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Thriller 2

Stories You Just Can't Put Down

Литагент HarperCollins

**Thriller 2: Stories You
Just Can't Put Down**

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GOODBYE TO YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY. Welcome to Thriller 2: Stories
You Just Can't Put Down. Edited by the grand master of adventure, Clive Cussler,
Thriller 2 is packed with over 20 all-new stories from some of the biggest names in
fiction, including Jeffery Deaver, David Hewson and R. L. Stine.

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Thriller 2 Stories You Just Can't Put Down

Edited By

Clive Cussler



www.mirabooks.co.uk

For Gayle Lynds and David Morrell

Co-founders

International Thriller Writers, Inc.

Introduction

What is a thriller?

It's an interesting question when you consider so many of today's bestsellers fall into that category. Look at the top sellers any given month and you might find novels of suspense, adventure tales, paranormal investigations, or even police procedurals—works by writers who couldn't be more different from each other, and yet their books share a common goal, if not a specific language.

All these books push their readers just a little closer to the edge of their seats. They cost their readers sleep, get carried to the grocery store to be read while standing in line and are held tightly until the last page.

And even though the reader can't wait to see how it's going to end, a book like this gets closed reluctantly, with a feeling of anticipation and longing for the next book that can quicken the pulse and fire the imagination.

As a reader, that's a feeling I know well. I grew up in the heyday of the pulps, devouring stories about globe-spanning adventures, one man facing impossible odds, racing against time to save the world. These were magazines and books that kept you up all night, sometimes reading under your covers with a flashlight.

Adventures that were, simply, *thrilling*.

That's really what I set out to do when I decided to try my hand at writing fiction over thirty years ago. I wanted to write a thrilling story with a modern setting and contemporary characters in the tradition of the great adventure stories that kept me turning the pages when I was a kid. I never imagined that one day my books would be translated into more than forty languages and read by millions of people around the world.

And now, an entire generation later, it seems that tradition lives on, because many of the most successful and finest authors today are writing thrillers. And this book you're holding now brings many of those writers together in a single volume.

This book is called *Thriller 2* because, as you probably suspect or already know, there was another anthology entitled *Thriller* that was edited by my friend James Patterson. The two books share a common source of inspiration, so let me take a moment to explain how this collection came together.

The first *Thriller* was the brainchild of an organization called ITW, which is short for International Thriller Writers. Barely five years old, ITW's roster reads like a *Who's Who* of thriller writing with 900 members worldwide and over 2,000,000,000 books in print. Headed by current co-presidents Steve Berry and James Rollins, its board of directors has included such notables as Lee Child, Tess Gerritsen, M. J. Rose, Carla Neggers, Douglas Preston, Gayle Lynds, David Morrell and David Hewson. This organization, of which I am a proud member, is dedicated to supporting the readers and writers of thrillers everywhere.

This anthology and its predecessor are collections of short stories written exclusively by ITW members from around the world, not only bestselling authors but also gifted writers you might not have discovered until you read this book.

But the two anthologies also differ slightly. The first *Thriller* included stories featuring well-known or established characters from our writers' novels and series, sometimes seen in a new light but very recognizable to their fans.

Thriller 2, by contrast, consists almost entirely of original stories featuring colorful characters you've never seen before. For the rabid fan, it's a unique chance to discover another side of your favorite author. For someone new to the world of thrillers, this collection is a wonderful opportunity to discover someone who just might become your new favorite writer.

Which brings us back to our question, *what is a thriller?* Or more precisely, what makes a story thrilling?

This collection attempts to answer that timeless question, if not directly than by showcasing over twenty writers who delivered an extraordinary range of thrilling stories. Stories that shock you. Stories that cause your heart to skip a beat. Stories that might make you laugh and flinch at the same time. Stories that you finish and then read again in disbelief, looking for the clues you must have missed the first time around.

There are many ingredients that go into an unforgettable thriller. These stories use them all, but each mixes them together differently, every tale delivering a unique blend of thrills that sets it apart. As a reader I can truly say this is one of the most consistently entertaining and eclectic collections I've ever read.

And as a writer, I'm incredibly proud to have my name on this remarkable book that you're about to read. I hope you find it as thrilling as I do. Clive Cussler 2009

Chapter One

Jeffery Deaver

The stakes are high and time is short in “The Weapon”—the perfect story to begin the collection. Originally written for the stage, “The Weapon” demonstrates why Jeff is considered a master of both the modern thriller and the short story. When it comes time to write a critical scene, Jeff turns down the lights, shuts his eyes and starts typing. The room is either heavily shaded or windowless. For some characters in “The Weapon,” such a dark room where devious scenarios are born would still be preferable to the bleak places they find themselves in. Shaped by today’s headlines, these characters are trapped in an intrigue as topical as it is thrilling.

Keep your eyes open for this one. Sit in a well-lit room, with a window. Maybe even go outside and read where people can see you, and you know it’s safe, because Jeff’s stories are anything but.

Chapter Two

The Weapon

Monday

“A new weapon.”

The slim man in a conservative suit eased forward and lowered his voice. “Something terrible. And our sources are certain it will be used this coming Saturday morning. They’re certain of that.”

“Four days,” said retired Colonel James J. Peterson, his voice grave. It was now 5:00 p.m. on Monday.

The two men sat in Peterson’s nondescript office, in a nondescript building in the suburban town of Reston, Virginia, about twenty-five miles from Washington, D.C. There’s a misconception that national security operations are conducted in high-tech bunkers filled with sweeping steel and structural concrete, video screens ten feet high and attractive boys and babes dressed by Armani.

This place, on the other hand, looked like an insurance agency.

The skinny man, who worked for the government, added, “We don’t know if we’re talking conventional, nuke or something altogether new. Probably mass destruction, we’ve heard. It can do quote ‘significant’ damage.”

“Who’s behind this weapon? Al-Qaeda? The Koreans? Iranians?”

“One of our enemies. That’s all we know at this point...So, we need you to find out about it. Money is no object, of course.”

“Any leads?”

“Yes, a good one—an Algerian who knows who formulated the weapon. He met with them last week in Tunis. He’s a professor and journalist.”

“Terrorist?”

“He doesn’t seem to be. His writings have been moderate in nature. He’s not openly militant. But our local sources are convinced he’s had contact with the people who created the weapon and plan to use it.”

“You have a picture?”

A photograph appeared as if by magic from the slim man’s briefcase and slid across the desk like a lizard.

Colonel Peterson leaned forward.

Tuesday

Chabbi music drifted from a nearby café, lost intermittently in the sounds of trucks and scooters charging frantically along this commercial street of Algiers.

The driver of the white van, a swarthy local, stifled a sour face when the music changed to American rock. Not that he actually preferred the old-fashioned, melodramatic chabbi tunes or thought they were more politically or religiously correct than Western music. He just didn’t like Britney Spears.

Then the big man stiffened and tapped the shoulder of the man next to him, an American. Their attention swung immediately out the front window to a curly-haired man in his thirties, wearing a light-colored suit, walking out of the main entrance of the Al-Jazier School for Cultural Thought.

The man in the passenger seat nodded. The driver called “Ready” in English and then repeated the command in Berber-accented Arabic. The two men in the back responded affirmatively.

The van, a battered Ford that sported Arabic letters boasting of the city’s best plumbing services, eased forward, trailing the man in the light suit. The driver had no trouble moving slowly without being conspicuous. Such was the nature of traffic here in the old portion of this city, near the harbor.

As they approached a chaotic intersection, the passenger spoke into a cell phone. “Now.”

The driver pulled nearly even with the man they followed, just as a second van, dark blue, in the oncoming lane, suddenly leapt the curb and slammed directly into the glass window of an empty storefront, sending a shower of glass onto the sidewalk as bystanders gaped and came running.

By the time the crowds on rue Ahmed Bourzina helped the driver of the blue van extricate his vehicle from the shattered storefront, the white van was nowhere to be seen.

Neither was the man in the light suit.

Wednesday

Colonel James Peterson was tired after the overnight flight from Dulles to Rome but he was operating on pure energy.

As his driver sped from DaVinci airport to his company's facility south of the city, he read the extensive dossier on the man whose abduction he had just engineered. Jacques Bennabi, the journalist and part-time professor, had indeed been in direct communication with the Tunisian group that had developed the weapon, though Washington still wasn't sure who the group was exactly.

Peterson looked impatiently at his watch. He regretted the day-long trip required to transport Bennabi from Algiers to Gaeta, south of Rome, where he'd been transferred to an ambulance for the drive here. But planes were too closely regulated nowadays. Peterson had told his people they *had* to keep a low profile. His operation here, south of Rome, was apparently a facility that specialized in rehabilitation services for people injured in industrial accidents. The Italian government had no clue that it was a sham, owned ultimately by Peterson's main company in Virginia: Intelligence Analysis Systems.

IAS was like hundreds of small businesses throughout the Washington area that provided everything from copier toner to consulting to computer software to the massive U.S. government.

IAS, though, didn't sell office supplies.

Its only product was information and it managed to provide some of the best in the world. IAS obtained this information not through high-tech surveillance but, Peterson liked to say, the old-fashioned way:

One suspect, one interrogator, one locked room.

It did this very efficiently.

And completely illegally.

IAS ran black sites.

Black site operations are very simple. An individual with knowledge the government wishes to learn is kidnapped and taken to a secret and secure facility outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. The kidnapping is known as extraordinary rendition. Once at a black site the subject is interrogated until the desired information is learned. And then he's returned home—in most cases, that is.

IAS was a private company, with no official government affiliation, though the government was, of course, its biggest client. They operated three sites—one in Bogotá, Colombia, one in Thailand and the one that Peterson's car was now approaching: the largest of the IAS sites, a nondescript beige facility whose front door stated *Funzione Medica di Riabilitazione*.

The gate closed behind him and he hurried inside, to minimize the chance a passerby might see him. Peterson rarely came to the black sites himself. Because he met regularly with government officials it would be disastrous if anyone connected him to an illegal operation like this. Still, the impending threat of the weapon dictated that he personally supervise the interrogation of Jacques Bennabi.

Despite his fatigue, he got right to work and met with the man waiting in the facility's windowless main office upstairs. He was one of several interrogators that IAS used regularly, one of the best in the world, in fact. A slightly built man, with a confident smile on his face.

"Andrew." Peterson nodded in greeting, using the pseudonym the man was known by—no real names were ever used in black sites. Andrew was a U.S. soldier on temporary leave from Afghanistan.

Peterson explained that Bennabi had been carefully searched and scanned. They'd found no GPS chips, listening devices or explosives in his body. The colonel added that sources in North Africa were still trying to find whom Bennabi had met with in Tunis but were having no luck.

"Doesn't matter," Andrew said with a sour smile. "I'll get you everything you need to know soon enough."

Jacques Bennabi looked up at Andrew.

The soldier returned the gaze with no emotion, assessing the subject, noting his level of fear. A fair amount, it seemed. This pleased him. Not because Andrew was a sadist—he wasn't—but because fear is a gauge to a subject's resistance.

He assessed that Bennabi would tell him all he wanted to know about the weapon within four hours.

The room in which they sat was a dim, concrete cube, twenty feet on each side. Bennabi sat in a metal chair with his hands behind him, bound with restraints. His feet were bare, increasing his sense of vulnerability, and his jacket and personal effects were gone—they gave subjects a sense of comfort and orientation. Andrew now pulled a chair close to the subject and sat.

Andrew was not a physically imposing man, but he didn't need to be. The smallest person in the world need not even raise his voice if he has power. And Andrew had all the power in the world over his subject at the moment.

"Now," he said in English, which he knew Bennabi spoke fluently, "as you know, Jacques, you're many miles from your home. None of your family or colleagues know you're here. The authorities in Algeria have learned of your disappearance by now—we're monitoring that—but do you know how much they care?"

No answer. The dark eyes gazed back, emotionless.

"They don't. They don't care at all. We've been following the reports. Another university professor gone missing. So what? You were robbed and shot. Or the Jihad Brotherhood finally got around to settling the score for something you said in class last year. Or maybe one of your articles upset some Danish journalists...and they kidnapped and killed you." Andrew smiled at his own cleverness. Bennabi gave no reaction. "So. No one is coming to help you. You understand? No midnight raids. No cowboys riding to the rescue."

Silence.

Andrew continued, unfazed, "Now, I want to know about this weapon you were discussing with your Tunisian friends." He was looking carefully at the eyes of the man. Did they flicker with recognition? The interrogator believed they did. It was like a shout of acknowledgment. Good.

"We need to know who developed it, what it is and who it's going to be used against. If you tell me, you'll be back home in twenty-four hours." He let this sink in. "If you do n't...things won't go well."

The subject continued to sit passively. And silent.

That was fine with Andrew; he hardly expected an immediate confession. He wouldn't want one, in fact. You couldn't trust subjects who caved in too quickly.

Finally he said, "Jacques, I know the names of all your colleagues at the university and the newspaper where you work."

This was Andrew's talent—he had studied the art of interrogation for years and knew that people could much more easily resist threats to themselves than to their friends and family. Andrew had spent the past two days learning every fact he could about people close to Bennabi. He'd come up with lists of each person's weaknesses and fears. It had been a huge amount of work.

Over the next few hours Andrew never once threatened Bennabi himself; but he was ruthless in threatening his colleagues. Ruining careers, exposing possible affairs, questioning an adoption of a child...Even suggesting that some of his friends could be subject to physical harm.

A dozen specific threats, two dozen, offering specific details: names, addresses, offices, cars they drove, restaurants they enjoyed.

But Jacques Bennabi said not a word.

“You know how easy it was to kidnap you,” Andrew muttered. “We plucked you off the street like picking a chicken from a street vendor’s cage. You think your friends are any safer? The men who got you are back in Algiers, you know. They’re ready to do what I say.”

The subject only stared back at him.

Andrew grew angry for a moment. He cleared his raw throat and left the room, had a drink of water, struggled to calm down.

For three more hours he continued the interrogation. Bennabi paid attention to everything Andrew said, it seemed, but he said nothing.

Goddamn, he’s good, Andrew thought, struggling not to reveal his own frustration. He glanced at his watch. It had been nearly nine hours. And he hadn’t uncovered a single fact about the weapon.

Well, it was time to get serious now.

He scooted the chair even closer.

“Jacques, you’re not being helpful. And now, thanks to your lack of cooperation, you’ve put all your friends at risk. How selfish can you be?” he snapped.

Silence.

Andrew leaned close. “You understand that I’ve been restrained, don’t you? I had hoped you’d be more cooperative. But apparently you’re not taking me seriously. I think I have to prove how grave this matter is.”

He reached into his pocket. He pulled out a printout of a computer photograph that had been taken yesterday.

It showed Bennabi’s wife and children in the front yard of their home outside of Algiers.

Thursday

Colonel Peterson was in his hotel room in the center of Rome. He was awakened at 4:00 a.m. by his secure cell phone.

“Yes?”

“Colonel.” The caller was Andrew. His voice was ragged.

“So, what’d he tell you?”

“Nothing.”

The colonel muttered, “You just tell me what he said and *I’ll* figure out if it’s important. That’s *my* job.” He clicked the light on and fished for a pen.

“No, sir, I mean, didn’t say a single word.”

“Not a... word?”

“Over sixteen hours. Completely silent. The entire time. Not one goddamn word. Never happened in all my years in this business.”

“Was he getting close to breaking, at least?”

“I...No, I don’t think so. I even threatened his family. His children. No reaction. I’d need another week. And I’ll have to make good on some of the threats.”

But Peterson knew they were already on shaky ground by kidnapping somebody who was not a known terrorist. He wouldn’t dare kidnap or endanger the professor’s colleagues, let alone his family.

“No,” the colonel said slowly. “That’s all for now. You can get back to your unit. We’ll go to phase two.”

The woman was dressed conservatively, a long-sleeved blouse and tan slacks. Her dark blond hair was pulled back and she wore no jewelry.

Since Bennabi wasn’t culturally or religiously conservative, worked with women at the university and had actually written in favor of women’s rights, Peterson decided to use Claire for the second interrogator. Bennabi would view her as an enemy, yes, but not as an inferior. And, since it was

known that Bennabi had dated and was married, with several children, he was a clearly a man with an appreciation of attractive women.

And Peterson knew that Claire was certainly that.

She was also an army captain, in charge of a prisoner-of-war operation in the Middle East, though at the moment she, too, was on a brief leave of absence to permit her to practice her own skills as an interrogator—skills very different from Andrew's but just as effective in the right circumstances.

Peterson now finished briefing her. "Good luck," he added.

And couldn't help reminding her that it was now Thursday and the weapon would be deployed the day after tomorrow.

In perfect Arabic, Claire said, "I must apologize, Mr. Bennabi, Jacques...May I use your first name?" She was rushing into the cell, a horrified look on her face.

When Bennabi didn't reply, she switched to English. "Your first name? You don't mind, do you? I'm Claire. And let me offer you my deepest apologies for this terrible mistake."

She walked behind him and took the hand restraints off. There was little risk. She was an expert at aikido and tae kwan do martial arts and could easily have defended herself against the weak, exhausted subject.

But the slim man, eyes dark from lack of sleep, face drawn, simply rubbed his wrists and offered no threatening gestures.

Claire pressed the button on the intercom. "Bring the tray in, please."

A guard wheeled it inside: water, a pot of coffee and a plate of pastries and candy, which she knew from his file Bennabi was partial to. She sampled everything first, to show nothing was spiked with poison or truth serum. He drank some water but when she asked, "Coffee, something to eat?" he gave no response.

Claire sat down, her face distraught. "I'm am so terribly sorry about this. I can't begin to describe how horrified we are...Let me explain. Someone—we don't know who—told us that you'd met with some people who are enemies of our country." She lifted her hands. "We didn't know who you were. All we heard was that you were sympathetic to these enemies and that they had some plans to cause huge destruction. Something terrible was going to happen. Imagine what we felt when we heard you were a famous professor...and an advocate of human rights!

"No, someone gave us misinformation about you. Maybe accidental." She added coyly, "Maybe they had a grudge against you. We don't know. All I can say is we reacted too quickly. Now, first, let me assure you that whatever threats Andrew made, nothing has or will happen to your colleagues or family...That was barbaric what he suggested. He's been disciplined and relieved of duty."

No response whatsoever.

Silence filled the room and she could hear only her heartbeat, as she tried to remain calm, thinking of the weapon and the hours counting down until it was used.

"Obviously this is a very awkward situation. Certain officials are extremely embarrassed about what's happened and are willing to offer, what we could call, reparation for your inconvenience."

He continued to remain silent but she could tell he was listening to every word.

She scooted the chair closer and sat, leaning forward. "Mr. Bennabi...Jacques, I have been authorized to transfer one hundred thousand euros into an account of your choice—that's tax free money—in exchange for your agreement not to sue us for this terrible error."

Claire knew that he made the equivalent of fifteen thousand euros as a professor and another twenty as a journalist.

"I can order all of this done immediately. Your lawyer can monitor the transaction. All you have to do is sign a release agreeing not to sue."

Silence.

Then she continued with a smile, "And one more small thing...I myself have no doubt that you have been wrongly targeted but...the people who have to authorize the payments, they want just

a little more information about the people you met with. The ones in Tunis. They just wish to be reassured that the meeting was innocent. *I know it was. If I had my way I'd write you a check now. But they control the money.*" A smile. "Isn't that the way the world works?"

Bennabi said nothing. He stopped rubbing his wrists and sat back.

"They don't need to know anything sensitive. Just a few names, that's all. Just to keep the money men happy."

Is he agreeing? she wondered. Is he disagreeing? Bennabi was different from anybody she'd ever interrogated. Usually by now subjects were already planning how to spend the money and telling her whatever she wanted to know.

When he said nothing she realized: he's negotiating. Of course.

A nod. "You're a smart man... And I don't blame you one bit for holding out. Just give us a bit of information to verify your story and I can probably go up to a hundred fifty thousand euros."

Still no response.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you name a figure. Let's put this all behind us." Claire smiled coyly again. "We're on your side, Jacques. We really are."

Friday

At 9:00 a.m. Colonel Jim Peterson was in the office of the rehabilitation center, sitting across from a large, dark-complexioned man, who'd just arrived from Darfur.

Akhem asked, "What happened with Claire?"

Peterson shook his head. "Bennabi didn't go for the money. She sweetened the pot to a quarter million euros." The colonel sighed. "Wouldn't take it. In fact, he didn't even say no. He didn't say a word. Just like with Andrew."

Akhem took this information with interest but otherwise unemotionally—as if he were a surgeon called in to handle an emergency operation that was routine for him but that no one else could perform. "Has he slept?"

"Not since yesterday."

"Good."

There was nothing like sleep deprivation to soften people up.

Akhem was of Middle Eastern descent, though he'd been born in America and was a U.S. citizen. Like Peterson he'd retired from the military. He was now a professional security consultant—a euphemism for mercenary soldier. He was here with two associates, both from Africa. One white, one black.

Peterson had used Akhem on a half-dozen occasions, as had other governments. He was responsible for interrogating a Chechen separatist to learn where his colleagues had stashed a busload of Moscow schoolchildren last year.

It took him two hours to learn the exact location of the bus, the number of soldiers guarding them, their weapons and passcodes.

No one knew exactly how he'd done it. No one wanted to.

Peterson wasn't pleased he'd had to turn to Akhem's approach to interrogation, known as extreme extraction. Indeed, he realized that the Bennabi situation raised the textbook moral question on using torture: you know a terrible event is about to occur and you have in custody a prisoner who knows how to prevent it. Do you torture or not?

There were those who said, no, you don't. That it is better to be morally superior and to suffer the consequences of letting the event occur. By stooping to the enemy's techniques, these people say, we automatically lose the war, even if we militarily prevail.

Other said that it was our enemies who'd changed the rules; if they tortured and killed innocents in the name of their causes we had to fight them on their own terms.

Peterson had now made the second choice. He prayed it was the right one.

Akhem was looking at the video of Bennabi in the cell, slumped in a chair, his head cocked to the side. He wrinkled his nose and said, “Three hours at the most.”

He rose and left the office, gesturing his fellow mercenaries after him.

But three hours came and went.

Jacques Bennabi said nothing, despite being subjected to one of the most horrific methods of extreme extraction.

In waterboarding, the subject is inverted on his back and water poured into his nose and mouth, simulating drowning. It's a horrifying experience...and also one of the most popular forms of torture because there's no lasting physical evidence—provided, of course, that the victim doesn't in fact drown, which happens occasionally.

“Tell me!” Akhem raged as the assistants dragged Bennabi to his feet, pulling his head out of the large tub. He choked and spit water from under the cloth mask he wore.

“*Where* is the weapon. *Who* is behind it? Tell me.”

Silence, except for the man's coughing and sputtering.

Then to the assistants: “Again.”

Back he went onto the board, his feet in the air. And the water began to flow once more.

Four hours passed, then six, then eight.

Drenched himself, physically exhausted, Akhem looked at his watch. It was now early evening. Only five hours until Saturday—when the weapon would be deployed.

And he hadn't learned a single fact about it. He could hardly hide his astonishment. He'd never known anybody to hold out for this long. That was amazing in its own right. But more significant was the fact that Bennabi had not uttered a single word the entire time. He'd groaned, he'd gasped, he'd choked, but not a single word of English or Arabic or Berber had passed his lips.

Subjects *always* begged and cursed and lied or offered partial truths to get the interrogators at least to pause for a time.

But not Bennabi.

“Again,” Akhem announced.

Then, at 11:00 p.m., Akhem sat down in a chair in the cell, staring at Bennabi, who lolled, gasping, on the waterboard. The interrogator said to his assistants, “That's enough.”

Akhem dried off and looked over the subject. He then walked into the hallway outside the cell and opened his attaché case. He extracted a large scalpel and returned, closing the door behind him.

Bennabi's bleary eyes stared at the weapon as Akhem walked forward.

The subject leaned away.

Akhem nodded. His assistants took Bennabi by the shoulders, one of them gripping his arm hard, rendering it immobile.

Akhem took the subject's fingers and leaned forward with the knife.

“Where is the weapon?” he growled. “You don't have any idea of the pain you'll experience if you don't tell me! Where is it? Who is behind the attack? Tell me!”

Bennabi looked into his eyes. He said nothing.

The interrogator moved the blade closer.

It was then that the door burst open.

“Stop,” cried Colonel Peterson. “Come out here into the hallway.”

The interrogator paused and stood back. He wiped sweat from his forehead. The three interrogators left the cell and joined the colonel in the hallway.

“I just heard from Washington. They've found out who Bennabi was meeting with in Tunis. They're sending me the information in a few minutes. I want you to hold off until we know more.”

Akhem hesitated. Reluctantly, he put the scalpel away. Then the large man stared at the video screen, on which was an image of Bennabi sitting in the chair, breathing heavily, staring back into the camera.

The interrogator shook his head. “Not a word. He didn’t say a single word.”

Saturday

At 2:00 a.m., on the day the weapon would be deployed, Colonel Jim Peterson was alone in the office on the Rehabilitation Center, awaiting the secure e-mail about the meeting in Tunis. Armed with that information, they would have a much better chance to convince Bennabi to give them information.

Come on, he urged, staring at his computer.

A moment later it complied.

The computer pinged and he opened the encrypted e-mail from the skinny government man he’d met with in his Reston, Virginia, office on Monday.

Colonel: We’ve identified the people Bennabi met with. But it’s not a terrorist cell; it’s a human rights group. Humanity Now. We double-checked and our local contacts are sure they’re the ones who’re behind the weapon. But we’ve followed the group for years and have no—repeat, no—indication that it’s a cover for a terrorist organization. Discontinue all interrogation until we know more.

Peterson frowned. He knew Humanity Now. Everybody believed it to be a legitimate organization.

My God, was this all a misunderstanding? Had Bennabi met with the group about a matter that was completely innocent?

What’ve we done?

He was about to call Washington and ask for more details when he happened to glance at his computer and saw that he’d received another e-mail—from a major U.S. newspaper. The header: Reporter requesting comment before publication.

He opened the message.

Colonel Peterson. I’m a reporter with the *New York Daily Herald*. I’m filing the attached article in a few hours with my newspaper. It will run there and in syndication in about two hundred other papers around the world. I’m giving you the opportunity to include a comment, if you like. I’ve also sent copies to the White House, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon, seeking their comments, too.

Oh, my God. What the hell is this?

With trembling hands the colonel opened the attachment and—to his utter horror—read:

ROME, May 22—A private American company, with ties to the U.S. government, has been running an illegal operation south of the city, for the purpose of kidnapping, interrogating and occasionally torturing citizens of other countries to extract information from them.

The facility, known in military circles as a black site, is owned by a Reston, Virginia, corporation, Intelligence Analysis Systems, whose corporate documents list government security consulting as its main purpose.

Italian business filings state that the purpose of the Roman facility is physical rehabilitation, but no requisite government permits for health care operations have been obtained with respect to it. Further, no licensed rehabilitation professionals are employed by the company, which is owned by a Caribbean subsidiary of IAS. Employees are U.S. and other non-Italian nationals with backgrounds not in medical science but in military and security services.

The operation was conducted without any knowledge on the part of the Italian government and the Italian ambassador to the United States has stated he will demand a full explanation as to why the illegal operation was conducted on Italian soil. Officials from the *Polizia di Stato* and the *Mini-sterio della Giustizia* likewise have promised a full investigation.

There is no direct connection between the U.S. government and the facility outside of Rome. But over the course of the past week, this reporter conducted extensive surveillance of the rehabilitation facility and observed the presence of a man identified as former Colonel James

Peterson, the president of IAS. He is regularly seen in the company of high-ranking Pentagon, CIA and White House officials in the Washington, D.C., area.

Peterson's satellite phone began ringing.

He supposed the slim man from Washington was calling.

Or maybe his boss.

Or maybe the White House.

Caller ID does not work on encrypted phones.

His jaw quivering, Peterson ignored the phone. He pressed ahead in the article.

The discovery of the IAS facility in Rome came about on a tip last week from Humanity Now, a human rights group based in North Africa and long opposed to the use of torture and black sites. The group reported that an Algerian journalist was to be kidnapped in Algiers and transported to a black site somewhere in Europe.

At the same time the human rights organization gave this reporter the name of a number of individuals suspected of being black site interrogators. By examining public records and various travel documents, it was determined that several of these specialists—two U.S. military officers and a mercenary soldier based in Africa—traveled to Rome not long after the journalist's abduction in Algiers.

Reporters were able to follow the interrogators to the rehabilitation facility, which was then determined to be owned by IAS.

Slumping in his chair, Peterson ignored the phone. He gave a grim laugh, closing his eyes.

The whole thing, the whole story about terrorists, about the weapon, about Bennabi...it was a setup. Yes, there was an "enemy," but it was merely the human rights group, which had conspired with the professor to expose the black site operation to the press—and the world.

Peterson understood perfectly: Humanity Now had probably been tracking the main interrogators IAS used—Andrew, Claire, Akhem and others—for months, if not years. The group and Bennabi, a human rights activist, had planted the story about the weapon themselves to engineer his kidnapping, then alerted that reporter for the New York newspaper, who leapt after the story of a lifetime.

Bennabi was merely bait...and I went right for it. Of course, he remained silent the whole time. That was his job. To draw as many interrogators here as he could and give the reporter a chance to follow them, discover the facility and find out who was behind it.

Oh, this was bad...this was terrible. It was the kind of scandal that could bring down governments.

It would certainly end his career. And many others'.

It might very likely end the process of black sites altogether, or at least set them back years.

He thought about calling together the staff and telling them to destroy all the incriminating papers and to flee.

But why bother? he reflected. It was too late now.

Peterson decided there was nothing to do but accept his fate. Though he did call the guards and tell them to arrange to have Jacques Bennabi transferred back home. The enemy had won. And, in an odd way, Peterson respected that.

"And make sure he arrives unharmed."

"Yessir."

Peterson sat back, hearing in his thoughts the words of the slim man from Washington.

The weapon...It can do quote "significant" damage...

Except that there was no weapon. It was all a fake.

Yet, with another sour laugh, Peterson decided this wasn't exactly true.

There was indeed a weapon. It wasn't nuclear or chemical or explosive but in the end was far more effective than any of those and would indeed do significant damage.

Reflecting on his prisoner's refusal to speak during his captivity, reflecting, too, on the devastating paragraphs of the reporter's article, the colonel concluded: the weapon was silence.
The weapon was words.

Chapter Three

Blake Crouch

Blake started writing stories in elementary school to scare his little brother at bedtime. He has since perfected the craft of creating intense and insulated worlds in which unspeakable evil can exist. A photograph Blake took of a deserted road on the high desert plain in Wyoming was the inspiration for his first book, *Desert Places*. The horrifying villain in that novel is shaped from the terrors Blake thought might be waiting for him in that unforgiving landscape.

Blake's story for this collection, "Remaking," is influenced by landscape in much the same way. Tragic events unfold in a snowy, sleepy Colorado town. From the first scene, in which a man sits alone in the cold, watching a father and son in a diner, you know something is about to go horribly wrong. With a sickening sense of isolation magnified by the blanketing snow, you'll find your fingers getting numb from gripping the pages as you turn them inexorably toward the final scene.

Chapter Four

Remaking

Mitchell stared at the page in the notebook, covered in his messy scrawl, but he wasn't reading. He'd seen them walk into the coffeehouse fifteen minutes prior, the man short, pudgy and smooth-shaven, the boy perhaps five or six and wearing a long-sleeved OshKosh B'Gosh—red with blue stripes.

Now they sat two tables away.

The boy said, "I'm hungry."

"We'll get something in a little while."

"How long is a little while?"

"Until I say."

"When are you gonna—"

"Joel, do you mind?"

The little boy's head dropped and the man stopped typing and looked up from his laptop.

"I'm sorry. Tell you what. Give me five minutes so I can finish this e-mail, and we'll go eat breakfast."

Mitchell sipped his espresso, snow falling beyond the storefront windows into this mountain hamlet of eight hundred souls, Miles Davis squealing through the speakers—one of the low-key numbers *off Kind of Blue*.

Mitchell trailed them down the frosted sidewalk.

One block up, they crossed the street and disappeared into a diner. Having already eaten in that very establishment two hours ago, he installed himself on a bench where he could see the boy and the man sitting at a table by the front window.

Mitchell fished the cell out of his jacket and opened the phone, scrolling through ancient numbers as the snow collected in his hair.

He pressed TALK.

Two rings, then, "Mitch? Oh, my God, where are you?"

He made no answer.

"Look, I'm at the office, getting ready for a big meeting. I can't do this right now, but will you answer if I call you back? Please?"

Mitchell closed the phone and shut his eyes.

They emerged from the diner an hour later.

Mitchell brushed the inch of snow off his pants and stood, shivering. He crossed the street and followed the boy and the man up the sidewalk, passing a candy shop, a grocery, a depressing bar masquerading as an Old West saloon.

They left the sidewalk after another block and walked up the driveway to the Antlers Motel, disappeared into 113, the middle in a single-story row of nine rooms. The tarp stretched over the small swimming pool sagged with snow. In an alcove between the rooms and the office, vending machines hummed against the hush of the storm.

Ten minutes of brisk walking returned Mitchell to his motel, the Box Canyon Lodge. He checked out, climbed into his burgundy Jetta, cranked the engine.

"Just for tonight?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That'll be \$69.78 with tax."

Mitchell handed the woman behind the front desk his credit card.

Behind her, a row of Hummels stood in perfect formation atop a black-and-white television airing *The Price is Right*.

Mitchell signed the receipt. "Could I have 112 or 114?"

The old woman stubbed out her cigarette in a glass ashtray and reached for the key cabinet.

Mitchell pressed his ear to the wood paneling. A television blared through the thin wall. His cell phone vibrated—Lisa calling again. Flipped it open.

"Mitch? You don't have to say anything. Please just listen—" He powered off the phone and continued writing in the notebook.

Afternoon unspooled as the snow piled up in the parking lot of the Antlers Motel. Mitchell parted the blinds and stared through the window as the first intimation of dusk began to blue the sky, the noise of the television next door droning through the walls.

He lay down on top of the covers and stared at the ceiling and whispered the Lord's Prayer.

In the evening, he startled out of sleep to the sound of a door slamming, sat up too fast, the blood rushing to his head in a swarm of black spots. He hadn't intended to sleep.

Mitchell slid off the bed and walked to the window, split the blinds, heard the diminishing sound of footsteps—a single set—squeaking in the snow.

He saw the boy pass through the illumination of a streetlamp and disappear into the alcove that housed the vending machines.

The snowflakes stung Mitchell's cheeks as he crossed the parking lot, his sneakers swallowed up in six inches of fresh powder.

The hum of the vending machines intensified, and he picked out the sound of coins dropping through a slot.

He glanced once over his shoulder at the row of rooms, the doors all closed, windows dark save for slivers of electric blue from television screens sliding through the blinds.

Too dark to tell if the man was watching.

Mitchell stepped into the alcove as the boy pressed his selection on the drink machine.

The can banged into the open compartment, and the boy reached down and claimed the Sprite.

"Hi, Joel."

The boy looked up at him, then lowered his head like a scolded dog, as though he'd been caught vandalizing the drink machine.

"No, it's all right. You haven't done anything wrong."

Mitchell squatted down on the concrete.

"Look at me, son. Who's that man you're with?"

The voice so soft and high: "Daddy."

A voice boomed across the parking lot. "*Joel?* It don't take this long to buy a can of pop! Make a decision and get back here."

The door slammed.

"Joel, do you want to come with me?"

"You're a stranger."

"No, my name's Mitch. I'm a police officer actually. Why don't you come with me."

"No."

"I think you probably should." Mitchell figured he had maybe thirty seconds before the father stormed out.

"Where's your badge?"

"I'm undercover right now. Come on, we don't have much time. You need to come with me."

"I'll get in trouble."

"No, only way you'll get in trouble is by not obeying a police officer when he tells you to do something." Mitchell noticed the boy's hands trembling. His were, too. "Come on, son."

He put his hand on the boy's small shoulder and guided him out of the alcove toward his car, where he opened the front passenger door and motioned for Joel to get in.

Mitchell brushed the snow off the windows and the windshield, and as he climbed in and started the engine, he saw the door to 113 swing open in the rearview mirror.

"You eaten yet?"

"No."

Main Street empty and the newly scraped pavement already frosting again, the reflection of the high beams blinding against the wall of pouring snow.

"Are you hungry?"

"I don't know."

He turned right off Main, drove slow down a snow-packed side street that sloped past little Victorians, inns and motels, Joel buckled into the passenger seat, the can of Sprite still unopened between his legs, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Mitchell unlocked the door and opened it.

"Go on in, Joel."

The boy entered and Mitchell hit the light, closing and locking the door after them, wondering if Joel could reach the brass chain near the top.

It wasn't much of a room—single bed, table, cabinet housing a refrigerator on one side, hangers on the other. He'd lived out of it for the last month and it smelled like stale pizza crust and cardboard and clothes soured with sweat.

Mitchell closed the blinds.

"You wanna watch TV?"

The boy shrugged.

Mitchell picked the remote control off the bedside table and turned it on.

"Come sit on the bed, Joel."

As the boy climbed onto the bed, Mitchell started flipping. "You tell me to stop when you see something you wanna watch."

Mitchell surfed through all thirty stations twice and the boy said nothing. He settled on the Discovery Channel, set the remote control down.

"I want my dad," the boy said, trying not to cry.

"Calm down, Joel."

Mitchell sat on the bed and unlaced his sneakers. His socks were damp and cold. He balled them up and tossed them into the open bathroom, staring now at his pale feet, toes shriveled with moisture.

Joel had settled back into one of the pillows, momentarily entranced by the television program where a man caked in mud wrestled with a crocodile.

Mitchell turned up the volume.

"You like crocodiles?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"You aren't scared of them?"

The boy shook his head. "I got a snake."

"Nuh-uh."

The boy looked up. "Uh-huh."

"What kind?"

"It's black and scaly and it lives in a glass box."

"A terrarium?"

"Yeah. Daddy catches mice for it."

"It eats them?"

"Uh-huh. Slinky's belly gets real big."

Mitchell smiled. "I bet that's something to see."

They sat watching the Discovery Channel for twenty minutes, Joel engrossed now, Mitchell with his head tilted back against the headboard, eyes closed, a half grin where none had been for twelve months.

At 8:24 p.m., the cell vibrated against Mitchell's hip. He opened the case and pulled out the phone.

"Hi, Lisa."

"Mitch."

"Listen, I want you to call me back in five minutes and do exactly what I say."

"Okay."

Mitchell closed the phone and slid off the bed.

The boy looked up, still half watching the program on the world's deadliest spiders.

He said, "I'm hungry."

"I know, sport. I know. Give me just a minute here and I'll order a pizza."

Mitchell crossed the carpet, tracking through dirty clothes he should've taken to the laundry a week ago.

His suitcase lay open in the space between the dresser and the baseboard heater. He knelt down, searching through wrinkled oxfords and blue jeans, khakis that had long since lost their creases.

It was a tiny, wool sweater—ice-blue with a magnified snow-flake stitched across the front.

"Hey, Joel," he said, "it's getting cold in here. I want you to put this on." He tossed the sweater onto the bed.

"I'm not cold."

"You do like I tell you now."

As the boy reached for the sweater, Mitchell undid the buttons on his plaid shirt and worked his arms out of the sleeves. He dropped the shirt on the carpet and rifled his suitcase again until he found the badly faded T-shirt he'd bought fifteen years ago at a U2 concert.

On the way back to the bed, he stopped at the television and lifted the videotape from the top of the VCR, pushed it in.

"No, I wanna watch the—"

"We'll turn it back on in a minute."

He climbed under the covers beside the boy and stared at the bedside table, waiting for the phone to buzz.

"Joel, I'm gonna answer the phone. I want you to sit here beside me and watch the television and don't say a word until I tell you."

"I'm hungry."

The phone vibrated itself toward the edge of the bedside table.

"I'll buy you anything you want if you do this right for me."

Mitchell picked up the phone.

Lisa calling.

He closed his eyes, gave himself a moment to engage. He'd written it all down months ago, the script in the bedside table drawer under the Gideon Bible he'd taken to reading every night before bed, but he didn't need it.

"Hi, honey."

"Mitch, I'm so glad you—"

"Stop. Don't say anything. Just hang on a minute." He reached for the remote control and pressed Play. The screen lit up, halfway through the episode of *Seinfeld*. He lowered the volume, said, "Lisa, I want you to say, 'I'm almost asleep.'"

"What are you—"

"Just do it."

A pause, then: "I'm almost asleep."

“Say it like you really are.”

Mitchell closed his eyes.

“I’m almost asleep.”

“We’re sitting here, watching *Seinfeld*.” He looked down at the top of Joel’s head, his hair brown with gold highlights, just the right shade and length. He kissed the boy’s head. “Our little guy’s just about asleep.”

“Mitch, are you drunk—”

“Lisa, I will close this fucking phone. Ask how our day was. Do it.”

“How was your day?”

“You weren’t crying that night.” He could hear her trying to gather herself.

“How was your day, Mitch?”

He closed his eyes again. “One of those perfect ones. We’re in Ouray, Colorado, now. This little town surrounded by huge mountains. It started snowing around midday as we were driving down from Montrose. If they don’t plow the roads we may not be able to get out tomorrow.”

“Mitch—”

“We had a snowball fight after dinner, and our motel has these Japanese soaking tubs out back, full of hot mineral water from the springs under the town. Say you wish you were here.”

“That’s not what I said that night, Mitch.”

“What did you say?”

“I wish I could be there with you, but part of me’s so glad you two have this time together.”

“There aren’t many days like this, are there?”

“No.”

“Now, I just want to hear you breathing over the phone.”

He listened. He looked at the television, then the boy’s head, then the ice-blue sweater.

Mitchell held the phone to Joel’s mouth.

“Say good night to Mom, Alex.”

“Good night.”

Mitchell brought the phone to his ear. “Thank you, Lisa.”

“Mitch, who was that? What have you—”

He powered off the phone and set it on the bedside table.

When the boy was finally asleep, Mitchell turned off the television. He pulled the covers over the both of them and scooted forward until he could feel the hard ridge of the boy’s little spine press against his chest.

In the back window, through a crack in the closed blinds, he watched the snow falling through the orange illumination of a streetlamp, and his lips moved in prayer.

The knock finally came a few minutes after 3:00 a.m., and nothing timid about it—the forceful pounding of a fist against the door.

“Mitchell Griggs?”

Mitchell sat up in bed, eyes struggling to adjust in the darkness.

“*Mr. Griggs?*”

More pounding as his feet touched the carpet.

“Griggs!”

Mitchell made his way across dirty clothes and pizza boxes to the door, which he spoke through.

“Who is it?”

“Dennis James, Ouray County sheriff. Need to speak with you right now.”

“Little late, isn’t it?” He tried to make his voice sound light and unperturbed. “Maybe I could come by your office in the—”

“What part of *right now* went past you?”

Mitchell glanced up, saw the chain still locked. “What’s this about?” he asked.

“I think you know.”

“I’m sorry I don’t.”

“Six-year-old boy named Joel McIntosh went missing from the Antlers Motel this evening. Clerk saw him getting into a burgundy Jetta just like the one you drive.”

“Well, I’m sorry. He’s not here.”

“Then why don’t you open the door, let me confirm that so you can get back to sleep and we can quit wasting precious minutes trying to find this little boy.”

Mitchell glanced through the peephole, glimpsed the sheriff standing within a foot of the door under one of the globe lights that lit the second-floor walkway, his black parka dusted with snow, his wide-brimmed cowboy hat capped with a half inch of powder.

Mitchell couldn’t nail down the sheriff’s age in the poor light—late sixties perhaps, seventy at most. He held the fore end stock of a pump-action shotgun in his right hand.

“I’ve got two deputies out back on the hill behind your room if you’re thinking of—”

“I’m not.”

“Just tell me if you have the boy—”

A radio squeaked outside.

The sheriff spoke in low tones, then Mitchell heard the dissipation of footsteps.

A minute limped by before the sheriff’s voice passed faintly through the door again.

“You still there, Mitch?”

“Yeah.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’m gonna sit down. I been walking all over town since seven o’clock.”

The sheriff lowered out of sight, and through the peephole, Mitchell could only see torrents of snow dumping on the trees and houses and parked cars.

He eased down on the carpet and leaned against the door.

“I was just speaking with your wife. Lisa’s concerned for you, Mitch. Knows why you’re here.”

“She doesn’t know any—”

“And so do I. You may not know this, but I helped pull you and your son out of the car. Never forget it. Been what, about a year?”

“To the day.”

Drafts of frigid air swept under the door, Mitchell shivering, wishing he’d brought a blanket with him from the bed.

“Mitch, Lisa’s been trying to call you. You have your cell with you?”

“It’s turned off, on the bedside table.”

“Would you talk to her for me?”

“I don’t need to talk to her.”

“I think it might not be a bad—”

“I had a meeting the next morning in Durango. Had brought him along, ‘cause he’d never seen the Rockies. That storm came in overnight, and you know, I just...I almost waited. Almost decided to stay the day in Ouray, give the plows a chance to scrape the pass.”

“I got a boy of my own. He’s grown now, but I remember when he was your Alex’s age, can’t say I’d have survived if something like what happened to your son happened to him. You got a gun in there, Mitch?”

In the back of Mitchell’s throat welled a sharp, acidic tang, like tasting the connectors of a nine-volt battery, but all he said was, “Yeah.”

“Is the boy all right?”

Mitchell said nothing.

“Look, I know you’re hurting, but Joel McIntosh ain’t done a thing to deserve getting dragged into this. Boy’s probably terrified. You thought about that, or can you not see past your own—”

“Of course I’ve thought about it.”

“Then why don’t you send him on out, and you and me can keep talking.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I just...I can’t.”

Mitchell heard footsteps outside the door. He got up quickly, glanced through the peephole just in time to see the battering ram swing back.

He stumbled toward the bed as the door exploded off its hinges and slammed to the floor, two men standing in the threshold—the sheriff with the shotgun trained on him, a deputy with a flashlight and a handgun.

Mitchell shielded his eyes—specks of snow blowing in, luminescent where they passed through the LED beam—couldn’t see the man behind the light, but the sheriff’s eyes were hard and kind. He could tell this even though they lived in the shadow of a Stetson.

The sheriff said, “I don’t see the boy, Wade. Mitchell, let me see those hands.”

Mitchell took a deep, trembling breath.

“Come on, Mitch, let me see your hands.”

Mitchell shook his head.

“Goddamn, son, I won’t tell you—”

Mitchell swung his right arm behind his back, his fingers wrapping around the remote control jammed down his boxer shorts, the room fired into blue by the illumination of the television, the laugh track to *Seinfeld* blaring, Wade screaming the sheriff’s name as a greater light bloomed beside the lesser.

Sheriff James flicked the light, felt the breath leave him as he blinked through the tears.

He leaned the shotgun against the wall and stepped inside the bathroom.

The cheap fiberglass of the tub had been lined with blankets and pillows, and the little boy was sitting up staring at the sheriff, orange earplugs protruding from his ears.

The sheriff knelt down, smiled at the boy, pulled out the earplugs.

“You okay, Joel?”

The boy said, “A noise woke me up.”

“Did he make you sleep in here?”

“Mitchell said if I was a good boy and kept my earplugs in and stayed in here all night, I could see my daddy in the morning.”

“He did, huh?”

“Where’s my daddy?”

“Down in the parking lot. We’ll take you to him, but I need to ask you something first.” The sheriff sat down on the cracked linoleum tile. “Did Mitchell hurt you?”

“No.”

“He didn’t touch you anywhere private or make you touch him?”

“No, we just sat on the bed and watched about spiders and stuff.”

“You mean, on the TV?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s that?” The sheriff pointed to the notebook sitting on a pillow under the faucet.

“Mitchell said to give this to the people who came to get me.”

Wade walked into the bathroom, stood behind the sheriff as he lifted the spiral-bound notebook and opened the red cover to a page of handwriting in black ink.

“What is it?” Wade asked.

“It’s to his wife.”

“What’s it say?”

The sheriff closed the notebook. “I believe that’s some of her business.” He stood, faced his deputy, snow melting off his Stetson. “Get this boy wrapped up in some blankets and bring him down to his dad. I gotta go call Lisa Griggs.”

“Will do.”

“And, Wade?”

“Yeah?”

“You throw a blanket over Mr. Griggs before you bring Joel out. Don’t want so much as a strand of hair visible. Shield the boy’s eyes if you have to, maybe even turn the lights out when you carry him through the room.”

The deputy shook his head. “What the hell was wrong with this man?”

“You got kids yet, Wade?”

“You know I don’t.”

“Well, just a heads-up—if you ever do, this is how much they make you love them.”

Chapter Five

Harry Hunsicker

Harry Hunsicker seems to know an awful lot about taking that short step from respectable citizen to flat-out criminal. His award-winning series featuring investigator Lee Henry Oswald is a high-octane tour of the seedier side of Dallas. His story “Iced” has that same feeling of a world turned upside down. The lead characters bear a shocking resemblance to people we might know—even to ourselves—pillars of society crumbling in an avalanche of bad decisions that seemed perfectly rational at the time. All you can do as a reader is hang on and hope, against all odds, someone makes it out alive.

Chapter Six

Iced

Bijoux Watson's body slipped underneath the muddy waters of the Brazos River without a sound, a mangled pile of flesh that had once been the biggest purveyor of black tar heroin in all of east Texas.

Chrissie and Tom watched it float downstream, both breathing heavily after dragging the remains to the edge of the water. After a few moments the corpse rounded a bend and disappeared. Chrissie and Tom looked at each other and smiled.

Then they screwed, right there in the mud and gunk, tossing their clothes aside in a tangled heap, their bodies sweaty. Tom felt the crystal meth they'd smoked an hour before course through his limbs like a bolt of sunlight, his groin jonesing for Chrissie and her tight body.

Bijoux was finally dead.

When they finished, they lay side by side on the dirt and listened to the cattle egrets trill overhead and the traffic lumber across the bridge going to Bryan/College Station. The air smelled of water and decaying vegetation and sex.

Chrissie dug a rumpled pack of Virginia Slims from the pocket of her denim skirt. She lit one and blew a plume of smoke skyward.

"I love you." Tom ran his index finger in a circular pattern around one of her breasts.

She sighed and pitched her cigarette in the river. "Daddy always said don't get lovin' confused with screwing."

Tom felt needles cartwheel across his intestines as the last of the meth ricocheted across his battered synapses. He tried to remember what sleep was like.

"But, baby. You said—"

"Bijoux's gone." Chrissie stood and brushed the leaves and dirt from her body. "Things're different now."

Tom tried not to cry as she dressed, an enormous fatigue making his limbs as heavy and stiff as tree trunks. His skin hurt and his vision turned black at the edges.

Chrissie buttoned her skirt and tramped up the muddy slope without a word.

He lay there for a few moments, thinking about Chrissie and the way she contorted her face when she had an orgasm, the sinews and tendons in her neck and how they came to the surface of her silky skin. He thought about doing her again and about the last hit of Ice, the crystalized amphetamine, in his briefcase in the car.

Tom scrambled into his clothes and ran after her.

Two minutes later he stepped off the path and onto the asphalt parking lot near the boat landing on the east side of the river. Bijoux Watson's lemon-yellow Jaguar was the only car visible.

Chrissie stood by the front passenger door with her arms crossed, staring intently at the smudged and cracked windshield.

Tom walked over and stood next to her.

Explosive residue, blood and liquified body parts coated the inside of the glass.

Bijoux had been in the driver's seat, a two-kilo package of what he thought was Mexican skag sitting between his legs, when Tom pressed the button, detonating the ten blasting caps nestled in the bag of Piggly Wiggly brown sugar. He and Chrissie had been thirty yards away, underneath a live oak tree with their cigarettes. Bijoux, a loan shark, pimp and dope dealer, was a rabid antismoker.

Tom said, "Guess we didn't think this through."

"No shit, Einstein." Chrissie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose

Town was ten miles away. They'd ridden here with the dead man to make the transaction, claiming the stuff was hidden by the river.

"What's your plan now?" she said.

Tom opened the front passenger door of the car.

A rank wave of hot air that smelled like blood and feces hit his face, making him gag for a moment.

He took a deep breath and grabbed his briefcase, dislodging what looked like a one of Bijoux's testicles. He plopped his carryall on the hood of the car, opened it and rummaged through the contents until he found the foil-wrapped nugget of methamphetamine. The pipe lay underneath some loan documents due at the title company a week ago, next to the Glock .40-caliber pistol he'd started carrying ever since he'd gotten tangled up with Bijoux Watson.

His fingers fumbled as he jammed the drug into the bowl of the pipe. With the battered Zippo his father had carried in Vietnam, he ignited the crystalized narcotic. Two big lungfuls and all the confidence, power and *cojones* on the planet coursed through his veins, as thick and fast and strong as the muddy waters a few hundred feet away.

Chrissie appeared at his side with a canvas bag she'd evidently found in the trunk. She opened it and pulled out a Ziploc sack full of dirty brown powder.

"Bijoux always traveled with a stash." She licked her lips and produced a needle and a blackened tablespoon from the bottom of the bag.

Tom offered her the pipe.

She grabbed it and inhaled deeply. Then, she set about cooking a dose of heroin.

"Baby, don't do that," Tom said. "Shit's bad for you, dirty needles and all that other stuff."

"Don't knock it until you've tried it." She lowered her voice. "It makes sex incredible." She pointed the needle at him. "Gimme your arm."

Tom looked at the syringe and then at Chrissie's face. Her eyes were wide with what he assumed to be anticipation. He wanted to say no, but because he had just ingested over a gram of primo Ice and had all the confidence, power and *cojones* in the world, he stuck his arm out.

Chrissie smiled, found a suitable vein and slid the needle in, giving him half the load. She then injected the rest into a blood vessel in her thigh. Together they sat on the grimy asphalt and leaned against the side of Bijoux Watson's bloody Jaguar. Tom felt like there was nothing he couldn't do, no task or challenge he couldn't accomplish. Except for the fact he had no energy, he thought at that moment he could climb Mount Everest.

Chrissie fell against him and said that just as soon as they came down a little, she'd fuck him so hard his toenails would hurt.

Later, it could have been thirty minutes or thirty seconds, Tom heard the crunch of tires.

He opened his eyes as a county squad car pulled up and stopped a few feet from the Jag.

A deputy got out.

Tom recognized him and struggled to remember the man's name. Dean something. Dean, Jr. had been in his wife's Sunday-school class a couple of years ago.

"Tom? Is that you?" Deputy Dean squinted in the afternoon sun and leaned down to get a closer look. "Whole town's looking for you. You ain't been to the bank in three days." The deputy rubbed one hand over his mouth, and his eyes got wide as he looked from Chrissie back to Tom. "You okay? What's wrong with your pupils?"

Tom nodded and pushed himself off the ground, the uppers and downers in his system making everything deliciously hazy and warm and happy.

"Dean, it's damn good to see you." He enunciated each syllable with extreme precision. "The bank. Um, yes, the bank. The bank. They need these very important documents. At the bank. Very soon, Dean. Can you help me with that?"

Tom turned his back to the officer and reached inside the briefcase

“Uh, yeah, sure,” the deputy said. “Anything you need.”

Tom remembered the man’s last name. Chambers. Dean Roy Chambers, his wife and two children lived in a double-wide on nine acres just outside of town. Tom’s bank had made the loan.

“Who is she?” the deputy said. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“She’s fine.” Tom turned and smiled.

Then he shot Dean Chambers in the cheek, about a quarter inch to the left of his nose, with the .40-caliber Glock.

The bullet was one of those fancy armor-piercing hollow-points the liberal gun-control freaks loved to whine about. It made a big hole exiting the back of the deputy’s head.

Chrissie snapped awake as the blast roiled across the empty parking lot.

“What the hell?”

“Took care of the issue, baby.” Tom squared his shoulders and sucked his gut in. “Goddamn, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“You fucking killed a cop.” Chrissie stood up, legs wobbly. “That ain’t taking care of no issues. That’s making new ones.”

“He’d seen us together, baby.” Tom stuck the gun in his waistband. His heart thumped a disco beat in his rib cage, *whump whump whump*. “Couldn’t do anything else. Besides, got us a ride out of here.”

“Ah, Tommy. You’re the greatest.” She staggered toward the cop car.

Tom grabbed his briefcase and ran after her. “I—I love you, baby.”

Why does any man begin an affair? Was it the impending fortieth birthday and the loss of vigor and sexual prowess traditionally associated with middle age?

Or was it the utter banality of living with the same woman for the past fifteen years, through the ups and downs of raising three children and a succession of overly precocious golden retrievers. Tom thought it something more profound, the need deep inside every male to experience one thing to the fullest, to nurture a spark into a roaring fire. To throw away the rearview mirror of life and press the accelerator to the floor. To be a man, dammit.

Chrissie sat in the passenger seat of the squad car, knees tucked under her chin, exposing the full length of her tanned legs.

Tom tried to concentrate on the road and not her thighs.

She said, “Where we going?”

“We need to get some more Ice.” Tom lit a Marlboro Light with one shaking hand. “Then I figure we get the cash I’ve been giving Bijoux and head south somewhere. I hear you can live like a king in Costa Rica, with plenty of gringo dollars.”

“Do you even know how to speak Mexican?” Chrissie scratched her left breast.

“We’re not going to Mexico, baby.” Tom pulled around a slow-moving pickup loaded with hay. “We’re gonna be the king and queen of Costa Rica. I’ll buy us one of those learn-to-speak-Spanish tapes and we’ll be fluent in no time.”

“Let’s just get the Ice and the money first, huh?” Chrissie drummed her fingers on the dash and looked out the rear window. “Then we’ll figure it out.”

Chrissie had arrived in town one month before, on a one-way bus ticket from Shreveport, vague about her past except it involved a crazy ex with a mean right hook. She’d just gotten a job at the local vet’s clinic when Tom had brought the dog in for a bath.

The attraction was instantaneous and electric, beginning with furtive glances and then an accidental brush of their hands when Tom handed over a check. A volley of double entendres ended up with Tom asking her to lunch. To his horror and amazement, she said yes.

He’d persuaded the vet to keep the dog for the remainder of the weekend. He then called his wife and told her an old college friend had gotten thrown in jail in Waco and he was going to bail him out. He’d be home in time for dinner. Probably. It was early Saturday afternoon, and he could

tell by her voice she had started on the second bottle of white zinfandel and only really cared about number three.

They went to a barbecue joint one county over and then on to a room at the Shangri-la Motel on Highway Six. The first time they did it, right as he started to come, Chrissie grabbed his balls and gave 'em a good squeeze. Tom had never felt anything as intense and pleasurable and thought he never would again.

That was before they met the next weekend and Chrissie brought a foil package of Ice, the greatest substance known to mankind.

Thirty days later, Tom was in a stolen squad car driving toward a tar-paper juke joint called Jolie's, looking to score enough meth and money to get them to Costa Rica and a new life. Tom took a deep breath and smiled. *This is living, man.*

The squad car slid to a stop in the gravel parking lot of the bar. Midafternoon on a Wednesday and there were only a couple of other vehicles present. A smidgen of the drug remained in the bowl. Chrissie and Tom split it, sucking on the pipestem until their lungs hurt. They hopped out of the auto and pushed their way into the neon gloom of Bijoux Watson's only legitimate business enterprise.

The place was empty except for an old man in overalls at the bar, drinking a sixteen-ounce can of Schlitz Malt Liquor, and the mulatto bartender, an ex-pimp named Teabag Johnson. The jukebox in the corner played Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing."

Tom felt the meth track through his body and thought about how appropriate that song was to the situation at hand and how he sure would like to take Chrissie back into Bijoux's office and nail her on the desk, right next to the safe, which reportedly held enough dope to get half of Texas strung out.

Teabag wiped a glass dry and looked at the door behind them as if expecting the owner to arrive.

Tom and Chrissie sat at the bar. Tom ordered two Miller Lites and two shots of Jose Cuervo Gold.

"Where's Bijoux?" The bartender set the drinks down. "Ya'll give him the shit you supposed to?"

"He's been...delayed." Tom downed the tequila in one gulp. "Said for me to get some stuff from his office."

"He told you to get something out a his office?" Teabag frowned and leaned against the bar.

"Yeah." Tom took a sip of beer to cool the fire in his mouth. He nodded toward Chrissie. "Ask her. She was there."

The bartender looked at Chrissie.

"I always thought you were pretty cute, Teabag." She ran her tongue around the rim of the shot glass. "Bet you know how to treat a lady right."

Tom spluttered on a mouthful of beer.

Teabag kept his face impassive.

"I don't truck with no whores no more. The preacher says that's the road to hell." Teabag reached under the bar. "Y'all is way messed up, been smoking too much crack or sumshit."

Tom's vision blurred with anger; the man called his baby a whore. He reached into the waistband of his slacks and pulled out the Glock.

Teabag's hand came out from under the bar with a sawed-off shotgun.

Tom yanked the trigger and missed, from three feet away.

Chrissie threw her beer bottle at Teabag and connected, a solid blow to the forehead.

The bartender raised a hand to his face and pulled the trigger on the shotgun.

The weapon was pointed about a foot to the right of Tom, away from Chrissie, and only a small portion of the quarter-inch-diameter pellets hit their intended target.

The noise was enormous, like a thunderclap in a cave, and Tom felt a chunk of lead tear into his left bicep and another hit the fleshy part of his side, just above the hip.

He jerked the trigger on the Glock as fast as he could. About half the bullets hit Teabag in the chest and head, the remainder colliding with the bottles of liquor on the shelf behind the bar. For one brief, surreal moment the area where Teabag stood was a virtual waterfall of liquid, a mist of blood and booze, eerily illuminated by the neon beer signs on the wall.

The Glock clicked empty.

Teabag coughed once and fell to the floor, dead.

Tom placed his gun on the bar and clamped a hand over the oozing hole in his arm. He felt no pain, only a mild sensation of pressure deep inside the muscle. The old man drinking beer was nowhere to be seen.

“He shot me, baby.” Tom grabbed a bar rag and wrapped it around his arm.

“It’ll be all right.” Chrissie helped him tie the makeshift bandage. “We get in the office, I’ll give you dose of medicine, okay?”

Tom grabbed the gun, stuck it in his waistband and picked up the bottle of Cuervo from the bar. Together they headed to the office in the back.

Two weeks after their first encounter at the motel, Bijoux Watson, resplendent in a pink warm-up suit and enough gold chains to outfit an entire rap band, showed up in his office at the bank. He talked his way past the secretary and told Tom he needed five grand or the whole county would know about his little split tail and their love shack over at the Shangri-la.

Tom, on the downside of a two-day bender, put the bank’s chairman of the board on hold, in midcomplaint about his president’s increasingly erratic behavior, and said, “Who the hell are you?”

Bijoux leaned back and put his Reeboks on top of Tom’s desk. “I’m one of those niggas you don’t never see, lest we cleaning up your house or serving you a drink at the country club.”

Tom hung up on the director.

“I don’t know anything about a motel.”

“Your gal’s name is Chrissie.” The man in the garish warm-up suit pulled a piece of gum out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. He dropped the wrapper on the floor. “That shit y’all been smokin’. Comes from me.”

Tom started to reply but the man held up his hand.

“My place out by the lake. Jolie’s.” Bijoux stood up. “You be there tomorrow. Noon. With five large in cash.”

That had been two weeks and two hundred thousand dollars ago. Money was missing from the bank and people were starting to ask questions. Three days before, they’d hatched a plan to kill Bijoux. Surprisingly, he had fallen for their story, that they had stumbled on some heroin and wanted to use it in lieu of a payment. Tom had said he’d foreclosed on a property and he’d found it when he inspected the place. The rest of it, the blasting caps and the remote-control device... well, it’s amazing how resourceful one could be when one had a couple of grams of pharmaceutical-grade meth surfing through one’s body.

Now they were in the inner sanctum, Bijoux’s office, a place of utter depression for Tom on his five prior visits. They stood by the door for a moment. There was a battered metal desk in the center. On one wall was a set of bookshelves filled with grimy three-ring binders. Another wall was dominated by a big-screen television set. In the corner sat a large, metallic-gray safe. Tom took a swig of tequila.

The safe had a complicated-looking combination lock. It also had a small key sticking out of the middle of the dial. Tom’s brother had a gun safe similar to this one. The key was to hold the handle of the safe in the open or closed position. Not nearly as secure as using the combo but, without using the dial, a lot easier to access the interior. Tom twisted the key, then the spoke handle and tugged.

The door swung open. A tiny light popped on and illuminated the interior of the safe, exposing stacks and stacks of plastic bags and cash.

“Holy shit.” Chrissie’s voice was low, respectful.

Tom gulped.

“I bet it’s skag.” She grabbed a bag at random and slit it with a letter opener from the desk. “Oh, shit. There must be twenty pounds in here, uncut I’ll bet.”

Tom ignored her and pulled out a similar size pack, but wrapped in darker plastic. The contents crunched as he massaged it. Butterflies bounced across his stomach as he thought about what might be wrapped in the black covering. He grabbed the opener from Chrissie and cut the container, exposing a couple of hundred tightly bound foil packages.

“Baby, it’s Ice.” His eyes filled with tears. “We got enough to get us through. We’re gonna make it.”

They laughed and cried and danced together until Chrissie noticed the blood from Tom’s wounded side.

“Let me fix that.” She pulled up his shirt and examined the damage.

“Uh, yeah. Okay.” Tom unwrapped one of the foil packages. “Let’s get high first.”

They smoked the whole pack, trading hits, until the world was right again and they’d both forgotten about Tom’s injuries.

“It’s time to split.” Chrissie paced the small room.

“See what’s out there.” Tom piled cash on the desktop and nodded toward a metal door on the back wall of the office.

Chrissie flipped open the dead bolt and peered outside. “There’s a truck...and it looks like some kinda road leading into the woods.” Tom stopped shoving money into the small duffel he’d found on the floor and joined her at the door.

“It’s gonna work, baby.” He hugged her, his hand sliding up under her sleeveless shirt to the smooth flesh covering her rib cage. His groin ached and his words spluttered forth, as fast as the bullets from the Glock.

“We’ll go to Austin. Then we’ll get new IDs. Saw it on a movie on HBO one time, about how people can do that. Then we’ll get on the Internet and find us a place to rent in Costa Rica and we’ll buy some clothes. A-a-and—”

“That’s a real swell plan.” Chrissie slipped from his embrace and faced him in the doorway. “But we need the keys to that truck out there. Unless the folks at banking school taught you how to hot-wire a late model Chevy.”

They looked at each other for a moment and then raced back in the office. The Ice made quick work of it. Tom found a cigar box in a file drawer. At the bottom was a GM key and a remote control. He clicked it, and the truck outside chirped.

They smiled at each other and slapped palms across the top of Bijoux Watson’s desk.

Chrissie found another duffel and filled it with the speed and heroin while Tom finished loading the money. When they were done, Tom poured them each a shot of Jose Cuervo. They toasted themselves and their cleverness.

“Here’s to us on the beach.” Chrissie poured another round. “Drinking little fruity drinks with parasols in ‘em. Who would ‘a thought it?”

Tom downed his fourth tequila of the last half hour and felt it burn all the way to his toes. The Ice kept him alert but not sober. He looked at Chrissie’s breasts beneath the thin cotton of her blouse and at her legs, long and shapely underneath the dirty denim skirt. He put his glass down and lurched toward her.

“Baby, let’s do it here, before we leave.”

“Sure, Tommy.” Chrissie held up a hand and smiled. “But first we gotta take care of that hole in your gut.”

Tom looked at his left side and saw that it was wet with blood to the middle of his thigh.

“Sit here and I’ll patch you up.” Chrissie pulled out the chair from behind the desk.

He did as requested.

Chrissie pulled the shirt away and dumped some tequila in the wound. The pain knifed through his side like a sling blade, burning through the last of the heroin in his system.

He struggled not to scream.

Chrissie patted the wound dry with a paper napkin she found on the floor. She fashioned a bandage out of Tom's handkerchief and fastened it over the injury with Scotch tape. The movement and activity were agony and made Tom nauseous.

He burped and tasted alcohol and cigarettes. He wanted to nail Chrissie but it hurt too much.

Finally she was finished. She fixed another hit of Ice and held the pipe to his mouth. He took a couple of puffs and felt the vigor return, though not as strong as last time.

"It hurts," he said.

"I know, baby." Chrissie got out the spoon and dumped a thumbnail portion of heroin in it. After a moment's hesitation, she added a little more. Using Tom's lighter, she heated the drug until it was liquid, then drew it into a syringe.

"Here you go, Tommy. This'll make everything better." She took his arm and injected the full load. He'd never felt anything like it in his life. The alcohol, speed and heroin combined to make him alert but nearly unable to move. Not like he cared to go anywhere. He was warm and comfortable in the padded leather chair, glowing with confidence and power and euphoria.

After a while, he was vaguely aware of Chrissie carrying the duffel bags outside. He kept his eyes open but didn't really see anything until the television set across the room turned on.

Chrissie dropped the remote control on the desktop. The noise startled him.

He blinked and found himself staring at the talking head on the big screen. She was one of the anchors for the station in Waco, the one with the bad permed hair.

The image on the screen shimmered and became the parking lot by the Brazos. A shot of Bijoux Watson's Jaguar and a pair of EMTs loading a body onto an ambulance. That dissolved into a photograph of Tom, his wife and their children. Their Christmas card from last year.

"I—I—I love you, baby." Tom looked at Chrissie, standing in front of the desk with the keys to the Chevy in her hand. His voice was barely above a whisper.

She didn't reply. Her image grew hazy in the dull light of Bijoux Watson's office.

Tom managed to turn his head back to the TV.

The cameras showed his house, the flowers in the front beds he and his oldest son had planted last month. His wife appeared on-screen, mumbling to the reporters, words too indistinct to comprehend. Tom knew he should be sad but wasn't. His breathing became shallow, but it didn't matter. Tom summoned what energy he could and forced his head to make the long slow turn back to where Chrissie stood.

But she was gone.

Chapter Seven

Mariah Stewart

Haven't we all dreamed about revenge at one time or another? Getting an abusive boss fired, leaving an unfaithful spouse, or killing a disloyal best friend are all common fantasies—rarely admitted and never discussed. In “Justice Served,” bestselling writer Mariah Stewart shows what might happen when a young woman does what the rest of us only think about in our darkest moments. It is a tale of vengeance that takes you to corners of the human heart better left unexplored in real life. And in classic Mariah fashion, the many twists and turns make this story anything but a straightforward tale of justice and revenge.

Chapter Eight

Justice Served

Every time I think back on that night, I can see myself poised at that exact moment in time. I watch the story unfold—it's like watching a movie, you know?—and I wish to God I could relive that instant when I did the unthinkable.

I wait for that split second when I could change what happened, when I could do what I should have done, even if it killed me. Dying that night, possibly as a hero, sure beats the shit out of living with the memory of my cowardice.

It always starts at the same time and place, and try though I might to make it turn out differently, it never does. I see it as it happened, over and over and over.

I am driving Jessie home in my car—not the one I have now, but the one I had that night. The streets are quiet, it's almost two in the morning, and we both have a pretty decent buzz on from all the drinks we'd had that night, Jessie in particular. She'd left her car at the lot rather than drive herself and I offered to drop her off since we lived in the same town, though several blocks apart. We knew each other casually, the way you know someone who works where you work, but who's never worked with you. We'd always been cordial to each other, but never really had all that much to say. Maybe if she'd worked there a little longer, we'd have been a little closer, I don't know. In any event, she was in my car because she'd had more to drink than I had, and the consensus among our coworkers was that her judgment was more impaired than mine.

A lot they knew...

So anyway, in my mind's eye, I see my car drifting slowly through the night, almost like a leaf floating downstream, taking the corners carefully, pulling up in front of her place and putting the car in Park.

"Do you need help?" I ask her. "Want me to come up with you, or wait while you get the door open?"

Jessie looks out the window to the front porch of the three-story Victorian house. There are three mailboxes alongside the front door, one for each apartment. I know that Jessie lives alone on the second floor. I follow her gaze and notice that one of the lights attached to either side of the front door is missing a bulb, but I don't mention it.

"I'm okay. I'll be fine." Jessie holds up her keys and gives them a little shake. "Just peachy. Not to worry..."

She opens the door and swings it wide, unbuckles her seat belt and slides to the edge of the seat.

"Thanks for the ride. 'Preciate it." She pushes herself out of the seat and bends down to face me. "See you tomorrow."

"I can pick you up in the morning if you need a ride," I tell her, but she's already slammed the door and is making her way up the sidewalk, more steady on her feet than I would have expected.

Out of habit, I lock the doors, then reach into the backseat and grab my bag and pull it by the strap and yank it to me, and some of the contents fall onto the floor behind me. Rather than take the time now to scoop them up, I plop the bag onto the passenger seat where Jessie had been sitting. In this brief time, she's made it up the steps of the house and is at the front door. I put the car into Drive, and start to lift my foot from the brake when, out of the corner of my eye, I first notice the shadow moving along a line of trees to the left of the house. I turn my head and there are several more, creeping through the dark toward the porch, and I blink, not sure if I've seen anything at all. But then, there, the shadows draw closer to the house, like wolves stalking in the night.

My hand falls to the door handle and I start to open it, when I realize one of the wolves has remembered that my car still sits in front of the house with the motor running. He turns and eases

across the lawn, and through the windows, our eyes meet. His are feral and small, and his nostrils are flared like the animal he reminds me of.

I look back at the house and see that Jessie is now completely surrounded. She's striking out at them and in the dim light of the one bulb that's still lit, I see them laughing at her. The one on the lawn stares me down defiantly, and I am frozen with fear.

And this is the part that I wish I could change. This is where I wish I could go back in time and do what I should have done.

But we know that there are no such second chances, right? What's done is done, you can't change the past—any cliché would fit right about here.

So every time, it's the same as it was: when I finally react, it is with the greatest cowardice imaginable. I hit the gas and drive away, pretending I did not see, leaving Jessie to be plundered by the wolves.

I know what I should do—*I know, I know*—but I am shaking all over. I'm afraid to stop and get out of my car to look for my cell phone in the backseat where it fell when my bag overturned. Besides, if I call 911, they will wonder why I have permitted a friend to be dragged away by beasts without doing something. Screaming. Blowing the horn. Calling the police right then and there.

But my mouth is dust-dry and my brain seems unable to form coherent thoughts. My heart is pounding out of my chest and my skin has gone icy cold. I am sweating and crying as I drive around, wildly, looking for a pay phone—if I call from my cell, they'll know, won't they, that I left her, knowing what was about to happen to her? Finally, in desperation, I drive to a market that's open all night and I find a phone, and with trembling hands, I dial 911. I whisper the words into the receiver anonymously and hang up and slink back to my car.

My face flushed with shame, I start off in the direction of my apartment.

They found her where those animals left her, after they'd done things to her that no one wants to even know about. For some reason known only to God, she was still alive. I went to see her in the hospital, but I never wanted to, never wanted to face her after what I'd done. But driven by guilt and shame, I had to, and I did. If I told you I didn't have nightmares after that, I'd be lying. And if I told you that I did not see the accusation, the burning hatred in her eyes when I came into her room, I'd be lying about that, too.

So I did the only thing I could do. I leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"I'll get them, Jessie. I swear to you on my life, I will get every one of them and I will make them pay."

I know she heard me, but she never reacted. The look in her eyes told me that the very least I should do for her was to bring down the men who'd traumatized her to the extent that she lost her ability to speak.

I spent every week night and every weekend day at a firing range. I shot handguns of every caliber and every weight until I could hit a target dead center with every shot. And even then I practiced until I knew there was no way I'd miss once I aimed and fired. Finally, I felt ready.

It took me three weeks to discover the name of one of her assailants, but truthfully, one was all I really needed. And I found him in the damnedest place: in our small local paper, where he was identified as a person of interest in the robbery of a convenience store. Daniel Montoya, age twenty-four, had a history of arrests including assault with a deadly weapon and domestic violence. Up until now, his criminal activities had been confined to Shelton, the small factory town ten miles away. What had brought him into our town that night, I could only guess. In my darkest moments, I believed that he was put there to test me, a test I failed miserably. But studying his photograph, I knew his eyes were the ones that had taunted me that night. And just as surely, I knew it was my destiny to hunt him down.

Once I had his name, I had him. His neighborhood wasn't hard to find—and it wasn't anything like mine, that's for damned sure. A few easy bucks on the street bought me everything I needed to know.

Daniel was a pool junkie, played every night at Tommy's Pool and Suds on East Seventeenth Street in Shelton. The bar closed at two, and by two-fifteen he was on his way to his wheels in the parking lot. The last thing he expected was to find a woman leaning against his driver's side door.

Did he think perhaps I was someone he knew, someone whose face was obscured in the dim light of the parking lot? Whatever, whoever he thought I might be, he was smiling as he walked toward me.

"Hello, Daniel," I said in my sexiest voice.

"Hello, you," he replied, never breaking stride as he walked toward me.

"Hey, Montoya," one of his buddies called from across the lot, "Tomorrow, hey?"

"Right, man," Daniel called back, never taking his eyes from mine. "Tomorrow."

We stood staring at each other, listening as the other cars were started and driven from the lot.

"So, pretty lady, what's happening?" he asked.

"You're happening, Daniel."

"Do I know you?"

"You know a friend of mine," I said, my right arm folded across my waist, my hand hidden by the loose jacket I wore.

"Who's your friend?" He stepped closer, sensing an easy score.

"Jessica Fielding." My arm started its slow move from beneath the folds of the jacket.

"Doesn't ring a..."

I could tell the exact moment that bell began to ring. His stare froze, his mouth half opened and his expression went from seductive to panic in the blink of an eye. "Don't think I know her, sorry."

In less than a heartbeat, my trusty little friend was pressed up against his temple.

"Should I describe her to you, Daniel? Should I remind you of the last time you saw her?" I had straightened up and now had him backed up against his front fender.

He was silent, trying frantically, I believe, to find a way out of this, a way to disarm me. He wanted to grab for the gun, I could see that in his eyes, but he wasn't sure of my strength or my reflexes, so he, like a wolf, was gauging my movements, biding his time when he could move in for the kill. He opened his mouth to speak, thinking to distract me.

"Don't say a word I don't ask you to say," I hissed, jamming the gun into the flesh on the side of his face. "I'm going to ask you a question, and you are going to answer it. No bullshit, understand? One question, one answer, or I will shoot you now, right now."

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and I was certain he understood.

"The name of the others who were with you when Jessie Fielding was raped."

"I don't know..."

"You weren't listening, Daniel. I will repeat this only one more time. I ask a question, you give me an answer, or I do you right now." I was beginning to sweat a bit myself. I wanted this over with. "One last chance, Daniel. Who was with you when Jessie was raped?"

"Some of the guys, I didn't know."

"Then some of them, you did. Give me a name." I began counting backward from ten.

When I got to six, he said, "Antonio. Antonio Jackson."

"Is he from around here?"

Sweating profusely now, he nodded. "He's my cousin."

"Where can I find him?"

"He lives over on Chester Avenue."

"Thank you, Daniel." I smiled, and for a moment, he seemed to relax.

Then I pulled the trigger.

I watched his body jerk, then slide sideways onto the ground. Then, satisfied, I walked into the shadows and through the alley that took me, eventually, to my car parked two blocks away.

I heard the sirens as I started my engine. A few minutes later, I pulled to the side of the road to allow the speeding patrol car to pass me.

That night, I slept straight through until morning for the first time since the night that changed everything.

“One down, Jessie,” I whispered in her ear the next night. “Daniel Montoya. One down...”

I left her sitting in her wheelchair, her eyes still trained on something beyond the window that no one else could see.

There'd been no change in her expression, but I know she'd heard and understood exactly what I said.

Ten days later, in the parking lot of yet another bar, Antonio Jackson and I came face-to-face. It had been remarkably easy to get his attention. Anytime a tall, well-built blonde beckoned, men like Jackson lost all caution. Even after what had happened to his cousin Daniel, Antonio apparently never considered the danger once he saw me perched on the hood of his car, my long bare legs dangling off to one side.

“One name,” I told him. “Just give me one name.”

He'd hemmed and hawed as I pressed the barrel of the gun to his throat. He stalled and he pleaded and he cried, but in the end, he gave me the one thing I wanted from him.

“Eddie Taylor.”

“Thank you, Antonio.” I pulled the trigger, and he dropped like a stone.

“Antonio Jackson,” I told Jessie the next evening. “Two down.”

It took me almost three weeks to find Eddie Taylor because he'd been in the county jail for possession and had only been back on the streets for less than forty-eight hours when we finally met. Like an avenging angel, I stepped out from the alley as he walked in. I knew I had the right guy. I'd spent every one of those twenty days staring at his picture on my computer.

“One name,” I'd said, emboldened by my previous success. “That's all I want from you, Eddie. Just give me the name of one of the other guys.”

He'd swallowed hard and tears streamed down his face.

“Awwwww,” I mocked him. “Scared, Eddie? Did Jessie cry when she realized what you were going to do to her? Did she cry when you raped her?”

“Listen, let me...”

“One name, Eddie.” When he didn't respond, I once again started counting backward from ten. I'd found that to be universally understood.

“Kelvin Anderson.”

“Thank you, Eddie.” I shot him through the heart.

“Three down,” I told Jessie the next night. “Eddie Taylor...”

Obviously, the police were not oblivious to the fact that several young men from the same general neighborhood had been taken out by the same shooter—hello, same gun, which thank God wasn't registered anywhere, I'd been careful in that regard even while I may have seemed careless in others—but they didn't seem overly interested in investigating too deeply. After all, at one time or another, they'd arrested Daniel, Antonio and Eddie. I began to think of myself as performing a public service when I realized that the rap sheets of the three of them would have reached halfway to Pittsburgh. In my own way, I was proud of myself. I was taking the steps necessary to ensure that no one would ever go through what Jessie'd endured. As for my conscience, well, after the night that changed everything, do you seriously think my conscience bothered me over ridding the world of a couple of predators?

A month later I found Kelvin Anderson, and he kindly supplied me with the name of yet another wolf. Frankie Eden and I had a tête-à-tête in the front seat of his car, and later that same night I was able to confirm to Jessie that the count was now four down, and two to go.

Frankie Eden's eyes told me he knew who I was, why I was there and where his next stop through the cosmos was going to be. He gave up the last two without flinching, and of all of them, I have to say that Frankie was the only one who died like a man.

Bernie Gunther and Dominic Large weren't as easy to track down, but in the end, although it took several months, I'd eliminated every one of them.

After I'd taken out the last of the six—that would have been Bernie—I went back to my apartment and took a long, hot shower. I slept straight through until one the following afternoon, which barely gave me enough time to do what I knew I had to do before evening came. After I'd completed my errands, I took another shower and blew out my hair so that it hung in long soft waves over my shoulders and down my back. I hadn't realized it had gotten so long. I'd been so focused on the task I'd set for myself that I'd barely looked at my reflection in the mirror anymore. I was surprised to see how gaunt I looked, how pale and thin I'd become, which had, I suppose, prompted all those questions at work I'd been brushing off.

"How are you? Are you feeling all right?"

"Have you been ill?"

Yes, I've been ill, I wanted to say. Sick to death of myself, I wanted to say.

"No, I'm fine. Really." I'd smile and make an effort to put a little spring back into my step.

But soon—probably by this time tomorrow, I thought—everyone will know the nature of my malady.

I typed up the letter I'd composed, sealed it and walked the seven blocks to the home of my parents. My father would still be at work; my mother had gone in to the city to have lunch with some friends and would have spent the rest of the afternoon shopping. I owed them the truth—they deserved the truth—but ever the coward, I was grateful to God that I wouldn't be around to hear what any of them would have to say. I could not have borne my mother's look of shock and horror, my father's cold stare of disbelief and disappointment.

I walked back home, feeling just that much lighter that at least in this, I'd done the right thing. I needed to make certain that neither of my parents would think that in anyway, this was their fault, that they'd failed me in some way. I needed them to understand that the guilt, the shame, the failure, was all mine.

I loaded the handgun and tucked it into my bag. I looked around my apartment for the last time, my gaze lingering on those possessions that had once meant so much to me. The antique tables my grandmother had given me, the sofa I'd saved so long to buy, the candlesticks my mom had given me when I moved in. They'd been a wedding gift from an old friend of hers, and she'd never used them. Neither had I.

I sighed and closed the apartment door for the last time. Looking at the lovely millwork that surrounded it, I decided to leave the door unlocked so that when they came to search my place, they wouldn't have to damage anything to get inside.

The drive to the nursing home seemed endless that night. For the first time ever, every light I approached turned red, as if some cosmic something was telling me to stop. But it was far too late for that. I'd done what I had to do, and now I was going to let Jessie do what she needed to do. I passed an old cemetery and thought for the first time about where they'd lay me to rest. Would I be permitted to be buried in the family plot once they learned what I'd done? Again, the only emotion I really felt was gratitude that I would not have to face their horrified eyes when the truth came out.

It was still early evening when I arrived at the nursing home, so I parked my car near the butterfly garden that some local school kids had planted for the residents and turned off the engine. Knowing I would not be needing them again, I left the keys under the driver's seat and sat quietly for

a few moments, taking deep breaths and holding them for as long as I could to calm myself. After my nerves steadied, I got out of the car, taking my bag with its special cargo with me. I took the long way to the building, going through the garden and soaking up the scents and the colors. Did one's sensory memories go with them to the afterlife? I wondered.

I went up the handicapped ramp because it took me past the birdbath where, not surprisingly for that hour, no birds were bathing, but the little fountain there still trickled water and I loved the sound. I went through the big double doors in the front of the building in an effort to hold on to the music of the fountain for as long as I could.

Walking past the guard, I smiled and waved. They were all used to seeing me now, and so there were no questions asked while I signed in. Everyone knew me as Jessie's devoted friend. I headed toward the south wing and Jessie's room, trying to conjure up the words to "Don't Fear the Reaper," which, to tell you the truth, I didn't. For me, dying wasn't nearly as bad as living with what I'd done and what I was.

I went into Jessie's room and found her sitting in a chair near the window, her untouched dinner tray on the foot of the bed. I knew how she felt. There were times when the horror of the night that changed everything came back full force and filled me so that the thought of eating made me physically sick.

"Jessie," I said, seating myself on the chair opposite hers, "it's done now. They're all gone. All six."

I opened my bag and felt the butt end of the old handgun, all cool metal hardness. My fingers wrapped around the handle and I drew it out.

"I know you've wanted to do this since the night it happened." I took her hands and placed the gun in them. "It's all right," I told her. "I deserve this. Everyone will know the truth now. No one will blame you. And after it's done, you can come back, Jessie. You can come back into the world, once I'm gone from it."

I sat directly in front of her, my back straight, my vision clear, my conscience for once subdued. I was ready.

Jessie's gaze dropped to the gun in her hand and she stared at it for a long time before looking up at me again. The gun raised slowly, the barrel aimed at nothing in particular. I tapped my chest, right where I felt my heart beating, with my index finger and told her, "Aim here. I'm ready when you are."

I closed my eyes, and waited for the end to come. And waited.

Curious, I opened my eyes just as swiftly, so swiftly, before I could take a breath or utter a sound or reach out to stop her, Jessie's wrists twisted and suddenly the gun was at *her* temple, and the room reverberated with the single shot.

I stared in horror as Jessie slumped forward before falling face-first from the chair onto the floor, red like a fluid carpet flowed around her as if to cushion her fall.

"No!" I screamed as the room filled with people.

Suddenly nurses, orderlies, visitors, residents, everyone who'd been close enough to have heard the shot crowded into the room even before the realization of what she'd done completely sunk in.

"Oh, my God, Jessie," one of the nurses said, "what have you done...?"

What, indeed?

So there I was... obviously I'd brought her the gun with which she'd killed herself, which made me an accessory.

My panicked brain recognized immediately that one, I was not dead, and two, I'd be charged with a crime. But since I was alive, and Jessie was not, at that point, copping to a charge of accessory to murder was definitely more appealing than admitting what I'd really done.

The story I'd tell swirled through my head, bits and pieces tripping over each other as I tried frantically to put one together. And I'd come up with a pretty damned good one, if I do say so myself.

Jessie couldn't face another day living with the memory of what had happened to her. She begged me—*begged* me—to help her to end it. As her friend, as someone who loved her, as the only person to whom she'd speak, how could I deny her that release? Who would doubt that story, knowing what she'd gone through?

I could get off with a light sentence, I knew, once I explained. No one would ever need to know the truth, right?

I was just starting to breathe a little easier when the door opened and my father walked in. He'd seen the story on TV—who in the tristate area had not?—and he'd come down to the station.

But he'd not come to comfort me, or even to ask me why.

His gaze was just as cold as it had been when, as a child, I'd disappointed him in some fashion. I wasn't surprised, frankly, that there'd be no attempt at understanding. There never had been in the past.

In his hands, he held a blue envelope. The same blue envelope I'd left in his mailbox earlier.

"Daddy," I said, ever the coward, holding out my shaking hands, silently pleading for him to give it to me.

But Judge Lucas Bradley—Judge Luke "Hang 'Em High" Bradley—handed the letter over to you. I guess there were other instincts that were stronger in him, other bonds harder to break than the one that existed between father and daughter.

Signed this date: Deanna Jean Bradley

When Detective Mallory Russo finished reading the last page of the statement, she held it up in one hand and said, "You haven't signed it."

"I will." The young woman held out her hand for the pen.

The detective and the once promising assistant district attorney stared at each other from across the table.

"You could have come to me, Dee," Mallory told her. "You could have given me the information and we could have gone after these guys. It didn't have to be this way."

"Yes, it did, Mallory. And may I remind you that none of you were too interested in them even as I was picking them off." The A.D.A. shifted in her seat. "Besides, everything that happened...it was all my fault. It wasn't your fight."

"They're all my fights," Mallory told her. "We've known each other for years, Dee. Why couldn't you have trusted me to take them down?"

Deanna shrugged, her eyes shifting to the two-way window on the opposite side of the room.

"Is he still there, watching? My father?"

"Judge Bradley left an hour ago." Mallory rested her arms on the table.

"You know, he could have burned my letter, he could have kept it and held it over my head for the rest of my life." Deanna Bradley continued to stare at the mirror. "I still can't believe he turned against me."

"Your father has an unswerving sense of justice," Mallory reminded her. "He's always going to follow his conscience."

"So will I, Mal." Deanna sighed. "So will I..."

Chapter Nine

David Hewson

David Hewson knows where to find the perfect black rice in Barcelona, the richest coffee in Venice and how to kill a person in a thousand gruesome ways. His wonderful series set in Rome, featuring detective Nic Costa and his stand-alone thrillers share an authentic sense of place, characters with rich lives that began long before you picked up the book and a relentless sense of pacing that pulls you into their world.

“The Circle” is a perfectly symmetrical tale that shatters our comfortable isolation from current events. Through the eyes of a young pregnant woman we see the world from a new perspective as a train carries her from a state of innocence into a state of fear. Hold on tight, because like it or not, every one of us is already along for the ride.

Chapter Ten

The Circle

The Tube line ran unseen beneath the bleak, unfeeling city, around and around, day and night, year after year. Under the wealthy mansions of Kensington the snaking track rattled, through cuttings and tunnels, to the bustling mainline stations of Paddington, Euston and King's Cross, where millions came and left London daily, invisible to those below the earth. Then the trains traveled on to the poorer parts in the east, Aldgate, with its tenements and teeming immigrant populations, until the rails turned abruptly, as if they could take the poverty no more, and longed to return to the prosperous west, to civilization and safety, before the perpetual loop began again.

The Circle. Melanie Darma had traveled this way so often she sometimes imagined she was a part of it herself.

Today she felt tired. Her head hurt as she slumped on the worn, grubby seat in the noisy, rattling carriage, watching the station lights flash by, the faces of the travelers come and go. Tower Hill, Monument, Cannon Street, Mansion House... Somewhere to the south ran the thick, murky waters of the Thames. She remembered sitting next to her father as a child, bewildered in a shaking train from Charing Cross to Waterloo, a stretch that ran deep beneath the old, gray river. Joking, he'd persuaded her to press her nose to the grimy windows to look for passing fish, swimming in the blackness flashing by. On another occasion, when he was still as new to the city as she was, in thrall to its excitement and possibilities, they'd both got out at the station called Temple, hoping to see something magical and holy, finding nothing but surly commuters and tangles of angry traffic belching smoke.

This was the city, a thronging, anonymous world of broken promises. People, millions of them, whatever the time of day. Lately, with her new condition, they would watch on the train as she moved heavily, clutching the swelling bundle in her belly. Most would stand aside and give her a seat. A few would smile, mothers mostly, she thought. Some, men in business suits, people from the City, stared away as if the obvious extent of her state, and the apparent nearness of her release from it, amounted to some kind of embarrassment to be avoided. She could almost hear them praying... *if it's to happen please, God, let it not be this instant, when I've a meeting scheduled, a drink planned, an assignation with a lover. Anytime but now.*

She sat the way she had learned over the previous months: both hands curved protectively around the bump in her fawn summer coat, which was a little heavy for the weather, bought cheaply at a street market to encompass her temporary bulk. Her fingers felt comfortable there nevertheless. It was as if this was what they were made for.

So much of her life seemed to have been passed in these tunnels, going to and fro. She felt she could fix her position on the Circle's endless loop by the smell of the passengers as they entered the carriage: sweet, cloying perfume in the affluent west, the sweat of workmen around King's Cross, the fragrant, sometimes acrid odor of the Indians and Pakistanis from the sprawling, struggling ethnic communities of the east. Once she'd visited the museum in Covent Garden to try to understand this hidden jugular that kept the city alive, uncertainly at times, as its age and frailty began to show. Melanie Darma had gazed at the pictures of imperious Victorian men in top hats and women in crinoline dresses, all waiting patiently in neat lines for miniature trains with squat smokestacks and smiling crews. It was the first underground railway ever built, part of a lost and entirely dissimilar age.

When the London bombers struck in 2005 they chose the Circle Line as their principal target, through accident, she thought, not from any conscious attempt to strike at history. Fourteen people died in two separate explosions. The entire system was closed for almost a month, forcing her to take buses, watching those around her nervously, glancing at anyone with dark skin and a backpack, wondering.

She might have been on one of those two carriages had it not been for her father's terminal sickness, a cruel cancerous death eked out on a hard, cheap bed in some cold public ward, one more body to be rudely nursed toward its end by a society that no longer seemed to care. Birth, death, illness, accident... Sudden, fleeting joy, insidious, lasting tragedy... All these things lay in wait on the journey that was life, with ambushes, large and small, waiting hidden in the wings.

Sometimes, as she sat on the train rattling through the black snaking hole in the dank London earth, she imagined herself falling forward in some precipitous, headlong descent toward an unknown, endless abyss. Did the women in billowing crinoline dresses ever feel the same way? She doubted it. This was a modern affliction. It had a modern cure, too. Work, necessity, the daily need to earn sufficient money to pay the rent for another month, praying the agency would find her some other temporary berth once the present ran out.

There were two more stops before Westminster, the station she had come to know so well, set in the shadow of Big Ben and the grandiose, imposing silhouette of the Houses of Parliament. The train crashed into the darkness of the tunnel ahead. The carriage shook so wildly the lights flickered and then disappeared altogether. The movement and the sudden black, gloom conspired to make the weight of her stomach seem so noticeable, such a part of her, she believed she felt a slow, sluggish movement inside, as if something were waking. The fear that thought prompted dispatched a swift, guilty shock of apprehension through her mind. The thought: *this is real and will happen, however much you may wish to avoid it.*

Finally the rolling, careering carriage reconnected with whatever source of energy gave it light. The carriage stabilized, the bulbs flickered back to life.

On the opposite seat sat a young foreign-looking man who wore a dark polyester jacket and cheap jeans, the kind of clothes the people from Aldgate and beyond seemed to like. He had a grubby red webbed rucksack next to him, his hand on the top, a possessive gesture, though there was no one there who could possibly covet the thing.

He stared at her, openly, frankly, with a familiarity she didn't appreciate. His eyes were dark and deep, his face clean-shaven, smiling, attractive.

The train lurched again, the lights flashed off and on as they dashed downward once more.

The young man spoke softly as he gazed at her, and it was difficult to hear over the crash of iron against iron.

Still, she thought she knew what he said, and that was, "They will remember my name."

She tried to focus on the book in her hands. It came from the staff library. The Palace of Westminster didn't pay its workers well, but at least they had access to decent reading.

"Are you scared?" the young traveler opposite asked pleasantly, nodding at the bump beneath her hands.

It was a book on philosophy. She chose it for the image on the cover: *Ouroboros*, the serpent that devoured itself. If she squinted hard she could imagine the familiar London Transport poster, with its yellow rounded rectangle for the Circle Line, transposed in its place.

"Not at all," she answered immediately without taking her attention off the page.

There was a paragraph from Plato, a description of *Ouroboros* as the very first creature in the universe, the beast from which everything sprang, and to which everything returned.

She felt a little giddy when she realized the words of some ancient Greek, who had been dust when Christ was born, made some sense to her. It was almost as if she could hear his ancient, cracked voice.

The living being had no need of eyes when there was nothing remaining outside him to be seen; nor of ears when there was nothing to be heard; and there was no surrounding atmosphere to be breathed; nor would there have been any use of organs by the help of which he might receive his food or get rid of what he had already digested, since there was nothing which went from him or came into him: for there was nothing beside him.

It was impossible to concentrate. Melanie Darma didn't want to ask, not really. But she had to. "Who will remember?"

Before he could answer they clattered into Temple. The bright station lights made her blink. The doors opened. A burly, scarlet-faced man in a creased, grubby dark suit entered the carriage, looked at their half, then the other, and sat down in the seats opposite her, as far away from the young man with the rucksack as he could. She could still smell the rank stink of beer, though.

"And why?" she wondered.

The newcomer grunted, pulled out a copy of the *Standard*, thrust his coarse face into it. Then he raised his head and stared hard at both of them, as if they'd broken some kind of rule by speaking to each other across the chasm of a Tube train carriage, strangers conversing beneath the streets of London on a breathless July day.

"I don't know what you mean..." the young man answered quietly.

Perhaps she'd misheard. The train was noisy. She didn't feel well. But now he had his hands curled round the rucksack the way hers fell in place about her stomach, and his eyes wouldn't leave her document bag from work, the green canvas carryall bearing the insignia of the Palace of Westminster, a golden portcullis, crowned, with two chains. It sat in the seat next to her, looking important, though in truth it contained nothing important.

The train lurched into darkness once more, for several seconds this time. She wondered whether someone had moved during that time. But when the lights returned they were both in the same seats, the older man face-deep in his paper, the younger, smiling a little vacantly, glancing in her direction.

She thought of the offices and who would be there, waiting. It was temporary work, six months, no more, until her... "confinement" as one of the older women put it. Temps didn't get maternity pay, even when they were forced to go through interminable interviews and vetting processes, just so they could answer irate e-mails to MPs she never met. The men and women there were, for the most part, kind, in an officious, offhand way. Each day she would nod and smile to the policemen on the door, place her bag on the security machine to be scanned, her ID card against the entry system reader to be checked. Nothing ever changed, nothing ever happened. Behind the imposing, ornate doors of the Palace of Westminster, beyond the gaze of the tourists who snapped and gawped at the great building that sat beneath the tower of Big Ben, lay nothing more than the world writ small: little people doing little jobs, leading insignificant lives, just looking, like her, to pay the bills.

No one ever asked who the father was. She was a temp. There was, of course, no point.

She leaned forward, needing to ask him something.

"I was wondering..." she began.

The man in the creased dark suit glared at her, swore, screwed up his paper and got to his feet.

Her heart leapt in her chest, her hands gripped the shape beneath her fingers more firmly. It was the middle of the day. Violence on the Tube at that hour was rare, but not unknown.

"Don't do anything..." she heard herself murmur.

There was an exchange of intemperate words, and the thickset man stomped off to sit in the far end of the carriage. The train burst into Embankment with a deafening clatter. One more stop to go. In her early days working at the Houses of Parliament she had sometimes abandoned the train here and walked the rest of the way, along the Embankment. She enjoyed the view, her left side to the river and the London Eye on the opposite bank, ahead the familiar outline of Westminster Bridge and the great iconic symbol of Big Ben beneath which—and this had long ceased to astonish her—she worked, humbly tapping away at a computer.

There was no possibility that she could walk such a distance anymore. She kept her eyes on the grimy carriage floor and said nothing else. At Westminster Station she got up and left the train without looking at anyone.

The day seemed brighter than when she first went underground. She glimpsed up at the impossibly tall clock tower to her right, blinking at the now-fierce sky.

Then, patiently, as she always did, because that was how she was brought up, she waited at the first pedestrian crossing, until the figure of the green man came and it was safe to walk. It was only a few hundred yards from the mouth of the Tube station to the heavily guarded gate of the Palace of Westminster, close to the foot of the tower, the entrance she had to use. As always, there were police officers everywhere, many carrying unsightly black automatic weapons in their arms, cradling them as if they were precious toys.

No one looked at a pregnant young woman out on the street in London. They were all too busy to notice such a mundane sight. She walked over the final stretch of road when the last pelican crossing allowed, wondering who would be on duty at the security post that day. There was one nice police officer, a friendly sergeant, tall, with close cropped gray hair, perhaps forty, or a fit fifty, it was difficult to tell. She knew his name: Kelly. Everyone else among the staff who scrutinized her bag and her ID card from time to time, asking pointless questions, picking curiously at her belongings, was still a stranger.

Twenty yards from the high iron gates of the security entrance she turned and saw him.

The young man from the train had his rucksack high over his head. He was running and screaming something in a language she didn't understand. He looked both elated and scared. There were policemen beginning to circle him, fumbling at their weapons.

Melanie Darma watched all this as if it were a dream, quite unreal, a spectacle from some TV show that had, perhaps, been granted permission to film in the shadow of Big Ben, though this was, she felt sure, improbable.

She walked on and found herself facing the tower of Big Ben again. Kelly—*Sergeant Kelly*, she corrected herself—was there, yelling at her. He didn't have a weapon. He never carried one. He was too nice for that, she thought, and wondered why at that moment she chose, quite consciously, not to listen to his hoarse, anxious voice.

"Melanie...!"

The bright, angry sky shook, the horizon began to fall sideways. She found herself thrust forcefully to one side, and felt her hands grip the shoulder bag with the golden portcullis close to her, out of habit, not fear, since all it contained was the book on *Ouroboros*, a few bills, a purse containing £20 and a few coins.

Falling, she clutched the canvas to herself, defending the tender swell at her stomach as she tumbled toward the hard London stone.

Two strong arms were attempting to knock her down to the ground. She broke the fall with one knee and felt his chin jab hard against her skull as the jolt took him by surprise. Her stockinged skin grazed against the paving. She felt a familiar, stabbing pain from childhood, loose flesh damaged by grit. Tears pricked at her eyes. She was in someone's arms and she knew, immediately, whose.

She couldn't see him, but he was still on her, tight arm around her throat.

When she looked up three men in black uniforms circled them, weapons to their shoulders, eyes fixed on a target that was, she understood, as much her as it was him.

Half-crouched and gasping for breath, she could see the iron security gates were just a few short steps away: security, a safe, private world, guarded so carefully against violent young men carrying mysterious rucksacks. Someone came into view, face in darkness initially since she was now in the shadow cast by the gigantic clock tower and the day seemed suddenly almost as dark as the mouth of the Tube from which she had so recently emerged.

"Don't shoot me," she said quietly, and realized there were tears in her eyes. "Don't..."

Her hands stayed where they were, on her stomach. Somehow she couldn't say the words she wanted them to hear. *Don't shoot us...*

The grip on her neck relaxed, just a little. She caught the eyes of the man in front of her. Sergeant Kelly—she had never known his second name, and feared now she never would—had his

hands out in front, showing they were empty. His face was calm and kind, unflustered, that of a gentle man, she thought, one for whom violence was distasteful.

"It doesn't need to end this way..." he pleaded quietly.

"What way?" the voice behind her demanded.

"Badly," the policeman said, and moved forward so that they could see his eyes. "Let the young lady get to her feet. Can't you see she's hurt?"

Laughter from an unseen mouth, his breath hot against her scalp. She found the courage to look. The old red rucksack was high in the air. From its dirt-stained base ran a slender black cord, dangling down toward the arm that gripped her. Tight in his fingers lay some small object, like a television remote control.

She couldn't count the black shapes gathering behind Sergeant Kelly. They wore heavy bulletproof vests and soft caps. Black, ugly weapons stood in their arms tight to the shoulder, the barrels nodding up and down, like the snouts of beasts sniffing for prey.

"She's pregnant," the sergeant went on. "You see that? *Can't you?*"

The unseen man sighed softly, a note, perhaps, of hesitation. She felt there was some flicker of hope reflected in Sergeant Kelly's eyes.

"Get up..." the foreign voice ordered.

She stumbled to her feet. Her knee hurt. Her entire body seemed racked by some strange, unfamiliar, yet not unwanted pain.

Her captor's young face was now just visible. He was looking toward the tower of Big Ben.

"We're going in there," he insisted, nodding toward the black iron security gates. "If you try to stop me...she's dead." He nodded at the armed officers circling them. "Them or me. What's the difference?"

She wondered how long the men with guns would wait, whether they were already gauging how wide to make the arc of their circle so that they might shoot safely in order to guarantee a kill, yet not be subject to their own deadly fire when the moment came.

It will be soon... she thought, and found her hands returning to her belly, as if her fingers might protect what was there against the hot rain of gunfire.

Someone thrust aside the barrel of the closest weapon. It was the sergeant again, swearing furiously, not at her assailant, but at the officers with guns. Harsh words. Harsher than she'd ever heard him speak before.

"There are choices," Sergeant Kelly insisted as he pushed them back.

Hands high, empty, face still calm, determined, he wheeled around to confront the man who held her.

"Choices..." the policeman repeated quietly. "She's pregnant. Isn't there—" he shook his head, struggling to locate the right words "—some rule that says it's wrong to kill an unborn child?" Sergeant Kelly shrugged. "For me there is, and I don't believe in anything much, except what I can see and touch. If you believe—" his right hand swept briefly toward the sky "—something, isn't it the same?"

"You are not my preacher, policeman," the voice behind her spat at him.

"No." Sergeant Kelly was so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face and it smelled of peppermints and stale tobacco. "I'm no one's priest. But tell me this. What will your god say of a man who knowingly takes the life of an unborn child?" He leaned forward, bending his head to one side, as if listening, curiously. "Will he be pleased? Or..."

A stream of angry, foreign words filled the air. The London policeman stood there, his hand out, beckoning.

"She doesn't belong here," he said. "Let her go with me. After that..."

He shrugged.

“You...and *they*...” The way he nodded at the others, the men with the guns, shocked her. It was as if there was no difference between them and the one who had snatched her, out in the bright, stifling day in Parliament Square. “You can do what the hell you like.”

Silence, followed by the distant caterwauling of sirens. This was, she knew, the moment.

“I beg you...” Melanie Darma murmured, not knowing to whom she spoke.

The grip on her neck relaxed. A choking sob rose in her throat. She stumbled forward, out of the young man’s grip, still clutching the bag with the portcullis logo close to her stomach.

“Quickly...” the policeman ordered, beckoning.

She lurched forward, slipped. Her knee went to the ground once more. The pain made her shriek, made her eyes turn blurry with tears.

One set of arms released her. Another took their place. She was in the grip of Sergeant Kelly, and the smells of peppermint and tobacco were now secondary to the stink of nervous sweat, hers or his, she didn’t know and didn’t care.

She fell against him. His arms slipped beneath hers, pulling, dragging, demanding.

They were close to the gate. She found herself falling again, turning her head around. She had to. It was impossible to stop.

The young man from the Tube had his hands in the air. He was shouting, words she couldn’t understand, foreign, incomprehensible words, a lilting chant that seemed to veer between anger and fear, imprecation and beseechment.

“Melanie...” the police sergeant muttered, as he pulled her away. “Don’t look...Don’t...”

It was futile. No one could not watch a scene like this. It was a kind of theater, a staging, a play in real life, performed on a dirty stone stage in the heart of London, for all to see.

Not far away there were men with cameras, people holding cell phones, recording everything. Not running the way they should have been.

That puzzled her.

She fell to one knee again, and felt glad the pain made her wake, made her pay more attention.

The dark shapes with the rifles were around him again, more close this time, screaming obscenities and orders in equal measures. Yet his eyes were on the sky, on something unseen and unseeable.

The rucksack flew from his hand. The ugly black metal creatures burst into life in the arms of their owners and began to leap and squeal. She watched the young man she had spoken to on the Tube twitch and shriek at the impact, dancing to their rhythm as if performing some deadly tarantella.

His bag tumbled through the air, falling to the ground, the wire that linked device to owner flailing powerlessly like a snapped and useless tendon.

That part of the performance was over. It was the dance now, nothing but the dance.

Sergeant Kelly didn’t drag her at that moment. Like Melanie Darma he realized the bomb, or whatever it was, had refused to play its part. Like her, he could only watch in shock and terrified wonder.

She closed her eyes, gripping her stomach firmly, intent on ensuring everything there was normal, as it ought to be. As she half knelt there, feeling the policeman’s strong arms on her shoulder, she was aware of two thin lines of tears trickling slowly down her face. And something else...

“Melanie,” Sergeant Kelly murmured, looking scared.

She looked at him. There was worry, concern in his face, and it was more personal now, more direct than such a vague and ephemeral threat as explosives in a young man’s bag.

Following the line of his gaze she saw what he did. Blood on the pavement. Not that of the man from the Tube. Hers. A line of dark, thick liquid gathering around her grazed knee, pooling as it trickled down her leg.

The wailing of sirens grew louder. Vans and police cars seemed to be descending upon them from every direction. Men were shouting, screaming at one another. A couple were bent down over the broken body leaking onto the ground a few yards away.

Before she could say another thing he bent down, looked in her face, breathed deeply, then scooped her up in his strong, certain arms.

"There's a nurse inside," Sergeant Kelly muttered, a little short of breath, as he carried her through the security gate, past the door and the gawping, wide-eyed officers next to their untended machines, and on into the cool, dusty darkness of the Houses of Parliament.

She knew the medical room, could picture it as he half stumbled, half ran along the narrow corridors. In the very foot of the tower, a clean and windowless cubicle with a single medic in attendance, always. Twice, she'd stopped by, for advice, for support, only to be told to see her own doctor instead of troubling the private resources of the Palace of Westminster.

Except in emergencies.

Sergeant Kelly turned down the final passageway, one that led into the very core of the building. The stonework was so massive here it scared her. Trapped beneath several hundred feet and untold tons of grimy London stone, an insignificant creature, like some tiny insect in the bowels of a towering anthill, she felt herself carried into the brightly lit room, lifted onto a bed there, placed like a specimen to be examined.

It was the same nurse. Thickset, ugly, fierce. The place smelled of drugs and chemicals. The lights were too bright, the walls so thick she couldn't hear a note of the chaos that must have ensued outside.

The nurse took one look at the drying stain on her ankle and asked, "When are you due?"

"Next week."

Her flabby face contorted in a scowl.

"And you're coming to work? Good God... Let's take a look."

She was reaching for a pair of scissors, casually, with no panic, no rush. It was as if life and death cohabited happily in this place, one passing responsibility to the other the way day faded into night.

He was still there as the woman came toward the hem of her dress with the sharp, shiny instrument, staring at the Palace of Westminster bag that she continued to clutch tight against the bump, as if it still needed protection.

"You don't need that anymore," Sergeant Kelly said, half-amused, reaching down for the carryall in her hands.

She let go and released it into his grip. The nurse advanced again with the scissors, aiming at her dress.

"Sergeant...?" Melanie Darma objected, suddenly anxious.

"I'm a London copper, love," he answered, laughing a little. "There's nothing I haven't seen."

"I don't want you to see me," she told him firmly.

The nurse gave him a fierce stare.

Sergeant Kelly sighed, held the bag up for her to see and said, "I'll look after your things outside."

As he opened the door, the faint wail of sirens scuttled inside, then died as he closed it again.

It wasn't like an anthill, she thought. More akin to being in the foundations of a cathedral, feeling the weight of ages, the massive load of centuries of tradition, of a civilization that had, at one time, dominated the known world, bearing down on her remorselessly.

"The doctor might be a man, love," the nurse said as she cut the fabric of the cheap dress in two, all the way up to the waist.

Then she stepped back, eyes wide with surprise, unable to speak.

It was all there. The plastic bag with the fake blood, and the telltale path it had left down the side of her leg after she burst it with her fingers. And the bulge. The hump. The being she had brought to

life, day-by-day, out of stockings and underclothes, napkins and tea towels, until that very morning. *The morning.* When something else took its place.

She knew the wires, every one, because he'd told her about each as he placed them there, around the soft, fat wad of material they'd given him, the night before. There was, she wanted to tell the nurse, no other way to penetrate this old and well-protected inner sanctum of a world she had come to hate. No other means to escape the attention of the electric devices, the sniffers, the security people prying into everything that came and went in this great palace, a place that meant so much to so many.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, reaching for the band of yellow cable, taking the tail to the mouth, as she'd learned and practiced so many times in her small, fusty bedroom of the apartment she could barely afford.

The foreign phrase he taught her wouldn't come. They were, in any case, his words, not hers, codes from a set of beliefs she did not share.

What she did know was the Circle. It seemed to have been with her forever, since the moment she first set foot in the dark world beneath the ground, hand in hand with her father, as he took the first step on the journey to his bleak, cruel end. By accident she had woken the slumbering beast one cold morning when she first met Ahmed on the stairs, a weak, impressionable creature, defined by nothing but his aimless anger. He was its slave, too, not that he ever knew.

Her mind could not dismiss the image of *Ouroboros* at that moment, the picture of the serpent devouring itself. Or the words of the book that was now in the hands of Sergeant Kelly who was, perhaps, a little way away, outside even, eyeing the shattered body in the street.

The living being had no need of eyes when there was nothing remaining outside him to be seen; nor of ears when there was nothing to be heard; and there was no surrounding atmosphere to be breathed. And all that he did or suffered took place in and by himself.

From nothing to nothing, round and round.

With unwavering hands Melanie Darma held the wires above her belly like a halo, bringing together the ends with a firm and deliberate motion, and as she did so she was filled with the deepest elation that this particular journey was at an end.

Chapter Eleven

R.L. Stine

R. L. Stine's story "Roomful of Witnesses" clearly demonstrates that while truth isn't always stranger than fiction, the strangest fiction always contains a kernel of truth. Based on a real place, this twisted tale could only have been written by R. L. Stine and reveals his wonderfully off-kilter look at the world. Best known for the nearly three hundred million children's books sold, he has an uncanny ability to write pulse-pounding stories that keep you turning the pages without ever losing that childlike obsession with the gory details. Why do so many kids love everything this man writes? Turn the page and find out.

Chapter Twelve

Roomful of Witnesses

What happened to Leon is a dirty shame.

I never liked the guy. I'll admit that. I thought he was lower than a squirrel beneath a truck tire. Bad blood between us? Maybe.

But no one can pin this thing on me. No way. I didn't do it—and I've got a roomful of witnesses. You heard me right. A roomful of witnesses.

The day didn't start too bad. Yeah, I woke up in the staff bungalow with the same joy, aches and pains in all the usual places, and a wet, hacking cough to remind me I was down to my last pack of smokes.

What else is new?

The sheets on my cot were damp from night sweat. I stood up and stretched. No bones cracking or creaking. Hell, I'm only thirty-eight.

I know my hair is a little thin in front and my cheeks have criss-cross lines in them. Charlene says I have old man's eyes. Well, what do you expect? No one ever built a haven for Wayne Mullet.

The top dresser drawer stuck again, and I tugged it so hard, I pulled something in my right shoulder. Groan. The Louisiana humidity doesn't agree with furniture, at least not the cheap, piney stuff they bought for our rooms.

I rubbed the soreness from my shoulder, coughed up something nasty and blew it out the window. Then I pulled on the uniform. Baggy, green cotton pants and lab coat, white rubber-soled shoes. Ha. They make the staff dress like doctors, which always gives me a chuckle.

Wayne, your momma would be so proud.

I crossed the back lawn to the kitchen. A promising day. Morning clouds shielding the sun, although the back of my neck was prickling by the time I reached the big house.

And what were those bugs? So many of them, swirling in such a tight circle, they formed a dark pillar reaching high above my head, and I'm six-three.

Leon Maloney is superstitious as all get-out. I hoped he didn't see this bug thing. He'd probably say it was an omen. Leon is always running on and on about omens. Sometimes I have to show him the back of my hand to make him stop.

He told me his momma had some kind of fortune-teller booth at the back of a saloon in the French Quarter, and she taught him everything you need to know about omens and bad luck. He says she never taught him *anything* about good luck.

Yeah, Leon can be a bitter dude. Why can't he just keep it to himself?

Okay. He's had some real bad luck. I mean last year, for example, one of the old guys pulled out Leon's left eye—and Leon was just trying to serve him some goddamn soup.

I had to slap a few bugs off my face as I pulled open the screen door and stepped into the kitchen. Some kinda swamp flies, I guess. Don't know how they got way out here in the woods.

Think maybe *they flew*, Wayne?

I like to give myself a hard time. Keeps me sharp, you know. But don't *you* try it. Yeah, you might say I'm a little touchy. Momma used to say I'd snap at a gator if I had more teeth.

Hey, I grew up on the bayous and I got swamp water in place of blood, and I saw a lot of things pulled up from the brown water a kid probably shouldn't see.

Well, why get started on that? Speaking of brown water, the coffee smelled good, and they had egg sandwiches this morning on toasted English muffins and the bacon wasn't burned as usual. So how bad could things be?

Leon was already finishing up. He raised his head from his grits bowl and flashed me a good-morning scowl.

Leon has long, wavy blond hair. He's into metal music and I've seen him go nuts on air guitar, making his hair fly around 'til he was red in the face. He says he could be an Allman brother if they'd let him in the family.

Some kinda joke, right? I never know with Leon. It's hard to read a guy with only one eye.

What a loser.

Dr. Nell made him promise to stop blasting his music in the staff dorm because it got the old folks all riled. Leon nodded his head and agreed, but I saw that twitch in his stubbly cheek that meant he was angry.

I wouldn't want to cross Leon. He's quiet and goes about his business taking care of the retired folks here. But once when he had a big knife and was slicing up the fruit salad for lunch, he told me he cut someone once, cut them pretty good, and didn't feel bad about it afterward.

He was holding the knife in front of him and had this weird smile on his face after he told me. And I think he meant it as some kind of warning or threat.

Leon and I had some run-ins back in the day when we were guests ourselves, guests of the Louisiana State prison system. That's when I learned to keep an eye on him. I mean, *two* eyes, ha ha.

Anyway, I finished breakfast, drained the coffee cup and crushed it in my hand. Leon had a stain on the front of his lab coat, but I wasn't gonna be the one to tell him about it. I followed him to the kitchen to start making the breakfast for our guests.

We got two hundred old guys living here, so that meant two hundred fruit smoothies just for starters. Leon and I are slicing and dicing the fruit and jamming it all into the smoothie machine. And I'm filling up glasses. We staff guys get paper cups, but the guests *get glass*, of course.

And Charlene Fowler comes in, all red lipstick and that bleach-blond hair glowing under the fluorescents, green eyes wrinkled into smiles. She's not in uniform. Instead, a magenta midriff top and white short shorts, with enough skin showing to let everyone see her flower tattoos.

She breathes on me and rubs one long, purple fingernail down my cheek, all flirty, or you might say slutty, like the two of us are something, only we're not.

I know she's banged Leon. More than once, I'm sure. But she's always coming on to me, too. Just to cause trouble and make things even more tense between us. I'll give her this. She's a sexy thing, especially for *this* place.

Leon told me to stay away from her once. But he didn't want to fight me. He said it kinda quiet and didn't look me in the eye.

We both know we gotta be careful. Dr. Nell always has her eye on us, and we want to keep these jobs.

Like I said, we both did time in the prison on the other side of the woods from here. Those stone walls poking up from the trees are a close reminder. We know we've got it good here at The Haven.

Charlene stays in my face. Her perfume smells like oranges. Or maybe it's the fruit I'm putting in the smoothies. "Did you forget everyone is leaving this morning?" she says, all breathy, like she's saying something dirty. "You two *boys* are on your own."

I shrug. My shoulder still aches from the dresser drawer. "We can handle it, Charlene."

Leon chuckles. You never know what's gonna strike him funny.

"Dr. Nell says don't forget Ida is still getting the antibiotics," Charlene says. "And no snack bars for Wally. He's put on some pounds. She says to keep your cells on. She'll check in from town."

Charlene gives us this devilish grin. It fits her face fine. "Guess Dr. Nell doesn't trust you *boys*."

Leon raises his eye from the bananas he's slicing. "*You* trust me, don't you, Char?"

"About as far as I can throw you."

"Why don't you stop rubbing your tits against him," Leon says, his voice suddenly as hard as hickory. "Come over here and give *me* some sugar."

Charlene sticks her head out, like she wants to get it chopped off, and the green eyes sparkle. “Why don’t you *make* me?”

Leon doesn’t give Charlene any warning. He grabs her by the neck, the way you’d choke a chicken, pulls her over to him and pushes his mouth against hers.

Charlene starts to struggle and spit.

And I don’t think. I mean, I shoulda just stood there and let ‘em work it out. Instead, I lose it. I grab Leon’s arm, lower my shoulder and bump him away from her.

That surprised even me. What did that mean? That I wanted Charlene? Or I just wanted an excuse to fight Leon?

No time to think about it. Leon lets out a roar like some kind of swamp creature. He tackles me to the floor and, before I can catch my breath, we’re wrestling and rolling around on all the fruit peelings and garbage.

He’s sitting on top of me, doing a little jackhammer action with both fists to my ribs. Powerful for a little guy. I’m not surprised. And those bony hands hurt.

Luckily, Charlene is no shrimp. Somehow she manages to pull him off me and step between us. I’m on my back, massaging the ribs. Leon jumps to his feet like a cat ready to spring. But then I see his shoulders sag. He looks away.

And I know he’s thinking what I’m thinking. We’ve gotta back off here and be cool. Our jobs ain’t the greatest, but they’re all we got.

I stand up and raise both hands. Like truce, man. Leon nods and backs up to the kitchen counter.

I turn and see this grin on Charlene’s face, and her eyes are still sparkling, like excited. “Oh, my!” she says in a girlie voice. “Did I cause that?” She even giggles. “Was that really over me?”

“Just kidding around,” I mutter.

“We were just waking ourselves up,” Leon says, stretching.

“Do I have to tell Dr. Nell about this?” Charlene asks, teasing. “I sure hope you boys can be trusted on your own.”

She doesn’t wait for an answer. She’s out the kitchen door. And about a minute later, I hear the staff Jeeps crunching down the gravel drive, which means Leon and I are all alone, in charge of two hundred residents.

We can work together. No biggie.

Most of the old folks here at the home are pretty nice and don’t give us much grief. Ida is my favorite. Poor thing’s been sick. Usually, she’s as flirty as Charlene. The old thing likes to grab me by the ears, pull my head down and smooch me on the lips. But the last few days, she’s been lying around moaning, acting pitiful as an old hound dog.

Leon and I brought out the smoothies on a tray and began passing them out around the front room. A couple old dudes were glued to the TV already. They sure love those cartoons, the louder the better.

I handed Frankie his glass. He raised his gnarly hands and signed, “Thank you.”

I signed, “Your welcome. How are you today?”

His fingers moved slowly: “I feel a little old.”

Leon makes fun of me for talking to the guests. But almost all of them can talk really well, and I don’t see any reason not to chat with ‘em a bit. They always like it.

Frankie taps my shoulder and signs, “Cookie? Cookie?”

I laugh and sign back, “Later.” Frankie is one of the oldest guests and the least trouble. He used to work in some kind of science lab in Texas. His pal Frannie worked in the same lab.

Next up—our *least* favorite dudes. Sweeny and Bo. These two guys were in show business. Big deal, right? But they act as if they own the place. Try to cross them and—well, that son of a bitch Sweeny bit me twice. Believe it?

They're nasty and bad-tempered and are always getting the other guests all riled. Talk about bad news. The only time their eyes light up is when they're causing trouble.

Leon and I each had one smoothie left on our trays. Sweeny's and Bo's hands shot out. They're grabby as weasels in a chicken shack. I started to hand Sweeny his drink—then pulled it back.

"Hey, Sweeny, watch this, dude," I said. I tilted the glass to my mouth and drank it down. I wiped juice off my mouth with the back of my hand. "Mmmmmmm. That was good, man."

Leon laughed. "*We're* in charge today, guys," he said. "No one to give you bad boys a break. Boo hoo." He copied me, gulped Bo's smoothie down in front of the old guy, then licked his lips.

Sweeny and Bo looked at each other like they didn't believe it. Then Bo pointed at us and rubbed his two pointer fingers against each other.

Shame, shame. That's what that means when they rub their pointers back and forth.

"It's not your day," I told them. "Everyone went to town to celebrate a birthday. Know what that means? Leon and I get a little payback time."

Then Leon went too far. As usual.

He gave Bo a little slap across the face. Not a hard slap, but it seemed to stun him. Leon laughed. "Think you haven't been asking for it?"

Again, I couldn't just stand there. I pulled his arm back. "Careful, Leon. Don't hurt 'em."

He snickered. "What are they gonna do about it?" Leon raised his hand and gave Sweeny a slap. It made a loud *smack*, and the old guy's head snapped back.

This wasn't good. Leon and I have been working here ever since we got out of the can. Six or seven months, taking care of these guys. So far, we'd done okay. I didn't like these dudes any more than Leon did. But why look for trouble now?

Leon gave Sweeny a slap on the cheek. "How's that feel, buddy?"

Sweeny lowered his head sadly and rubbed his fingers together. "Shame, shame."

Leon laughed and raised his hand to give Bo another face slap.

"Leon, you'd better not—" I started.

But I didn't get to finish my sentence cuz Bo grabbed Leon's arm up by the shoulder—and yanked him off his feet. I let out a cry as he whipped Leon over his head and sent him sailing into the wall.

Leon groaned as his body slammed hard into the wall. The whole house seemed to shake, and a stack of DVDs toppled off their shelf onto the floor.

Leon climbed up slowly, looking kind of green. And before he could catch his breath, Sweeny jumped off his bench, shot forward, and head-butted Leon in the gut. Leon went *oof*, just like in the cartoons, and his face turned from green to blue. Breath knocked out, definitely.

These old chimpanzees weigh about 200 pounds. They're over five feet tall, you know. And adult chimps are several times stronger than humans.

They're big and ugly and dangerous, which is why people send them here to The Haven. They're only cute 'til they're six or so. Then they turn into big, hairy monsters.

I guess it was some lamebrain in Washington who had the idea to open a retirement home for chimpanzees back in the Louisiana woods. When we heard about it in the prison, we laughed at first. Then we started to get angry, thinking about these chimps living in luxury with their DVDs and wide-screen TVs, their playrooms, three meals a day served to them on trays in their puffy armchairs and five acres of woods to play in behind their house.

That made us angry when we looked around at what *we* had.

The ugly, old chimps were living high on the hog, all right. And every day, *we* got the slops.

Did Leon and I have a chip on our shoulders when we started working here? Like I said, we just needed jobs.

But now some bad feelings were out in the open, and we had to tie things up and push 'em all back. Like trying to get toothpaste back in the tube.

Leon was still kinda purple, wheezing and holding his chest. I had to deal with these monkeys. I stepped forward, thinking hard, trying to look tough. But what looks tough to a monkey?

Bo glared at me, a big, toothy grin on his ugly face, waiting for me to make a move, I guess. Or planning his next one.

Behind us, the other chimps were going nuts. Leaping up and down, screeching and howling, heaving their smoothie glasses at each other. I saw Frankie—good old Frankie—crouch down and take a big dump on the living room floor. Guess he was upset.

Pretty soon, I knew the shit would be flying.

Holding his stomach, Leon pulled himself to a sitting position. He was moaning and groaning. You wouldn't like it either if a 200-pound monkey took a dive into your belly. "Wayne, we gotta get help," he choked out. "Can't let this get...out of control."

We had an agreement with the prison. It was in our rule book. Call 'em up in an emergency, and they'll send the guards running.

But I knew those dudes. Believe me, I knew them too well. They'd come shooting like it was the first day of deer season. I don't know about you, but I always think it's good to avoid a bloodbath before lunch, if you can.

"We can control 'em, Leon," I said. I started to tug him to his feet. He groaned again, rubbing his middle.

I had him standing up, teetering a little, when I saw Bo and Sweeny leap out the open window. One followed the other, and they didn't look back.

No, we don't have bars on the windows. Cuz this isn't a cage, remember? It's a haven. Besides, what chimp in his right mind would ever leave a cushy setup like this?

"Ohmigod! Ohmigod!" Leon kept slapping his forehead and staring at the window. "I'll kill 'em! I'll kill the both of 'em!"

Bad attitude. I was about to tell Leon that his bad attitude got us in this mess to begin with. For a moment, I couldn't decide whether to start packing my suitcase, or go after the two fugitives.

But I'm a hopeful kinda guy, and I really wanted to stick around. So I motioned for Leon to follow me. "We can bring 'em back. They're probably waiting for us in the garden."

Leon glanced all around crazily. I don't know what he was looking for. A weapon? Then he narrowed his eye like he was trying to focus on the situation in hand. And he followed me out the front door.

The screen door slammed behind us. Sounded like a gun going off, and I jumped. I took a breath and told myself to cool out because I had to be the thinking one.

The heat hit us like a tidal wave, and I felt the first trickle of sweat at the back of my neck. The air felt thick and steamy. "They ain't waiting in the garden," Leon said.

"There they go." I pointed just as the two chimps disappeared into a stand of red mangrove trees. Leon and I took off, jogging after them. We ran right through the whirring column of buzzing swamp flies and kept going.

I could hear the two chimps chattering to each other, all excited like. I knew that'd make it easy to follow them. One small break.

"Wait," Leon said, pulling back on my shoulder. "We need something."

"Like what?" I said.

He didn't answer. Ducked into the little, white garden shed. I heard him banging around in there. "Leon—they're getting away!" I shouted. "If we lose their trail..."

Leon came running out carrying a long-handled shovel in front of him, like a spear.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"Convincing them," Leon said.

I sighed. "We *have* to bring 'em back in good shape, Leon. No bruises or nothing. So Dr. Nell and the others can't tell anything went on."

“First, we’ve gotta bring ‘em back,” Leon said. He swung the shovel head to part the tall grass, and we stepped into the shade of the trees.

I couldn’t see them, but I could hear Sweeny and Bo clucking to each other somewhere up ahead. Leon led the way over the snaky mangrove roots and through the tangles of tree trunks and low limbs.

I decided to try a simple approach. I called to them. “Hey, Sweeny! Bo! Come back here!” That didn’t work. I shouted their names some more, but I could just as well have been shouting at the birds in the trees.

I swatted a fat mosquito off my forehead. Leon’s face was red, his blond hair was matted wetly to his head. He carried the shovel on one shoulder now, like a soldier marching to battle. The shovel head kept rattling low tree limbs, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“They’re heading to the ravine,” he said. He spit angrily.

“That’s bad,” I replied. “They could get caught in the leaf bed.” At the bottom of the ravine, the dead leaves from cedar elms are piled five or six feet high. It was just a natural pit, not man-made or anything. Even if it didn’t bury them, it would make it almost impossible to pull the two big jerks out.

“Gotta catch ‘em before they get stuck in there,” I said. I ducked my head under a low vine, pushed between some palmetto palms tilting as if they were windblown, and started to trot faster.

Leon was breathing hard. I could see he was having trouble keeping up. Dude kept groaning and rubbing his sore belly as he tried to run.

We ran into a circle of cedar elms, a small clearing with tall grass in the middle. Three scrawny, brown rabbits high-tailed it over the grass in different directions. I stopped because I realized I didn’t hear Sweeny and Bo anymore.

I listened. I could hear tree frogs all around in the high limbs. No chimp sounds. Did they already bury themselves in the ravine? Not too likely. It was still pretty far up ahead.

Leon leaned on the shovel, breathing hard. His shirt was stuck to his body, soaking wet. “Which way?” he muttered, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. He stared into the trees.

“Straight ahead maybe?” I said, pointing. I shook my head. “We came this far. We *can’t* lose them. We just can’t.”

Sure, I sounded desperate, but I didn’t care. I was thinking about consequences. Losing our jobs was one thing. But what if the big chimps escaped and got messing with people and hurt somebody or did some real damage? That could be major consequences for *me*, right?

I heard a low growl close behind me. And then a grunt.

I turned and saw two pairs of dark eyes, glowing in the shade of some cedar elms.

Another growl. Like a warning. Two lumbering figures stepped slowly into the clearing.

“It’s them,” I murmured. “Look, Leon. They made a circle and they’re creeping up behind us.”

The two chimps stepped forward, hunkered low, tall grass up to their knees. They pointed at us, snarling, pulling back their lips and showing us their big teeth.

I took a step back. Leon raised the shovel. But he took a step back, too.

“Sweeny! Bo! Let’s go back!” I shouted.

They kept their teeth bared. They lumbered forward, one step at a time.

I felt a chill run down my spine. “Leon,” I said softly, “see what’s going down here? They’re *stalking* us.”

He tightened his grip on the shovel handle. He held it in front of him with both hands. His teeth were gritted. His cheeks were twitching.

I knew what Leon had in mind. Stand our ground and fight it out with them. But that wasn’t my idea. Try to fight two angry, 200-pound beasts? I’d give us better odds at wrestling a cotton-mouth.

“Follow me, Leon,” I said. “Let ‘em chase us. Let ‘em chase us right back to the house.”

He squinted at me. “Huh?”

“Just keep backing up,” I said. “Stay with me. Act like you’re afraid. Start backing up. We can lead them right back to where we want them.”

It sounds crazy but that’s what we did. We backed over the grass and into the trees, retracing our steps. And the growling monkeys stalked us, keeping their distance, but coming slowly and steadily, letting us know this wasn’t going to end in a friendly way.

My only question was: when were they going to make their jump at us? If they decided to take it to us before we reached the yard, Leon and I could be chimp meat in seconds.

So, Leon and I backed our way through the trees. I can’t speak for Leon, but I’ll confess I never was so scared in my life. If you could see the anger boiling off those monkeys’ faces, you’d know why. And I can tell you how happy I was to see the house and the front yard come up behind us.

Almost there. “Now what?” Leon demanded. “How do we get ‘em in the house?”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Can you keep ‘em busy?”

He spit on the grass. “You being funny?”

The chimps backed Leon toward the front wall of the house. He raised the shovel, holding it against him like a shield.

Through the window, I could hear the chimps inside, chittering and wailing and screeching and carrying on like holy hell.

Deal with that later, Wayne, I told myself. First get our two runaways safely inside. I thought I knew what might pull Sweeny and Bo in. Breakfast.

I ran down the hall past the front room. I ignored the screams and hollering of the rioting chimps. I knew Leon and me could get ‘em soothed once we got in.

Into the kitchen. Still a mess from breakfast, of course. When did Leon and I have time to clean up? I fumbled in the fruit bin ‘til I found what I wanted. I pulled two bananas from the bunch and, holding one in each hand, went running back to the front.

I held the bananas out the screen door. The chimps were closing in on Leon, bumping up and down on their haunches like movie chimps, ready to make their attack.

“Leon, get inside,” I said. He slid along the wall till he came to the door, then practically dove into the house.

I held open the screen door with my hips and raised the bananas. “Come and get it, dudes. Breakfast. A special breakfast for my favorite buddies.”

The chimps stopped hopping and stared at the bananas. Like they were actually thinking about what was the best thing to do.

“Come on...” I urged, waving the bananas at them. “Come on...please...please...”

“Is it working?” Leon called from behind me in the hall.

“Think so,” I said.

“I’m gonna beat ‘em to death when they get in here,” Leon said. He clanged the shovel head on the floor.

“No, you’re not,” I said softly. “No more talk like that. I mean it, Leon. We’re gonna keep our jobs. And we’re going to forget this ever happened.”

Leon stepped up beside me. “I don’t believe in forgetting,” he said.

I waved the bananas. The chimps finally took the bait. They stepped toward the door, reaching out their arms. I pulled back a step. The chimps followed. Back a step into the hall. Yes! Sweeny and Bo stepped in through the door. Yes!

Into the front room. The other chimps fell silent, as if stunned to see their pals again. Yes... yes... “Welcome back. Come on, boys. Here are your lovely bananas...”

Sweeny took his banana. He examined it like he’d never seen one before. Then he raised it high over his head—and with a real powerful thrust, jammed it deep into Leon’s good eye.

Leon staggered back. His hands shot up to his face. He didn’t make a sound at first. Then he began to howl like a swamp dog caught in a gator trap.

He dropped to his knees. He gripped the banana in both hands and pulled—and the eye came out with it.

I guess I froze or something. It was just so sick. I don't know if I could have done anything about it or not. But I didn't.

I just stood there with my mouth hanging open as Bo took the shovel, pulled way back on it and slammed the back of the blade into the side of Leon's head.

I heard a *crack* and saw Leon's neck snap back. Leon made a sound like a hiccup. Then red stuff started to pour out of the side of his face. Like what happens when you squeeze a tomato.

Leon folded up and dropped onto his side on the floor, all bent and twisted, blood puddling under his head. I knelt down beside him, shook him a bit, but it didn't take long to see he was dead.

Was I next?

Struggling to breathe, I jumped to my feet. Before I could back away, Bo handed me the shovel.

Oh, thank God! I thought. But I didn't have much time to feel relieved. Cuz the screen door flew open, and in came Charlene, followed by Dr. Nell and a bunch of other staff workers.

Charlene's eyes went to the floor and she saw Leon and all the blood and his messed-up face. Then she let out a scream that hurt my ears. "Oh, no. Oh, no. I had a *feeling* I shouldn't leave you two on your own!"

I saw what Dr. Nell was staring at. The bloodstained shovel in my hand.

"Now, wait," I said. "I didn't do it. Really. It wasn't me! I got a roomful of witnesses!"

I waved my hand around the room. I gestured to all the chimps that sat there watching the whole thing. "I didn't do it," I said. "I've got a roomful of witnesses."

The chimps stared at me.

"You guys can all talk," I said. "I know you can. Tell Dr. Nell what happened here."

The chimps stared at me. They didn't move. They didn't even blink.

I turned to Bo and Sweeny. "Tell 'em," I said. "Tell 'em the truth. Tell 'em who did this. Come on—*talk!*"

Bo and Sweeny lowered their eyes to the floor, like they were sad. Then they pointed their fingers at me, and began to rub their pointer fingers together, back and forth.

Chapter Thirteen

Phillip Margolin

“The House on Pine Terrace” shows why every one of Phillip Margolin’s books has hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. The story is an intricate puzzle—a crime that leads to a romance that triggers another crime that ends with a mystery, which makes you question every event in the story. Phillip’s many interesting jobs over the years—a teacher in the Bronx, Peace Corps volunteer in Liberia, criminal defense attorney—have clearly provided remarkable insight into how ordinary people react to extraordinary circumstances. This is no more evident than in “The House on Pine Terrace,” where every character seems to do the unexpected and yet it all makes perfect sense in the end.

Chapter Fourteen

The House on Pine Terrace

There was an intercom attached to the ice-white wall and I used it to call up to the house on Pine Terrace. The voice that answered was the voice on the phone. He sounded just as pleasant now as he had then. Not uptight like I expected a john to be. While we were talking, I heard an electronic hum and the iron gate swung inward. We broke off and I drove my Ford along a winding drive past stands of palm trees. The house was at the end of the drive.

My father left my mother when I was too young to remember him. From a remark here and a remark there, I've figured out that it was no big loss. I do remember that we were always dirt poor. Mama was part of a crew that cleaned houses. You don't get rich doing that, but you do get to see how the other half lives. A few times, when she couldn't get anyone to watch me, she risked getting fired by bringing me with her. The only place she brought me that I remember clearly was the house on Pine Terrace.

When I was little, Mama called me princess. She said someday I would marry a prince and live in a castle and be rich. I've never been married, I'm working on rich and this is the castle I'd live in if I had my way. I dreamed about this house. Fantasized about it when I was alone and feeling lazy. Wished for it when I was younger and really believed I could do anything.

The house was so white the rays of the sun reflected off it. It was long, low, modern and perched on a cliff with a view of the Pacific that was so breathtaking you'd never get tired of it. There was a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud parked near the front door. Farther down the drive was a sports car so expensive that someone in my tax bracket couldn't even identify it. I looked at my Ford, thought about the small, singles apartment I lived in and suddenly felt like a visitor from another planet.

What I saw when the front door opened confused me. Daniel Emery III was one of the handsomest men I'd ever seen. He was six-one or -two, broad-shouldered and tanned a warm, brown color that made you think of tropical beaches. He wore a yellow cashmere V-necked sweater and tight white jeans. There were no gold chains, diamond pinky rings or the other swinger jewelry turnoffs. He was, in other words, the male equivalent of his dream house and I wondered what in the world a guy like this with a place like this wanted with a call girl.

"You're Tanya?" he asked, using the phony name I'd given when he phoned in response to the ad in *Swinger's Weekly*.

"And you must be Dan," I answered, pitching my voice low and sexy.

He nodded as he gave me the once-over. I was sure he would like what he saw. His smile confirmed my belief.

"You certainly fit your description in the ad."

"You're surprised?"

"A little. I figured there'd be a bit of puffing."

I smiled to show him that I appreciated the compliment.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks," I said, starting to hate what I was going to do. "And we should get the business part out of the way so it won't interfere with your pleasure."

"Sure, the money," Dan said. "One thousand in cash, you said. I've got it here."

He handed me an envelope and I thumbed through the ten crisp hundred-dollar bills inside it.

"One more thing," I said. "What do you expect for this?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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