *I* am the law."

"Back up, Ma'am," Ray commanded with his badge suddenly in his palm. Jaras caught a blast of his breath in her nostrils.

"Don't touch anything," Ray said.

She stiffened, raised a hand to her mouth, and batted her lips with a finger, trying to assess the situation. A drunken cop and a rogue doctor on her turf. This was bullshit.

Ray used the table phone to call 911.

Christine turned to the funeral home transporters.

"I'll sign the DC tomorrow. This so-called health care center will take care of all expenses. I can guarantee that." Her eyebrows went up for a response.

Long-tall shrugged. Short-stocky nodded. Good enough.

"And call the medical examiner's office tonight," Christine said. "There may be criminal charges to consider here." She turned back to Ray, who was hanging up the phone. "He's sleeping," she said.

"Can we wake him up?" Ray asked.

"No. I have a feeling he's been working very hard and is getting some well-earned rest. Besides," Christine said, directing daggers at Jaras, "we need to get him out of here. Obviously, his life is in danger."

Jaras blazed with loathing. She would threaten the insane, snooty, rogue, bitch doctor and the drunken cop, except for one thing. If the insane, snooty, rogue, bitch doctor was correct about the time of death of the man just hauled away, that could be trouble. She might have a bigger battle to prepare for, maybe in court. She held her tongue.

"Piss-poor service here, huh?" asked Ray.

"He's a DNR," Christine said, "Do Not Resuscitate. I reinserted a G-tube because he was only minutes from death, and he *was* conscious and . . . God, your breath smells like a skunk."

"Sorry. So . . . conscious? How could you tell?"

For the second time, the detective saw the doctor smile.

"We had a conversation," she said, then watched his face for the reaction. It lit up like a jack-o-lantern.

"I don't believe it," Jaras huffed. "I'm calling Mrs. Bliss."

"There's the phone," Christine bluffed, "on top the Bible there, but I'll tell you something, Nurse Sharon Jaras, esteemed member of the Association of Rehabilitation Nurses . . ." She let it hang.

“What?”

“If I were you, I would start being nice to me—very nice and very cooperative.”

Jaras stared hard but said nothing as she tried to decipher the veiled threat.

“Now,” Christine continued, “I am *asking* you to wait fifteen minutes before you make that call.”

Jaras kept staring, her mind groping for some kind of handle on this inconvenient, preposterous shit storm.

Christine turned to Ray.

“Detective, would you *ask* these nurses to leave the room?”

Ray looked at Jaras.

Caught between indignation and befuddlement, Nurse Jaras decided to hedge on the side of amity. Sarcastically, she curtsied, then turned and took Arlene by the elbow. Side by side, they seemed to squirm out the door. Christine closed it behind them.

“Detective, the ambulance?”

“Any minute.”

“We can’t let him die now.”

They were violating court orders, Ray knew, and probably all kinds of rules in the great book of procedures.

“You’re sure he’s back?”

“He was. We communicated.”

“What’d he say?” Ray asked, astonished.

“He couldn’t actually talk. Look, Detective, not now, not now.”

“Right. I’ll call my chief. He’ll get ahold of the judge.” Ray started for the door, then turned with a curious look. Christine intuited his puzzlement.

“I got a call,” she said.

Ray waited, eyebrows raised. She shrugged.

“From whom, I do not know.”

Good enough for the moment. Ray opened the door and went to direct the ambulance workers back to room seven.



THIRTY-ONE

Diagnosed with stage 3 pressure ulcers, stress hyperglycemia, polyneuropathy, ileocolitis, paralytic ileus, cardiogenic shock, and hiccups, Finley Bliss was protected from visitors by Dr. Christine Shepherd as standard medical policy. Not just outsiders. She persuaded Chief Neurologist Robert Goode to issue new protocols to the entire treatment team. Anyone who entered the multi-filtered air of Finley's sterile room had to wear disposable Tyvek coveralls, gloves, and masks. She was not about to get Finley this far only to have him come down with some kind of nosocomial infection.

She was aware of, and reminded daily of, how urgently Detective Ray Dieckmeyer wanted to get in and get answers to the questions that had been burning in his gut for well over a year.

And she knew Finley's wife had tried to call her at least once—probably returning her call.

Christine had phoned Eva's number that first morning, a Saturday, at 5 o'clock in the morning, calculating that it would be a time Mrs. Bliss was not likely to pick up. The message she left on the machine was short. Finley had been moved to Riverside General. That was it.

She guessed that Nurse Jaras had not called Mrs. Bliss as she had threatened but was more likely hoping the whole matter would somehow dry up and blow away.

Christine wanted Finley to herself. There was too much to be learned from this case, this amazing man who, in her opinion, had survived

his own death three times. The Lazarus phenomenon times three. She couldn't let the jackals have at him before he was even out of the CCU.

Her first concerns were ensuring the proper oxygen supply to Finley's brain, controlling his blood pressure, and preventing any kind of dangerous bacteria or virus from getting near him.

Once his vitals were stable, the testing would begin. There would be testing and more testing, diagnostic procedures to detect and evaluate everything. Screenings for everything. Scans for everything. Cultures for everything. Monitors for everything.

Everything, both mental and physical, would be closely observed for progressions, drifts, swings and susceptibilities.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14

7:23 a.m.

On the sixth day after Finley's return to RGH, surprising words tumbled from Christine's mouth before she could catch them. She was working with a young trauma surgeon named Mitch, conducting a series of medical imaging tests to reevaluate her diagnoses, when she sighed, "The patient of a lifetime."

"What?" Mitch asked and looked at her.

Christine, surprised by her pronouncement, or at least that she had uttered it out loud said, "Oh, this guy. He's . . . he's amazing to me."

The twenty-eight-year-old, shave-headed traumatologist nodded his understanding.

"Yeah, considering. Yeah."

Finley's recovery was in stage one, safety and stabilization, but Christine was already determined to stick with him through stage two, remembrance and mourning, and even stage three, reconnecting.

In her head, she was working on plans to develop independent strategies of her own. She decided that she would devise new therapies for cognitive restructuring to help Finley with his long-term recovery of function. After what she'd done to him, he deserved that, and anything else that her gifts as a healer might extend.

She did not want what happened to her twin sister to happen to him.

What Christine did not say out loud was that she found herself more elated with each passing day, with each procedure. Every blink of Finley's eye, she had to admit, to herself only, generated a rush.

Mitch, the trauma surgeon, remarked that he also had become a fan of this tenacious patient.

"It's hard to beat a guy who won't give up," he said.

His use of the word *fan* struck a chord. *That's what I am—a fan, like all those crazy Chiefs fans*, Christine thought. *Yeah, pulling for the team, admiring the grit, cheering every advance. Nothing wrong with that.*

She rationalized and justified these thoughts every time she felt an inexplicable tingle. Having never allowed herself to get personally attached to a case before, let alone a man, she was in uncomfortable territory and getting nervous about the feelings she was having.

All the Chiefs fans she knew, though, were, without doubt, emotionally invested in the ups and downs of that team. A silly way to live, she thought, or used to think. But now, as a clinical scientist, here she was with her moods actually swinging with the ups and downs of the big game—the Finley game—which consisted of him, deep inside himself, playing against the odds of his post-trauma responses.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19

2:47 a.m.

Something was going on with Christine—something weird. It had her waking in the night, going over each step they had taken since Finley had arrived back in the CCU at Riverview General, eight days ago now.

Why did she keep going over and over the diagnostic criterion? Was it the memory of her twin sister?

What kind of problems would Finley have with, say, reasoning and memory? How could she calculate that? Would he experience depression, anxiety, aggression, and social inappropriateness? These were common with traumatic brain injury patients, but maybe there'd be a way to . . . then *pop*, there it was again. That one question that always threw a roadblock to all other ruminations. That one question that Finley either could not

or would not answer. Who was it that had called her that night from Felicidad to tell her Finley had awakened?

She realized she had developed a passion for this case—a *passion*, for God's sake. That had never happened before. She was not a passionate person. She was a scientist.

Was it the case, or was it the man?

"Don't be ridiculous," she said aloud as she lay in her bed.

Tossing contemplations like mixed greens, she realized that, since Finley's condition had stabilized, and he seemed to feel safe, stage one was concluded. She would be unable to justify not moving him from the CCU to a room on the third floor where she could limit but not prevent visitation.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, turned on a lamp, and picked up her cell phone from the nightstand. She lost the detective's card that night at that god-awful nursing home, but hopefully it would still be in her cell somewhere.

"Please be in here," she murmured as she tapped, and then there it was.

She started to call, considered the time, and changed her mind. She would do it tomorrow—rather, later today. Business hours.

No. No, she would do it now. Would he think she was crazy? She was beginning to wonder that herself.



THIRTY-TWO

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20

6:55 a.m.

Christine and Ray stood, talking softly, at Finley's bed, waiting for him to awake.

"You had somebody trim his beard," Ray said. "Looks good."

"I did it," she said.

"You, personally? Isn't that unusual for a—"

"He's an unusual man."

Ray nodded. "Shaved his head too, I see."

"I didn't want to. That was his idea. I brush his teeth too. He needs some serious dental work. That's the first thing he wanted."

"So he's back to normal?"

"Hardly. It'll take months of therapy for him to relearn how to walk and talk and feed himself but," she shook her head, "his physical recovery is likely to be fast compared with the emotional problems." She sighed. "I suspect those will be severe and long lasting."

They stared quietly, watching Finley breathe. Christine broke the silence.

"The only thing I can think of is that it had to be somebody on the cleaning crew," she said.

Ray understood what she was talking about. He didn't really care about the who-done-it mystery, not like she did, but he indulged her.

"Cleaning crew?" he asked skeptically. "Felicidad? Did that place look like they had a cleaning service?"

"The lobby was clean," she said. "That's the only thing it could have been. Somebody on the cleaning crew went into room seven, saw that Finley's eye was open," she thought for a moment, "picked up his chart, saw my number, and called."

"That doesn't make any—*whoa*," he interrupted himself and pointed. "Speaking of Finley's eye," he whispered.

Christine turned. They watched Finley's left eyelid flutter.

"I can't wait to see the look on his wife's face when he informs against her. It's going to be priceless," Ray said.

Christine held up a hand.

"Shush." She bent to position her face in Finley's line of sight. Hers was the face he trusted. Hers was the only face, with brief exceptions, that he had seen for the last ten days.

"Good morning, Finley. Do you recognize me today?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

"It's once for yes, twice for no," she explained to the detective. "Isn't that right, Finley? One blink for yes and two for no?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

"Let me talk to him," said Ray.

"Not yet. Just listen and watch." She bent low. "Finley, do you remember what I asked you about your wife?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

Ray's arm made a discreet jab with a clinched victory fist. *Yes*. He didn't want to pull rank on the famed neurologist, but this was a murder case. The patient was obviously awake, obviously communicating, in no imminent danger, and he, Ray, had not exactly a right but a duty to interview the guy as a material witness. As he opened his mouth to declare his authority, a disruptive commotion blew through the door.

With Mary and her attorney in tow, Eva surged in with a scowl of exasperation.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Anthony August raised his hand.

"I'll handle this." He stepped to the front with a snide greeting. "Good morning, Doctor. I hope for your sake that you're not in the kind of trouble I think you are."

Christine checked her watch.

"I'm sorry, folks. Visiting hours don't start for two hours."

The lawyer raised his palms.

"And yet I see my client already has a visitor."

"Excuse me?" Christine said sharply.

"Detective Dieckmeyer is here."

"I'm not a visitor," Ray said. "I'm a police detective on an active investigation." He noticed a tinge of unprofessional smugness in his own voice, but so what? "And whether or not this man is your client is totally up to him."

"You've hooked him back up to a feeding tube?" Eva wailed, indignant. "Why?"

"Oh, he asked me to," Christine said.

The new arrivals were dumbstruck.

"What?" the attorney scoffed.

"It's standard medical procedure," Christine said. "When a patient asks for help, we do what we can."

"Bullshit," Eva said.

Ray loved it.

"Mrs. Bliss," he said as his eyes tap-danced on hers, "you'll be happy to know that your husband is conscious and talking." He added a taunting nod. "Well, sort of."

"Why weren't we informed of this?" August demanded.

Christine looked shocked.

"You certainly should have been," she said. "You didn't know he'd been moved here?" A look of grave concern played on her face. "There should be a record of my office's call to you, Mrs. Bliss."

Eva thought about this.

"Wait," she said. "I did get a phone message. Something about him being moved. But, you know, I signed that organ donation paper. I assumed they were going to harvest his—"

"My God, lady," Ray lambasted, then lowered his voice. "You're going to talk that way right in front of him?"

August wanted to rip into everybody—the doctor, the cop, and his client for excluding him from the loop—but he perceived the possibility of a more pressing concern. A conscious Finley Bliss. Could it be so? No. He couldn't believe it was possible.

"Your humor, Detective," he said, "is in even poorer taste than usual."

The doctor raised a halting hand to signify her authority.

"This is what I was afraid would happen and what I warned Finley would probably happen."

"What?" Eva wailed. "Warned Finley? That makes no sense."

Christine smiled, then motioned that she would allow them to get closer.

"You may stand right here," she said, pointing to a strip of duct tape on the floor.

Ray hadn't noticed this before but now nodded, impressed by her preparation for this moment.

"And no further." Then she leaned again into the patient's sight. "Okay, Finley, it's once for yes and twice for no, right?"

Finley's eye blinked once. Ray felt the tension in the room shoot up like a bell ringer whacked by a sledgehammer at the county fair. *Clang*, he thought. *First prize . . . the three drug protocol. Oh, yeah.*

"May I ask you some questions?" Christine asked Finley.

Finley's eye blinked once.

"Is your name Finley Bliss?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

"Is your wife's name Eva?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

August stepped into Finley's view.

"Now just a minute," he said but was cut short by the doctor.

"Get back," Christine ordered.

"I will not get back," he bellowed. "I represent this man's legal guardian. Hell, I represent him, and I have every right to put a stop to this nonsense until proper testing has been done to determine the veracity of your little sideshow here. I don't know what you two fraternizers have conjured up here, but—"

"In this room, Mr. August, doctors rule." She cocked her head. "Fraternalizers?"

Ray hadn't caught that word. He was intrigued by the notion of the lawyer confronting the patient.

"What would it hurt?" he asked. "The counselor needs to confirm this for himself."

Christine glared at him.

"You have no say in here either, Detective," she said, defending her turf.

"Please," Ray pleaded. "Everyone involved has a right to know if this is the real deal or not."

"It is."

"Then what's the harm in letting Mr. August ask him a question or two?"

Christine relented with a sigh.

"Would you like to ask him something, Mr. August?" Christine asked.

The attorney smelled a trap. He thought for a second, decided he was smart enough to handle it, then said, "Yes, I would."

Christine turned to Finley.

"Dr. Bliss," she said, "did you catch all that?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

"May your wife's attorney ask you some questions?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

"Okay, then. I just have one more question that the detective here has been dying to ask. Did your wife shoot you?"



THIRTY-THREE

7:07 a.m.

That was exactly the question, the one and only question, Ray wanted to ask, but he was glad Christine did it because the slick attorney would certainly have tried to roadblock him with a load of legalese crap.

“Did your wife shoot you?” Christine repeated.

They watched. After a long moment, Finley’s eye blinked once.

Eva and Mary traded glances, then started inching backwards toward the door.

August stood firm with a poker player’s nonchalance.

Ray couldn’t have been more tickled.

“Doctor?” he said, waving her back to allow August to step forward. He was salivating for this moment like a Rottweiler for a rib eye.

Christine nodded and stepped aside.

“Mr. August?”

Eva’s hand slid silently around the doorknob.

After studying Finley for a moment, the attorney took a deep breath and asked his question.

“Finley, are you from the planet Mars?”

After a brief pause, Finley’s eye blinked once.

The lawyer, the doctor, and the cop leaned in, focusing on the patient’s good eye, never in their lives having stared harder at anything. After twenty seconds, their own eyes began to water, but Finley’s eye did not blink a second time.

Ray was devastated. He groaned.

"No, wait," Christine protested.

"Once for yes, Doctor," August affirmed. "That's what you said. Isn't that right Finley? Once for yes?"

Finley's eye blinked once.

"See?" He thought about his next question. "Finley, did the big bald man shoot you?"

Finley didn't blink at all this time.

Ray muttered agonized curses. "What the . . . ?" He shot a harsh stare at Christine.

She was crestfallen.

Eva and Mary, thrilled, sidled back into the group.

"Just as I thought," August said, then halted his questioning right there. A smart lawyer quits while he's ahead. He turned from Finley and then drilled into Ray and Christine with his best professional look of malaise. "Don't think the judge isn't going to hear about this little charade."

Their mouths were open, but the doctor and the detective were speechless.

"I will stipulate, for the record, that he is conscious, but he is not cognitive. I would say, 'Nice try, Detective,' but it wasn't. It was despicable. Doctor, I'll discuss with my client what charges we may file against you and this hospital. In the meantime, I intend to seek a restraining order immediately and get my client moved from this facility so he's not turned into some macabre sideshow for med students."

"Moved to where?" demanded Christine.

"None of your business," August said.

"Felicidad? Believe me, that place is going to be shut down."

"As well it should be," August said. "Mrs. Bliss had no idea that they weren't in conformity with state regulations."

"It was a death camp for inconvenient invalids, but she had no idea?"

"I didn't," Eva said. "Honest."

"So your *next* choice . . . ?"

"Like I said, that will be none of your concern," August said. "It will be where he'll be treated like a man, though, instead of a pet." He paused to let the implication do its branding. "My client wants only the best for

her husband.” He turned to her. “Mrs. Bliss, I am so sorry about this. It’s unforgivable that they got your hopes up like that. Unforgivable.”

Eva nodded and rubbed her eyes. Mary took her hand.

The attorney gave a condescending shake of his head to his adversaries, then escorted Eva and Mary out of the room.

“You’ll be hearing from me,” he called back. “Both of you.” He closed the door behind them.

“Damn it, Doctor,” Ray said, busting at the seams. “Damn it. You owe me an explanation.”

Christine took a deep breath and nodded.

“I know how you feel. Somebody owes *me* an explanation.” She looked at Finley.

Ray glanced at him too, but only for a moment. He knew it wasn’t right to be angry with Finley, but he was, damn it. He really was. With searing frustration he turned, went to the door, and let himself out. *Damn it.*

Alone with her patient, Christine turned back to him.

“Well, Dr. Bliss? Hardly the way to treat a colleague.” She stared down for a few seconds. “You know what I want to do now? Hmm? Do you? I want to smack you.” Another long pause. “You humiliated me.” She stared into his eye. “The only reason I don’t smack you is because I’m inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt.” She rubbed her neck. “You had your reasons for the pretense?”

Finley’s eye blinked once.

“Could you share them with me?”

Finley’s eye blinked once and then again.

“Well, two blinks, at last. Okay. May I ask, since you’ve already communicated to me personally that your wife did shoot you, don’t you want her prosecuted?”

Finley’s eye blinked twice again.

“No. Alright. That explains your lies. I don’t know why you wouldn’t, but that’s not my department. May I share this with Detective Dieckmeyer so he doesn’t think I’m crazy?”

Finley’s eye blinked twice.

Christine was vexed.

“So, you don’t care if he thinks I’m crazy?”

No response.

She reconsidered her phrasing and tried again.

“The detective probably thinks I’m crazy,” she said. “Do you care? Yes or no?”

The answer was a two blink no.

Christine expelled an annoyed puff of air from her lips.

“So I’ve got a mischief-maker on my hands, huh?” She shook her head. “And after all I’ve done for you.” She stared. “Well, okay then. Do *you* think I’m crazy?”

Two quick blinks.

She scratched her head and sighed.

“Then I’ve got to ask you, Finley, are *you* crazy?” She watched his face for a perturbingly long time. What was he doing in there? Wondering if he was crazy? She started to speak again, then—

He stunned her. He smiled.

Finley Bliss smiled.

Chills ran up her spine.

“Oh, my God.”



THIRTY-FOUR

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15

8:20 a.m.

“Shooting Victim Wakes From Coma”

The headline on its own was enough for August to conjecture that Dieckmeyer was funneling his frustration through his girlfriend, the neurologist, to harass his client, the lovely Mrs. Bliss, via the print media. The article appeared in various papers around Missouri, including the *Grand Bluff Quill*, the paper he now held to comb slowly through, hoping to glean something, anything, that could be construed as a violation of Wade Greyfield’s suppression order.

Finley Alan Bliss, a Grand Bluff dentist and victim of a shooting in his home during what was thought to be a bungled burglary, awoke last week from a coma after seven months. While official records of the investigation remain unavailable, at least one city police officer said he thought Bliss was targeted for his wealth by an as yet unidentified housebreaker, who was killed when the local dentist fired back with his own gun. According to records at Riverside General Hospital, Bliss suffered severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) when a bullet was fired through his right eye.

Riverside General Neurologist Randall Marsh told the Quill he understands the temptation to compare the case with that of US Senator Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona, but added, “When it comes to the brain,

patients like Dr. Bliss, with that kind of lengthy unconsciousness, rarely awake from such an injury. You only hear about these cases very rarely, and they're always a surprise when they actually come to light."

Chief Neurologist Robert Goode said his department was exploring the possibility of matching Bliss with a scan speller so he could communicate through a computer.

Bliss's primary care physician, neurologist Christine Shepherd, said she believes that, throughout his coma period, Bliss could hear and understand what was going on around him.

There it was. The set up. The groundwork for the next story, which he suspected would have Finley sitting up, chatting away, and accusing his wife of all kinds of wrongdoing. It wouldn't be true, of course. The poor man would be the equivalent of a ventriloquist's dummy, but, as Eva's attorney, he had to stop it before things were allowed to go that far.

Monday he would pop over to the courthouse and ask for a five minute meeting with the judge. That's all it would take. He would do his thing, the poor old judge would concur, then he, "The Ladies' Lawyer," could refocus on the lawsuits he was filing on behalf of his client, the wealthiest he'd ever had.

His phone chirped. He checked and saw that it was her. He answered. She was not happy. "Eva Distraught" he jotted on a pad as he sat at his kitchen counter, then scratched the word "distraught" and replaced it with "enraged."

She had seen the story in the paper about Finley and felt warranted in giving her pricey attorney a blistering piece of her mind.

August assured her, for nearly ten minutes, that he was all over it, confident that he could put a legal stop to the detective's and the doctor's shenanigans since she, being *Mrs. Bliss*, was, after all, her husband's legal guardian.

"Don't worry," he said.

8:45 a.m.

When Eva hung up, Mary stared, waiting.

"Well?"

"He's going to do something."

Mary rolled her eyes.

"He's going to do something?"

"That's what I said."

"He's going to do what about what for what, which will lead to *what*?"

"I don't know."

They were in the white robes on the couch where they had awakened from a night of fine wine, good pot, and HBO On Demand.

"This sucks. I want a legal binding with you," Mary said.

"A what? A legal binding?"

"Yeah, you know, joint bank account, credit cards, home ownership. Shit like that."

Eva grimaced.

"What? I'm supposed to hand over half of everything I own to you?"

"That was the plan. It's been over a year. Except for a new car, I ain't got shit out of this deal yet."

They had been through this before, and Eva had pointed out that Mary's life presently was worlds better than she could ever have dreamed as a gang member in Canada. She realized that little speech wasn't going to work this time.

"It's taking longer—a lot longer—than we planned," Eva explained calmly. "Big deal. We play the hand we're dealt, right? Not show our cards. Things change. Patience and resolve. That's how we see this thing through. Patience and resolve."

"I'm out of patience. I love you, but I want what you promised. I want what you promised me."

"Oh, you lesbians. Always so high strung."

Mary scowled.

"Like you're not one."

"I'm bi," Eva said. "So are you, if you really did enjoy that night with my husband." She leapt playfully onto Mary to pretend to strangle her in a vindictive rage. "You cock-loving, trailer park whore. Take this." It was a play slap. "Take that." Another. Finally she collapsed on top of her partner and sighed ruefully. "Why can't I make you laugh anymore?"

Mary wrapped her arms around Eva and sighed.

"What do we have? You and me. What do we have together?"

"Besides our amazing chemistry and mind-blowing sex?"

Mary took a deep breath.

"Yeah, besides that." She pulled away. "We mapped out every detail together. That was fun. That was really fun." She looked toward the window and remembered. "After you left, I would just lie in my cell and dream about it, you know? I couldn't wait to get out of there. I couldn't wait to get down here and be with you. But when I got out, I stayed up there and did my part, didn't I?"

Eva nodded.

"You came down here, did your part. We both did our parts, right?"

Eva nodded again.

"Now, four years later, we're here together just like we planned except, *hey*—you've got everything. I've got nothing."

"You've got me. And we've still got our plan. Once my lawyer can prove Finley's a retard, everything will be back on track. And for the record, I love you too . . . you bitch."

Mary smiled. Her body slackened.

"No, you bitch."

"No, you bitch."

"No, you bitch."

"No, you bitch."

A bark from outside paused their silliness, and Mary rolled her eyes.

"That damned dog again. Rummy. Why don't you have him put to sleep?"

"For the millionth time, it's *Rammy*, as in the St. Louis Rams?"

"Rummy's such a cuter name, though. Let's call him Rummy and have him put to sleep."

Eva shook her head.

"He barks whenever somebody gets near the yard," she said. "Good guard dog. You never know. What if Detective Dickhead comes snooping around, huh? Rammy'll let us know."

Mary shrugged and reached for the bottle of Chaddsford Rubino 2006 for her first wine tasting of the day.

Monday, November 18

10:10 a.m.

Greyfield's clerk, Ivan Stein, informed Anthony August that the judge, having also read the article in the *Grand Bluff Quill*, would not see the lawyer alone. He, Greyfield, wanted all principals, for a third time, to appear in his chambers at 3:00 p.m. on Thursday. If a summons were necessary, of course, it would be a conventional hearing in the courtroom. Ivan would personally phone each person to ask if they were amenable to making an appearance without the formalities. Was that all right with the attorney?

Sure, but if he could just have five minutes of the judge's time today.

"No."



THIRTY-FIVE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28

3:05 p.m.

They were all there plus one, Riverside General's Chief Neurologist Robert Goode.

The attorney surmised that this could be a problem, unless the new man was in on the ruse as an evident co-conspirator, someone he could accuse of complicity. The guy's name had been mentioned in the write-up, which would make an objection at this point seem like he, August, had been intimidated by the newspaper. The attorney did have an ace up his sleeve, but playing it would be tricky.

Judge Wade Greyfield looked much older now and very tired as he scanned the small assembly before him. He nodded to Ivan. Ivan sat.

"Before we get started," he said, "I should announce that this is my last day on the job."

The group stared.

"My last ruling." He smiled, as if expecting a round of hubbub.

They only stared. He shrugged and cleared his throat.

"Mr. August, I believe you requested this meeting, so what is it that you would have me do today?"

August shifted in his chair.

"First of all, Your Honor, congratulations on your amazing career. I mean that sincerely. You're a legend around here."

The judge lowered his head with humble appreciation.

"But I did not request this meeting."

Greyfield looked to his clerk.

"Ivan, didn't you tell me that—"

"Well, yes," August interrupted. "I did ask for a quick meeting with you on Monday but—"

"That's what I just said," Greyfield interrupted with his hands raised, palms up. "So what did you want?" His eyebrows arched.

"Just to inform Your Honor that your suppression order has been violated. I understand you're aware of this." He waited.

"Go on," the judge said.

"Not by the detective directly, but through his friends at Riverside General. The violation is egregious and, I submit, with intent of malice."

The judge glared at Ray.

"Detective Dieckmeyer," he said, "do you have friends at RG?"

"No, Your Honor," Ray responded. "I'm occasionally a pain in their backside."

"Did you have anything to do with the Bliss article in the paper?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Judge," August cut in, "I didn't want to do this, but I have photographic evidence that the detective is Dr. Shepherd's lover."

A gust of gasps rose in the air as the judge frowned.

"You do?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you have this evidence with you, Counsel?"

"I do, Judge."

As the attorney pulled a five-by-seven inch photograph from his briefcase, Ray and Christine exchanged baffled stares. August stood and handed it to the judge.

Greyfield took the photo and pushed his glasses up from his nose. He studied it and then put his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands, fingers interlocked.

After twenty seconds, Christine whispered to her boss, "He does this sometimes."

Dr. Goode nodded, then probed her with questioning eyes. She scrunched her face and whispered, "Of course not."

The judge raised his head, took the picture, and held it like a teacher would for the whole class to see. He looked at Christine, then he looked at Ray.

"Well?"

It was a telephoto image of the detective and the doctor on the porch of her house, clearly showing her kissing the detective on the cheek. Ray, both enraged and amused, had to fake a coughing fit to smother the expletives trying to launch from his mouth.

"Are you all right, Detective?" the judge asked.

Ray held up his wait-a-second finger and nodded.

Christine stood up.

"Your Honor, the detective dropped by my house to ask about the status of Finley Bliss. Ten minutes, max. I was moved by his concern. As he was leaving, I just—I don't know—he seemed so despondent that I gave him a peck on the cheek and advised him to go home and put it behind him. That was it."

The judge nodded and laid the photo aside.

"That's exactly what it looks like to me." He raised his eyes. "But you never know these days, with Photoshop and all. Mr. August, do you have any pictures of these two in bed together?"

"Not at this time, Judge," answered August.

"That wasn't a serious question," the judge said, shaking his head before narrowing his eyes and digging into the lawyer. "What possible bearing could this photo, even if it proved they were doing the horizontal hokey-pokey, have on this case?"

"They may be colluding against Mrs. Bliss, Your Honor, for control of the Bliss estate."

The judge shook his head.

"Shame on you, Counselor."

"But Your Honor—"

Greyfield cut him off. "Enough." He cast his eyes to Christine's boss, Robert Goode. "Okay, who's the new kid?"

"Robert Goode, Your Honor, chief neurologist. Dr. Shepherd asked me to accompany her here today."

The judge nodded his approval.

"My first question for you, Dr. Goode, is: Are you the smartest person in this room today?"

Goode smiled.

"From what I've gathered, maybe so, with the exception of Your Honor."

The judge smiled and leaned back.

"Tell me about Finley Bliss."

"I'm here to vouch for Dr. Shepherd, Your Honor, who is more knowledgeable than I about this case."

"All right," said Greyfield. "Dr. Shepherd?"

Eva couldn't take it.

"Excuse me, Your Honor, but he's totally not himself. My husband, I mean. We're only here, my lawyer and I, to make sure that I, as his loving wife, don't lose custody of his well-being."

The judge frowned.

"Mrs. Bliss, ordinarily you should wait until I ask to hear from you, but since this is my last day, and you're in such a hurry, well . . . we'll let you cut in." He paused for effect. "What did you say about your husband's well-being?"

Eva cleared her throat.

"Thank you, Your Honor. Just two things, really. I would like a restraining order against the detective here, enjoining him from getting near my husband, and I would like to hire my own specialists to take over Finley's case because I think these doctors are just using him to turn him into a puppet."

The judge lowered his head into his hands again and was silent for nearly half a minute. When he came back up, he looked around.

"Anybody here read the *Bible*?"

Eyebrows went up. They looked at each other.

"While I was musing the fire burned," the judge said. "Ever heard that? Anybody?"

Apparently not.

"No? It's Psalms 39:3, and it's me in a nutshell, isn't it?" He rubbed his forehead and repeated it to himself. "While I was musing the fire burned."

His guests were not tracking. The judge shrugged.

"Mrs. Bliss, did you warehouse your husband like a can of meat in a place called Felicidad Health Care Center?"

Attorney August shot to his feet.

"Your Honor, isn't that inappropriate?"

"My question, you mean?" the judge said.

"Mrs. Bliss had no idea—"

"Save it," Greyfield said, then lowered his voice and spoke slowly. "I have signed two different writs right here, right in front of you people, which would have dispatched a normal man to glory, but he's still with us. He's still alive, despite being left to rot in what one reporter called," he picked up a newspaper clipping, "a chamber of horrors." He crumpled the paper in his fist. "A reporter on Channel 7 in Jeff City described Felicidad as 'a human garbage dump.'" His focus went to the attorney as he tossed the waded paper to August. "Hardly seems to me that your client had her husband's best interest at heart."

"But she didn't know—"

"Don't insult me, Mr. August," the judge snapped, then turned to Christine. "Dr. Shepherd?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Talk to me."

Christine was pleased to do so.

"Finley Bliss is not only still alive, but he is awake, he is respondent, and—"

The judge held up a hand. "Respondent?"

"He's communicating, Your Honor."

"Not lucidly, Judge," August interjected.

"Just signals for now," Christine continued. "We can't predict the future extent of his recovery, but he is lucid."

The judge asked, "Has he shed any light on what happened the night he was shot?"

Ray and Eva stared at each other. Each held their breath. His a breath of hope. Hers a breath of fear.

"Not that I can say," Christine finally said.

Ray's sail collapsed in a huff of disappointment. Eva's sail billowed with a gust of fresh air. Up went the snowy eyebrows on the judge, who stayed glued on Christine.

"Not that you can *say*?" He tilted his head with a wry gaze.

She had to provide more. She took a breath.

"My colleagues think the shock he endured to the medial temporal lobe could have affected his memory processing."

Greyfield rubbed his chin.

"Doctor, forgive me, but I've been doing this for a long time. I know deflection answers when I hear them." He cleared his throat. "Has he or has he not communicated information regarding his being shot in the head?"

Christine chewed her bottom lip, wondering how to answer without betraying Finley's confidence.

"Not verifiably," she finally said.

The judge tapped his lips with a finger.

"You mean he has, but only to you."

She took an uneasy breath and nodded slowly.

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Your Honor," the attorney lamented with a polished expression of painful skepticism, "surely the court cannot allow Dr. Shepherd to channel testimony from a mentally debilitated man, no matter how divine her gifts may be." He capped his statement with a humble, beseeching smile.

The judge ignored him.

"Dr. Shepherd, does Dr. Bliss need a specially appointed legal guardian?"

August interrupted again.

"That would be his wife, Your Honor."

"Not anymore," the judge said bluntly.

"But your ruling of January seventh—"

"Is overturned," the judge said. "New ruling."

August leaned over for private consultation with Eva, then straightened back up.

"We take exception, Your Honor."

"My clerk will note that, Counsel, but you'd better put it in writing. This is my last day. Did I mention that?"

"You did, Judge."

Greyfield's eyes went back to Christine.

"Doctor, go on, please."

"He doesn't want a legal guardian," Christine said.

The judge thought for a moment.

“What about a conservator?”

“I’ll ask him,” Christine answered. “What he needs, Judge, is a state of the art recovery and therapy facility.”

The judge leaned forward, intrigued.

“Do you have such a place in mind?”

Christine yielded one of her rare smiles.

“I do.”

The judge nodded.

“Book it, but put that in writing also. I want everybody’s final adjurations clearly written, then given to Ivan, here.”

“Your Honor,” August pleaded, “this is crazy.”

“I’ll tell you what’s crazy, Counsel.” Greyfield looked around with an odd expression, as if studying the room’s history—the ghosts of cases past. “While I was musing the fire burned,” he said, softly. “That’s what’s crazy.”

The group stared, silent.

“Oh, one more thing,” the judge said. With his elbows back on the desk, he placed his thumbs against his temples, his hairline against his interlocked fingers, and rested his head.

They were used to this.

Two minutes later, Christine said, “I don’t think he’s breathing.” She rose and rushed around the desk to feel for signs of life.

Ivan, too, scrambled to the judge’s side.

“Judge Greyfield? Wade?”

Christine pulled the judge’s chair over backward till his head was on the floor, his legs draped over the edge of his seat, then began CPR chest compressions with both her hands. Her boss, Dr. Goode knelt beside her.

“He’s gone,” she whispered, then looked up to Ivan with sympathy. “The judge is gone,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Ivan bit his lip, then, apparently not that surprised, he nodded knowingly. Still in her seat, a hopeful smile broke across Eva’s mouth.

Her attorney watched, not observing so much as imagining how this twist of fate might serve their legal situation. Although Ivan Stein had recorded everything, there was evidence that the judge had lost his mind right before he died. Those crazy words about musing during a fire—

had Ivan recorded those? Would that not be enough to get another judge to overturn that final ruling concerning the guardianship of his client's husband?

Ivan's immediate acceptance of the situation struck the detective as suspicious.

"You're sure taking this well, Mr. Stein," Ray said.

"I was afraid of this," Ivan answered. "I was afraid of this." He sighed. "Wade Greyfield was a great man."

As Dr. Goode drew his cell phone to call 911, Christine straightened up from the floor and asked Ivan, "You knew he was sick?"

Ivan nodded.

"It was his heart." Then, slowly, he waggled his head with adulation and said, "This is where he wanted to die, and dad-gum if he didn't pull it off." He raised his watery eyes to Christine. "He was a very disciplined man."

"I'd say so," she said as she looked at the others. "What do we do now?"

"Just wait," Ray said, and then he explained that at least one more police officer would be needed along with some medtechs to conduct some quick scene processing. They could all go after that.

"For the record, Mrs. Bliss," Ivan said, "you'll be pleased to know that the judge was thrilled to read in the paper that your husband awoke from his coma. He wrote an opinion piece about the whole ordeal to be published after his death."

Eva scowled.



THIRTY-SIX

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2

4:30 pm

The seven acres of woods that bordered River Ridge Park appeared to be a continuation of the municipal property but were separated by a camouflaged fence winding through the trees.

Beyond the fence lay the grounds of Blaine House, a modern facility named after Dr. James Blaine, who introduced and fought for new methods in the operation of nursing homes, an approach he called the “garden alternative.”

The idea was to move from a command-and-control management style to a more participatory model, where residents would have choices about food, décor, and activities—a total cultural change from traditional nursing homes.

The Blaine House complex was built in an octopus pattern, the round center housing the offices, the recreation room, the dining room, the game room, and the library.

Extending from the hub, halls A through H branched into eight residency wings, each with its name above the entrance: Apple, Birch, Cherry, Dogwood, Elm, Fir, Ginkgo, and Hickory—the H Ward reserved for residents with special needs, as determined by various court judgments.

Finley Bliss was in Hickory-5, about halfway between the interior entrance and the emergency exit at the hall's end.

Prints of colorful autumn trees from Missouri artist Josh Mitchell appointed the sky-blue walls. Fresh flowers stemmed from a plastic blue vase on the desk, and the room was immaculate. Finley could not know how different his new nursing home was from his last.

Sunday, June 8

8:20 a.m.

The door to the hall was left open as Marie Guerrero sat in an electronically adjustable bedside chair, feeding Finley a concoction known as Invalid Gruel—coarse oatmeal, nutmeg, butter, and fruit juice.

The nurse scraped the bowl's bottom, then raised the spoon high.

"Open wide, Finley. This is it." She was Hispanic, in the fall of her twenties, Finley guessed, and plumply attractive with a perky personality.

He obeyed, opened his mouth, and sucked the last dollop from the shiny spoon.

He was clean-shaven now—his whole head—with a handsome black eye patch over his right ocular socket. His body weight was back up to a healthy 160.

A dribble of the formula escaped his lips and slid down his chin.

"Oops," Marie said. "Let me get that." She caught the trickle of pond scum—Finley's secret nickname for the gruel—with the edge of the spoon and scraped it back into his mouth. "There we go," she said. "You always make me proud. How did you like it today?"

Finley swallowed and replied, "Ih wah goo."

"You'd better say it was good. It's an old family recipe."

Finley's left eye twinkled surprise.

"Ih wha?"

She wiped his mouth with a blue linen napkin and winked.

"Not really, no, but I'm glad you liked it." As she stood to take the tray, she noticed from the corner of her eye someone standing in the doorway.

Dr. Christine Shepherd leaned against the frame, observing them.

"Oh, Dr. Shepherd," she said. "We didn't know we had an audience. Come in."

"Thank you," Christine said.

As Nurse Marie got next to the doctor she said, "Be careful with him. He thinks you're taking him out today for a car ride. I didn't know what to say about that."

Christine nodded.

"I think he's ready."

The nurse was aghast.

"Really?"

"Could you get us a wheel chair? We're all clear in the front office." She held up a blue plastic card. "Got my own keycard and everything."

Marie searched for the right words of protest.

"As his nurse, I really don't think he should be—"

"I'm his doctor."

Marie shrugged.

"Well, okay then, I guess." She turned her face back to her favorite resident. "I sure thought you were pulling my leg, Finley."

Finley grinned.

"Have a good time. Don't give the doctor any trouble."

"I wone."

Marie shot a perturbed glance at the doctor, then carried the breakfast tray out of the room.

Christine lingered to watch the nurse bus the food cart back up the hall, then stepped in and closed the door. She looked at Finley and said, "Bizarre."

Finley smiled with a Groucho Marx eyebrow wave.

"Hand me the floss from the sink in the bathroom, would you?"

She wanted to say, "Get it yourself," but she was never sure quite how to respond to his seemingly normal male impositions. *Seemingly*—that was the keyword, she thought. He was seemingly normal. Physiologically and psychologically speaking—too normal. Impossibly normal, as far as she was concerned, which meant something was wrong. The thing was, he was only seemingly normal with her.



In general, a judge's notes cannot be used as evidence of what transpired in his hearings because they are not allowed as part of the official record. But humans being human, and Judge Greyfield's reputation being what it was—one of expedience—conjoined by the fact that he had filed notarized affidavits regarding the state and federal violations of Felicidad Health Care Center for the public record, Eva's attorney, Anthony August, advised her to hold off on suing the hospital and the police department until the news of Finley's awakening and of the judge's uncanny death had settled down.

Eva rebuked this advice, fired her "chicken-shit lawyer," and began a nationwide Internet search for an attorney who wasn't a buffoon. She called a dozen of her clients who owed her favors in exchange for the personal touch she had rendered as part of her consultancy service, which she was sure they would remember forever and for which she never added a dime to her fee—men and women, leaders of some notable NASDAQ companies. She had the secret photos, of course, but she was reluctant to use them. That sort of thing could get ugly. She told her tale of woe and hoped they would get back to her with an attorney recommendation. They each assured her that they would. They all liked her and wanted to set up a return visit for more "consultation."



The famed neurologist, Christine Shepherd, had been driving her Volvo out to Blaine House nearly every day since Finley had been moved there on Tuesday, the day before Christmas, to be with the man she had called the patient of a lifetime.

By the middle of March, Finley's speech began to return, which amazed and delighted her, but also frustrated her because he chose to be articulate only when they were alone together. She was the only one who knew the man could speak, and he could speak quite eloquently when he wanted to.

She assumed it was a variation of sociophobia or xenophobia, both common anxiety disorders with traumatic brain injury victims, and she knew that it could get better, or it could get worse. She took copious notes during and after their private conversations, of which there were many.

In the first few weeks, Christine encouraged Finley to open up about himself. How was he feeling? What he was thinking?

“Where’d you go to school? Who was your third grade teacher? What was the name of your best friend? What were some of the songs on the radio back then? Who did you take to the prom?”

“To the prom?” he asked. He didn’t feel the need to relive that day. He hadn’t taken anyone. He didn’t go.

Often, as Finley’s speech continued to improve, much like a preschooler’s, he would talk about his dog—an amazing, wonderful white dog that always cheered him up. He wished he could see his dog.

Having never known a dog personally, Christine was unaware of the healing capacities of canines and so assumed that Finley’s dog chatter was another symptom of his condition. She jotted on her notepad, “thoughts of dogs.”

Everything about him was fascinating to her, so much so that, at times, she found herself fantasizing about him in ways she knew were neither professional nor scientific. She would reproach herself, like a nun to a schoolgirl, for having such impure thoughts. But she was having them, and they had been getting stronger ever since his first day back from what he had called “the wrong side of the river.”

And that was the thing. The man was brain damaged. She knew from experience that people with brain damage have a very limited, if any, social future at all. In too many cases, their own families can hardly stand them, having to live in a sociopathic minefield every day.



“How long are you going to keep this up?” Christine asked as she watched him wad his used floss into a waste receptacle on the nightstand.

“Not much longer,” he said as he hopped out of bed in his pajamas. “Why?” He dropped to a front lean position.

“Why?” She watched him do push-ups. “Why, is what I want to know.”

Finley flipped over and started his daily sit-ups. As he went up, he grunted words in short bursts.

“For as dystrophic as . . . I was . . . I think . . . I’ve toned up pretty . . . well. Don’t you?”

He certainly had, she thought. So why couldn’t the world know? What was he afraid of?

He finished twenty sit-ups.

Maybe today, with their trip off-campus, she could make a breakthrough. She was willing to try anything. Yes, anything, including . . . well, there they were again, the impure thoughts. Damn. They frustrated her because she knew they were germinated by emotions—emotions with which she had never felt comfortable since her work had long ago become her whole world. Everything outside of her work, traditional things like love and family and relationships, were all too painful, so . . . back to work.

Finley’s dependence on her as the only person he could allow himself to be intelligible with could not be healthy. It had to be a symptom of his TBI, but she had not heard of this singularity before.

“Well?” he asked, lying flat. He turned on his side and looked up.

“I’m sorry?” She couldn’t remember his question.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing. I mean, wait. I asked you a question. How long do you intend—?”

“When I come out of the closet, so to speak,” he cut her off with a puckish glint in his eye, “could I take you out to dinner?”

“You don’t have any money,” she said. “That’s why I told you to get a conservator. Remember? Your wife is still in charge of your bank account.” He seemed to consider this as he sprang up and stepped to the closet. “Isn’t your girlfriend going to be back here in about five seconds?”

“Marie?” He turned and smiled. “It’ll be a couple minutes. Right now she is in a heated discussion about whether or not letting me go out with you is in my best interest.” He paused for a beat. “I’m a little worried about it myself, to tell you the truth.” He turned and made a funny scared face, then shrugged. “She thinks I’m retarded, you know.”

"You do have brain damage, Finley, and believe me when I tell you—"

"She's got her doubts about you too," Finley interrupted as he shed his PJs and stood naked and still for a moment, then he unfolded a pair of jeans. "She thinks that, to you, I'm just a lab rat."

"I don't care what she thinks," Christine said as she averted her eyes from his nude, toned body. She had seen his body many times, but always in a clinical setting. With him standing there now—pulling on jeans, smiling that thousand-watt smile, and making quips—it made her blush.

"I love her for that concern," Finley said as he slipped on a white Izod golf shirt and then noticed that Christine had turned away. He huffed with mock derision.

"Doctor, what part of me, inside or out, from head to toe, have you not seen before?"

"That's not the—"

The door opened. Marie Guerrero pushed in, smiling, behind a wheel chair. She stared at Finley, who had managed to be on the edge of his bed all dressed and ready.

"Are you sure about this, Finley?"

"I wan go ow," he replied.

"Well, your doctor says you can, but I'll worry about you."

"Don wah-ee, Mawee."

"Well, I can't help it," she said. "Now let's get you into this chair and—"

"Thank you, Nurse," Christine said. "We'll take it from here. Just put the doorstep down and have a nice day."

Marie put the doorstep down, made sure Finley caught her look of irritation, then left the room.

Finley hopped from his bed into the wheelchair.

"Where are we going, Doctor?"

"I'm taking you to a real house where we can sit and talk in a real kitchen and enjoy a real home-cooked meal."

"Fantastic. But why?"

She stopped before they entered the hallway.

"Recovery can sometimes be impeded by institution fatigue. We don't want that happening to you, do we?"

“So, you want to study my . . . what?”

“Epistemology.”

Finley twisted his head and sneered up.

“I really am just a lab rat to you, aren’t I?”

“Hush,” she said and wheeled him into the hallway.



THIRTY-SEVEN

10:05 a.m.

As Christine unlocked her front door, Finley made the same comment as Detective Dieckmeyer and every other first time visitor.

“Nice place.”

“One hundred percent typical so far,” she said as she led him through the living room into the kitchen.

“What’s that?” Finley asked.

“Never mind. Do you like wine, Finley?”

“Some.”

She gave him a quizzical look.

“You like wine *some*? Or you like some *wine*?”

“Some wine I like. Some I can’t stand. Are you going to ply me with alcohol?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It just so happens I have a bottle of Château Lafite Rothschild Pauillac I’ve been saving for a special occasion.”

“You’re kidding,” Finley exclaimed. “1982?”

She bent to pull the bottle from a rack under a panel of oak cabinetry and then studied it. “No. Sorry. 1996.”

“Excellent,” Finley nodded. “I would love a taste.”

“Good,” she said and handed him the bottle. “Sit down, please. Here’s the opener.” She handed him a corkscrew then said, “I’ve been in these clothes now since . . .” She checked her watch. It was only ten after ten

in the damned morning. How had she failed to consider the time of day for this? What the hell was she doing? The line about being in her work clothes for so long would make sense if it were the end of the day, but who changes clothes at 10:15 in the morning? Embarrassment reddened her face.

"I don't ordinarily drink in the morning," Finley said, "but this is a special occasion to celebrate my break from institution fatigue, which, I'll have you know, was driving me crazy. And . . . and . . . I think I would be a better lab rat if you weren't dressed so formally. Look at me here in these jeans and a pullover and you all prim and starchy." He waved an arm around. "Is this really your house?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you make yourself at home?"

Christine stared at him in awe of how skillfully he had assessed her dilemma and how deftly he handled her shameful conundrum. He was not at all the awkward person he had claimed to be in their talks. He was insightful, confident, and charming. She didn't need to change clothes for what she had in mind. In fact, it would be cheesy to do so now. He knew. The man knew what she was up to, even though she didn't want to admit it to herself. Then, as she thought about it more, how ridiculous a situation she had put them both in, her courage began to drain. She started to turn and leave the room, to go change clothes or beat her head against a wall or—

"Here goes," Finley said.

She looked back and watched nervously. As the cork surrendered with a baritone pop, Christine could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She turned back and took two crystal goblets from a cabinet and set them on the table. As Finley sniffed the cork, Christine seated herself beside him, then leaned over and sniffed him. His scent filled her nostrils, and it filled her brain till she felt like she was floating.

"Pheromones," she mumbled to herself.

"What?" Finley asked.

"I love the way you smell," she said.

Finley didn't know what to say about that, but he did know about wine.

"We should really give this about thirty minutes to breathe," he said.

"A wine of this character—why rush it, you know?"

Christine kissed his neck.

“Thirty minutes?”

Finley was surprised, but remained relaxed—all but a certain part of his anatomy, which stiffened immediately. “Yeah, about thirty minutes.” He cleared his throat. “Mellow the tannins.”

“I want you, Finley.”

He turned and riveted his gaze to hers.

“I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to do.”

“Neither do I, but I can’t seem to stop.” She grabbed his hand, stood up, and pulled him to follow her.

They went into her enormous bedroom where everything was blue and brown.

“Let’s take off our clothes,” Christine said, then she clung to him. “Can I kiss you, Finley? While we undress, can we kiss at the same time?”

Finley nodded and leaned in as his fingers worked to release his belt.

She rose on her toes and put her mouth to his as though it were a medical emergency. Never in her life had she felt crazy passion like this, intense and panicky, but here it was, shameless lust. She could wrestle with the consequences later. For now, she was hearing from a part of herself that had been dormant for years, aching for uninhibited sex with this amazing man. Forget the fact that he was her patient. It had been building up ever since that first blink of his eye.

She pushed him down on the bed, but remained upright so he could look at her—gaze up at her slender ribcage, her small but slightly pensile breasts, her wide hips, and the thick, natural tuft of her mons. She watched his eyes, and then she studied him. It was true that she had seen every inch of Finley, inside and out, but never like this. The top of his rock hard penis was already shiny with secretion.

She came down upon him, her body writhing on his with no thought of foreplay. Foreplay? What were these last six months if not foreplay? Her insides were blazing, and only the hose of life could save her from burning to death from within, and it had to be Finley, and it had to be now. She straddled him, slid down on him, and consumed him into herself.

“Oh my God,” Christine said as Finley groaned. After several euphoric moments of the newness of the union, Finley’s body made a motion.

Christine's body danced along, and harmoniously they turned till Finley was on top in the center of the bed.

Moments ago, he had come close to confessing that he wasn't good at this sort of thing, but she never gave him a chance to speak, it happened so fast. Now, he didn't feel that way. Now, he felt like he was doing just great as she groaned louder with each thrust. It was an amazing, empowering, manly feeling. Then suddenly, all too soon, Finley realized it was time to pull out.

Christine wouldn't let him. She wrapped her legs around him and secured his pelvis to hers as Finley rolled over the crest of the wave, and the wave, leaving its flotsam behind, rolled on and faded away.

His body stopped. Hers did not. Her legs stayed locked around him, and her hips gyrated in delirium. Finley was less firm now, but he wanted what she wanted. He matched her grinding rhythm and enthusiastically partnered with her to the edge of rhapsody only moments later.

"Oh God," she screamed. "Oh my God!"

Finley raised his head and looked down, surprised by this first time experience. Was she in agony? Her face was contorted as though she were in pain. She turned her head aside with a small shriek, and Finley wondered what he should do. Then she turned her eyes back to penetrate his.

After a mild spasm, her body slackened, then shuddered. A few heartbeats later, her face broke into a broad, dreamy smile.

"Oh, my God," she said and closed her eyes.

Finley withdrew and rolled away. He stared up at the ceiling fan, oscillating just slow enough for his eye to pick one blade and stick with it.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Wait. Not yet." She wasn't ready for talk.

Finley's eye circled with the one blade.

"I need to know if you're okay," he said softly.

After savoring the waning carnality as long as she dared, she took a deep breath, then pondered his question. She released a long sigh.

"Am I all right? Am I okay?" She scrunched up her face to hone the answer. "Yes and no, I guess."

He waited.

"I just had my first *assisted* orgasm, *ever*, if you know what I mean." She turned to check his face.

It was blank.

"It was wonderful, you dork. It was wonderful, Dr. Bliss, an apt name for you, Sir, I must say. It was blissful." She sighed again.

He took his eye from the fan and looked at her, concerned.

"Yes, I'm fine, except for the fact that I'm already feeling guilty." She turned on her side and propped her head in her hand. "The question is, are *you* all right?"

"When I ask that question, it's dorky, but from you, it's relevant?"

They fell into a listless silence for a minute and then Christine asked, "Do you have this effect on all women?"

Finley gave a bemused expression.

"Not on this particular planet."

Christine took a deep breath.

"I don't have any excuse for this," she said. "I made this happen. I hoped it would happen. I knew better, but I did it anyway. Shit."

"Pheromones," Finley said nonchalantly as he looked around the room. "This bedroom is huge."

"Pheromones," she reflected the word. "You heard me say that in the kitchen."

"Did I?" He was looking at something. On the wall adjacent to an arched window hung a picture of two teenage girls, one of which had to be Christine. They were twins—that was obvious—on a bicycle built for two.

"That's her, huh? Which one?"

Christine knew instantly what he was asking, but had no idea how he knew to ask it.

"What do you mean?"

"You and your twin sister, in that picture. Which one is—?"

"How do you know about her?" she asked brusquely as she popped up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"You told me."

"No, I did not."

"Did too."

"Look, we'd better get going."

"What about the wine and the home-cooked meal to relieve my institution fatigue?"

She stood up and walked to the bathroom.

"I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. I've got to get back to the hospital."

Finley sighed, got up, and reached for his pants.

"I didn't know she was off limits as a topic," he said. "I'm sorry if I—"

"Please! Don't talk. Let's hurry. Really. I've got things to do."

Finley nodded and wondered what it was that his doctor was going through.

The ride back was awkwardly silent until finally, just before the gate, Christine asked Finley if he felt like talking.

"I don't think I'm the one who needs to talk, Doctor," he said.

She grimaced, grit her teeth, and drove onto the Blaine House campus.

12:15 p.m.

As Christine slid her keycard into the outer slot of the door to Hickory Hall, she said, "I don't know what to say. I apologize for—"

Finley cut her off with his Blaine-House voice.

"I ha goo ti. Ih wah fun. Thang you for taying me to your hou."

"Stop it," she said as she rolled him down the hall.

But he didn't. When he saw Marie heading toward them he shouted gleefully, "Hi Mawee. Ih me, Finwee. I been gone two whole howah, but I bah now."

Marie knelt down and leveled her eyes with a smile.

"I'm glad you're back, and just in time for lunch. Are you hungry? We have calf's foot jelly today."

Finley nodded.

"Yeah. I din geh any foo."

Marie looked up to Christine.

"You want me to take him from here?"

The doctor's face was burning with secret shame.

"Would you?"

"Sure," Marie said and rose to replace Christine at the handles of the wheelchair.

Christine turned her back to walk toward the front exit, but was stopped by Finley's voice.

"Wait, Dockaw," Finley called. "When aw you comeen bah?"

She turned and looked into his eye. It was pleading.

"I'll come see you tomorrow," she said.

"Can we go ow again?"

Her head tilted sideways.

"We'll talk about it."

"I shuh ha goo ti wih you."

Christine cringed, turned away again, and receded down the hall.



THIRTY-EIGHT

If sex between a doctor and a patient is wrong, what makes it wrong? The common answer, Christine knew, was that it was harmful to the patient. She could accept that, as much as ninety-nine percent of the time, but not always.

Had she harmed Finley in any way? She didn't think so. On the other hand, he was brain damaged. Surely it was reprehensible to abuse the trust he had in her, like a teenager has in his basketball coach. Since that trust was derived from the professional relationship, it had to be unethical to exploit him that way for personal gratification. Was she like one of those female teachers in the news lately who had sex with their students?

She considered reporting herself to the Missouri Medical Board, but what good would that serve? Besides tarnishing her reputation, it would disgrace her profession. She would be fined \$10,000, forced to take Missouri University's Physician Assessment and Clinical Education program, and be prohibited from ever seeing Finley again.

Since she was the only one he trusted, at least for now, she decided that this would be unfair to him. If he didn't say anything about her misconduct, then she wouldn't either, and she would make sure it never happened again. From now on, strictly professional. You don't get the patient of a lifetime, a man who was murdered thrice, twice by her own hand, just to go crazy and ruin everything with a scandal. What the hell had she been thinking?

He was supposed to be the one dependent on her, not she on him. Why did it feel so backwards? She had to get control of her mental processes. She had to devise another plan. *Another* plan? What was the first one? She never really had one other than to help Finley, to study him, to get to know him, to be near him, to . . .

“Oh, God.”



Christine did not come back the next day but called to leave a message at the front desk. She would be too busy to visit Finley for a few days but would be back out before the end of the week.

Finley missed her and hoped that she wasn't being too hard on herself, but, somehow, he knew that she was. She had rarely missed a day in months.

Thursday, June 12

3:05 p.m.

Christine walked through Finley's door and laid it out. She would not be taking him out of Blaine House again. That was a job for rehabilitation therapists. If he wanted real food, all he had to do was ask for a physical exam to prove his digestive system had healed and then order whatever he wanted—steak and French fries if he wanted. As long as he insisted on the absurd pretense that he was bedridden and could not think or speak normally, she could do no more to help him. She had to get on with her life.

“So you think I'm normal then?” he asked.

“Well, no.” She sighed. “You couldn't possibly be. But you have the skills to behave normally.”

“Wouldn't that be just another pretense?”

“Not an absurd pretense.”

“So I should pretend to be normal.” He thought for a second. “Isn't that what most people do?”

"To a degree, yes. We all pretend that the standards we impose on everyone else should be applied to ourselves. Well, except politicians. They don't bother to pretend."

"Or doctors."

"Look, I'm not going to tangle with you. Either we reach a new agreement today, or I say goodbye and good luck."

Seeing the angst in her eyes, Finley understood that she was more frustrated with herself than anything else.

"Dr. Shepherd," he said, "I need you—nobody but you—to take me off-campus three more times. You're the only person I trust."

"I know that, but . . ." She stared back, confused. "Three more times? What? Why?"

"I think by then . . . you know . . . I'll be ready."

"Ready for what?"

"The world."

She stared for a long moment.

"What's in it for me?"

He smiled.

"Answers to any questions that you have and dinner on me."

"Any questions," she repeated and then walked around his bed to the window. She looked, with no particular focus, at the public park down the hill.

Finley finally said, "Any."

"Do you know who called me the night you came out of your coma?"

"I do."

She flinched but kept her gaze on the landscape outside.

"I've asked you fifty times. Why haven't you told me?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Somebody on the cleaning crew?"

Finley didn't answer. He wasn't going to answer.

She turned back and picked a staring fight. She gaped. He countered with a one-eyed leer. The match was even, but he knew that she knew he held the trump card, and he wasn't going to play it today.

"*Quid pro quo?*" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

“Let’s say I agree to take you out three more times—”

“And that I get to take you out for dinner.”

She rubbed her chin.

“I want you to see a neuropsychiatrist.”

Finley raised his patch to rub his eye socket.

“I don’t know.”

“Look,” she said in her forbidding voice, “something’s going on with you that I can’t get a handle on, and I’m . . . well, let’s face it, I’m too close to the situation for a proper clinical perspective.”

“There’s nothing going on with me.”

She folded her arms.

“That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

“Can we go out tomorrow?”

She decided to play rough.

“I’ll check my schedule, but I’m thinking maybe next Wednesday.”

Finley shook his head. He didn’t like it, but she needed to prove the point apparently, that she, not he, had control of her life. He would adjust his plans.

“Next Wednesday would be fine,” he said, then nodded and smiled.

Christine wanted to go out the next day to find out, if she could, what he was up to, but she decided to be firm to prove her resolve, if not to Finley, then, at least, to herself.



THIRTY-NINE

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18

4:15 p.m.

Finley was dressed and ready to go. He was anxious.

"What's wrong?" Christine asked after she pushed the wheelchair into his room.

He waited for the door to close.

"I skipped lunch. I'm starving."

"Hop in. We'll go get you something to eat."

"That home-cooked meal you said—"

"No." She was embarrassed again. "I don't know what I was thinking that day but," she sighed, "are you wanting to talk about that? Because—"

"No. Sorry." He rose from his bed and stepped into the wheelchair. "I'll never mention it again."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Thank you."

"A Whopper, then."

"A big fish, you mean?" She stepped around the chair to reopen the door and maneuver the doorstep down with her foot. Finley realized she wasn't joking.

"No, not that kind of whopper. Are you serious? You mean you've never—"

"Shush. Here we go."

She pushed him into the hall.



As Christine drove, Finley sat in the passenger seat chomping away at a half-pound Double Bacon Swiss Whopper.

"Oh, man," he muttered. "I'd forgotten. This is what makes America so—"

"Obese," she interjected. "Go ahead. Fatten up those arteries." He gave a guttural reply as he stuffed his mouth, his words like caveman gibberish. "Let's see if we can get you back to your pre-TBI weight of, what was it, 240?"

He swallowed.

"One cheeseburger," he pleaded. "Spare me. You never had a cheeseburger?"

"It's teenager food," she said, glancing over to notice that his focus had shifted to something ahead.

"Right up there on the right," he said, crumpling the Burger King wrapper. He tossed it into the bag.

"What?"

"Blossoms," he said. "That florist's shop. Pull in there."

"What for?"

"Please?"

"You don't have to buy me flowers, Finley. Besides, like I said, you don't have any money."

He scrunched the BK bag in his hands.

"I'm going to have to borrow your credit card."

He never ceased to surprise her. Twice dead, maybe three times, he was now full of wit and verve and audacity, like a teenager who would scarf down a Whopper.

She had gathered from their talks over the months that Finley thought of himself as a weakling. If that were ever true, it wasn't anymore. Had his brain damage, or its self-repair, transformed him somehow from a timid

introvert to the exuberant personality sitting there, telling her he needed to borrow her credit card? *Yeah, like that was going to happen.*

She recalled once that he had confided in her that his mind's living space seemed like it had been remodeled, and that all the furniture in his brain had somehow been rearranged. At the time, she remembered thinking it was a positive attitude but more of a coping mechanism than anything else for dealing with his injury. She still believed that, but before the words, "Don't be absurd," could pass through her lips, a stronger impulse intervened, in the interest of science, of course. She had to look at it that way because she couldn't fight it—the urge to accommodate Finley's wishes, which surprised her as much as he had. So, now, she had to convince herself that this would be an opportunity to observe and learn about how a brain in shambles remodels itself and moves the furniture around in order to regain an individual place in society.

As she pulled into the florist's lot she said, "You're going to have to borrow my what?"

"Your credit card."

"Sure, I always let TBI patients have my credit card. It's so interesting to see what they'll buy."

Finley sighed.

"Dr. Shepherd, I respect you, and I trust you. Could I get a little reciprocity here?"

She reared back.

"I saved your life. Who's up in the air on that seesaw?"

"I *am* just a project for you, then?"

"Oh, stop it."

"Someone to write a paper on, maybe get yourself into the *New England Journal of Medicine*?" He stared at her with a convicting eye. "Is that why you stick with me?"

Exasperated, she cleared her throat and said, "Yes, that's it. You got it. Reciprocity."

Finley turned away, stared out the passenger window, and sighed.

"You won't let me use your credit card?"

"Why?" she demanded. "What is it you want?"

He turned back with a droll smile.

"I want to buy my wife some flowers."

With Christine's training on how to look calm at the sight of horrifically wounded patients, she controlled her face.

"I see," she said in as blasé a tone as she could muster. "But if you're going to borrow my credit card, which I *will* loan you, I have the right as your doctor—well, as your *friend*—to ask," her voice got suddenly shrill, "*why?*"

"I'll pay you back."

"I didn't ask about being paid back, did I? I asked, *why?*"

Finley thought for a few seconds.

"You want a Nobel Prize or not?"

They had a silent eye to eyes shootout till Christine held her MasterCard between two fingers.

"Do what you have to do, Dr. Bliss," she said. "Just remember our deal."

Finley took the card.

"By the way," he said, "until I am dead, I do expect you to honor doctor/patient confidentiality."

"Whatever. Go! Go buy your murdering wife a lovely bouquet." She scowled as he slid out of the car, closed the door, and ambled into the little shop. She turned her eyes away and let them drift across the street to nothing in particular.

Christine had never felt jealousy before. She had always assumed it was a wasted emotion, for lesser people, but damned if this didn't have all the earmarks.

"Damn!"

She recalled when Finley was first moved to Blaine House, how she spent so many afternoons in his room with the door closed—afternoons that should have been spent at Riverside General, but she had taken time off, compelled by some strange force to be with this one special patient, this one special person.

She would stroke his arm and tell him everything about herself, hoping it would help his brain open up.

She told him about her twin sister, Katrina, how, when they were sixteen, they were in a car wreck. Christine, the driver, didn't get a scratch. Katrina suffered brain damage to the point of becoming a different person.

She woke one morning, still in the hospital, with a different accent, talking and sounding as though she were from Scotland.

That's when Christine first heard terms like the circle of Willis and brain ischemia. Katrina was allowed to go home after three months, but she was never the same. She got mean and uncontrollably angry at everything and everybody, all the time. The following year, another surgical procedure was recommended. The family had high hopes. There were complications. Katrina died. Christine decided to devote the rest of her life to the study of brain injury. She had told Finley all of this in disjointed musings. She never suspected that he had actually processed it.

Why in the hell would he be buying that woman flowers? Only one reason. The damage to his brain, caused by the bullet Eva had fired through his head, was still affecting his executive function, his judgment, his foresight, and his interpersonal behavior. Well, he had agreed to see a neuropsychologist. The sooner, the better. Tomorrow, if she could arrange it.

When Finley came out of the store, she was relieved to see that he was flowerless. At least he wasn't going to ask her to drive to the scene of the crime and wait while he made a delivery.

Finley hopped in with a smile on his face and her credit card flat in his palm.

"Thanks," he said. "I owe you seventy-eight dollars."

"Seventy-eight dollars? Good Lord!" She started the car, U-turned, and pulled back onto the street. "In my business," she said, "we don't use the word 'crazy.' Bad form, you know. But what you just did." She shook her head.

Finley laughed.

After parking near the far door of Hickory Hall, Christine got the transport chair from the trunk and rolled it to the passenger side of her car where Finley made a big show of standing on his own for a moment before collapsing into the wheelchair.

"Are you going to keep this act up, even with Dr. Bierbaum?" she asked. "Because he'll see right through it, I can assure you."

"The neuro-shrink?"

"I'll call his office as soon as I leave and see if he can meet with you tomorrow."

Finley watched carefully as she took the keycard from her purse and slid it into the lock slot.

“Okay.”

“I think it’s critical he examine you, Finley. Remember when you told me the furniture in your brain had been rearranged?”

“No.”

“He may be able to help you put it all back in place.”

“Okay.”

As the door opened and she rolled him in, he watched again to see where in her purse the key card would go.

“I think you should take him into your confidence.”

“No,” Finley said. “Only you. We have an agreement. If you’re going to betray me—”

“I’m not going to betray you.” She pushed the wheelchair to his door and opened it.

Down the hall, Finley saw his nurse, Marie. He gave her a big wave and a goofy grin just as Christine pushed through the door to his room.

“Marie will be here any minute,” he said. “Can I trust you, Christine?”

She was taken aback.

“That’s the first time you’ve called me Christine,” she said, surprised by him yet again.

“Well, you call me Finley. I figured it would be all right, after, you know.” He rolled his eyes.

“You promised never to mention that again.”

“After you loaned me your credit card is what I meant.”

“Oh.”

“Can I trust you?” he prodded as he left the wheelchair and moved to the edge of his bed. “Well?”

She looked to the ceiling.

“Up to the point where you become a danger to yourself, yes. You reach that point, though, and all bets are off.” She stared at him and shrugged.

“We don’t have a bet, we have an agree—”

“Look,” she cut him off, “symptoms of TBI don’t always lessen over time. Sometimes they worsen, and, when that happens, psychological problems arise and—”

The door to Finley's room opened without a knock. Finley's nurse stepped in with a suspicious look.

"What's going on with you two?" she asked with a forced smile. "You're supposed to check back in with the office. Finley, Hon, are you okay?"

"Of course, he's okay," Christine said curtly, "and I'll stop by the office when I'm finished with my patient. Thank you, Nurse."

"I juh fi, Mawee," Finley said with a supportive smile. "I ha goo ti. Wha we ha faw dinaw tonigh?"

Marie, somewhat vindicated, smiled back at him sweetly.

"Tonight we're having beef tea and egg snow with orange jelly. I'll go to the kitchen, see how it's coming along." She turned and left.

"Hey, go easy on her," Finley chastised. "She takes good care of me."

"She doesn't want you leaving here, that's for sure."

"Which I would like to do again tomorrow, if you could fit me in," Finley requested.

"I cannot. I've got a conference in Little Rock."

Finley froze.

"Besides, tomorrow is your day for Dr. Bierbaum. I told you that five minutes ago. Now look, you promised—"

"Did you say Little Rock?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You're not going to sneak back early and shoot me, are you?"

Christine scrunched her face.

"I'll be back on Monday." She shook her head. "I won't play along with the second part of your question." She quirked an eyebrow. "Are you experiencing dark thoughts?"

Finley stared at her.

"Yeah, I think maybe I am a little."

"Then open up to Dr. Bierbaum tomorrow. It could help you immensely." She opened the door.

"Help me what?"

"Understand yourself," Christine said as she left the room.

"We'll see," Finley said as the door closed behind her. "Bye, Christine."

The door reopened. Christine stuck her head back in.

"Bye, Dr. Bliss."



FORTY

THURSDAY, JUNE 19

10:20 a.m.

Mid morning sun streamed through the living room window while Jerry Springer's audience booed a man who had been duped into appearing on his TV show.

Mary, stretched out on the couch, watched, and rooted for the wife who wanted to keep her job as a stripper against the forbiddance of her husband.

"Fucking-A," Mary said. "Don't let that bastard rule your life. You want to dance pregnant—that's *your* fucking business."

"What?" Eva called from the kitchen.

Mary, twenty pounds heavier these days, ignored her.

"I just think humiliating the baby before it's even born is a bad way to start our family," the stripper's husband said.

"Oh, fuck you," Mary said just as the doorbell rang.

"I think pregnancy is sexy," the wife told Jerry, "and I love expressing my sensuality through the performance art of interpretive dance. It's what I do. It's who I am."

"Interpretive dance?" the husband moaned. "There's only one way to interpret what you do, for (bleep) sake."

The doorbell rang again, and Eva called from the kitchen, "Mary?"

Mary was engrossed in the Springer show as the pregnant woman wept and said she wished she had a man with more culture.

"You tell him, girl," Mary said. "Fuck him."

After the third ring of the doorbell, Eva strode in from the kitchen.

"Would it kill you to answer the door?"

Mary ignored her.

Eva's irritation turned to delight when the deliveryman held out a splendid bouquet of roses.

"For Eva Bliss," he said.

Mary was suddenly interested in who had been ringing the bell. She sat up and watched.

Eva giggled and said, "That's me," and the man laid eighteen red roses in her arms, like an infant, wrapped in green tissue, embellished with an herbaceous plant she knew as baby's-breath. "Thank you," she said, then closed the door with her hip. "Oh, my God. These are beautiful. Look at this."

"Who are they from?"

"No idea," Eva said. "Wait. There's a card. Probably one of my clients."

Mary followed Eva into the kitchen and watched her search under the pantry for a vase.

"Aren't you going to read the card?"

"Water first," Eva said, then saw the brooding look on Mary's face. She rolled her eyes. "Go ahead. Open it. Read it."

Mary tore the tiny envelope open and read the card.

"Looking forward to more—Ray D."

"What?" Eva rose with a large glass vase. "Ray D?"

"Who the hell is Ray D?" demanded Mary. "And what is it he's looking for *more* of?"

"Ray D? Ray D?" Eva mulled over aloud. "It's got to be one of my clients," she said. "Either that or that detective, Ray Dickhead. Remember him?"

"Why would he be sending you flowers?"

"Sweetie," Eva answered, as she put the flowers in the vase, "he wouldn't." She set the bouquet on the countertop and stepped back. "Gorgeous, though, aren't they?"

"You bitch."

"No, you bitch."

"No, *you* bitch with *flowers*. You get everything. You always get everything. Shit."

"Oh, come on," Eva said, then kissed her bitch on the cheek. "Don't be like that."

"Call the florist and ask who sent these?"

Eva shook her head.

"Fine." She took the card from Mary to see the store name. "Blossoms Floral Shop." She picked up the phone.

2:45 p.m.

Otto Bierbaum, Ph.D., was admitted to Finley's room by Marie, who would love to have stayed to help in any way she could. He was tall, in his sixties, with thin hair, colored black with "Just for Men" or some such product, Finley noted. The dye job was obvious, and it was a strike against the man before he sat down. A man who can't accept that his hair has turned gray has no business judging other people's mental issues. Also, before he sat down, he had to explain to Marie that his business required absolute privacy.

After she left, he introduced himself.

"Hi, Dr. Bliss. I'm Otto," he said, extending a long hand. "Dr. Shepherd wanted us to get together?"

"Righ," Finley said.

"Good." He opened his briefcase. "First, I want to say congratulations for finding your way out of the coma." He gazed into Finley's eye. "I have a thousand questions about that, but not today, huh? May I sit down?"

"Shuh. Oh, I'm sawy," Finley said. "I wah stawing at yuh haiw."

The doctor laughed as he seated himself.

"Most people do, I guess." He smiled and studied Finley's countenance. "Well, I brought along an abbreviated version of the Halstead Category Test. Have you heard of that?"

Finley had decided to expose his intelligence but not his abilities.

"No," he answered honestly. "What happen to yuh haiw?"

Otto smiled.

"What happened to *your* hair?"

"I aks you fust."

The shrink eyed Finley.

"To tell you the truth, my hair, the way I wear it, like this, never fails to get some kind of reaction from my patients. Those responses, however slight or aggressive, help form my opinions."

"Oh," Finley said. He wanted to say, "What about the opinion of others? You don't care if they think you look like a weirdo?" If Finley said that though, his cover would be blown. He would have to be careful with this guy. "I use to hah a comb-ovah. Now I jus bald."

Otto pulled the test booklet from his satchel.

"This is called the BTC. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You will hold this." He handed Finley a white cardboard strip divided into equal segments: 1, 2, 3, and 4. "And I will turn pages in this booklet." He held up a booklet. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"Each page is what we call a 'stimulus plate,' the idea being that you point to the number that corresponds to the answer to the question I ask. Okay?"

"I not shuwa."

"You're not sure?" Otto blinked several times. "Okay. Well, let's just talk for a minute then, okay? Would you like to talk about our hairdos some more?"

Finley stared warily. Otto stared back and narrowed his eyes.

"Would it surprise you to know that I have already identified four rigid inconsistencies in your speech pattern?"

It did surprise him, but he tried to look vapid.

"Wha duh tha mean?"

"You tell me," the neuropsychiatrist said, leaning back. "Sometimes you use the consonants, R, T, M, D, and V, and sometimes you seem unable to." He waited.

Finley shrugged innocently.

"My point being, your tongue works correctly sometimes, so we know that it could work correctly every time, unless there are some intermittent

neuronal conflicts, right?” He watched for a reaction—a glint in the eye, a facial twitch, or a hand movement. What he got was a blank stare. “The question is, what’s going on behind your eyes, Finley? Tell me.”

“I juh hah one eye. See?” He raised his patch. Otto didn’t swerve.

“What are you thinking right now?”

“I thinging you shuh grow a beahd.”

“A beard? You think I should grow a beard. Like yours?”

Finley didn’t have a beard, so he nodded yes.

Otto pursed his lips for a moment.

“You think that was a freebie, don’t you?” he said. “But I know that you know you don’t have a beard, so why did you give me a yes-nod? It was to make me think that you can’t think, which, in fact, would make you . . . cunning.”

Tricky, Finley thought, but stared like he was confused.

Otto leaned forward, looked around the room, and sighed.

“What I do, Dr. Bliss, is explore how things like reason, feelings, emotions, decision-making, etcetera, match up, or not, with the physiology of neural tissue. Okay? Thoughts versus physical functionality, if you will.”

Finley shrugged.

“I ha no idea wha yo tawging abou.”

Ordinarily, this particular doctor might have said, “No sense wasting any more of our time,” and folded up to leave. But whether or not Finley was being honest, the opportunity to visit a man who had survived what Finley had gone through was rare and potentially valuable.

“Look,” he said, “since I’m already here, and Dr. Shepherd seems to care for you a lot, and, well, I admire her, why don’t you go through the motions, at least, of taking this exam? It could be fun.”

“Okay.”

“No matter how you decide to react to the questions, it’s an honor for me to get to hang out with you and see what responses you give.”

Finley nodded, keeping his face vacuous.

“Okay.”

The exam took thirty minutes, and both men enjoyed the experience, Finley especially, even though he did not deviate from his plan. Intelligent? Yes. Capable? Dubious.

Finley did ask Otto for a favor before their time was over. The neuropsychiatrist considered the request, then nodded.

"Of course. Absolutely."

FRIDAY, JUNE 20

12:07 a.m.

Mary couldn't sleep. Eva's call to the florist's had yielded no information, as per store policy, other than they had been purchased in person, not online. She pestered Eva as they lay in bed.

"Those roses are really bothering me, Eva."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Why?"

"You know." She paused to goad Eva's attention. "I could have had Carla."

Eva turned over to face her.

"Carla?"

"Yeah."

"Carla, the old-school, blazer-wearing, feather-mullet, prison guard asshole? You could have had her? Duh!"

"Well?"

"Sweetie, go to sleep. I don't know who the roses came from, and I don't care. Neither should you."

Eva drifted off into slumber. Mary couldn't. And their weekend went that way. Eva seemingly in sync with the smooth rhythms of June, and Mary out of time, out of shape, and out of patience.



FORTY-ONE

MONDAY, JUNE 23

Dr. Bierbaum told Christine by phone that he believed her star patient was, indeed, more accomplished on the inside than his persona would indicate, but he could not say for sure, and it would be a breach of punctilio to speculate.

She called the office at Blaine House to inform them of her plans to take Finley out again at one o'clock that afternoon. Would they give Finley that message?

Of course they would.

1:05 p.m.

Marie knocked gently on the door, then opened it to announce Christine.

"Hey, Finley," the nurse said, "guess who's here to take you for a ride again? Can you say good afternoon to Dr. Shepherd?"

"Goo afa-noo, Dah Shepawd,"

"Hello, Finley," she responded, noticing he was already in his street clothes. "Feel like getting some fresh air?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he's very excited," Marie said. "We knew you were coming, so I went ahead and helped him get ready."

Finley nodded that this was true and smiled.

“Good,” Christine said with feigned cheerfulness.

“I’ll be right back with the wheelchair,” Marie said and ducked back into the hall, the door closing behind her.

“She helped you get ready?”

“Yeah.”

Christine puffed a dismissive blubbery sound, “Pff.” She shook her head. “And still with the wheelchair?”

“Blaine House policy,” Finley said as he hopped out of bed and went to his desk. As she watched him open a drawer and withdraw some personal items he asked, “Did you talk to Dr. Bierbaum?”

Confused by what she was seeing—Finley, with somebody’s wallet, keys, and credit cards—she answered distractedly.

“He said either you have a rare form of apraxia or you’re a bad actor. He’s more worried about your mood and temperament. Is that your wallet?”

“It is. My credit cards are all here, and I’ve got my keys.”

“How’d you get those things?”

“Dr. Bierbaum and I thought having symbols of my identity in my possession would help me realize who I am.” With a rascally smile he asked, “Would you concur, Doctor?”

“Good Lord,” she said, “What am I getting into?”

“He had them sent over Friday, from the police department’s evidence room, which means two things. First—”

The opening door interrupted him as Marie pushed the wheelchair into the room.

1:23 p.m.

“Two things, you said. What?” Christine asked as she drove her Volvo up the hill to the gate.

“You know, this really is a beautiful world,” Finley said, admiring the scenery. “So, so beautiful, except when it’s foggy. Can’t stand fog. But this sunshine, it’s really good, isn’t it?”

“Sunshine is good,” Christine said as she pulled out onto the road. “Fog can be beautiful too.”

“Not to me.”

“Out with it,” she prodded. “You said the police sending your wallet over meant two things.”

“Number one,” he said, “it means they’ve closed the case.”

“Not necessarily,” she said. “More than likely, Otto Bierbaum argued that your personal effects were, like you said, an aid for your recovery, and the police just figured, why not?”

Finley considered this. It made sense.

“Okay. Number two: Somebody had to have put pants on me *after* I was shot. My wallet and keys were in the pants I had been wearing the night before, but I was naked when they murdered me. I know that.”

“So the police took your clothes from the E.R. that night for forensic analysis?”

“They must have.”

“Did they send those over—the clothes from that night?”

“No.”

“Then maybe the case is still open.”

“It doesn’t matter.” They were silent for several blocks, then Finley glanced down a side street and said, “Whoa! Back there.”

“Where are we going today? To buy her some chocolate?”

“Make a right up here and circle back to Boone Street, please.”

“I am not giving you my credit card today.”

“I have my own now.”

“You’re really going to buy her something else?”

“No.”

When the car reached the four-way stop at Boone Street, Christine looked left, gasped, and then prayed that Finley’s goal was not the Enterprise Rent-A-Car lot, which she could see about a half block down. But one look in his eye told her it was.

“No,” she said. “No way.”

“I’m a licensed driver, Christine.”

“You’re scaring me, Finley. Are you going to commit a crime?” A horn blast from behind impelled her to lurch the car out onto Boone Street, where she did make the left turn, though she did not know why other than having been flustered. “Because at this point,” she spouted, “I would be an accessory.”

“I think getting behind the wheel will help me assimilate back into the real world,” he said.

Against her own will, she found herself pulling into the Enterprise lot, maybe just to have a place to stop and talk. How did he control her like this?

"Finley," she pleaded, "listen to me. We've talked about this before, but please remind yourself that with everything that you went through it is quite common to have wild or dark thoughts that can cause irrational—"

Finley cut her off. "Christine, for Pete's sake, I want to drive a car."

"They won't rent you a car."

"Why not?"

Christine could not think of why they wouldn't, other than that they shouldn't.

"What's next?" she asked. "You're going to rent a car, and then what? Drive to a pawn shop and buy a gun?"

Finley smiled sweetly.

"I am not that kind of person."

"I don't think you know what kind of person you are, Finley. You're not thinking straight." She shook her head slowly. "It is truly amazing to me how your brain has rewired itself, so far, so fast, but, no, you're not thinking straight yet."

Finley reached out and took his doctor's right hand for a firm, gentle squeeze, kissed her fingertips, and stared with his one eye into her two.

"Christine," he said, "I promise that I am not having any violent thoughts. I don't think I've ever had any violent thoughts in my whole life, and that hasn't changed. Do I have fits of anger and rage? Yes, I do, but I'd be more of a nut if I didn't, wouldn't I?"

Her gaze fell away.

"I don't know," she sighed.

"I *am* thinking straight. I would never do anything to burn you. I owe you everything."

Christine's eyes turned back. She loved this moment. It felt so intimate, her hand in his, staring at each other, each with the other's best interest at heart. She felt her cheeks flush as her pulse quickened. She could easily have told him at that moment that she was in love with him, but, instead, said, "The fact that you think you're thinking straight is proof to me that you are not thinking straight."

He pretended to peek out from behind his eye patch.

"Worst case of circular reasoning I ever saw."

She wasn't amused.

He adjusted the patch back into place, then pulled on the door handle.

"Hey, how about that dinner?"

"What dinner? Oh." She was taken off guard. "Uh, all right. When?"

"Tomorrow night?" he asked as he opened the door to slide out.

"Wait, wait, wait. What if they don't rent you a car?"

"Then I'm screwed," he said with his impish smile.

She shook her head.

"I'll wait here to make sure. I hope they don't, but if they do, I'll follow you back and help you get in. Or are you not going back?"

"To Blaine House? Of course I'm going back." He stepped out.

"Why I go along with you on these antics, God only knows."

Finley lowered his head and peered back in.

"Pheromones," he said, and there it was again—his thousand-watt smile.

She stared, then turned her head away and smiled. Finley caught the corner of that rare, very rare, smile and noted that she had no comeback.

"Or maybe you need a session with my friend, Otto Bierbaum," he said, "the neuropsychiatrist. He's very good."

She turned back without the smile.

"You going to rent a car or not?"

Finley nodded and turned away.

She watched him enter the office, the patient of a lifetime—maybe the man of a lifetime.

"Besides, Mr. Straight Thinker," she said aloud, "the wheelchair's in my trunk."

5:45 p.m.

It took Finley much longer to rent the car than he had hoped. He had asked for something small and dark, but his credit cards, all five of them, were declined.

He would like to have said, like everybody does, "Well, that's funny because I just used it. Try it again." But this, he realized, was the problem. His accounts had shown no activity in nearly two years. Could he use

their phone? Yes, he could. He did, and his Bank of Grand Bluff Visa card was finally reactivated.

There were no late charges because in Finley's prior life he had set up his business account there, which automatically paid the monthly balance on that particular card, along with all the utility fees at his dental clinic.

Now, as he drove his rented black Taurus back to Blaine House, he wondered about that account. What kind of shape could it be in after his crazy wife and her depraved friend had access to it? Or maybe they didn't. That account was set up through a medical group separate from his household account. Maybe Eva didn't even know about it. But, then, she didn't miss much, and if she tried to steal his life, well . . .

He adjusted the rear view mirror. Christine was following close behind.

There were other things to think about. Where to stash the car, for one. He figured the best spot would be where the maintenance people parked.

At one time, security cameras were considered for Blaine House, but opponents, who called them granny-cams, won the fight against them by arguing that they would compromise the residents' dignity. There would be cameras everywhere, even in the bathrooms. A rogue employee could post embarrassing clips on YouTube. So, with the exception of the lobby, the records office, and the front entrance, inside and out, no cameras were ever installed on Blaine House property.

Another thing he wanted to think about, but was almost afraid to, was his beloved bull terrier, Rammy. Although Finley had mixed feelings about prayer, he could not keep from whispering as he drove: "Please, Lord. You made him. You know what a terrific guy he is. Please let him be all right. And maybe could you put a little comfort in his mind that I'm all right, and that I'll be seeing him soon?" A tear escaped from under his patch. "Thank you, God." He felt better.

They turned into the Blaine House complex, and the Volvo tailed the Taurus to the lot by the utility building.

6:13 p.m.

As Christine wheeled him from the far door up the hall toward his residence, Nurse Marie was exiting another room. She stopped abruptly,

checked her watch, and said, “I thought I was going to have to call the cops on you guys. It’s past six o’ clock, Doctor Shepherd.”

“Our outing took a little longer than expected,” Christine responded.

“Blaine House requirements for off-campus activities are not vague.” She lowered her head. “Are you alright, Finley?”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Christine snapped.

Finley smiled his goofy smile and said, “I juh fi, Nur. I hah goo ti.”

“Good. You go on to your room. Maybe Dr. Shepherd will help you get washed up, and I’ll bring you some dinner, all right?”

“Alrigh,” Finley said as Christine rolled her eyes then pushed him to his door.

“Dr. Shepherd, would you mind stopping by the office before you go?”

Under his breath Finley snickered.

“Uh-oh.”

In the room, she dropped her purse from her shoulder to the desk and huffed, “You wash yourself up, DiCaprio. I’m going to the office to give—not get—a quick lecture on modus operandi.” She spun around. “I’ll be right back.” The door closed behind her.

Finley could not believe his luck. Within two seconds, he was into her purse. He found the keycard, snatched it out, and slid it into his own wallet. Then he took a victory breath to calm his nerves and hustled into the bathroom for some face splashing and hand washing.

No sooner had he seated himself on the edge of his bed then Marie entered with a tray of steamed white fish and sponge pudding.

“Where’s your doctor, Finley?”

“She be righ bah.”

“Did you get washed up?”

Finley held his clean hands up proudly.



FORTY-TWO

7:00 p.m.

He knew he should get some sleep, but he couldn't. At least he could rest for the long night ahead—just lie there and let his mind go blank. No, he couldn't do that either. The lines of an old John Mayer song wormed into his brain. *I want to run through the halls of my high school. I want to scream at the top of my lungs.*

He turned on the TV and found a *Seinfeld* episode. Having seen it a dozen times, he turned over and just listened. George Costanza was trying a new Chinese hair growing ointment. Finley smiled.

He was hungry. The white fish and sponge pudding had only teased his appetite. Even though that double cheeseburger he ate last Wednesday ended up being vomited out into his toilet, man, it had sure been good. He thought now that his system could probably handle it. When you've had nothing but pap for a year, a body, it turns out, is shocked to start back on solids by way of a Double Swiss Bacon Whopper. *You know what would be great right now?* he said to himself. *A Chili Three-Way from Steak 'n' Shake. Oh, yeah.*

The voice awoke—the voice that had warned him from the get-go about giving in to Mary on that fateful night. But, hey, it was a voice of objection. It always had been, no matter what. That was its job, Finley assumed. When it spoke, it griped. *Sure, go ahead,* it said. *Go out and eat some greasy fast food. Balloon back up, and be the man you once were—an ignorant fool.*

Finley closed his eyes. The voice was right. The voice was *right*. He had been a total ignorant fool. But wait. He had thought he was happy with his life, with his practice, and with his marriage. Had he been living in what they called a fool's paradise?

If a person thinks he is happy, then finds out that that happiness was based on a falsehood—not just his wife, Laurel Labs should be included here too—should the new knowledge retro-erase the satisfaction he'd enjoyed up to that point?

Impossible, Finley decided. Things purchased with counterfeit money were no less real because of it. Not if the purchaser bought in good faith like he had—like the ignorant fool he had been. One should be able to hold on to happy memories as authentic ones, as true—truth in context—up to the point where new intelligence changes reality. James Earl Jones, though, the man in his coma, had warned him that what a person believes has no bearing on actual truth.

Why, he wondered, had he been that ignorant fool?

Eva had come into the Bliss Family Dental Clinic as scared as a runt rabbit. Well, that's what he thought at the time. She was beautiful. She was smart. She was, or seemed to be, attracted to him like no other woman ever had been. Two days after her first appointment, she sent him a poem. Yeah, the poem. That damned poem. That's what sunk him, he remembered now. It was a wonderful poem. Come to think of it, wasn't there a folded copy in his wallet somewhere? He'd completely forgotten about it. Would it still be there?

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and sprang to his desk. He opened the drawer, snatched up his wallet, and riffled through it, remembering how Eva had said, "Seeing someone from the angle the dentist sees you is probably the most unflattering viewpoint conceivable."

He couldn't find the poem. It wasn't there. Then, gazing through the clear plastic of his driver's license compartment, studying the picture of a man with two eyes and fat cheeks, he had an inclination to check behind it.

Voila, there it was, folded tightly. It was worn, wrinkled, and barely legible. He stared at it, looked around the room, took a deep breath, and read it aloud.

*Dear Doctor Bliss, you gentle thing, my dental king you be.
It seems unfair that I should wear this crown you put on me.
I feared the worst, and so, at first, I hated being there,
But with one touch you gave me such assurance in your chair
That I chilled out, without a doubt. Relaxed, I did lean back
And in your eyes I saw the guise of the confidence I lacked.
Like a fool with mouth of drool, when you said open wide,
I thought it was my heart you meant, and I let you inside.
So personal, so intimate, your fingers entered me,
And just like that my whole life changed and would forever be.
I hold no secrets in my mouth or even up my nose,
But deep inside there is no pride where something awesome grows.
I cannot brush this thing away or floss it out of me,
And I'm afraid that you have made it smile for all to see.
Through every tooth I tell this truth: I need your dental kiss,
For you alone can make me moan. I love you, Doctor Bliss.*

He let the paper drop from his fingers, wiped a tear from his eye, and then crumbled back onto his bed.

8:30 p.m.

Finley could not believe how slow time was going—like a snail on its way to the stage for a lifetime achievement award. He wished to God he could fall asleep.

A movie came on the AMC channel, a drama about a man who got shot in the head: *Regarding Henry*, starring Harrison Ford. He decided it wasn't realistic, but it was a good story, and, besides, every case must be different.

10:00 p.m.

He dozed off and dreamt of Christine Shepherd. He thought he was awake, and that she was talking to him there, telling him about her sister, about her job, and then about her breasts.

"Would you like to see them?" she asked.

"Yes, I would," he said.

So Christine took off her clothes, then picked up a book and asked, "Would you like me to read to you?"

"Yes, I would."

"What would you like to hear tonight?"

"The story of you."

"Good choice," she said.

When he woke, he realized his right hand was wrapped around an erection. Though he was by himself, this embarrassed him.

11:30 p.m.

Almost time. The brief period of dream-sleep had helped.

Five hours earlier, after Christine left and Finley had eaten, Marie had stayed and chatted with him about her favorite movies.

He had told her he was very sleepy and asked that no one come into his room to check on him in the night.

"They alway wake me up," he said. "I wan sleep aw nigh."

"We just want to make sure you're all right," she said.

"I be aw-righ, Mawee," he replied. He held up his remote nurse-call unit. "If I nee you, I will press buh-un."

"Well, I won't be here, but I'll tell them at the nurses' station you don't want to be disturbed tonight." She scratched her neck and nodded. "I think it's a sign of progress, Finley. I'll tell them that I'm okay with your decision, all right?"

"Thane you."

She rose to take the tray then said, "But don't you be sneaking out of here."

It startled him.

"Wha?"

At the door, she turned and said, "I don't want to read in the paper tomorrow that you snuck off and won some karaoke contest downtown."

Finley laughed.

"You neveh know."

“Good night, Finley.”

“Goo nigh, Mawee.”

She was gone.

Come on, snail. Get up there!



FORTY-THREE

TUESDAY, JUNE 24

12:01 a.m.

The evening's attire would be dark jeans, a black sweatshirt, his KC Royal's cap, and a cushiony pair of black Adidas with a label that read Rava Microbounce.

He checked each item for the tenth time since Marie said goodnight: his wallet and the keys—his own and the rental car's and the Blaine House keycard, pilfered from Christine's purse.

He almost forgot the Xanax pill hidden in the spout of his Barbasol shaving cream can. That was it for now, at least from here. He would get the other stuff at his office, but still the feeling of forgetting something or overlooking an important detail of the plan nagged him.

His heart pounded as he pushed open the door and stretched his neck for a traffic check. The hall was, for the moment, all clear.

Suddenly, he was afraid to go through with it. He changed his mind and let the door close again. *Good*, said the voice from the canyon. *Let's watch TV.*

Finley shook his head. If he didn't do this, he would never do anything again in his life—nothing, ever. He would lie back, watch TV, and wither away as a fly-appealing pile of rancid regret.

"No."

He pushed the door back open and stepped out. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained*, the old cliché resounded.

He had taken that scary path away from the river. That worked out well—great, in fact, for the proverbial new lease on life. This was the same thing. He had overcome cowardice then. He could do it now. Just do it. Go!

He ran to the door at the end of the hall and pushed the latch bar. It didn't open. How could that be? He had watched Christine push it open easily. There was a noise. He turned around. At the end of the corridor a night shift employee was buffing the lobby floor. If the guy turned to do H Hall, or even glanced that way, Finley would be busted, his mission ended before it started. The man buffed on by.

Finley drew a breath to calm his nerves. Okay. It's probably locked after dark. Of course. They can't have Alzheimer's patients wandering off in the middle of the night. On the other hand, what if there were a fire? How would people get out?

Then he saw it—unobtrusive, just below the bar—a small panel, painted to match the door, with a slot—the slot for keying out of the building. He'd had no need to notice this apparatus before. He slid the card in. A small red light blinked twice, and the door did not budge. He tried again. Same result.

"Crap," he grunted audibly, then withdrew the card and turned it around. This time a green light came on and the door gave way.

Outside, Finley breathed a sigh of relief, looked around for potential problems and then up at the stars, which he realized he had not seen for nearly two years.

"Wow," he said softly. "Well done, Mr. Creator. That is truly awesome."

The late June moon was three-quarters full but blocked momentarily by a dawdling cloud that resembled tumbleweed.

He wanted to run to the Taurus but . . . No, no. Prudence was required here. He should saunter nonchalantly, as though conducting a nightly routine.

After he started the Taurus and began to back out, someone held up a hand to stop him.

"Crap," he said, tugging the bill of his Royal's cap.

He lowered his window. A man bent low to look in.

“Oh, sorry, dude. I thought you was George.”

“I think he left already,” Finley said.

The man nodded. “Night.” He turned away.

“Night,” Finley said, then raised the window and drove the rented Taurus off-campus, his heart pulsating like a timpani drum.

12:22 a.m.

He was surprised by how many road projects had completely altered what were once familiar intersections. They were improvements, he assumed, but their unfamiliarity was disconcerting—new stoplights, new turn lanes, new buildings even. How could they do all that in just twenty months? No, let’s see. He was murdered on September 28 so . . . that would be what? About twenty-one-and-a-half months now.

“Keep calm,” he told himself. “Things change.” He wondered if there had been any changes in Lakewood Heights. Maybe his street had been completed and now extended to Old Mill Road. Maybe the forest behind his house had been leveled. He hoped not. He was counting on those woods.

12:37 a.m.

When he pulled into the parking lot of his own freestanding building, The Bliss Family Dental Clinic, he noticed that it needed resurfacing. Some cracks in the pavement had given way to weeds as high as his knees, especially tacky-looking against the walls. This would have disturbed him to the point of shame at one time, but now there were other concerns. Would he be able to get in without setting off the alarm?

He drove around to the back, left his car, and went to the employee door as he wondered how his receptionist was doing. What was her name? Claire. That was it. *Ahhh, Claire.* She thought he was funny.

On a keypad, he pressed the number of his home address backwards—3,1,8,6—to activate the bolt release. He thought he heard a click but wasn’t sure. He pushed. The door opened.

“Yes!”

He reached for the light switch, then stopped himself. Light from this building at this hour would make any passing patrol officer suspicious.

He pulled his personal key chain from his pocket, went to the supply room, and opened it. No windows to worry about in here.

“Let there be light,” he said and thumbed the switch. “And there was . . . no light.” The main power had been turned off.

This was disappointing, but if his MagLite was still in the utility drawer and if the batteries were still good He found it and pressed its button. The beam was strong and bright. He shined it through the glass of the pharmaceutical cabinet, inserted a tiny key, and opened its door.

“All right, Dr. Bliss,” he said, “let’s don’t forget anything. Syringes, superglue, topical lidocaine, liquefied Temazepam. What else? Oh, a Vacutainer. Can’t forget the Vacutainer. Some gauze, tape, and some cotton balls.” He hated the nagging inkling of forgetting something, but he had it again.

From his jeans, he withdrew the Xanax tablet, placed it on the table, and, with a sickle probe, cut it to a third of its human dosage. He put it in a small Ziploc bag and then put that bag with the rest of his paraphernalia in a larger dark plastic bag bearing the Bliss Family Dental Clinic logo.



FORTY-FOUR

Finley pulled the Taurus onto Lakewood Street. There were streetlights, but only at adjoining side streets for a total of three. The nearest was five houses up from his, right about where he had hoped to park. That wouldn't do. He wanted a dark spot but not too near or too far from his house, the last one on the street. Things looked the same. The street was still a dead end. The woods behind were still undeveloped.

He turned off his lights to maneuver the turnaround, then pulled back off his street to head around to the other side of the woods.

It occurred to him now that as long as he had lived here, since two years before Eva, he had never explored the other surrounding streets. *That's a shame, and that will change. You never know what you'll find or whom you'll meet when you're not afraid to venture down a new path.*

Old Mill Road, which curved around behind Finley's woods, was about what he expected—same home styles, same yard dimensions.

What was different was the lack of the clearly visible woods behind these homes. He knew it had to be there, but it might be tricky finding his way through to his own adjacent property.

He made a U-turn at about where he thought he should start, then pulled up to a wildly overgrown forsythia bush, its proximity between two houses suggesting that each neighbor thought it belonged to the other, and neither wanted the responsibility of grooming it. The giant bush was near the street, so it would make a good shield for his car, at least from

that side. And if anything went wrong, his car would be pointed in the right direction to skedaddle.

1:51 a.m.

Finley took a deep breath, checked his watch, then grabbed the dark bag. His ball cap pulled low, he got out of the car, his knees wobbling, then leaned against the door to quietly fix it shut.

Running between the homes that shared the massive forsythia bush, he was encouraged that neither yard had a fence, which meant, hopefully, no dogs.

The noise of his feet smacking water and trampling over the loose rocks of the back border creek was unnerving but only momentarily. As he hustled up the bank and into the thicket, he could not believe the volume of the bug noises—the fury of the chanting and chirring insects. A hundred decibels. It had to be.

There was enough moonlight now that Finley could see most of the larger branches but not the finer ones, the switches, which, as he ran, would occasionally whip back and lash his face with a sobering sting. One of the offshoots flogged him with a force that he guessed would have caused some serious eye damage if there had been an eye there instead of a patch. But it's times like these, running through the woods at night, when a fellow really misses having both eyes. His spatial judgment was piss-poor.

Slow down, the voice from the canyon said. *You're going to get us killed.*

Finley paused to peer ahead and saw pinpricks of light through the trees. *A good sign*, he thought, *probably another 200 yards.*

After a few more facial canings, he was sure he saw the streetlamp five houses up from his. With his face stinging the way it was now, he wished he had gone ahead and parked there.

He adjusted his trajectory and trudged toward his own backyard, his footsteps like jungle drums to any watchdog worth his biscuits.

There were two short warning woofs, then a long guttural half growl and a half bark as the dog barreled toward the encroacher's position.

The white seventy-five pounds of bull terrier muscle now charging toward him in the moonlight was a beautiful sight, a beautiful sight, and

gladdening to the point of tears. Not once, in all those months, had he allowed himself to wonder if Eva had done something awful with his dog. Apparently, she hadn't. Fantastic. But the barks were loud. Then another dog barked, probably the basset hound, Oprah, across the street, and, in the distance, one more began to howl. That's how it worked, he remembered.

If these night-puncturing outbursts were held to a minimum, no one would think anything of it. But he knew he had to use his own voice in a robust tone that the dog would recognize.

"Rammy, *no!*" he commanded, then quickly, added, "Rammy, Rammy, here boy."

Rammy's barks turned to sharp yelps of joy. His body convulsed with paroxysms of jubilation for the glorious surprise of his master's return, to him the second coming. He had kept the faith all along.

"Good boy," Finley said, then threw his bag into the yard. As he swung himself over the fence, it dawned on him what it was he had forgotten—treats for the dog. Crap. How could he have? It could have been anything—a piece of cheese or bread—anything. Crap.

Rammy did not seem to notice the faux pas as he leapt with rejoicing against Finley's crotch, knocking the man back and onto the ground.

Except for some testicular discomfort, Finley thoroughly enjoyed this moment and reveled in every lick of the dog's huge tongue across his face. He couldn't help but giggle out loud.

"Whoa, whoa, hang on, hey," he said. "Yeah, me too, me too, old friend. How ya doin'?" But this was not the time. "No," he finally commanded sternly. "Sit."

To his astonishment, Rammy obeyed.

"Wow. Good boy, good boy." Finley allowed himself to anthropomorphize for a moment, remembering how he felt when he wished he had been a good boy, a better boy, a more obedient boy for his parents before they had vanished from the earth.

2:13 a.m.

He calculated twenty minutes to sedate the dog. He didn't want to do it, but it had to be done, and now.

He scratched the sides of Rammy's thick white neck, then nuzzled the huge head with sweet nothings as he reached into the bag for the Xanax chip. Unlike all the other times he had tried to force a pill into that gator-like mouth, Rammy seemed resolved to be as cooperative as anybody would ever want him to be.

"What a good boy."

He tossed the pill to the back of the dog's throat, then held the jaws shut till Rammy swallowed.

Now he sat on the ground stroking him and explaining why he had failed to spring him from the vet's that day twenty-one-and-a-half months ago and why he'd been gone for so long and why he was here now, at this moment.

A light suddenly glimmered from an upstairs window, causing him to duck down.

"Hmm," he said quietly. "The master bathroom, right, Rammy? Nothing to worry about. Good dog. Good boy."

With their butts on the dew-gathering ground, the sheer pleasure of the man and dog reunion was sweeter than Finley could have imagined. Still, he had to keep an eye on the lighted window.



FORTY-FIVE

2:15 a.m.

Mary was on the toilet dealing with diarrhea, which she had self-diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome triggered by stress. As she sat she remembered seeing a newspaper clipping, used as a bookmark, in one of Eva's *Cosmos* in the magazine rack. She grabbed five issues at once to look for it, and it poked right out. What was it? She couldn't remember. Unfolded, the headline jumped off the page: "Local Dentist Shot by Intruder." There was that, and then, right below, there was a picture of the police investigator, Detective Ray Dieckmeyer.

"Ray D," she said out loud. "Ray D. What the fuck?" She scrunched the article into a ball and hurled it hard against the shower wall. "That's who it was, all right—Ray D! Damn. She is going to fuck me." She seethed and then shook her head. "Oh, no she's not!"

She wiped, rose from the toilet, flushed, and marched back into the bedroom, ready for a showdown.

"Eva," she shouted.

Eva was snoring on the far side of the bed, deep in sleep.

Mary started to flick on the light, then paused and took a deep breath. Maybe . . . maybe she was just being paranoid due to her irritable bowel syndrome.

"Fuck," she said as she slid back into bed and wrapped an arm around her partner. "Eva?" she said tenderly. "Eva?"

Half awakened now, Eva snarled, "What?"

"Who sent you the roses?"

"Sweetie, I swear to God, I do not know. One of my old clients. Why? This is buffoonery. Please go back to sleep."

"You said it might be that detective."

"That was a joke. Are you insane? I swear I'm going to have you committed to an insane asylum."

Mary withdrew her arm, turned over, and sighed.

Twenty seconds later, Eva was snoring again.

It wasn't fair. She couldn't sleep. Why should Eva? They were partners. But she did love the sound of her significant other slumbering beside her. *She loves me. She wouldn't fuck me. Everything's fine. Everything is going to be fine. Shit.*

Fifteen minutes later, Mary finally drifted off and dreamed they were back in prison in Canada.

In the dream, Carla, the butch prison guard, was sponging Mary's naked torso in the shower. Suddenly, Eva stepped in with a gun, aimed it, and shot out Carla's right eye. Blood and water swirled down the drain. She and Eva then beat on the shower room walls till they crumbled and found themselves in the prison yard. They scurried to the fence, which magically melted away, then ran across the prairie toward Baldy Mountain.



FORTY-SIX

2:41 a.m.

Finley lifted his sedated dog's head from his lap and gently lowered it to rest on the grass.

"Good boy."

He checked his watch as he rose and headed for the back patio.

On the keypad at the back door, he punched in his wife's May 9th birthday—0509—then the number 1 to activate the code. She could have, should have, changed it by now, but, considering her confidence level, probably had not. He had an electronic fob on his key chain to raise the garage door, but he hoped he wouldn't have to get in that way. It made noise. He tugged on the bronze locking system, and the door slid open.

Inside, with his heart pounding furiously, again he took a deep breath to calm himself and listened. Other than the ringing in his ears, all was quiet.

The kitchen looked the same, at least in the dark, but it had a different smell—kind of a perfume mixed with red wine and something else, something musky. Apples maybe. The nose always remembers. It was she, the Asian girl, with that scent of musky cider.

The olfactory receptors, having stimulated the entorhinal cortex, caused a rush of memories—memories of his last night here. The plate of meat loaf falling to the floor, shattering into a ceramic nebula, and the girl,

that beautiful she-devil, standing there, right there, in an open robe as he looked up. He remembered thinking that it had been an innocent cultural faux pas. What a goober.

Live and learn. They didn't think I would do either one. Surprise.

He stepped into the living room and glanced toward the staircase. *And it is incumbent upon those who do manage to live and learn to teach.*

The bouquet of roses he had sent was on the end table beside the sofa. He smiled. Seventy-eight dollars. It did seem on the high side.

At the foot of the stairway, he checked his watch again.

2:46 a.m.

As anxious as he was about the time, he knew he could not rush any part of his plan.

Up the steps, he crept slowly, gently, till he paused midway, flashing back to what had happened there on step number seven—catching the girl, pinning her down, kissing her.

It was like a dream he'd had about when he was somebody else—vivid, but still a lifetime ago, the kind ex-soldiers have. He was somebody else then. Or was he somebody else now?

At the top of the stairs, Finley froze when he heard a snarl. Listening through the roar of his own blood as it surged through his ear canals, he recognized the sound as the vibration of respiratory structures. *Snoring*, he whispered inside his brain. *Somebody needs a mandibular advancement splint. See your local dentist. No, wait. You don't have to. I'm making a house call.*

As he delicately stepped toward the open bedroom door, some funny lyrics from a high school musical popped into his mind.

*With cat-like tread,
Upon our prey we steal;
In silence dread,
Our cautious way we feel.
No sound at all!
We never speak a word;
A fly's foot-fall
Would be distinctly heard.*

What was that? *Pirates . . . something. Pirates of Penzance—that was it.* He had played one of the non-speaking pirates.

He peeked in. They were both there, and both were sleeping with two distinctly different snoring patterns.

Finley, barely breathing, crept across the carpet to the end of the bed to determine which was who.

Mary, much thicker now than he remembered, was on the right with one bare leg extended over the edge of the bed. Good.

When he opened the dark sack, the crinkling of the plastic nearly panicked him. *Crap.* The bag would have to go, and he would have to move slower—slower and smarter.

He bent his knees and squatted to empty the contents onto the carpet—softly, softly—but as he went down the popping of his left knee cracked the silence.

There was just enough moonlight to distinguish the shapes of his materials clustered on the floor.

The topical lidocaine first. He tipped the bottle to saturate a cotton ball, and then closed his hand around the swab to heat it with his warm, silent breath. “Hhhhhh.”

Although he was on Mary’s side and her leg was conveniently protruding from under the covers, he could not help himself from doing Eva first. That’s how he had imagined it. That’s how he would do it. It felt right.

On her stomach, Eva’s body was completely covered, but as far as he could tell she was sleeping soundly. She always had.

As painstakingly as anything he’d ever done in his life, he peeled back a wedge of blanket to reveal a patch of her left shoulder.

Just a little lower. Under the scapula. Fewer nerve endings.

He touched the cotton ball to her moonlit skin, as carefully as possible to test for reflex. There was a quick snort. That was it. Her normal respiring resumed. *So far, so good.* He swabbed the chosen spot, then stood back to prepare the syringe.

As he did, one of his mental slide shows began. He titled it, “Memories of my Murder.”

Click: Drinking adulterated wine and losing control of himself.

Click: Having sex with Mary.

Click: Mr. Bald-thug saying, "By the way, she takes pictures."

Click: Eva looking at some Polaroids, maybe a dozen.

Click: The topper—the small burst of flame from the barrel of a gun fired by her, his own gorgeous wife.

With the two cubic centimeter syringe filled with Temazepam now, Finley reached down and carefully pricked Eva's skin.

She flinched. Her left arm shot out to the side, and then nothing more. The injection went swimmingly until the last of the approximately forty drops of the drug entered her vein. She bolted up.

"Ouch."

Finley withdrew and ducked below the bed line in the nick of time. He held his breath.

Eva looked at Mary. Mary was snoring. She scanned the moon shadows around the room. Finally, she yawned and let herself slump back into the covers, which she pulled to her chin, then turned over for a new position.

Concluding that Eva's respiratory pattern had returned to its normal sleep mode, he crept around to Mary's side to perform the same procedure. Well, almost the same.

He picked a spot five inches above the ankle on her extended right leg and swabbed it with the lidocaine. The leg did not move.

Thirty seconds later, the needle punctured her anesthetized skin, and Finley plunged the sedative into her blood. The leg gave a slight kick, but Mary's body did not stir.

The difference in the injections was the dosage. Mary got only half of what he had pushed into Eva.

He checked his watch.

2:55 a.m.

Behind schedule, but not by much. You don't want to rush any kind of benzodiazepine. Patience is your friend. The onset time would be two minutes, but he decided to give it ten, or at least until he sensed the apneic reactions to be about right.

3:05 a.m.

Intrepidly, he walked to the window, drew the drapes, then went back to the circular switch by the door. He pressed it and turned it clockwise, little by little, till the overhead light was at maximum brightness.

There, in living color, were his true mortal enemies, sprawled across the bed, the same bed, his Chuck Berry bed, on which he had been murdered by them, those two beautiful women with hearts as dark as any black hole in the universe.

"Hello, ladies," he said out loud. "Long time, no see. Gee, Mary, have you gained weight?"

They must have been virtuous people at some point in their lives, but, somewhere along the line, had fallen off or jumped off the wagon of morality to hitch a ride with the devil. Maybe he could make them see the error of their ways.

He went to the framed Guy Buffet sketch of Eva on the wall, slid it aside, and wondered if the combination of the safe behind it was still operative. The numbers, programmed by Eva, had been 69 right, 69 left, 69 right.

He didn't need to do this for any useful reason, especially since his time was ticking by so quickly, but he was curious about something, which he could not resist.

"I saw you, Eva, looking at some photos right before you shot me. I'm just wondering . . ."

The safe door pulled open. If he'd had more time he may have been disappointed by how easy it all was. She hadn't changed anything.

"You really didn't expect me back here at all, did you?" He shrugged. "Well, why would you?"

Rummaging through the safe's contents, he immediately clutched the stack of Polaroid photos, the pictures he had heard her promise Mary she would destroy, bound together with a thick rubber band.

"I knew you wouldn't," he said as he shuffled through them. "I knew you wouldn't." He grimaced. "You should have, though," he said.

The Polaroids were images of him and Mary, naked, locked in lewd and iniquitous positions. At least that's what they were supposed to portray. Not only was it obvious that each exposure was taken by remote

control—obvious because of the tilted angle, probably from an un-leveled tripod—but also ridiculously obvious was the fact that he, Finley, was unconscious.

“Oh, Eva,” he ridiculed. “If these were supposed to be some kind of plan B, Mary was right. You should have burned them.” He winced at the last one and shook his head. “Depraved, dear beautiful wife. No other word for it. You are depraved.”

He tossed the photos onto the dresser, flicked off the light, then made his way back downstairs.

3:15 a.m.

Standing in the door to the garage, he wondered what they had done with his Ford Escape Hybrid. It wasn't there. Eva's RAV4 was gone too, both replaced by new Lexus coupes—one gold, one black.

Beyond those he saw, where he had left it for years, the tarp-covered motorcycle.

He stepped in, sidled past the new vehicles, and then pulled the covering off his dad's old Harley Electra Glide.

Through the years he thought his father would have wanted it restored, but Finley had never found the emotional fortitude to have that done. He didn't want to ride it, and he didn't want to sell it, so he left it like it was—just the way it was found at the scene of the accident. One drunk driver. Two lost parents.

And Eva, it seemed, had not messed with his tools, thank God. His dad's old board with the tools hanging untouched for—how many?—twenty-three years, not counting the move to this house, were still there. All of them, that is, except one—the ax.

“Oh, my God.” A chill ran up his spine and his arm hairs bristled, but he did not want to ponder that coincidence now. Not now.

Next to the tool board hung the tire chains that his dad used to put on their vintage '65 Impala whenever the weather got icy. Finley couldn't remember the last time he'd seen anybody use chains like these, but he could never throw anything away that brought back memories of his dad.

He opened a drawer on the workbench and searched to find some U-bolt connectors.

3:26 a.m.

When Finley reentered the bedroom, he dropped the snow chains on the carpet.

“All right, who’s ready to party?” He turned the light back up to full strength and studied the two party poopers sprawled on the bed as he had left them. “Oh, come on, ladies. Honey, why don’t you go make us one of your famous meat loaves? I’m so hungry I might be able to choke some down.”

They laid stone still.

“No?” He sighed. “Okay. Who wants to go first?”

Finley stretched his arms under Mary and then had to grunt to turn her over and sit her up. She really had put on a few. More than a few. Painstakingly, he chained her wrists to the Chuck Berry solid iron headboard and fastened her tight with the U-bolts. It was important that her shackles be escape-proof, and it helped that her wrists were thicker now, making it less likely for her to be able to slip free.

3:41 a.m.

As he worked, he found himself wishing he’d brought party hats to put on their heads and some pistols to place in their hands but then, no, let’s not get sadistic. He was here for one purpose. To make a point. To show the world that he was a man who settled his own scores.

3:47 a.m.

Confident that Mary’s chains were as escape-proof as his had been, he took the Polaroid prints and stuffed them in an envelope, then grabbed a pen from the nightstand drawer and wrote, “To Ray D.” He placed the packet on Mary’s lap.

Now for some quality time with the wife. He had really wanted to make love to her that night she was packing for her trip to Little Rock. He could almost see that half-filled suitcase sitting there now at the foot of the bed. He shook his head.

“*Coup de gras* time,” he said and bent to grab the superglue and the Vacutainer package from where he’d dumped them on the carpet.

He pulled Eva's ankles, turned her flat on her back, and then went around and got her vanity chair to seat himself at her head, which he tilted back as far as he could.

"This reminds me of our first encounter," he said. "Do you remember that day?" A long sigh. "I do. Have you been flossing, honey? Huh? Daily?" He turned her top lip up. "Yeah, I'm sure you have."

He broke the sealed packaging containing the two parts of the Vacutainer and joined them, syringe into vial.

"I'm not here for your teeth, though," he said. "Tonight I want to work on that right eye of yours."

Puncturing her right arm, Finley drew blood. Four cc. Four cc of her evil blood, filling the vial, which he then set aside.

Then with professional delicacy, he reached with both hands to tug her right eyelid down, and then he folded it up. On its pink inner side, he applied a liberal rivulet of superglue.

Coagulation being fairly standard in most mammals, the bulk of his time would be spent waiting for the blood pool to dry enough to be properly bandaged with gauze and tape.

4:35 a.m.

The eye procedure accomplished, Finley wrapped the tire chains around his wife's arms and then around the bed irons, but not like he had done with Mary. No. Eva's chains he would leave unfastened, so as *not* to be escape-proof.

He stood up, did a quick survey, then kneeled down to collect the night's accoutrements.



FORTY-SEVEN

4:54 a.m.

As Finley reentered the kitchen, he paused at the cupboard where the dog food was kept. He had intended to fill Rammy's dish but, no, he would absolutely not give his dog Ol' Roy. And he couldn't believe that Sam Walton would ever have fed it to his own dogs.

He opened the refrigerator and sniggered at the first thing he saw—a plate of meat loaf covered with plastic wrap. He had made a joke about it upstairs, and now, wham, here it was. And what a call he had to make. Ol' Roy or Eva's meat loaf?

He shook his head with frustration, then grabbed the plate from the fridge.

Outside on the deck, Finley could see the white mass of dog muscle struggling to rise. He had timed it perfectly. With the plate of meat loaf in one hand and his bag of tricks in the other, he trod across the yard to Rammy.

He yanked the covering off the meat loaf, then shoved the plastic wrap into his bag as he watched his dog try to shake off the effects of the Xanax. Then he set the plate down.

Rammy was confused for a moment but wagged his tail gratefully and dug in. That dog would eat anything, any time. Always had. Finley could tell that Rammy would be fine, and, although he didn't want to, he knew it was time to climb back over the fence while his best buddy was preoccupied.

He hopped the fence and hoped for fewer facial welts as he ran back through the woods to his car. He could see the branches now. Dawn was breaking. Crap! It was only a few days beyond the summer solstice, the shortest night of the year. Probably why the insects had seemed so desperate.

5:07 a.m.

No sooner had he turned off Old Mill Road onto Carver Avenue than blue lights were flashing behind him. *Great.* He stowed the plastic bag under his seat. What kind of snag was this going to be?

As young a police officer as Finley had ever seen stepped up and asked for his license and registration. What was this cop, like sixteen?

Finley nodded, extracted his license from his wallet, and reached for the glove box for the car's rental papers.

"The reason I stopped you, Sir, did you know your right taillight is out?"

Finley smiled with relief.

"It's a rental," he said. "Enterprise. My car's in the shop."

As the officer studied his license, Finley told him that he was a dentist, working at Blaine House on some of the elderly residents there, and was headed out for an early start.

"They get up early, those old folks, you know."

"This is you?" the young patrolman asked cautiously.

Finley explained. The eye patch was not in the license photo because it was a temporary prescription to correct a focus problem. And he had lost a lot of weight since that picture was taken.

"Heck, that photo's, what, three years old?" He was afraid for a moment that the baby officer might want a peek under the patch but then, no, apparently not. Most people don't.

As the cop handed the rental agreement back he said, "You might want to run by Enterprise today and have them fix that light so you're not in violation."

"I'll give 'em what for, Officer," Finley promised.

"Drive carefully," the young cop said, then turned to go. Then he stopped and looked back.

"Something else?" asked Finley.

The officer stared for a moment. Yes, there was something else, but, no, he couldn't place it. He shook his head.

"No, Sir. Have a good day." He walked back to his City of Grand Bluff patrol car.

5:33 a.m.

Finley slipped into his room, pitched his Royal's ball cap onto the desk, and slid under the covers breathing hard and sweating like a pig, although he knew pigs did not sweat. He was sweating like a man in the clothes he wore to flee a crime scene, get stopped by the police, and still had those clothes on in bed under the covers. It had been a crime scene all right, twenty-one-and-a-half months ago. Certainly, what he had just done should not be considered a crime.

Five minutes later, his door opened. The light from the hall poured in and revealed to the orderly that all was well in H-5. Finley Bliss had, by all appearances, slumbered undisturbed through the night.

When the door closed, he hopped up, shed his shirt and jeans, wiped himself down with a cold wet towel, and then put on his pajamas. He yawned and slumped back down. He was tired. He was very tired and very sleepy and very, very pleased with himself.

7:45 a.m.

"Finley? Happy Tuesday." It was Marie Guerrero. "Are you all right?" Bleary-eyed, he turned over and asked the time.

"Almost eight," she said cheerfully. "You're usually up and at 'em by now. How'd you sleep last night?"

"Noh a wink," he said. "I wah ow all nigh on a cwime spwee."

"A what? A crime spree?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll keep an eye out for the po-po. What sounds good this morning? Want an omelet?"

"Oatmeal an bacon, pweeze."

"Are you sure you're ready for bacon?" she asked as she stepped around the bed and opened the curtains.

"I wan twy it."

"Okay." She nodded. "A banana on the side?"

"Yeah," Finley said. "Oh, Mawee, you know I hah a date tonight, righ?"

She stepped back around the bed and headed for the door.

"Yes, I heard about that, with your doctor friend. What time is she coming to pick you up?"

"I noh shuh. I hah to call her."

Marie stared at Finley with an inquiring penetration.

"Oh my God," she said, "You think you're going to get lucky tonight, don't you, Finley? Oh. My. *God*."

"Wha you mean?"

The nurse opened the door but stood, then shifted her weight.

"You know good and well what I mean, Little Mister. You're thinking about doing the deed with Dr. Shepherd, aren't you?"

Finley laughed and shrugged.

"I'm only human! Besie, ih migh help me be a bettaw man faw you, Mawee."

Marie shook her head.

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes." She paused. She looked back. "Finley," she said in a sexy voice, "you couldn't be a better man for me. If it weren't for our professional relationship, I would take you out myself and rock your world like an earthquake."

Finley smiled. "You would?"

"But doctors and nurses aren't allowed to do that. You know that, don't you?"

His expression exhibited disappointment.

When she came back with the oatmeal, bacon, and banana, he was sleeping soundly. Marie decided not to wake him.



FORTY-EIGHT

9:53 a.m.

Mary groaned and moved her head from side to side, trying to rouse herself from the sedation stupor, her chin wet with drool. Finally managing to force her eyes open, she had difficulty focusing and thought for a moment she must still be asleep in a dream, the only logical explanation of why she was sitting up and why she could not move her arms and why there was a thing in her lap.

She closed her eyes to go back to sleep in order to awake, this time for real. It didn't work. She opened them again and tried to get out of bed. That didn't work either. The chains rattled but held her snug.

"What the hell?" She looked over her shoulder for her first glimpse of her shackles and shrieked, "Jesus Christ, what the fuck is this?"

Confounded, she looked to Eva and saw that she too was manacled to the bed bars, still sleeping soundly, snoring, her head turned away.

"Eva, wake the fuck up. Eva! Eva! Damn it, Eva, wake up."

Having been injected with twice the amount of the benzodiazepine, Eva did not stir.

Mary screamed, "Eva! Eva! What the hell is the matter with you? Wake up." She swirled her legs around to kick Eva, causing some of the Polaroid prints to slide out from the unsealed envelope lying in her lap. She recognized them immediately. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. What the fuck? Oh, my God!" She gave Eva a hard kick in the back, causing more

photos to slip out. “Eva, you bitch, wake up. You said you burned those pictures. Damn you, wake up. We are in deep shit, Eva. *Eva?*”

No response.

Mary stared, realizing that Eva should have at least moaned. She should have moved an arm or a leg or something. She hadn’t because she couldn’t. So completely un-present was she, she may as well have been in outer space. There was nothing to do but wait for her to get back. How long would that be? What if she never came back? *I’m back*, Mary thought, *so why isn’t she?*

Then, there it was. The writing on the envelope. “To Ray D.”

“Oh, Christ.” What were those pictures doing in an envelope in her lap addressed to Ray D? It had to be the detective, Ray Dickhead or whatever. Why had he sent Eva the roses? Why had she pretended not to know who they were from?

Was Eva intent on double-crossing her? If so, why were they *both* in chains? Why was she, Mary, wide awake, and Eva dead to the world? They had to have been drugged with something, but with what? How? Why?

None of this made sense, and all of it was terrifying.

“Eva, please, wake up,” she pleaded in a trembling voice. “I’m getting really scared. Really, really scared.”

Then, for the first time in years, Mary broke down and cried. She sobbed and wailed till she was exhausted, then closed her eyes and drifted back into the clutches of Temazepam. She dreamed of her father, which also had not happened in years.



FORTY-NINE

When the Americans withdrew from Vietnam in 1975 and the Saigon government fell to the communists, there was a massive exodus of Vietnamese people to Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, mostly on small, leaky boats.

When the Western news media began to cover stories of these nations turning away the boat people and pushing them back out to sea, the world's wealthiest nations were compelled to offer asylum to the refugees. The efforts of individual Canadians and community groups led to the arrival of 30,000 boat people in 1979.

Duong Sann and his pregnant wife, Ly, were among those. Two weeks after their arrival in British Columbia, Ly gave birth to a seven pound girl at Vancouver General Hospital.

Through an outreach program by the Franciscan Sisters Benevolent Society, they were given food and clothing and taught that the mother of God was named Mary, and that she could grant them grace. For the extra protection that this name might provide their new daughter in their new land, her parents bestowed it upon her. Mary. Mary Ly Sann. It sounded good, they thought.

Another 30,000 Asian refugees were allowed in the following year, 1980, but it wasn't enough. Hundreds of thousands wanted desperately to move to the West, which gave rise to a whole new underground industry—people smuggling.

The snakeheads, as they were called, most notably the highly organized Fuk Ching gang, charged \$60,000 per person and each, if they didn't perish on the way, ended up in indentured servitude and/or prostitution to pay that debt. Money was also extorted from the families left in the homelands by way of threats of rape and dismemberment of those who survived the crossing.

Unspeakable atrocities were committed against those who dared to protest against the snakeheads, and some tried to hide or run away. Few made it.

When Mary's father, Duong Sann, witnessed the kidnapping of a young neighbor woman who had tried to quit her "job," he agreed to look at some RCMP mug shots as a favor to the police and identified the very first photo they showed him as the kidnapper, Peter Ping.

After assurances that his family would be well protected against any gang retribution, Duong Sann promised that he would testify against Ping.

That case never came to trial during Duong's lifetime. He became an activist in the immigrant community to try and shed light on the inhumanities of the snakeheads and the fact that the police, unlike what they had assured him, seemed unable or unwilling to stop the horrendous gang activity.

Mary's beloved father, the only one who could cheer her up when something was wrong or make her laugh or sometimes make her squeal with glee, disappeared without a trace when she was ten years old.

It was such a crushing blow that she never recovered. Her grief took root and grew like a noxious vine around her heart, tightening more each day, strangling her innocence and choking off her humanity, something her mother could hardly have noticed since she was the manager of the Port of Vancouver Gift Shop, working ten hours a day. Because of these work hours, Ly Sann could not be there to see the mental downfall of her daughter who, at age eleven, joined the Viet Ching, a gang responsible for a series of murders and armed robberies in China Town, mostly against a rival gang, the Red Eagles.

In 1992, Mary herself witnessed the attempted murder of William Hongin by Tony Yeung in front of the Golden Princess Theater on East Broadway.

At age twelve, when she was asked to testify, she flatly refused, not wanting to disappear like her father. Upon further consideration, she concluded that the Fuk Ching leaders could not take a chance on her. She was doomed, no matter what. It was savvy thinking—street smarts that saved her life.

Mary sought refuge in a church where she met Father Gerald Bidwood, who did more than take her under his wing. Because of the priest's proclivities he, at this time, was being transferred, or more accurately shuffled, to the diocese of Saskatchewan. She could go along. He would keep her secrets if she would keep his, her being one of them.

She scrambled away from the good father in Saskatchewan, where a gang called the Indian Posse had an active recruiting campaign, gaining power on a daily basis in control of turf, drugs, and prostitution.

Mary gravitated to this group, and because of her beauty, her intelligence, and her claim to be one of the First Nation's Aboriginal natives, which no one believed, she rose to prominence in the gang hierarchy and became a skilled confidante and advisor.

By the time she was twenty-three, Mary was a top Indian Posse officer, controlling operations in the community centers, in the schools, in the jails, and on the streets, reaching out to disenfranchised youths looking for a sense of belonging. She knew that feeling, painfully well, and she knew how to exploit it. The motto of the I.P. was "blood in, blood out," and every new "stryker" was urged to get the tattoo "IP."

She was arrested on charges of racketeering and sentenced to five years in the Stony Mountain Correction Center for Women, within whose walls she already had adoring IP members eager to prove their loyalty to her.

After a sexual fling with a manly female guard named Carla, she met and became enamored with Eva Bullock, who declared that she would rather be an individual than a member of any silly gang. That kind of talk could have gotten Eva killed, but Mary was smitten by her beauty.

When a reporter interviewed Mary about how and why she had spent most of her life as a gang member and what could be done to halt Canada's rapid twenty percent rise in violent crime, Mary pointed out that nearly

every woman in that prison had lost her father, one way or another, at an early age.

In her report, the journalist did not include that fact, conjecturing that it was a meaningless coincidence that would convolute her account of why Saskatchewan needed more social programs for teens. It wasn't a lack of fathers. It was a lack of government grants. Stay on point.

10:20 a.m.

Mary's dream brought back the pain of her father's disappearance. She thought maybe she knew where he'd been hiding all these years. *Daddy, I'm coming. Hang on.* But it was one of those dreams where you're stuck. Can't move. Weighted down. Chained to a bed.

She awoke. She felt terrible. She was cramping. She was horrified again.

"Eva," she shrieked. "*Evaaaaaa.*" A feeling of sticky discomfort mushroomed in her groin and she began to slide into a sense of ruin. "Eva," she moaned. "Eva."



FIFTY

1:15 p.m.

In the H wing of Blaine House, Marie Guerrero was taken aback by the gruffness of Christine Shepherd as the doctor stormed by her.

“Dr. Shepherd?” Marie queried.

Christine paused, turned.

“Yes?”

“He’s not expecting you till six.”

She turned back and continued walking.

“I need to see him now.”

Marie watched as Christine opened the door to H-5 without so much as a warning tap.

Finley turned lazily toward his surprise guest and checked his watch.

“Christine.”

“You stole my keycard?”

Finley pointed to the desk while he spoke through a yawn.

“Is that what that thing is on the desk, there, next to the lamp?”

Christine glanced at the keycard, then back to Finley.

“You went out last night, didn’t you?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“What I want to know is that you are not a danger to yourself or others.” She took a frustrated breath as her left foot began to tap without her noticing. She was exasperated. It was time to face the facts. “I care for

you, Finley, I guess you know that, in a way that I shouldn't, but, holy crap. You're driving me crazy."

"We still on for tonight?"

A long moment ticked by.

"Will you admit you stole that card from me?"

Finley ruminated.

"We're both *borrowers* of that card. It belongs to Blaine House." He shrugged. "So, technically—"

"No. Stop it. Finley . . ."

He was yawning again.

"You promised I could take you out for dinner tonight."

"I did, but—"

"I'm glad you're here now, though. I've got to get that car back to the rental place. I almost got a ticket this morning."

"This morning?"

"You like blackened grouper?"

"What?"

"I'm going to take you to a place where—"

"Wait, wait. Hold on."

He smiled. "You should know by now I can hold on. I can hold on with the best of them."

She glared at him.

"Did you break any laws?"

He jumbled his lips as he wondered.

"Other than driving with a busted taillight? Hmmm, I would have to say no, not really."

Befuddled, she pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed her eyes.

"You're going to get kicked out of here, you know."

"Not if you honor the confidentiality protocol." He sighed. "But I'm ready. I'm sick of this place. Hey, guess who kind of hit on me today?"

Christine stared.

"She can't follow through, though, she says, because of professional ethics."

Why didn't he just waterboard her? She put the heels of her palms against her eyes and felt the afternoon falling apart around her.

1:25 p.m.

Mary saw Eva move an arm. She screamed, "Evaaaaa! Evaaaaa!"

Eva groaned, then moved a leg.

"Eva, Eva, Eva, Eva, wake up. Come on. Wake up, honey."

"No," Eva mumbled. "Leave me alone."

"It's fucking one thirty in the afternoon, girl, and we are in big trouble. Big, big trouble. Get up now. I mean it. Right now, Eva. It's *bad*. Look at the clock."

Eva turned her head.

"What the fuck is your problem? I'm sleepy, all right? God, I've got a terrible hangover."

With her first look at Eva's right eye, Mary exploded with a bloodcurdling scream and repeated the phrase, "Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God," over and over again.

It was Eva's turn to realize she was in chains. She twisted around to look at Mary, who she saw was also clamped to the bed irons. Tire chains?

"What the fuck is this? What happened?"

"We were drugged. Probably roofies, I don't know. We're chained to the bed." Mary had been thinking about it. "Sound familiar?"

Eva tried to assess.

"*Finley*? No." She couldn't believe that. "No."

"It has to be." Mary gaped at the bandage on Eva's face. "Your eye," she said, then bit her tongue.

"What about my eye?" Eva yanked her chains, and surprisingly they loosened, allowing her arms to disentangle. "Ha!" she chortled. "Whoever chained me wasn't very good at it. Wait. My eye? What the hell is this?" She touched the dressing as she threw her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Eva, get me loose, please. I've been awake since, like, nine this morning. I'm sitting in my period blood. It's gross. Get me out of these chains right now. We got to get the fuck away from here."

But Eva was headed for the mirror.

"What about my eye?" she asked again, with her fingertips now exploring the compress. "What the hell?"

"Don't look," Mary begged, but it was too late.

As though the mirror itself were a dagger, its blade her own reflection, Eva's anima was slashed, swift and deep, the spectacle impaling her very essence.

Her right eye in bandages, with dried dribbles of blood down her cheek, panicked her into a state of outrage. She stared at herself, at the wound dressing, the taped gauze over her right eye, and she felt an avalanche in her gut. So stunned was she by this atrocity, she could hardly hear the anguished voice of Mary enfeathered behind her.

"Eva, come on. Get me out of these chains, please. Please, baby, please, baby, help me. We've got to go." She may as well have been a cricket chirping behind a distant wall.

Eva's worst nightmare had detonated, exploding the shrapnel of vandalism into her soul. It was ruination. The desecration of her beauty was the end. The end of her individuality, the end of her very existence.

"Oh, God," she said as she finally summoned the courage to see the mutilation. She reached up, clutched the dressing, and tore it away.

1:38 p.m.

Outside, on the road, Fred Pfister, the neighbor with the basset hound, was walking Oprah, allowing a leisurely sniff at the Bliss mailbox, when both man and dog froze at the sound of the scream, shattering the tranquility of Lakewood Street. Their heads bolted up.

Mr. Pfister adjusted his hearing aid and looked around. He was thinking it came from the Bliss house.

"Jiminy Christmas, Oprah. Now what?"

The hound looked up, uncertain.

"That place has seen its share of terror. Surely—"

He was cut off by another scream—a long, wailing, anguished howl of horror, definitely from the Bliss House.

He reached into his pocket, dropped his end of the leash, and dialed 911 on his phone.

1:42 p.m.

Upstairs in the bedroom, Eva stared at her lacerated face with its crater of dried blood and screamed again, "No, no, no, no, no!"

"Eva, quit screaming," Mary pleaded. "It's only going to bring the police."

"It *was* Finley," Eva screeched.

"Of course it was! And it was Finley who sent the flowers. I know that now. Think about it. We have got to get out of here."

"He cut my eye out! He cut my fucking eye out! How did he do this?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. He did it. Do you want the police to find us?"

"Hell yes! Why not?"

"Why not? Look at these pictures on the bed. These pictures you promised to burn! The cops will come. They'll see these Polaroids. They'll put two and two together and . . ." It was obvious that Eva wasn't listening. "Eva, damn you, focus!"

"Focus?" Eva spewed the irony. She was fused to herself in the mirror, bemoaning the loss of her beauty, of that pair of eyes that had, for the most part, opened any door she chose, had gotten her anything, everything she ever wanted in life. She cursed the word again. "*Focus?*"

"Eva," Mary implored, "we've got to get out of this house. Please, baby, unlock me. I've got my period, and I'm a mess, and I'm hurting all over."

Eva turned with revulsion then and hissed.

"Get out of my own house? Are you fucking kidding me? Get out of my own house?"

"We have to!"

"Fuck you very much, Mary, you stupid cow, but I don't think so."

Mary took a breath to calmly explain the situation.

"Honey? Eva? Listen. Here it is. If the police come and find these pictures, that one guy, Detective Dickhead, is going to add this up. He will. He'll add this whole thing up, and you and I will end up right back in prison, only this time . . . are you listening? This time, for murder. Is that what you want?"

Eva turned back to the mirror and said flatly, "We didn't kill anybody."

"Well, yes, in a way we did. Baby, please get me out of these chains. I'll take care of things. We'll get your eye fixed, I promise." She was completely ignored.

"I was a beautiful woman," Eva sobbed, staring at her image. "Good at my job. Damned good! I helped a lot of retarded CEOs cover their asses. I could have saved Detroit!"

"Baby, you still are a beautiful woman. You will always be a beautiful, dynamic, powerful woman. Let's get me out of these chains, get out of this house, and go figure out our next move."

Stupefied, her voice small now, Eva said, "I thought he was a vegetable."

"Eva, unchain me."

Eva turned to Mary. She was staring, but could see nothing beyond her own ruin.

"How does a vegetable do something like this? That motherfucker cut my eye out, and it hurts like hell."

Mary began to cry again as she watched Eva turn from the mirror and stagger toward the door.

"We got any pain pills?"

"Unlock me. I'll get them for you. I know right where they are. The good stuff."

"We got any OxyContin tablets left?" Eva asked again, oblivious.

Mary's mind was cracking. She went berserk, twisting, flopping, and sobbing.

"Help me, Eva, you stupid bitch! Help me, and then I will help you, and we'll help each other get the fuck out of Dodge!"

Eva was through the door and at the top of the stairway when she raised her hand to touch the ocular socket. She was expecting pain. It felt almost normal. Maybe a nerve had been severed. It had to be that, otherwise the soreness would be excruciating. She wanted to feel the eyeball crater with her fingertips, but it didn't push in. *It should feel more squishy*, she thought. Wait. Probably the hole had filled with a deep incrustation of blood. *Wouldn't it be more, what was the word, viscous?* she wondered.

"OxyContin," she reminded herself, then called back to Mary. "I'm going to get something for the pain, Mary. I'll be right back." The last words Mary heard Eva say were the ones she muttered as she started down the stairs. "That son-of-a-bitch."

"Eva!" Mary screamed.

One-eyed, Eva's depth perception was impaired. Either that, or she felt so bamboozled that she was too preoccupied to pay attention. Maybe

it was a combination of both, but her left foot wobbled on the second step for some reason, and she lost her balance.

Mary could not see the fall, but she heard it—the small but bone-chilling yelp, mixed with the clamor of an uncontrolled human body tumbling down a stairway. There was that ruckus—a terrible ruckus, a sickening sound on its own—and then something more sickening and much more horrifying: silence. Dead silence.

“Eva!” Mary screamed at the top of her lungs. “Evaaaaa!” She strained to hear Eva’s voice, hoping for the sound of some furious cursing. A good fall might bring the crazy bitch back to her senses. Mary’s ears were ringing with the echo of her scream, but she tried again. There was nothing else she could do. “Evaaaaaa!”

What she heard from the bottom of the staircase was silence. Stone dead silence.



FIFTY-ONE

5:45 p.m.

Marie, walking from Blaine House to the parking lot, was startled by what looked like the resident in H-5 driving a dark car from behind the maintenance building toward the gate. *It couldn't possibly be*, she thought, but then she saw, following directly behind him, someone she knew to be Dr. Christine Shepherd in her Volvo. Finley Bliss *driving*? The man could barely dress himself. She turned and walked back to the building.

6:23 p.m.

Finley returned his rental car, reported the inoperative taillight, then hopped into Christine's car and closed the door.

"I've just got this feeling you're taking me for a long, bad ride," she said.

"You're the one driving," Finley said, smiling.

"A ride," she continued, "that could lead me into big trouble, and I've got to tell you, Finley, I've never been in trouble in my life. Really. None. Not with my parents or my teachers or my bosses, certainly not the police. Nobody. Ever. But I'm in it now, aren't I?"

Finley let her talk.

"Oddly enough, I do care for you." She exhaled a breath of frustration. "Yes, I do think I may *love* you, but I will not go over the cliff with you. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

Christine looked around.

"Where to?"

Finley shrugged. "You just shot down my cliff idea, so how about Canoodles?"

She gave a glum side-glance.

"You're kidding, right? Canoodles? Over on Truman?"

"You know the place."

"I've seen their obnoxious TV ads."

"Pull onto Boone Street, make a right on Market, and then a right again, and that'll be Truman Avenue."

"It's a bar and grille, right? Blue collar joint? Kind of a dive?"

"You're not a snob, are you, Christine?"

She considered that question as she turned onto Boone. Maybe she was a bit of a snob. Not consciously, of course, but she had to admit it was a long time since she had dined anywhere other than the prestigious club restaurants—the country club, the University Club, the Tower Club, the Three Cedars Club.

"I guess," she said hesitantly, "that you, being a professional man, I thought we'd be going to—"

"L'Oignon Qui Hurlant?" he interjected.

"Not necessarily, no, but, you know. Someplace nice."

Finley shook his head.

"You *are* a snob."

She swung the car onto Market.

"Fine. Wherever you want to go. Just remember the deal."

He nodded.

"Any question you want."

"My first question is—"

"Hey," Finley interrupted. "Don't be uncouth. Refined people have their philosophical conversations over dinner."

Christine rolled her eyes.

"I have to know, as your doctor, what you're thinking. Why the big retarded ruse? Why you needed a car? Why—?"

Finley raised a halting hand. Lightheartedly, he attempted a Dracula voice, rolling his R's Transylvania-style.

“Christine.”

She shot him an anxious glance.

“It shall all be revealed over dinner.” He raised his head and bellowed a maniacal laugh. “Bwah-haw-haw-haw-haw-haw.”

“Oh, dear God,” Christine muttered and turned onto Truman Avenue. They were quiet for a minute until she noticed that he was smiling. “Tell me what you’re thinking right now,” she said.

Finley looked at her.

“I’m thinking that I’ve won the prize.”

“What prize?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“What is the prize?”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“According to my dad, a satisfied mind.”

7:12 p.m.

In Canoodles, Finley asked the young waitress, Patti, if they could seat themselves at a particular table. He pointed. She turned to check, then said, “Sure.”

It was the table on the raised floor in the back corner. A TV was mounted above it.

With his neurologist, he now sat at that table, the same table, maybe in the same chair—they were all alike—at the same angle as he had been when his life had fallen through a trap door nearly two years ago.

7:15 p.m.

When Christine looked at the menu, she wanted to roll her eyes the way a snob would, but she resisted. Instead, she pretended to study the choices, which were what she had expected they would be. Unable to keep the sarcasm completely covered she said, “Gee, I wonder what’s good tonight. The hamburgers or the chicken strips?” She arched her eyebrows and shrugged. Finley chuckled.

“When the waitress comes back, ask about the specials.”

She nodded with a look of excitement.

“Oh, specials. Maybe it’s chilidog night.”

Finley put an elbow on the table, his chin in his palm, and smiled as he studied her. He liked her like this. Feisty.



FIFTY-TWO

7:25 p.m.

After Patti recited the three specials of the evening, Christine found herself intrigued after all and asked to hear about the second one again.

“Chicken breast divan—what is that?”

Patti, though only twenty-three, answered maternally, “Oh, honey, you’ll love it. Juicy, tender chicken breast with a hint of curry in a creamy sauce topped with cheesy buttered crumbs. Comes with our own fancy rice pilaf. It’s good.”

Christine had to admit that, yes, it sounded good.

“I’ll have that.”

Two thumbs up from Finley, pleased to have broken through at least one of her walls. On second thought, *another* of her walls, but he had sworn not mention the first. Besides, that one had been her idea, not his.

“And how about you, Captain Jack?” the waitress smiled.

Finley ordered the third of the specials, the beer-braised beef brisket with roasted garlic red potatoes.

After the waitress turned away, Christine’s first question was, “Why did she call you Captain Jack?”

“The eye patch, I guess. You know, Captain Jack Sparrow?”

A blank look.

“Those pirate movies? Johnny Depp?”

She didn’t know, so she admitted to him that maybe she kept herself in a more exclusive world than was normal.

"Smaller world, you mean. I was the same way," he said, "most of my life, but at least I went to the movies."

"With your wife?"

His wife. Here it was. Was he ready? He thought so.

"No," he answered, "mostly when she was out of town on business."

Christine saw an inner shadow rise in his face and sensed that it was not the moment, not yet. She could wait. She was prepared to be patient tonight. But not too patient.

Finley's eye was now on the table where he had witnessed the quarrel between the big bald man and the Asian girl.

"You can always see two or three single guys at the movies," he muttered, "but never any single women. Why is that?"

Christine stayed quiet, watching him.

Four college girls, barely drinking age, occupied the table he was fixed on, but in Finley's mind, like a holographic superimposed movie, he could see and hear every word of that surreal scene from almost two years ago. He shook his head.

"Twenty-one-and-a-half months ago," he said.

"What was that?" She leaned in.

"I killed a man, Christine." He turned to her.

"I know," she said sweetly. "I know." She reached to take his hand in hers. "Why do you mention that now?"

"You said you wanted to know what was going on in my head."

"I do."

"Well, this is where it started," he said, "right here." He looked at his watch. "Right about this time."

He told her the whole story—what he ordered, what song the Richard Brown Trio was playing, how he looked up when he heard the big bald man and the girl arguing.

"He was shaking a breadstick in her face," he recounted, "then he got up to use the restroom, and then, somehow, she disappeared. I cannot explain that."

Christine nodded sympathetically.

"She slipped away while he diverted your attention, maybe? Con artists are bold like that."

Finley nodded and took a deep breath to hold back the tears pressing against his eyes.

"I killed that guy, Christine, that same guy, the next day at my house."

"He had to be in on the deception though, didn't he? The what-you-call-it, the scam, the caper?"

"Yeah, but," Finley shook his head, "I think he was as big a dope as I was." His wet eyes looked into hers. "I don't even know who he was."

"Neither do the police," she said softly. "They never found out." She squeezed his hand. "Your wife knows, though, doesn't she?"

"She and her accomplice, Mary. Sure."

Christine raised her other hand for a double grip on his, to reinforce the message that here was a deeply caring friend in whom he could fully confide.

"So why," she asked, as softly as the room's hubbub would allow, "if you don't mind me prying, won't you press charges against her and tell your story to Detective Dieckmeyer? He's in your corner, Finley. He wants to help you make this whole thing right."

It was too deep, too fast. Finley's eye veered to the stage where he watched the musicians setting up their instruments. Then his eyebrows shot up.

"I'll be danged. That's them—the Richard Brown Trio—the same band!" He stretched his neck for a better look. "Talk about an amazing coincidence."

Christine looked toward the bandstand.

"Maybe they play here all the time."

He didn't respond.

Patience, yes, she thought, but she'd be damned if she was going to let him deflect her all night. How could she get him to pour his heart out?

"Tell me about your invention."

This brought his eyes back to hers.

She smiled and raised her brows, a look of anticipation.

He leaned in to keep his words tightly leashed.

"I can straighten the most misaligned teeth in—are you ready for this?—*four* hours." He held up a finger to indicate *but wait—there's more*. "With only a three week healing time."

They had talked about this, months ago, maybe a year ago.

"As long as they use the Peridex correctly," he added.

He must have forgotten that he had told her these things, but she had it all down, somewhere in her notes, next to a red question mark. If his claim was true, it was certainly amazing enough to act blown away. Her head drew back.

"Really? Unbelievable!"

"I get seven hundred fifty thousand dollars quarterly for five years, and then royalties go based on sales but . . ." He stopped.

She bent forward to keep him talking.

"But what?"

"It's being kept off the market." He sighed. "There ain't no stinking sales."

"I would imagine not," she said. "The orthodontic industry isn't about to roll over and let you kick them to the curb."

He nodded, like he had figured that out, and then shook his head.

"Their technology is obsolete, Christine."

"And you and . . . what was the company?"

"Laurel Labs."

"Laurel Labs. They specialize in dental technology, right? And they're the only ones who know about this?"

With a nod of acknowledgment, his gaze went to the silverware. The hand she wasn't holding picked up a spoon. He twiddled it.

"You think she just wanted your money?"

Bang, it was back to Eva. Well, he had promised that she could ask him anything. It was time, he guessed. He raised his head.

"I think she wanted a thrill."

Christine squinted, trying to understand.

"What kind of thrill?"

"The kind I couldn't give her, apparently. She said I was boring."

"Excuse me?"

Finley's head bobbed.

"She told me that she was going to kill me because I was the most boring man in the world." He dropped his eyes and studied his reflection in the spoon between his fingers. "I *am* a boring guy, I know that. I was never, what's the word, *charismatic*. She killed me because," he shrugged,

"I'm boring." He looked up again, waited, and watched the expressions wrestle on her face.

She took her time, finally leaned back, and then shook her head slowly.

"Finley, listen to me."

The Richard Brown Trio started their first set with a sax version of Nora Jones's "Don't Know Why."

She grabbed his hand again and squeezed tightly.

"You have the most challenging mind I have ever encountered in my life. There is not a single thing about you that isn't unique and fascinating."

Finley leaned in.

"So, you really do like me? I'm not just a project for TBI research?"

She smiled.

"Well, you are most certainly a case for the textbooks. Your brain should definitely be studied but," she withdrew her right hand and rubbed her chin, "I think you know that I . . . that I've . . ."

"Fallen in love with me?"

She scrunched her face and turned her gaze across the room.

Crap, he thought. He was only trying to be funny, and he had spoiled the moment.

"To tell you the truth," she intoned, "I don't really know what that means—falling in love." Her eyes moved back to his. "One doesn't really fall in something. You fall *into* something."

"You could fall in the mud," he said.

"If you're already in the mud, yes, you could fall *in* it."

Finley nodded.

"I never got that either, really."

"But you did love your wife, didn't you?"

"I'd have to say yes, but, basically, I think I was emotionally manipulated by the fact that here was this beautiful woman who seemed to love me. I never dreamed that could happen—to me, I mean." His expression buckled. "Turns out, it really didn't."

"Finley, if Eva had a thrill deficit to the point of murdering you, then she must have had a long and twisted past that you didn't know anything about. She probably gets her adrenaline rush from crime like . . . like Jack the Ripper."

He tinkered with his patch as he thought about that, then put a finger to his lips.

"But I really was boring," he said. "Heck, I bore myself."

It was an opening, and she took it.

"Your farce as a mental invalid—that doesn't seem to bore you. It's obviously quite self-entertaining."

Finley lowered his head with a wry smile.

"I'm done with that now."

"Thank God." She sighed. "Your nurse, of course, will take the credit, thinking it was her miraculous flirting therapy."

Quiet settled in for a few moments while Christine stared at one of the mounted TVs across the room—a local channel with a rerun of *Family Guy*. What had America come to?

"Is that it?" he asked.

She chortled and turned back to him.

"I'm building up slowly to the big question."

"I hope it's something about maxillofacial pathology."

Christine smiled.

"Tell me. I started to ask you this before, but you shut me down. Why don't you want her prosecuted? Your wife?"

"That's your big question?"

"I told you I'm building up."

He stared at her and repeated, "Why don't I want her prosecuted?" It was as if he'd never thought about it. He took a breath. "Well, to me that would be like having your dad go down to the playground and beat up the bully who stole your lunch money. You just don't do that. Not with something so personal."

Her eyes narrowed.

"My dad was big on figuring out and then dealing with a guy's own personal problems."

"That's ridiculous," Christine said with a new cloud of worry moving across her face.

7:53 p.m.

Patti was suddenly there with hot dinners, one in each hand.

Finley leaned back.

Christine was too concerned to notice.

"You didn't shoot your wife last night, did you?"

Clearing his throat as a warning signal, Finley cocked his head toward the waitress, who now had a shocked look on her face. He checked her nametag.

"Patti, do I look like a murderer to you?"

Patti set their plates on the table.

"Kind of," she said. "Yeah, I can see it." She straightened back up. "Can I get you anything else?"

Both shook their heads, and Patti toddled away.

"Answer me," Christine demanded.

"The question was what? Did I shoot my wife? You're not serious." He saw that she was. He sighed. "Other than hunting rabbits once with my Uncle Don, I have never fired a gun, ever. And when I saw that beautiful rabbit, dead . . ." He shook his head to dislodge the memory. "How could you ask me such a thing?"

"You did fire a gun again, though."

"Oh, yeah. Okay. I have blasted the life out of exactly two fellow mammals—one bunny and one total stranger. I have fired a gun twice."

"You said I could ask anything," she said defensively.

He nodded.

"Go for it."

Christine heaved a sigh.

"My bladder is about to burst." She looked around. "Where are the restrooms?"

"Around that corner." He pointed.

As she rose she asked, "Do you own a gun?"

"My wife bought one for my birthday. She told me—"

Christine held up her *hold-that-thought* finger.

"I'll be right back." She started to step away then paused, twisted around, and bent down. "My next question is going to be . . . are you ready?"

"Shoot."

"Who called me the night you regained consciousness? Somebody called me at my house." With the increasing pressure on her bladder, she started to step away.

"It was the black guy," Finley blurted abruptly.

She froze and turned back again.

"What black guy?"

"Only one in the room."

"The coma patient?"

He nodded.

"The one to my right." He sighed. "I understand the old guy on the other side died while you were there."

Christine's bladder was in distress, but she was riveted. She nailed her eyes to his.

"You're asking me to believe that that comatose old Negro came out of his coma, noticed you were awake, went to the phone, and called me?"

He shrugged.

"I saw it with my own eye."

Galled by his temerity, Christine huffed and spun away. It was time to have a full-blown showdown with this silly man, brain damaged or not, confidentiality clause or not, romantic dinner or not. Romantic? Whatever. She had to pee. But then, as her residency supervisor used to say, there would be a "come to Jesus" meeting.

8:06 p.m.

Lady's night at the local honky-tonk and only three stalls in the women's restroom.

"For God's sake," Christine muttered as she realized it would be five more excruciating minutes before she got into a stall.



FIFTY-THREE

8:10 p.m.

In the restroom stall, three things frustrated her. In reverse order they were, well, number three was the fact that her dinner was getting cold, and it really did look delicious when she finally noticed it. Number two was the feeling that she had lost the momentum with Finley, who had been loosening up pretty well there until, well, that brought her to number one, the bizarre answer to the question that she told him she would ask when she got back—when she got *back*, damn it. Why had he blurted the answer out like that? Why didn't he wait? Answering on the spot like that when he knew she had to walk away? Damn him.

“The black guy,” he had said. The coma patient to his right.

First of all, well, first of all, that was impossible. Why would he have said that? Even if it were true that that man could have gotten off his bed to make a phone call—impossible, but let's just say—how would he have known to call her? How would he have gotten her number? How would he have gone back to bed and slipped back into his coma? People can't just promenade in and out of comas as they please. People can't just fall in and out of love as they please.

Then again, she remembered, Finley had been only minutes from death. He wouldn't, couldn't, really know who the caller was.

She rose from the toilet and flushed.

His answer to her suggested that he had either been hallucinating that night—very possible—or he was lying tonight. Also possible. But why

would he lie? And why had he refused to answer this question all this time, until now? Perhaps he believed the hallucination but assumed no one would believe him. Plausible.

She continued pondering as she washed her hands and then checked her watch.

8:14 p.m.

Finley told her he saw the man call her, saw it with his own eye. He said those words exactly. But how could he have known whom was being called? As she headed back to their table, she realized Finley would have figured that out long ago, maybe that very night, because she was the one who showed up. It would not be a sensible way to reopen the Q&A. She would ask, though, if he heard that phone call. Great question.

As she emerged from around the wall, back into the main room, she paused in the crowd to formulate her reentry into Finley's head. She looked over the partitioning planter that separated the two different floor levels and saw that Finley had ordered a bottle of wine. It would be good. Suddenly, her eyes were drawn to the TV screen above his head.

His eye was on the musicians.

What would be the best thing she could say to confound him, to knock him off his feet, to lower his guard, to make him laugh, to make him love her, and open up to her, and tell her the truth about everything? No dodges, no smokescreens, no games.

Her first sentence back from the restroom after, what, fifteen minutes, would have to be something that— Wait. What was she seeing on TV?

It was a special report, live from a familiar residential background. A chill ran up her spine as she recognized the place. She had seen it on the news before. Her eyes dropped to check on Finley.

He was watching the band play “Ain’t No Sunshine,” so he didn’t notice Christine standing in the throng reading the silent words crawling across the bottom of the TV screen above him. Her hand covered her mouth as each word of the closed caption report became more horrifying.

“... bizarre incident at the home of Dr. Finley Bliss, who himself was a victim of a shooting exactly two years ago today. Dr Bliss is recovering from a brain injury at Blaine House Nursing Home. His wife, Eva Bliss,

was found dead by police, who were called to the scene by a neighbor who heard screaming at around 2:30 p.m. today. Another woman, believed to be a friend of the victim, was found in a state of shock, chained to a bed. Not only had Mrs. Bliss's neck been broken, but, according to one source, her right eye appeared to have been carved out."

Christine's heart sank. Her stomach churned, and her throat filled with some kind of acidic secretion she had never felt before. Her eyes lowered back to Finley.

He saw her and shrugged, wondering why she was just standing there. He circled a finger in the air, then pointed at the bottle of wine, and then shivered and hugged himself to say the food was getting cold.

People bumped her as they tried to slide by. She didn't notice. She was frozen there, mouth agape, barely able to breathe, staring at Finley, the biliousness rising.

"What's the matter?" his mouth formed the words.

Christine raised her BlackBerry and mouthed back, "Emergency." She held up a finger to signal it would just be another minute, then disappeared around the corner.

8:22 p.m.

When Christine returned to the table, Finley did not hide the fact that he was disgruntled.

"You've been gone half an hour."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He deferred with a nod.

"I'm sure they'll rehear—" He broke off. Something was wrong. "Aren't you going to sit down?"

Her throat felt tight.

"Another time."

Something was definitely wrong. His eye narrowed with uneasiness.

"Another time?"

"I've got an emergency at Riverside General."

Finley frowned, disappointed, and stared at the wine.

"That's a '74 Heitz Martha's Reserve Cab," he said with eyebrows arched. Then he shrugged. Such is a doctor's life. He understood.

Her throat constricted, and her voice began to collapse.

"I want you . . . to go with me," she managed to say.

This surprised him. He fixed on her fretful gaze and decided she was just trying to be polite. Either way, go or stay, it would be a logistics kink for him.

"I'll be fine," he said. "A Yellow Cab pulling up to Blaine House will freak them out, for sure, but that's going to happen anyway. It's time—"

"No, Finley. I really, *really* want you to go with me."

"Oh." He pushed away from the table and rose to his feet. "Really?"

She nodded.

"Please."

On the way out, Finley handed Patti his credit card.

"Emergency," he said. "Hold onto this. We'll be back."



FIFTY-FOUR

8:30 p.m.

Something odd was going on. Tears were streaming down Christine's cheeks as she drove. Maybe the victim of the crisis was someone she knew. He didn't know what to say, so he waited. She wanted him with her, so she would fill him in when she was ready, he thought.

Christine turned her Volvo off Truman onto Ingalls, then down Broadway toward Riverside Drive without speaking, but she kept clearing her throat to cover the sobs.

"Christine," Finley finally broke his silence gently.

"What?" she barked.

"You asked me to come along. I'm here." He shifted his body closer to hers. "It's my turn to be a confidante for you."

She slid a palm up her right cheek, as though trying to push the tears back up into their ducts.

"What kind of emergency is it?"

She glanced at him. She had to talk. How should she broach this? She decided to start with an example.

"I worked with a patient recently who was having violent outbursts that neither he nor his doctors could figure out."

Finley listened.

"I mean, for years this went on." She sniffed. "After he was finally referred to me, I was able to trace it back to a head injury he received in a car wreck."

“Okay.”

“When we put him on propranolol, the explosive episodes stopped.”

“That’s a BP medication, isn’t it?”

They turned onto Riverside Drive, two blocks from the hospital.

“My point is,” she cleared her throat again, “that rage resulting from neurological impairment is unpredictable. I warned you about that.”

“So you did.” He nodded. “On several occasions. Got it.” He waited, missing something, he guessed. “Why are we talking about me?”

“You killed your wife,” she said.

Finley watched her hands turn the leather-bound steering wheel as they swung into the massive Riverside General parking lot. He liked her hands.

“Well?” she asked, apoplectically.

“Well, what? I’m supposed to respond to that? Did you just say I killed my wife?”

She stared.

“You asked me that two hours ago. I thought it was nutty then, but I answered you. I told you, no.”

“What I asked was, did you *shoot* her?”

“What is wrong with you, Christine? What about your emergency call?”

“It’s on the news,” she sobbed and wiped her face with a wrist. “I’ve already called the police.”

He grappled with this.

“You called the police.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You called the police on me?”

She nodded slowly.

“I don’t know why you would do that, but, more importantly, what happened to our doctor-patient confidentiality clause? I’m only a dentist, but if a patient asked me—”

“Did you go to her house last night?”

Finley thought for a moment.

“I went to *my* house last night.”

“Last night, you went there, right?”

“Yes.”

“And today she’s dead.”

Finley scoffed.

"No."

Christine screeched the car to a halt at the edge of the pavement, near the slope above the river.

"I knew better. I knew better! Explosive aggression occurs in seventy percent of victims of serious brain injury, and there I went," she threw up her hands, "ignoring the facts, crossing over my own fantasy bridge into your kingdom of delusion, when I knew better. I *knew* better."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Finley interrupted. "Maybe it isn't as bad as all that."

As the sun was starting to sink on one of the longest days of the year, the sound of sirens came within range, distant but definite. She gasped.

"Not as bad as all that? My God, you murdered your wife." She stared at him, her face a mess.

Finley shook his head as though he didn't understand English.

"God's honest truth," he said, "in my whole life I've only murdered one rabbit, which I told you about, and one person. You know about him. I swear, at the time, I thought it was self defense. I have never even wounded anyone else, except for a few of my dental patients." He smiled to indicate he was injecting humor. Christine did not smile back, and the sirens were getting closer.

"So why'd you go there? *Why*, Finley? I deserve an explanation. I mean, I have my professional opinion, but if you could tell me anything . . ."

"Are those sirens the police coming for me?"

"Probably."

"Because you told them I murdered my wife?"

"I just told you it was on the news—on TV—just thirty minutes ago. The TV above your head at Canoodles."

"Eva is dead?" Finley asked as he twisted around to see blue and red flashes pulsating from the black-and-white cars turning into the hospital lot.

Christine lowered her head onto the steering wheel.

"A lawyer who understands psychiatric concepts—that's what you're going to need. I'll explain everything for whoever it is." She groaned, then pounded the wheel. "Ohhh, I knew better, I knew better, I knew better!"

"Christine," Finley said calmly, "I anesthetized her. I sealed her eye with glue, drew some blood from her arm, and plastered it over her eyelid."

She turned to look at him.

"I did dress it as though it were a wound, but it wasn't. I did not harm her whatsoever. I just wanted to freak her out, her and her girlfriend. They had it coming, don't you think?"

Four police Dodge Chargers were circling the lot, looking for the Volvo. Christine was supposed to signal them by flashing her lights.

"She's dead, Finley," she said as she looked toward the patrol cars. "And you have been playing games with your doctors and your nurses and the whole world with your little retarded routine."

"She can't be dead," he said defensively.

"Oh, and guess what," Christine commanded. "I'll probably be charged as an accomplice. I thought, idiot that I am, that you cared for me."

Finley looked around. The police-car noose was tightening.

"I can't tell who you're more upset with," he said, "me or yourself." He unlatched the car door and shook his head dejectedly. "I just wish you hadn't called the police. Of course, I care for you." A tense moment ticked by. "You were my only friend."

"What are you doing?"

"Since we can't trust each other now . . . well, I don't want to go to jail, Christine, not after what I've been through." He pushed the door open and slid out.

"Finley, don't run." She hadn't expected this. "There's nowhere for you to go."

"I love you," he called back and then ran from the car onto the grass, to the back of the building.

A moment later, he reappeared, running down the hill, toward the river. Had she heard him right? *Did he say he loved me?*

8:52 p.m.

She never got around to flashing her lights, but the police found her, head on the steering wheel, tears and mucous soaking her devastated life. When they opened her door, it startled her, and, for an instant, she hoped it was Finley.

Detective Ray Dieckmeyer leaned in.

"Are you all right, Doctor? Did he hurt you?"

She stared at him through bloodshot pools. *Yes, he hurt me very deeply.* That's what she wanted to say.

"No, Detective. I'm fine."

"Does he have a weapon?"

"No."

"Where'd he go?"

She nodded toward the river.

"He ran down there."

"Damn." Ray straightened up and shouted to six uniformed officers. "Subject is unarmed. I say again, unarmed. Do *not* fire on him."

The six officers, five men and one woman, waited for specifics. Ray heaved a sigh and pointed.

"Down there by the river, I guess. Go get him, but be careful. He's mentally disturbed."

They headed back to their cars but were stopped by Ray's irritated voice.

"On foot."

8:55 p.m.

As Finley trampled through the brush along the upper bank of the Chickasaw, he turned and saw the beams of flashlights bouncing down the hill toward him. They were coming after him. It wasn't fair. They would be on him in seconds and arrest him and handcuff him. Handcuff him. That thought alone made him nauseous. He was not about to be handcuffed, not if he could help it, ever again. Too bad about Christine. Why would she have turned on him like that? Women.

There were voices behind the bouncing lights, calling out and cursing to each other.

"Great," Finley said. "Just great." He had hoped never to put even a toe into river water again, ever, but what choice did he have now?

If Eva were dead, and he sincerely doubted that—probably another of her elaborate scams—the authorities would suspect him, if for no other reason than there was probably a report of his having been stopped while driving away from the scene—his house, thank you very much—last night. But how could any of that, any of what he had done, be illegal? Admittedly,

his prank was diabolical but . . . Eva dead? And they thought he did it? He wished he had time to contemplate the irony, but the situation now was bad and knocking on worse.

As he tried to imagine what his father's advice might be for such a conundrum, he was interrupted by shouts of "Freeze," "Don't move," and "Down on the ground, *now!*" To his surprise, his normal fear of all things unknown did not arise or even stir. Oddly, he noticed that his most immediate thought was, *These guys must watch a lot of TV.*

Finley was calm. The cops had guns drawn, he saw that through the glare of their flashlights, and they were aimed at him, but they didn't scare him. He'd been shot at before and survived. Could he survive being handcuffed again, though? He didn't think so.

Since he'd had some experience with crossing difficult waters, he turned and waded into the cold river, ignoring the shouts to halt. He took a deep breath, let his body fall forward, and disappeared beneath the surface.

The cops couldn't believe it. They stared at the ripples where his feet had kicked into submersion, then exchanged glances that said, *Oh, shit.*

"Where'd he go?" Ray demanded as he huffed down the hill.

"In the water, Detective," one cop said, pointing.

"Oh, my God, no."

"Yes, Sir."

"How in the . . . ?" No time for blame now. "Get in there, and get him out," Ray ordered, exasperated. "We don't let murder suspects swim away, do we?"

His posse wasn't too sure.

Ray realized that none of the officers in his command that evening were going to be first to tread into the cold, polluted water. Should they take off their shoes? Their uniforms? What about their firearms and communication devices?

"Maybe we should call for a chopper spot, Detective," the female officer suggested.

"Get the hell in there," Ray yelled. "I want Bliss out of that river now! Let's go." Ray led. He tossed his communicator to the grass but kept his shoes on.

Wading into the water, the patrol swung their light beams across the river's surface.

9:03 p.m.

Standing in front of her car, peering down the hill at the bobbing lights some 200 yards away, Christine thought she could assess the situation. Finley was hiding in the brush along the bank, and the police would have to wade into the river then turn around to flush him out into the open.

She would wait right here for them to bring him back up to her. The detective would let her speak to him, wouldn't he? Surely he would. She was his doctor. But what would she say?

She tried to formulate her words the way she had done back at Canoodles, just before the breaking news on TV, but then she began experiencing pangs of guilt. Whose fault was this anyway? The brain-damaged patient or the doctor whose career was built on similar case studies? It would certainly come out now that she had sexually seduced him.

She recalled the woman born with half a brain, Michelle Mack, how the other half, the right side, had rewired itself and taken over all the functions of a full brain. Other than some issues with anger control and abstract concepts, the woman was a high-functioning individual. Was that what had happened to Finley?

Did he have issues of anger that he'd kept hidden that led him to kill his wife? He had behaved so rationally in the car and seemed genuinely surprised by the news that Eva was dead. It wouldn't be news to him if he had done it—killed her. He was a good actor, but was he that good?

9:22 p.m.

Overwrought from waiting and worrying, something finally bumped Christine's eyes from the dark muddle below—a sound, a rotational roar, swooping in from on high. She looked up. A helicopter thundered into view, zoomed over her head, then banked left toward the river.

When she saw the chopper's incredibly bright searchlight switch on, and watched as it began to sweep the expanse of the river, the last of her intransigence evaporated. She whirled into a dark vortex of bewilderment, her knees buckled, and she collapsed onto the grass.

"Oh, my God, no," she whimpered. "What have I done?"



FIFTY-FIVE

9:22 *p.m.*

Finley's head had popped out of the water the same moment the police had stepped into it some twenty minutes ago. Downriver, fifty, maybe seventy-five yards, he grabbed onto the ruins of an old wooden doghouse that, unknown to him, had once floated by his window at Felicidad Health Care Center. The thing was snagged on a submerged tree limb, and, for now, it made a good hiding place and rest stop. Finley didn't know what it was. What he did know was that he needed breath. Gasping for it as silently as possible, he watched the cops' flashlight beams wag in front of their reluctant waist-deep bodies. They were grumbling, wisecracking, and yelling, apparently trying to cover their ignorance about traversing rivers. Then, suddenly, they were backing out.

Were they giving up? Finley hoped so. He had a terrible pain in his side, and his vision was hazy, very hazy. He would have to worry about that later. His immediate concern was air. He couldn't seem to get enough. If he could just catch his breath.

He would have to stay behind the half roof and two walls of . . . what was this thing? A doghouse. Something his dog had never heard of.

Then another problem—a severe headache.

"Crap. I can't catch a break tonight." He clung to the edge of the structure's roof, let his head go limp, and closed his eyes. "Uh-oh." His patch. His fingertips shot up to feel for it. It was gone. He'd lost his eye

patch. *Doctor, I served with Jack Sparrow. I knew Jack Sparrow. Jack Sparrow was a friend of mine. Doctor, you're no Jack Sparrow.*"

He wanted to let his mind wander off to find a peaceful spot inside his head so he could set his body on autopilot, to work on conveying oxygen into the bloodstream. But then his ears picked up a new sound.

9:23 p.m.

It was the murmur of a distant, oscillating roar. It was distant. Then it wasn't—booming suddenly above him with a massive, high-intensity beam that carpeted the area with light, illuminating large swaths of the dirty river with its pummeling shine.

The intensity of the blaze was enough to smother anyone's last good eye, and the noise was more than enough to make a bad headache worse.

9:25 p.m.

From his vantage point, a piece of river debris about a hundred yards south of the police detail was easy for the pilot to spot. He zoomed over and down for a closer look, then radioed: "A man's head down here. Hold on. Maybe. It's gone now. I saw it, though. Better check this out."

The copter held its position as the cops ran through the river brush down to the spot lit by the sky beam.

9:26 p.m.

No matter how exhausted or anguished he felt, Finley would not allow himself to be swept away by another torrent of bright light. He'd made that mistake before in that weird basketball gym, and the aftermath, in his opinion, had been catastrophic. So he hid from the light by ducking under the water. He would just have to do without air for a while.



When his head bobbed up again, he got lucky. Or did he? The light had vanished, the noise was gone, but there was a fallen tree reaching out

over the water, and, carried by the current, he was about to be slammed into it. *Manageable*, he thought. He spoke the word as he prepared for the impact.

“Manageable.”

Then his body hit the log and stopped. The tree would be something to cling to. He could pull himself up onto the bole and finally catch his breath.

Feeling secure on the toppled tree, Finley fought hard to fill his lungs with air in a way that felt uncomfortably familiar. He coughed and sputtered, then let himself rest for a moment and thought about her. *Too bad about Christine*. Had he been ridiculous in thinking that the time they had would lead to a time to come?

Why was his vision so murky? It was a murky river. Who knows what kind of pollutants he had just marinated in?

He couldn't stay there, he realized, but the question of which way to crawl evoked another eerie feeling of déjà vu. Toward the darker side, he decided, to be harder for the police to spot. He sure didn't want to be handcuffed, let alone go to jail.

But why would they send him to jail? For killing Eva? He hadn't done that. There was no denying that he did shoot a guy, sure, he admitted that—the huge fellow, Mr. Bald-thug. Shot him dead all right, right there in his own bedroom.

As he crawled through the upturned branches, he found himself wondering again who that man had been. If anyone should be charged with murder, it should be Eva and Mali. No, not Mali. What was it? Mali. That's what she said, right?

When, at last, Finley reached the riverbank, he rolled off the tree and into the mud. There, exhausted, he let himself rest. He would feel fine, he thought, once he caught his breath. If he could just breathe. Then, overcome by exertion, he passed out.



FIFTY-SIX

9:55 *p.m.*

An ambulance was howling north on South Riverside Drive, followed by Detective Ray Dieckmeyer with Dr. Christine Shepherd, both in his city car.

Twenty-seven minutes earlier, the helicopter pilot had radioed for emergency personnel to converge on Finley's location three city blocks downriver from the hospital.

In the time span of the short drive from that point back to the hospital, the detective wanted to break into Christine's dazed state of mind. But how? With sympathy or with anger? He was feeling both, so both it would be, starting with anger. Why should it matter how intellectually advanced she was? She had done a stupid thing, hadn't she? She practically admitted as much through her sobs when he had walked her to his car. Now he glanced over.

"You knew something like this was possible?"

She stared at him.

"Don't start with me, Detective. I told you and the police chief and the city attorney, that day at city hall. Remember? I told you about this very likelihood. That, if he did come out of his coma, there would be a propensity for aggressive outbursts. And what did you say?"

Ray couldn't remember.

"You said, 'He would have every right.'"

"But he came out of his coma almost a year ago. I understand you've been with him every day since. You didn't notice till tonight this . . . *propensity* for aggressive outbursts?"

"No, I did not."

They parked near the ambulance at the emergency entrance, got out, and watched as Finley's body was expertly removed from a scoop stretcher, onto a vacuum-mattressed gurney, then rolled through sliding glass doors.

"I wish you'd confided in me, Christine."

This irked her.

"About what? That he was playing people?" She let a beat of silence tick by. "He never said or did one thing that could remotely be considered hostile. Besides, he made me promise."

He followed her into the ER ward.

"Made you *promise*?"

"Doctor-patient confidentiality."

He rolled his eyes.

"No, no, no. If the man is insane—" His phone interrupted with the opening riffs of "Smoke on the Water." He grabbed it from his jacket pocket and checked the screen. "Larry Cotner."

"The medical examiner?"

He nodded and raised his cell to his ear.

"Doctor?"

Christine saw Ray's eyes go wide, and then watched his face contort—struggling, she supposed, to process an apparent thunderbolt. She hoped his wife and daughters were all right, but somehow knew that this call wasn't about them.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Ray rasped.

"What?" Christine asked. "What?"



FIFTY-SEVEN

What awoke Finley from his bed of mud were voices shouting his name—a man’s voice, then a woman’s.

“Finley, can you hear me? Finley, come back!” He thought at first it was the wise guy voice, calling up from his brain’s basement.

No, it’s not, the voice called up. Must be the law. They’re closing in. Better hit the trail, or you’ll be back in handcuffs before you know it.

Finley looked around. This wasn’t your run-of-the-mill flash of déjà vu. He knew this landscape. He knew it well, and he knew that, as long as he was here, on this side of the river, no one could reach him. He could rest if he wanted, at least for a while, and then cross back over when he felt more confident to face them. They would be waiting, for sure. He could hear them yelling and urging him to come back.

What would be worse? Being stuck over here in the fog—and there was that, again, or still, although not nearly as thick as before—or going to jail for murder? It just wasn’t fair. Christine, though, did say she would help him with the right kind of lawyer. *Too bad about her.*

You could get the death sentence, the voice lamented. Go ask your dad.

“Hmm.” As long as he was here, he could pay another visit to his childhood home or at least try. No harm in trying. If the grid of the world on this side hadn’t shifted, it might still be there.

He rose from the ground, stood up, and looked around to get his bearings. Where was that path?

Since the tree he had chopped down to traverse the river about a year ago was right there, a circumstance that greatly comforted him, the path should be downstream, not up. Down toward his old encampment, that safety zone that he had been so afraid to leave.

He remembered how the old black man told him not to be afraid to explore. He remembered how panicked he was when that man, or entity, or whatever he was, had disappeared just by walking away.

Finley had seen him again, though, after that. He had watched the man walk into his line of sight, pick up a telephone, and make a phone call. Christine hadn't believed him. Well, it did sound kind of mystical or supernatural. Something an educated person could not reconcile. He understood that. But he, Finley, was educated. How could he believe it? He couldn't, but he did. He believed his own one-eyed-witness account. Besides, stranger things than that were reported in the Old Testament, weren't they? *Too bad about Christine.*

As he walked downriver in search of the path to his old house, he decided that there was no such thing as the supernatural. If God is real, and that guy, the old black man, was, say, like an angel or something, then it was natural. It had to be. Not in the sense that humans had yet figured out, but it had to be constitutional. It had to be because the creator of the universe would not need to use contrivances, would he? And didn't Einstein himself say that God doesn't play games? That had been his reasoning for pursuing his unified field theory, hadn't it? He would ask his dad about that.

He walked along, trying to recall Einstein's unified field theory, when he froze. There it was—the homeward trail.



FIFTY-EIGHT

SATURDAY, JUNE 25

2:05 a.m.

In the ER of Riverside General, Christine Shepherd and Ray Dieckmeyer held Finley's hands and stroked his arms.

"Hey, Finley," Ray shouted, "It's me, Detective Dieckmeyer. Come back. You're not in any trouble at all, man. Come back."

"Come back, Finley," Christine pleaded. "I'm sorry! I am so sorry. The police know everything now. You are in the clear. That woman—"

"Mary Sann," Ray filled in. "She told us everything, buddy, and you are home free. We spooked you, I know, and that's my fault. Come back. Let me apologize. Let's go celebrate."

There was no response. The life support machinery clicked, beeped, whirred, and hummed to no avail.

Finley was not home.

Or rather, he was.

PART FOUR



FIFTY-NINE

When he broke through the thicket, Finley was never happier to see anything than that house—still there. What a relief. What a wringer the world had just put him through. He couldn't wait to tell his folks, and, this time, he would tell them everything. Why not?

He ran across the clearing, leapt onto the porch, twisted the doorknob, and swooped into the house.

Something that every teenager develops is an instinct for is knowing, upon entering a room, when you're in trouble.

Finley's parents were sitting on the couch like he had seen them before, thirty years ago, when bad news had somehow beaten him home. They were expecting him. They had been waiting for him. They were beautiful.

"Hey." He shrugged. "Surprise. I'm back."

They exchanged regretful glances.

"You're not glad to see me?"

"You shouldn't be here, Fin," his mother said.

His father nodded agreement.

"What are you thinking, son?"

This was a punch to the gut. It always had been, whenever his father had expressed disappointment in him. And he hated those words especially: What were you thinking?

"I'm thinking it's great to be home," he said, "where a guy can, I don't know, relax, and be himself, and not worry about the outside world

cutting his heart out.” He shrugged again, hoping for a glint of sympathy. “Isn’t that what home is all about?”

“This isn’t your home, Finley. You know that,” his father said.

“You shouldn’t be here, Fin,” his mother repeated.

“Who says I shouldn’t?” Finley whined.

“That man,” she said, pointing toward the kitchen. “He told us you were coming, and he said it was . . . out of keeping.”

“Misguided,” his father said, then looked into his son’s eye. “He said you were misguided. We told him we’d try to talk you into going back.”

“Wait a minute,” Finley said. “What man?”

Then there the man was, standing in the kitchen door, holding a basketball.

“I found this in the garage,” the man said and then tossed it to Finley.

Finley recognized him, of course—the man in the bleachers, the man who helped him up off the rocks, the man who abandoned him in the fog, and the man who called Christine. James Earl Jones. How could that be?

“Shall we go out and shoot a few hoops in the drive?”

“No, sir,” Finley said.

“It’ll give us a chance to talk,” he said. “You know, about which way you want to go?”

Finley tossed the ball back.

“I want to stay here.”

“I think you’re smart enough to know there is no *here*,” the man said as he twirled the ball on the tip of his finger.

Finley suspected as much.

“How long do I have? I want to spend some time with my folks.”

The old black man shook his head.

“How long? How short? How many heartbeats you got left?” He stopped, the ball balanced on his fingertip. “To avoid a decision is to make a decision,” the James Earl man said. “Usually, the unhappy one.”

“I know that,” Finley said.

“This way to the judgment seat, or that way to Rammy, Christine, and little Nancy Metzger?”

Little Nancy Metzger? What did she have to do with anything? Maybe, Finley thought, if he just turned away from this guy, just ignored him, he

could sit on the couch with his mom and dad for a while—just for a little while—and talk things over in a calm and rational manner. What was the rush? He wasn't trying to avoid a decision. He just didn't know how to make one right now.

But when he turned back around, Joe and Naomi Bliss had vanished. He would have called out for them, but he knew that they, like Elvis, had left the building and were farther away than he could yell.

The old man said, "I'll be right outside" and then walked out the front door.

So now Finley stood alone. He stood alone and began to weep in his childhood living room. He cried for his parents. What wonderful parents they were. Had he made his father proud at all? He never got to tell him about his invention.

He thought about the names the old black man had mentioned—Rammy, Christine, and little Nancy Metzger—and he thought about his options, or if he had any options. And then he talked to, spoke to, nobody. But it wasn't nobody. It was the universe. Or maybe it was God. Or maybe it was just the emptiness that pressed around him.

"I don't think I've got the energy to cross that river again, and, besides, what kind of life would I have in prison with brain damage and only one eye? Too bad about Christine. She would never think of me as normal if I did go back. She would constantly be waiting for me to explode into craziness, and it would be that very waiting, that constant scrutiny of my moods, that *would* drive me crazy.

"And I'm tired of the eye patch. It was cool at first, but it itches most of the time. Reminds me of when I had to wear braces on my teeth. I don't do well with those kinds of irritating accoutrements. I guess I could get an ocular prosthesis, what they used to call a glass eye. These days I think they're made from some kind of advanced acrylic, but they still can't see. I bet they will soon, though. That would be cool—a bionic eye."

Finley mused while his fire burned. He knew it was burning, but he didn't care, well, except for that one thing, that one little issue—the judgment seat. Was he ready? he asked himself. He was as unsure about that as he'd been about anything ever in his life. And this led to

more questions. Are there really only two destinations—heaven for the redeemed and hell for the reprobate?

He wondered if there would be pearly gates. Will there be streets of gold? Why would heaven need streets? Wouldn't that mean addresses and intersections? What would he do there?

"I hope it's not a place with fluffy clouds and angels playing harps, like the cosmographical speculations of Michelangelo and William Blake—all those shining, celestial city concepts. Surely not."

Finley could hear the basketball bouncing on the driveway outside. Or was it the ticking of a large grandfather clock in the great hall of somewhere? Or was it the beating of his heart? His fire was burning.

He fell to his knees and cried again, unsure of why, specifically. Maybe for himself, maybe for the world, maybe for all the kids with crooked teeth or all the dogs betrayed by their owners. Maybe it was because he just swam away from a shot at true love with an incredible woman. He didn't know. He didn't have the resolve to break it down, but he knew, at that moment, that he was the saddest person in the world. Which world, he wasn't certain, but if there was a difference, it was flimsy.

"Too bad about little Nancy Metzger. Too bad about Christine."



SIXTY

THURSDAY, JULY 1

11:47 a.m.

At the City Animal Shelter, a seventy pound white bull terrier sat forlorn in a dismal six-by-eight foot cage. Having just been hosed down, he was soaked. Ever the optimist, his tail suddenly whipped side to side at the sound of a metal door opening, then footsteps. He rose to greet two uniformed animal handlers wearing HexArmor gloves, holding that same long stick that had snared him from his own yard and dragged him to the truck that brought him to this place.

That's all right. All is forgiven. Just get me out of here. Is Dad with you?

The loop on the end of the stick went around Rammy's neck, and then a muzzle mugged his face—aggressive behavior that demanded a response of resistance. He snarled a warning. It didn't work.

Again, these men were able to drag him to wherever they pleased, which was back up the hall, through the deafening uproar of his fellow captives, and into the front office.

From there, it was out the door and across the parking lot to that truck that he already hated. Rammy loved rides, but not in the back of this van. Whatever harsh chemical cleanser they used was not enough to mask the pissed traces of fear by the many who had gone before him. Then being crammed into a metal cage with a mask so tight that his tongue was also incarcerated made it a completely cheerless situation.

12:28 p.m.

Miserable minutes or months later—he couldn't tell—Rammy squinted into sunlight blasting through the van's open back doors. This couldn't be good. He hated the cage, but it was probably safer than what was next, and so, again, he resisted, confused and scared, and decided that he just might have to kill somebody. He didn't want to but . . . Then he heard his name.

"Rammy?" It was a pleasant female voice.

He didn't recognize it, but it was friendly, and his tail involuntarily beat itself against the mesh of his prison.

The handlers tugged him from his mobile confinement till he had no choice but to jump to the pavement.

"Take off the muzzle," the woman said.

"We're not allowed to," answered one of the handlers, "but you can if you're sure it's safe."

Christine knelt down.

"Is it safe, Rammy?"

The dog assured her that it was, his body convulsing with elation.

She reached behind his ears, unfastened the restraint, then clipped a leash onto the shiny ring attached to his collar.

"You really going to take a bull terrier into the hospital?" the driver inquired. "You know anything about this particular breed?"

As Christine allowed Rammy to unwind, sniff, pee on the truck's tire, and look around, she explained herself.

"I've heard a lot about you, Rammy," she said. "My name is Christine. I'm a neurologist here at the hospital. I know you're a good boy, but I should tell you, this is highly unusual, what we're doing here today."

Rammy tugged her toward the grass. She went along.

"We've got clearance from Dr. Goode, but, you know, you'll have to be on your best behavior, okay?"

Rammy raised a leg and peed again, this time on the grass.

"Goodness," Christine said.

Rammy looked up.

"No, that's good," she said. "Get it all out." Suddenly, the dog started clawing the ground like a mad bull, tearing at the grass, which came loose in shreds.

Christine watched, bewildered. Was he trying to cover his urine?

Then the dog startled her. He looked up into her eyes and barked.

To Christine it looked—she knew it couldn't be, but it looked—like he was smiling at her. Unfortunately, this was not a smiling matter.

"If you bark even one time inside this hospital," she said, "they will kick us out of there. Both of us. Immediately. End of story."

Rammy barked again.

"No," she protested and began to think that her efforts to prepare for this day had been in vain.

Dr. Goode had reluctantly granted her a waiver for Rammy, even though he was not a certified therapy dog. Her part was to make sure that the dog was clean. She assumed this was taken care of by an arrangement, and the donation she made, with the animal shelter where he had been blasted by a hose earlier that morning. The dog was also to be flea-free and, above all, silent. So far, the silent part was a serious uncertainty.

They paused at the door, and she made eye contact with him again. They stared at each other.

"I hope you can do this, Rammy."

The dog turned his gaze away.

She felt silly talking so personally to an animal, but what was there to lose but her reputation, which was already in jeopardy?

"You may be the last hope for—" She was interrupted by the shock of her right humeral head being nearly wrenched from its glenoid as Rammy caught a glimpse of a rabbit and yanked her after it.

"No. Bad dog. No." She kept a firm grasp on the lead, but he was able to pull her nearly five yards. "No!" she wailed. "No!"

Rammy stopped. Christine caught her breath.

"Shit. You nearly jerked my arm off."

The dog, having lost sight of the rabbit, turned back, his tail wagging once more, his smile returning.

They stared at each other again and sighed simultaneously.

A week earlier, in a small conference room, Christine had fought for this venture with Rammy. Finley had shown no signs of response to any stimulative stratagem. They tried various noises, various pain techniques, tickling, even waterboarding, a new one at Riverside General. The

rationale for that tactic was that Dr. Christine Shepherd was certain that Finley's reticular activating formation was functional.

Apparently it was not, which led others in the department to argue that the patient, Finley Bliss, should be rotated back to a nursing home. Hospital resources for this kind of extraordinary regimen were limited, and there were other patients whose conditions lent more hope for recovery.

"Besides," said Dr. Goode, "he could possibly come back on his own. He did it before."

"That was a miracle," Christine snapped, "and you know it." It was a declaration met with sympathetic silence. What had she just said?

The word *miracle* is often heard in hospitals, sometimes even by doctors holding forth hope to the praying loved ones of a patient, but never in a policy conference. She swallowed hard, but stayed the course.

"Time is the enemy here, gentlemen," she harangued. "The longer—"

"Look," interrupted Dr. Goode. "We have knocked on his door. We have knocked as hard as we can, for as long as we can. Talking to this patient is like trying to teach Chinese to a monkey. It's not working."

"We haven't tried family members," she blurted.

Dr. Goode blinked. A confused moment of silence ticked by.

"I was under the impression he had no family."

Christine massaged the bridge of her nose as she wondered if any of the four men and one other woman on this panel had pets. She had never had one but had recently read an article in *Psychology Today* which promulgated that a high percentage of Americans considered their dogs and cats to be members of the family.



1:07 p.m.

"Finley," she said, "this is Christine." With her mouth an inch from his left ear, she decided to be straightforward. "I've got your dog, and I'm carrying your baby."

Dr. Goode winced. He knew she was willing to try almost anything, but her saying something like that, something so silly, flummoxed him.

He had agreed to accompany her to Finley's room to help with the dog experiment. After they arrived, closed the door, and assessed the situation, they decided that for this canine therapy idea to have its best chance the dog should actually be on the bed with the patient. They raised Rammy's front paws to rest against the bed and walked his hind feet as close as possible. His tail began to whip frantically as he sensed the presence of his human god. When the strangers lifted his haunches to the point where his back feet found purchase atop the mattress, he twirled in a circle of joy, then made a lunge for Finley's face.

"Hold him back," Christine said.

"He's strong," said Dr. Goode.

1:12 p.m.

Now, Dr. Goode, having gotten the dog to settle somewhat, held the leash tight and stared at Christine. Why had she just told the patient she was carrying his baby?

"That was a weird thing to say," he said.

Christine looked at him and nodded.

"Let me talk to him a little more, and then we'll let his dog . . . do . . . whatever." She lowered her lips back to Finley's ear. "Finley, Rammy's here. He needs you. Finley, I'm here, and I need you. I'm pregnant, Finley. We're going to have a baby. You're going to be a father. You've got some serious responsibility here, Mister, and I expect you to do the right thing for your family."

Dr. Goode's mouth dropped open a full inch.

"Christine," he rasped, "you're not pregnant."

"I am," she said.

"But how . . . I mean . . . did he rape you?"

"No."

"You mean you had—"

"Yeah, Bob. I had sex with the patient."

Dr. Goode involuntarily dropped the leash.

Rammy noticed, lunged for the head of the bed, and began to lick Finley's face voraciously. He licked and nuzzled and made grunting noises with all the joy that any creature could ever express.

"Do you realize what this could mean to your career?"

"Can we talk about it later?" Christine asked as she turned to watch Finley's face for any reflexive twitches.

"*Look,*" Dr. Goode said.

Christine turned back. Her boss was pointing to Finley's feet. Some kind of small but noticeable movement beneath the sheets. She leapt up, hopped to the foot of the bed, and pulled the sheets away.

They watched as Finley's feet, one at a time, twitched, toes scarcely curling toward his body, ankles swiveling, just slightly, every few seconds. One foot, then the other.

Christine drew a sharp breath and held it as her hands came together in the prayer formation, pressed against her lips.

"It's like he's walking," Dr. Goode said. "I think he's walking."

Christine's eyes filled with tears. She rushed back to the patient's head and lowered her mouth to his ear.

"We're waiting for you, Finley. Aren't we, Rammy? Aren't we, boy?"

If ever the dog heard a cue to speak, this was it. Rammy let go with one loud affirmative blast.

"Did you hear that, Finley? That was Rammy. Come on now. We're here. We're just waiting on you. Don't fool around, okay? You've got a personal responsibility to come back to me. You're a going to be a father. You're a dad, Finley."

Dr. Goode pulled up a chair to wait with them, the rule-breaking dog and the ethically-challenged neurologist who reminded Finley every thirty seconds or so to keep his eyes on the prize.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author of the acclaimed historical novel, *Blood Silver*, Woody P. Snow lives on his farm in Webster County, Missouri, with his wife, their dogs, and cats. He is a multi-award-winning broadcaster, song writer, screenplay writer, and a painter whose art can be seen and purchased at the Springfield/Greene County Library Center. His gold record for *Rocky* hangs in the Ralph Foster Museum at College of the Ozarks.