



# 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 cinching 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 watching breadsticks float by the head of a big bald man and then James Earl Jones appeared, the actor pointing his finger and trying to warn him about something. He couldn’t tell what.