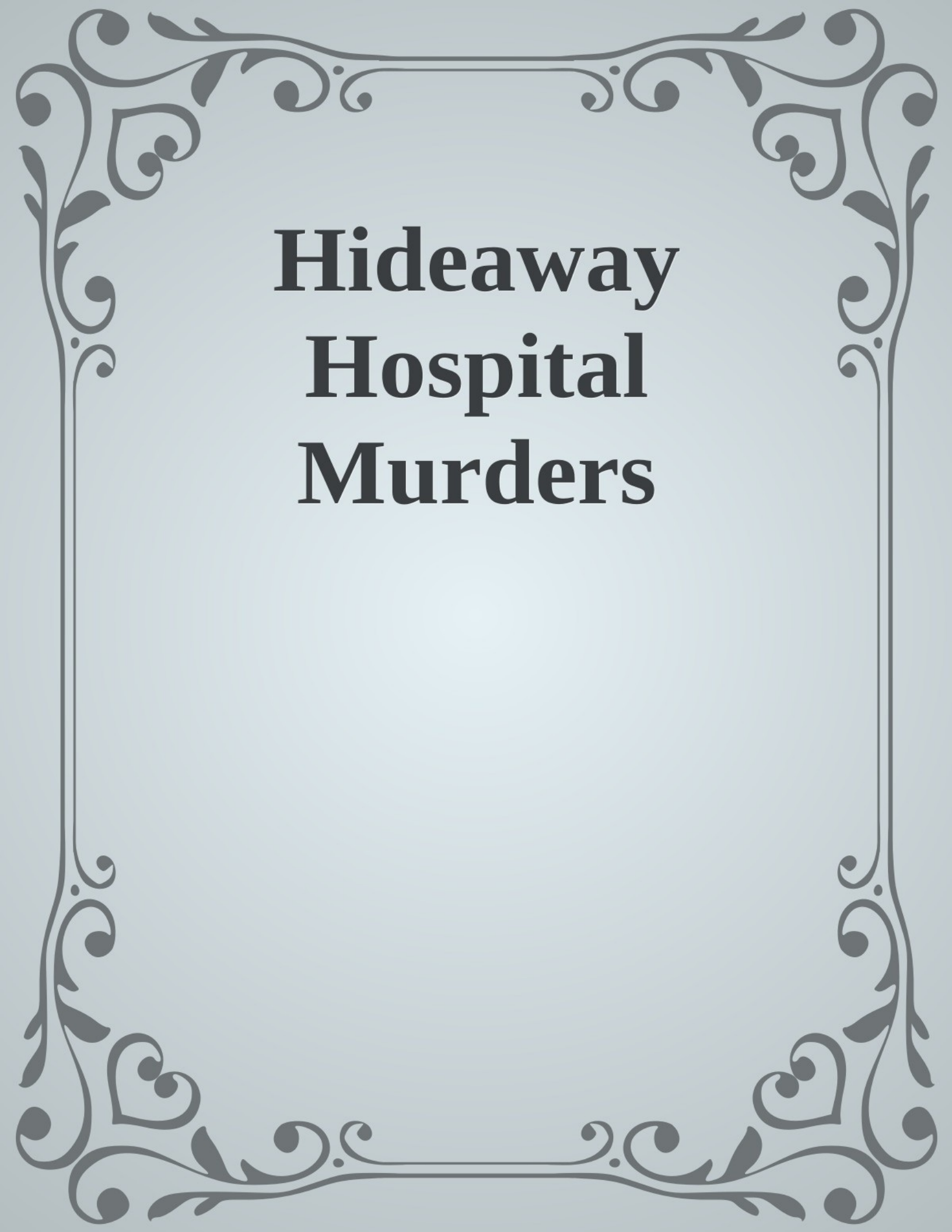


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the central text.

Hideaway Hospital Murders

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This is a work of fiction. The characters and events described in this book are imaginary and resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Books by

ROBERT BURTON ROBINSON

Greg Tenorly Mystery Series:

Bicycle Shop Murder

Hideaway Hospital Murders

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Robert Burton Robinson

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SYNOPSIS

The small East Texas town of Coreyville is shaken by brutal murders and kidnappings, striking too close to home for Greg Tenorly. And the only witness is a mentally ill neighbor whose remarks are rejected by the police as gibberish. But Greg listens carefully to the man's seemingly incoherent statements, and later realizes that they just might contain enough clues to point him in the direction of the killer.

But his investigation leads him into a hornet's nest of dark secrets, old grudges, jealousy, and greed. Now, caught in the crossfire between two families, Greg's life is in serious jeopardy.

By morning, more bodies will be headed for the morgue. The only question is whether Greg Tenorly will be among them.

*

Hideaway Hospital Murders

by Robert Burton Robinson

Chapter 1

“It’s about to come on. Hurry.”

“I’m coming.”

Nurse Judy delivered Martha’s tray just in time. It was a frozen dinner, but Judy always transferred it to a fancy plate and prepared a small salad and a bowl of applesauce to go alongside it.

“Looks great, Judy. Now sit down and let’s eat.”

Nurse Judy sat down in the recliner next to Martha’s bed. The meal she made for herself was similar to Martha’s. “Didn’t we just see this one a few days ago?”

“I don’t remember. But you know it doesn’t matter. I love Jessica Fletcher.”

It was the only good thing about her failing memory. She could watch reruns of *Murder She Wrote* over and over again. They were all new to her.

The doorbell rang.

“Whoever it is, just get rid of them. It couldn’t be friends or family. They know better than to interrupt my show.”

Nurse Judy walked down the hallway to the front door. It was a nurse.

“May I help you?”

“The agency sent me.”

“No, there must be some mistake. I’ve been caring for Mrs. Mason for a couple of months now.”

“Oh, great. Why do they keep doing this to me? Mind if I come in and use the phone?”

“Don’t you have a cell phone?”

“Yeah, but it’s dead. I forgot to charge it last night.”

“I hate when I do that. Sure, come on in. What’s your name?”

“Carnie.”

“Good to meet you, Carnie. I’m Judy. You can use the house phone.”

Judy led her to the phone. Carnie picked up the receiver and began to dial. But as Judy turned to walk away, Carnie slammed the phone across the back of her head.

Nurse Judy collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

Martha’s blaring TV masked the noise.

Carnie scoured the living room, kitchen, and other rooms for valuables, but found none. Finally, she entered Martha’s bedroom. Martha was so engrossed in her show that she didn’t even look at the nurse when she came in.

“Who was that at the door?”

“It was me.”

“What?” Martha looked away from the TV. “Who are you?”

“I’m the person who’s not going to hurt you as long as you cooperate.”

Martha picked up the remote and muted the TV.

“What do you want?”

“Jewels, valuables—that kind of stuff.”

“I don’t have anything but costume jewelry.”

“Where’s your safe?”

“I don’t have a safe.”

Carnie walked out of the room.

Good, thought Martha. The young criminal would soon exit the back door.

But then she heard her rummaging around in the kitchen. Then silence. Carnie came back carrying a large butcher knife.

“Where’s the safe, Old Lady?”

“I told you I don’t have a safe. You’re just wasting your time here. I don’t have anything valuable. I’m poor. Can’t you see that?”

Carnie grabbed Martha’s right hand and flipped her arm over. Then she held the sharp blade against Martha’s wrist.

“Tell me, you old hag.”

Carnie only waited three seconds for a reply. When none came, she dragged the blade across Martha’s wrist and the blood began to leak out.

“Stop, stop! I’ll tell you.”

Carnie released her hand.

Martha clamped her wrist with her left hand to try to stop the bleeding.

“Where is it?”

“Behind that big mirror. You’ll need a screwdriver. There’s one in the—”

Carnie didn’t need a screwdriver. She kicked the mirror several times until it broke, jumping back as the pieces fell to the floor. “What’s the combination?”

Martha told her.

Carnie got the safe open and found some very nice pieces of jewelry, which she slid into her bag.

“So you like *Murder She Wrote*, huh? Yeah, it’s fun to solve the murders, isn’t it?” She walked back to Martha’s bed and picked up the knife she had dropped on the floor.

Martha was too scared to say a word. She just wanted this horrible woman to

leave her house. She was afraid to think about what had happened to Nurse Judy.

Carnie held up the knife and turned it to reflect the light from the table lamp into Martha's eyes, blinding her for a moment. "Yeah, it's fun to be the one who solves the murders. But you know what's even more fun? To *be* the murderer."

Carnie grasped Martha's forehead with her left hand and smashed it deep into the pillow as she thrust the knife in an upward motion through Martha's abdomen, piercing her heart. She yanked out the knife and casually walked away, as the blood gushed out, forming red pools on each side of the dead woman's body.

When Carnie walked into the living room, she saw Nurse Judy crawling to the front door.

Just as the nurse reached for the doorknob and tried to stand up, she felt a sharp pain in her back. She quickly lost strength and slumped down on the floor.

Carnie ripped the knife out of her back and kicked her body over.

Nurse Judy lay sprawled across the living room floor.

Carnie smiled at the nurse, as she sat down on top of her. She forced the knife into Judy's chest slowly and repeatedly until she saw the pain leave her face, and the life go out of her eyes.

No witnesses, she thought. Just like Grandma taught her.

*

It was their first official date. Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman had been through quite an ordeal together—being hunted by police for the murder of her abusive husband while they ran from the real killer.

But all that was behind them now. All charges against them had been dropped, and Cynthia's husband had been buried. And the rumors would have died down eventually if they had gone their separate ways.

They could feel the stares as they walked to their table. Greg had requested the most private booth, way in the back. Coreyville Pasta House was the oldest

Italian restaurant in town. And still the best. Mama Castilla had run the place for over thirty years. She had taken over for her grandfather in 1973. A sign on the wall said so.

Cynthia ordered the Fettuccini Alfredo. Greg went with his favorite, the Chicken Parmesan. Both ordered iced tea and salad. The bread and olive oil with roasted garlic and pepper came with every meal. Greg could not resist great bread. And this was the best. He tore off a chunk as soon as the waitress delivered it. Cynthia would wait for the salad.

“So we’re finally on a real date,” said Greg.

“Yeah. So how does it feel?”

“Kinda weird and scary and...wonderful.”

Cynthia smiled and Greg momentarily forgot all about the amazing aroma in the restaurant. All he wanted to do was kiss her. But that would have to wait. So, his hunger came rushing back.

Cynthia’s mood turned serious. “I don’t want to spoil our date, but I’ve got to tell you something.”

Greg wondered if he had done something wrong. He could fix it—whatever it was.

“I’ve asked Mom to move in with me.”

“Why? I thought she was happy living in Marshall.”

“She *was*.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“The other night a friend of hers was murdered. And the woman lived on *her* street. They killed her nurse too.”

“Was it a burglary? Did she have a lot of cash or jewelry in the house?”

“She had a safe. They took whatever was in it. So, yeah, she probably has

something of value, but nobody knows what.”

“But why did they have to kill an old woman and a nurse? Why didn’t they just wear a mask and tie them up?”

“I don’t know. But now Mom’s afraid. And I don’t blame her.”

“Does she keep valuables in the house?”

“No. But somebody like that would probably kill you whether you had anything or not. It could even be a serial killer.”

“Yeah, I can see why she’s not happy there anymore.”

“Besides, if she lived with me I could spend a lot more time with her.”

“I hope you two get along well.”

“Oh, we do. We never get on each other’s nerves.” Cynthia hoped this news would not scare Greg off. She was not ready to say the ‘L’ word out loud. She couldn’t even say it in her head. But it was already in her heart.

*

Greg walked Cynthia to her front door.

“Greg, I had a wonderful time. And I can’t believe I’d never tried the Pasta House before. It was great.”

“Yeah, I love their food. But not half as much as I love being with you.” He would hold off on telling her he loved her. Although, what he had just said was dangerously close, he thought. He just didn’t want her to freak out.

Cynthia gave him a smile that turned him to mush as she moved in close, ready for contact.

As he lowered his head to give her a light kiss, he imagined her mother peeping through the window. How would they have any privacy if she moved in? But then the warmth of Cynthia’s lips began to melt his inhibitions, and made him forget all about her mother. He stepped in as he pulled her gently toward his

body. That sent a million little turned-on messengers screaming to his brain all at once.

He would later realize that it wouldn't matter who was watching while they were kissing. You don't care about anything else in the world when you're completely out of your mind with ecstasy.

Cynthia was like a drug. And Greg was already addicted.

Chapter 2

“Should I leave the top down or put it up?”

It was Saturday morning and Greg and Cynthia were getting into his red 1965 Pontiac Bonneville convertible.

“Leave it down. I want to show it off to Mom. I told her about it and she thought it sounded cool.”

“Really? She used the word *cool*?”

“Hey, she’s 67—not 97.”

“Sorry.”

“She was born in 1939. People said *cool* back then.”

“Yeah, meaning *not warm*.”

“No, really, they did.”

“Well, I know jazz musicians used it that way in the 40s. Not sure about nine year olds.”

Cynthia slapped Greg lightly on the shoulder. “Shut up and drive.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

It would take less than twenty minutes to drive to Beverly Sonora’s house in Marshall.

“Do you really think your Mom will want to sell her house and move in with you?”

“I hope so. She’s still pretty shaken up by the murders.”

“How long has she lived there?”

“I grew up in that house. She’s been there since the early 70s. But she doesn’t need a big house anymore.”

“So, you want her to move in with you permanently?”

“Actually, I hope she’ll consider Coreyville Community House at some point. That would be great, I think. They have plenty of fun activities for the residents. And she could make new friends. But I don’t want to mention it right now. She’s definitely not ready for that. Maybe in a year or two.”

Marshall is one of those towns that reminds you of its history everywhere you look. It was founded in 1841—four years before Texas became a state. By 1860, it had become the fourth largest city in Texas. That was in the day when the riverboat was the king of transportation. Before the U.S. Corps of Engineers dropped the water level in Big Cypress Bayou. Before the railroad came.

The current population of Marshall is about 25,000. The city has two outstanding small colleges: Wiley College, primarily a black school, affiliated with the United Methodist Church, and East Texas Baptist University. One of Greg’s church choir members had attended ETBU.

“You think your mom will like me?”

“Sure. I’ve told her so many good things about you, she already *does*.”

“Like what?”

“Sorry. Mom-daughter confidentiality.”

“Well, I just hope she’s not disappointed.”

“Quit worrying. Believe me—she’ll fall in love with you.”

Just like *you* did? Greg wondered.

Before they even stepped onto the front porch, Beverly Sonora had walked out the door to greet them.

Greg could see where Cynthia got her red hair and her good looks.

“So, you must be Greg. I’ve heard a lot of wonderful things about you.”

Greg offered to shake her hand, but she hugged him instead.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Mrs. Sonora.”

“Oh, please—call me Beverly. That way I don’t feel quite so old.”

“Okay, Beverly.”

Cynthia hugged and kissed her mother.

“Hey, I love your car, Greg.”

“Thanks. So do I.”

“You want to go for a ride in it, Mom? Are you getting hungry? We thought we’d take you out for lunch.”

“No need. I’ve already cooked us some lunch. Come on in.”

“Oh, Mom, you shouldn’t have gone to the trouble.”

“No trouble at all, Dear.”

As they entered the house, Greg was overwhelmed by the aroma of roast beef with carrots and potatoes, green-bean casserole and apple cobbler.

Greg turned to Cynthia. “Wow. Suddenly I’m starving.”

“Yeah. I forgot to tell you Mom’s a great cook.”

Beverly had set a beautiful table for the three of them. And Greg wanted to display his best manners. But everything was so delicious he could have easily pigged-out. The conversation saved him from embarrassing himself. Every other bite had to be postponed briefly to answer a question.

“So, I understand you teach music lessons?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Piano, voice, guitar, and music theory. And I also direct the music at First Baptist Church on a part-time basis.”

“Sounds like you stay pretty busy.”

“Sometimes not busy *enough*. I could use a few more students.”

“Mom, we’ll have to get Greg to bring his guitar sometime so he can play and sing for us.”

“That would be nice. I love music.”

“I’m not sure you would enjoy *my* music. Most of the songs I play on guitar are from when I was a teenager. Hits of the 80s.”

“That’s okay. I like some of those too,” said Beverly. “Are y’all ready for some apple cobbler?”

“I’m ready,” said Greg.

“I’ll get the ice cream,” said Cynthia.

Greg wondered how he would ever lose weight now. If he ate this way every day for a year he would double in size.

“Mom, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sounds serious,” said Beverly.

“I think you should move in with me.”

Greg was surprised at how Cynthia got right to the point.

“Honey, I’m fine right here.”

“No, you’re not. There’s a killer on the loose.”

“He won’t come back to our neighborhood. I’m not worried about it.”

“Well, I am, Mom. Besides—you could keep me company.”

“Looks like you have some very good company right here.” Beverly smiled and winked at Greg.

“Come on, Mom, really. You don’t need this big house. And it would be fun seeing you every day. We could have coffee together every morning. Watch some TV at night. We like a lot of the same shows.”

“That might get old for you. And then what if you wanted to get married again?” She glanced at Greg.

“Mom!”

“I don’t know, Cynthia.”

“Just think about it.”

“I’ll *think* about it.”

“Mrs. Sonora—I mean, Beverly, this is fantastic. Everything was delicious. Thank you so much.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

“See, Mom—you could cook for me. That would be great. I know you love to cook. And you know I love to eat.”

“I said I’ll think about it.”

*

The Marshall police were looking for the killer, but they had no evidence or witnesses. The case would go cold in a hurry.

Carnie was ready to check out of her room—not because of any fear of getting caught—just from boredom. She hadn’t sold the old lady’s jewelry, but had plenty of cash anyway.

Carnie flipped open her cell phone and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Sis, how are you doing?”

“Fine. What’s going on?”

“How about if I come stay with you guys for a few days before the wedding?”

“You mean now?”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind.”

“Uh...sure, that’ll be fine.”

“Great. It’ll be like old times.”

“No, no. I can’t party all night and get drunk.” Carsie laughed.

“Okay. Maybe not *exactly* like old times. But we’ll have fun. See you in thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes? Where are you?”

But Carnie had already hung up.

It was hard to believe that her sister, Carsie, had wormed her way into the heart of the wealthy doctor. Sis had a lot more patience than she did. She would have just slit his throat and skipped town with his fortune. Surely Carsie hadn’t actually fallen in love with the nerd. Maybe her biological clock had started ticking too loud to ignore.

Carsie was about to turn 31, and Carnie was only a year behind her. But unlike her sister, Carnie didn’t need a man to support her and give her babies. Anything *she* needed she would get for herself, thank you very much.

But it would be hysterical to watch Carsie go through the whole ‘until death do we part’ shtick. Would she actually have the balls to wear a white dress? If the color of the dress indicates the purity of the bride, maybe she should go with midnight black.

The two sisters had been quite a handful for their grandmother. She had taken them in after their parents died. Grandma felt so sorry about the girls losing their parents that she let them get away with murder—literally.

Carsie had cried herself to sleep one night after discovering that her boyfriend was cheating on her. The next morning the boy’s father found him dead on the

sidewalk in front of his house. He had been stabbed in the chest and his genitals had been amputated.

The doctor would treat Carsie right, or little sis would make him sorry. She wouldn't necessarily have to kill him. She could just cut something off. Something not vital. Maybe an ear or two. She knew she shouldn't think about it doing those kinds of things though. The more she thought about it, the more she'd want to do it. And eventually she would not be able to restrain herself.

But Carsie shouldn't even marry the guy if he's unworthy, she thought. Would be a bachelor party for the fine doctor? If so, she should be there to observe his behavior. Maybe she could pay off the jump-out-of-the-cake girl, and do it herself. She could pull it off with a good disguise. If the Doc got fresh with her she could just take care of him right there. One quick twist of the head, lay him down like he's passed out from the booze, and walk away.

Yes, she would protect her sister. And have fun doing it.

Chapter 3

Carnie was on her way to Carsie's new home at the Mobley estate. Of course, it wouldn't become her sister's permanent residence until after she married Dr. Mobley. But the wedding was only a week away. Carnie knew very little about the doctor. But she knew all she *needed* to know—he was rich.

She drove into Coreyville on FM-2208 and then went south on Highway 450. The Mobley property was three miles outside of town. The Georgian style home sat in the center of a 1,200-acre plot that was inhabited mostly by pine trees.

There was a security gate near the front end of the long, winding driveway that led to the house. The gate was hidden by a couple of strategically placed hairpin turns. It was almost impossible to make the 120-degree turn onto the driveway from the north.

Carnie was five miles out of Coreyville when she realized she must have missed the entrance. She made a U-turn and headed back north. This time it was easy to spot the driveway. However, it seemed to dead-end into the tall trees. But she turned onto it anyway. When she reached the end of the road, she saw that it was not really the end. The road actually turned sharp to the left. Then sharp to the right. The gate was closed, but she saw the intercom on the left side of the road.

Fancy, she thought.

She drove up close and pushed the button. After about thirty seconds, she heard a man's voice.

"May I help you?"

"Yes. I'm here to visit Carsie Slitherstone."

"And may I please have your name, Ma'am?"

"Yes. My name is *Carnie* Slitherstone. I am Carsie's sister."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I will connect you."

Very fancy. After a few seconds, she heard her sister's voice.

“Carnie?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“Okay. I’ll open the gate for you. And I’ll be waiting out in front of the house.”

“See you in a minute.”

The half-mile drive from the gate to the house had many curves, hills and valleys. Carnie could only imagine that whoever put in the driveway had taken the path of least resistance through the trees. Finally the road straightened out, and she could see the house. The ground sloped upward as she approached her sister, who was standing out front.

It was a two-story house, with a walk-out basement. It had been built by the doctor’s grandfather, Milstead Mobley, in 1923 and had been renovated in 1976. With its huge pillars, it reminded Carnie of a courthouse.

“Sure didn’t take you long to get here. Where were you?”

“Oh, just down the road a ways.”

“Why is everything always a secret with you?”

“It’s just the way I am, Sis. What difference does it make—I’m here. Now let’s have some fun.”

Carsie got into her sister’s car and directed her to the left side of the house. They drove past the three-car garage, and then took another left, around to a little parking lot concealed behind the trees. The two walked across the parking lot and along the walkway between the trees to the house. Carsie led her sister across the terrace and into the recreation room. There was a billiard table in the center of the room.

“Nice. How about a game of pool, Sis?” said Carnie.

“How about a *beer*?”

Carnie grinned. “Even better.”

Carsie led her into the adjoining room.

“You’ve got your own bar?”

“Yep. Take a seat, Young Lady.”

“Alright.”

“What’ll it be?”

“Let’s see, Barkeep. I think I’ll have a Bud Light.”

“Coming up, Ma’am.”

Carsie grabbed a couple of beers out of the fridge.

“Come on. I want to show you my favorite room.”

“Let me guess—the bedroom?”

“Not yet. We’re waiting until the honeymoon.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Carsie led her through a short hallway into the Media Room. There were two levels of theater seats facing a wall at the far end that acted as a screen for the projector mounted on the ceiling. Carsie pick up a remote and turned it on. The picture was huge and incredibly clear.

“Wow. No need to go out to the movies.”

“That’s right. Elmo and I watch a lot of TV and movies down here.”

“*Elmo?*”

“Yeah. That’s his nickname.”

“A doctor named Elmo? That’s pretty lame, Sis.”

“No, not really. His real name is Lilman Raster Mobley.”

“Ouch. His parents must have been cruel.”

“Lilman and Raster were old family names. But Elmo hated them, so he always went by L. Mobley—even in first grade. For the first couple of years, schoolteachers called him Mr. Mobley. The kids didn’t know *what* to call him. They kind of avoided him—thought he was weird.”

“I can understand why.”

“But then in high school he got real tall—six-foot-seven. The coach begged him to play basketball. And he got pretty good at it. So the kids started to like him. But they still didn’t know what to call him. Then one of the players came up with ‘Elmo’—from L. Mobley and from the Sesame Street character. And it stuck. That’s what everybody calls him now—except his mother. She still calls him Lilman. But it worked out great since he became a pediatrician. Kids usually hate going to the doctor. But not if it’s Dr. Elmo.”

“Dr. Elmo. That’s hilarious.”

“Okay, let me show you your room.”

Carsie took Carnie to the bedroom that was just off the Pub Room.

“This is handy,” said Carnie.

“Please go easy on the booze while you’re here.”

“What do you mean—‘while I’m here?’ I don’t plan to ever leave.”

Carsie laughed. “Funny.”

But Carnie was not joking.

*

Macy peeked in, expecting to see Mallie Mae in her favorite chair. Instead, she was standing at a front window, staring at the sky. The matriarch spent most of her time in her bedroom these days. She had everything she needed right there. The room was spacious and beautifully furnished. And Macy was ready to jump at her command.

“Did you finish your lunch, Mallie Mae?”

The 75-year-old Mallie Mae Mobley loved Macy like the daughter she never had.

“Yes, I’m finished. But tell Hadley the ham was dry.”

“You know that will hurt his feelings.”

“I don’t care. I won’t eat dry ham. I’ve told him over and over, but he keeps sending me dry ham.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’ll tell him.

Macy walked over to pick up the tray.

“What do you think about Lilman’s fiancé?

“She a nice young lady, I suppose.”

“Macy—tell me what you *really* think.”

Macy studied Mallie Mae’s face to make sure she really wanted to hear her opinion. “I’m not crazy about her.”

“I think she’s awful—a crude money-hungry tramp.”

Macy tried not to smile.

Mallie Mae went on. “If there was any way I could stop this wedding without alienated my son, I would do it in a heartbeat.”

“Just tell him how you feel.”

“No, no, no. Then he’ll be *determined* to marry her—and he’ll be mad at me. I wanted him to be a surgeon, you know. I had planned it since he was a little boy. He could have been a world-class surgeon.”

Macy had heard this story nearly every day since she took the job as a personal aide fifteen years earlier, after Mallie Mae had taken a fall and broken her leg.

Macy had grown up in Kilgore, graduated from the two-year nursing program at Kilgore College, and joined the staff at Coreyville General Hospital as a Licensed Vocational Nurse. Two years later, she had doubled her salary by going to work for the Mobleys.

She fell in love with Elmo early on, and dreamed that her life would turn out just like the lives of the women in her favorite romance novels. Eventually he would fall for her, and they would get married and live happily ever after. But it was taking much longer than she had expected. Then Carsie Slitherstone came into the picture.

Macy started listening to Mallie Mae again.

“...so he decided to become a pediatrician. And there was nothing I could do about it. Maybe if I hadn’t pushed him so hard to be a surgeon, things would have turned out differently. He despised me all the way through medical school. I’m not sure he ever completely forgave me. And I don’t want to do anything to make him hate me like that again. I don’t think I could survive it.”

“So, what can you do to change his mind?”

“Nothing. It’s hopeless. Unless that woman does something to rub him the wrong way. Maybe this sister of hers will accidentally tip him off to what he’s getting himself into. From what I understand she’s even worse than Carsie.”

“Really?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. We’ll see. He stayed single for all these years. At first I thought he was just being very picky. And I thought that was good. But now he’s 56 years old. It’s no wonder a lot of people started thinking he was gay.”

Macy had heard this speech many times. But it didn’t bother her before, since she always thought Elmo would marry *her* some day.

Mallie Mae continued. “Maybe the sister will blurt out something horrible about the lovely bride’s past. I just hope she does it *before* the wedding.”

Chapter 4

“What did you get?” said Cynthia.

“Groundhog Day. It’s one of my favorite movies.”

Greg closed and locked Cynthia’s front door. Then he walked over and sat down on the couch next to Cynthia.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen it.”

“You’re gonna love it.”

“Who’s in it? What’s it about?”

“It’s about this egotistical weatherman, played by Bill Murray. He gets stuck in a time warp. Then he finally realizes he’s gonna keep reliving the same day over and over again until he gets it right. And it’s got Andie MacDowell. I love her. I can’t believe you’ve never seen it. It’s a classic.”

“Well, it sounds good.”

Greg loaded the DVD and started up the movie.

Cynthia had the popcorn ready to go.

They laughed as Phil did everything he could think of to win Rita’s heart. By the end of the film, they both had watery eyes.

“That’s a wonderful movie,” said Cynthia.

“I told you.”

“Hey, I’ll be your Rita and you can be my Phil.” She was ready for a kiss.

Greg started to kiss her, and then stopped. “But what if I’d rather be Ned Ryerson?”

“Shut up and kiss me, Stupid.”

“But first, Ned wants to sell you some insurance.”

“Ned can go step in a mud puddle. This is for Phil,” said Cynthia.

She grabbed him by the shoulders and kissed him hard on the lips. “Still want to be Ned?” she said with a grin.

Greg pulled her close and started a kiss. After a few seconds, he was about to pull away when Cynthia took over for a while. Then Greg again. It went back and forth. He hoped Cynthia would keep him in check, because he was feeling more out of control by the second.

It would be different if Cynthia’s mother were living in the house, he thought. Could they still make out on the couch like this? Not likely. Beverly could walk in on them at any moment if she lived there. Greg was committed to having no sex outside of marriage, but Cynthia’s amazing body and passionate kissing were tempting him to the limit. He was in danger of going on autopilot. His body could explain it all to his brain later.

Oh, by the way, Brain, earlier tonight I took over for you, and made wild, crazy love to Cynthia. She was on autopilot too. It was great. Hope you didn’t mind. Signed, Your Body. P.S. I forgot to ask if you wanted to use protection.

Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing for Cynthia’s mother to move in with her sexy daughter. But what if he and Cynthia were making out at *his* house?

*

Macy Golong peeked into Mallie Mae’s room and was not surprised to see her sleeping. Elmo’s mother rarely stayed up past 10:00 PM, and it was nearly 11:00. She closed the door and started to go back to her room across the hall. She was halfway through a romance novel. But Hadley’s delicious oatmeal raisin cookies were calling to her.

She walked down the stairs to the kitchen and put a few cookies on a plate. Then she poured a glass of milk. She wondered what Elmo was doing. Was he in the Media Room with Carsie? *Their* Media Room? Before Elmo and Carsie got together, Elmo and Macy used to spend hours almost every night in that room. Some nights he had almost kissed her.

She left her milk and cookies on the kitchen counter and went down another flight of stairs, which came out in the Recreation Room. Macy could hear the sound of the TV coming from Media Room. She tiptoed to the open doorway and peeked in. There she was—that conniving slut—sitting where Macy should have been. How could Elmo have replaced her like that? She thought he had been falling in love with *her*. How could she have been so wrong? But it could still happen—if that woman would just go away.

Elmo said, “Yeah. So, beginning Monday there will be *two* doctors in the office. That should take a little pressure off. If I need to be out for a day or two, Dr. Edwards can fill in for me.”

“Yeah, or if you need to take off a week for a trip to Hawaii with your beautiful new wife.” Carsie gave him a sexy smile.

“That’s right. Dr. Ernie will take care of everything while I’m gone.”

“Dr. Ernie?”

“Yeah. I asked if he would mind being called ‘Dr. Ernie’. His name is Ernest, but I thought ‘Dr. Ernie’ would fit in well with the Sesame Street theme of my office.”

“So the two of you are Drs. Elmo and Ernie?”

“Yep.”

“That’s cute, Honeypie.”

“The kids will like it.”

“The only thing better would have been *Bert* and Ernie.”

“Yeah. But unfortunately, Baby, my name is not Bert.”

“No problem. I don’t want Bert anyway. I want Elmo.”

Carsie threw her leg over Elmo’s lap and straddled him. She placed her hands on the sides of his head and snuggled it in between her breasts. Then she began to slide her body slowly toward and then away from his crotch. And again. And

again.

“Oh, yeah. I want some Elmo. And I want it right now.”

Macy had seen more than enough. She would try to erase that last few seconds from her memory. She and Elmo would still get together. Somehow.

She had been so busy watching the doctor and his bride-to-be, that she had not even noticed Carnie, who was sitting across from her in the dark Pub Room, sipping her Vodka Tonic. The light from the TV shown through Macy’s flimsy gown. Carnie had been enjoying the silhouette of her firm, shapely body standing in the doorway.

Carnie admired a well-toned body—male or female. She loved the feel of the smooth, tight skin. Sometimes it made her want to rip off her clothes and have sex. Other times she just wanted to slash that beautiful skin with a razor blade. Once she got a taste, her lust for the flesh was ravenous, whether making love to it...or mutilating it.

She strained her eyes to watch, as Macy moved out of the light, and became a dark ghost moving across the room to the stairs. It would be so easy to follow her to her bedroom...

*

Macy brushed the cookie crumbs off the edge of her bed and into her hand. A couple of tiny bits of cookie fell between her fingers and onto the floor. She got down on hands and knees and studied the carpet at very close range, retrieving every morsel. The maid service vacuumed twice a week, but that was no excuse for sloppiness.

She went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth for a full three minutes. Then she flossed. Then she flossed again. She brushed her perfect thick, shoulder-length brown hair until all of the tangles were gone. Then she brushed it another thirty times.

Macy eyed the paperback adoringly as she approached her bed. She had read fifty more pages while enjoying her cookies. The characters in her romance novels were her closest friends. She wasn’t simply reading a book. She was visiting another world—the world where she felt most at home.

Macy switched off her lamp and rolled in between the sheets. Then she turned over onto her left side, closed her eyes and began to relax. Within moments, she heard something. Someone sneaking into her room. Through her peripheral vision, she could see a figure standing behind her. Standing over her. She pretended to be asleep. Maybe they would go away. But what if they planned to kill her? Her back was completely vulnerable to a vicious thrust of a knife. Her head was sitting perfectly still on the lacy pillowcase—just inviting the blow of a heavy blunt instrument.

She felt the bed move as the person got under the covers with her. She cringed when she felt a hand on her shoulder, the warm breath on the back of her exposed neck. Then the soft, smooth hand caressed her right arm and moved down toward her hip. What was about to happen to her? She began to tremble.

Then she felt the fingers work their way under her nightgown...over her stomach...under her right breast. The intruder's body inched ever closer to hers, until they were spooned.

Then a voice whispered, "I want you, Macy."

The warm tongue just behind her ear gave her goose bumps. She moved away slightly. Then she rolled over onto her back.

Macy said, "I was afraid you weren't coming."

Then the warm body was on top of her. There was a long, deep kiss. Her feelings were so powerful she thought she would faint at any moment. But the feeling went on and on, building to a mind-bending crescendo.

Then it was over. She lay spent. The hot passion that had worked her body into a sweat was *almost* as good as the real thing. Now she was ready for a warm, peaceful night's sleep.

But cold reality would be waiting for her again in the morning.

Chapter 5

The bright Sunday morning sun illuminated the stained glass windows, diffusing multi-colored hues across the congregation. Attendance is up today, thought Greg. As the organist was nearing the end of the Prelude, he stepped up to the podium.

“Please take your hymnals and turn to page 23, and let’s stand and sing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy.’”

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning, our song shall rise to Thee...

As Greg sang and conducted the 4/4 pattern, which he could do in his sleep, his mind began to wander. Shouldn’t he feel guilty about what he was thinking last night while kissing Cynthia on the couch? His *actions* had been within the bounds of acceptable behavior. He had nothing to be ashamed of in that regard.

But what about his thoughts? It wasn’t what he *did* with Cynthia—it was what he *wanted to do*. He didn’t want to dishonor her or his commitment to God. But his feelings had been only natural. God created humans and gave them sexual desire. Wasn’t it okay to *want* to have sex, as long as you didn’t actually *do it*? Then he remembered the passage from Matthew 5:28.

But I say to you, that whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart.

At the end of the hymn, Greg stepped back and Dr. Huff went to the podium and said a prayer. Then there were announcements, two more hymns, and a chorus.

After the offering, it was time for the choir to sing their anthem. When Greg motioned to the choir to stand, Cynthia smiled at him from the Alto section. She was so incredibly beautiful. Standing there in her choir robe, she looked like a redheaded angel. If they could just get married, Greg could stop feeling guilty about his desire for her.

*

Elmo was not thrilled that Carsie had invited her sister to stay at the house. But it would only be for a few more days. He had made it clear to his fiancé that as soon as the wedding was over, Carnie must move out.

“More orange juice, Sir?” Hadley had prepared a brunch consisting of Eggs Benedict, bacon, sausage, blueberry pancakes, bran muffins, and hash browns.

“No, thanks. I’ve had enough. It was delicious, as usual.”

Hadley nodded. It was his admiration of Dr. Mobley that kept him from retiring. He had worked for the family since Elmo was a young boy.

It was a very pleasant day, so Hadley had put them on the back porch near the kitchen.

“It’s such a nice day,” said Carsie. “We should do something special.”

“Like what?” Elmo was reading the business section of the Dallas Morning News.

“We could drive over to the Dallas Zoo.”

Carnie joined in, “I love animals. They’re so primitive.”

Elmo wasn’t sure what to make of Carnie’s statement or the odd grin on her face.

Macy walked out of the house, leaned over and whispered into Elmo’s ear.

Carsie did not appreciate the fact that she was being left out of the loop. Why did Elmo need to hide anything from his bride-to-be? As soon as they came back from their honeymoon, she would fire Macy Golong. She didn’t trust her with Elmo.

“Ladies, you’ll have to excuse me,” he said to Carsie and her sister. He got up from the table and walked into the house with Macy.

“I don’t like her,” said Carsie.

“She’s harmless,” said Carnie.

*

“What makes you think she’s acting weird?” said Elmo.

“You’ll have to see for yourself,” said Macy.

Elmo rarely spent any time with his mother. He only saw her once or twice a week.

“Come on in. I think she’s still in the bathroom. Don’t let her see you.”

“Okay.”

Macy led him through Mallie Mae’s bedroom, to the bathroom door. Macy walked in, leaving the door open so Elmo could see.

“Are you okay?” said Macy.

“No. I can’t remember how to make this thing start,” said Mallie Mae.

Elmo was shocked by what he saw: his mother holding a hairbrush in one hand and a tube of toothpaste in the other. She had applied a line of Crest across the bristles of the hairbrush.

“I know how to make it work. I just need a little help.”

“That’s okay. I’ll help you,” said Macy.

“I just need to wash my things.” She pointed to her teeth. “These things.” She looked in the mirror. “These little white things in my mouth. I just don’t remember how to do it. I think my breakfast made me a little sick. Tell Had... whatever that man’s name is—he cooks our food. You know. Tell him he made me sick and now I can’t think right.”

“Mother?” said Elmo.

Mallie Mae turned and was surprised to see him standing there.

“What are you doing in here? Get out of my room and just leave me alone.”

“But, Mother, you seem to be having a problem. I just want to help.”

“Get out! Now!”

Elmo walked out of the bedroom and shut the door. He stood in the hallway, stunned. He was about to go back downstairs when Macy came out.

“See what I mean?”

“Yeah. She’s in bad shape. I had no idea. Has she ever acted like this before?”

“Well...”

“You mean she’s been like this for a while and you didn’t tell me?”

“I’m sorry. But she swore me to secrecy.”

“When did it start?”

“She started having some memory problems a couple of years ago. But I thought it was just old age.”

“You should have told me, Macy.”

“I know. But it wasn’t that bad at first. It’s gotten a lot worse in the past few months.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry. Do you think it’s Alzheimer’s? She’s only 75.”

“It could be. Most people don’t get until their mid-eighties. But sometimes it happens a lot sooner.”

“I hope that’s not what it is.”

“It could be something else. Like a reaction to medication. What is she taking?”

“Just her blood pressure medicine. And sometimes a pain pill.”

“Or it could be a nutritional deficiency. How’s her appetite?”

“Pretty good.”

“And sometimes people have these symptoms after a stroke.”

“Oh, I think I would know if she had a stroke. Wouldn’t I?”

“Probably—considering how much time you spend with her.”

“So, what do we do?”

“I’ll send her to the hospital for testing.”

“Oh, I don’t think she’d like that. She’s embarrassed. She’d rather die than have everybody in town hear about this.”

“Okay. I’ll send her to a good friend of mine in Dallas. He specializes in geriatrics.”

“So, he’ll be able to find out what’s wrong with her?”

“Yes. He’s an excellent diagnostician. I’ll give him a call and set it up for tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to drive her over there?”

“No. I’ll call the limo service. You just go along and take care of her.”

“Good. I will.”

Elmo went downstairs to his study. Macy went back into Mallie Mae’s room.

“He’s going to send you to a geriatric doctor for tests.”

“I don’t want to go to Coreyville or Longview. People know me there.”

“No. This doctor is in Dallas.”

“Good. And you’re going with me, right?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

*

Elmo called his old friend, Dr. John Fransein in Dallas.

“Hey, Johnny. This is Elmo Mobley.”

“Well, you didn’t have to give your last name.” Johnny laughed. “How many Elmo’s do you think I know?”

“Not that many, I guess. But it’s been a long time.”

“It sure has. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. But I’m afraid my mother has a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“She may have Alzheimer’s.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“But it could be something else. I hate to ask such a big favor, but could you run some tests on her?”

“Of course. I’d be happy to.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Uh...yeah, sure. I can work her in. How about 2:00 PM?”

“That would be great, Johnny. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. She’ll be coming with her personal aide. Her name is Macy.”

“Okay. But you know that all I can do is rule out other things, right? There’s still no definitive test to diagnose Alzheimer’s disease. But we get it right about ninety percent of the time. Unfortunately, there is no cure.”

“But there are medicines that can help.”

“Yes. There are things we can do to try to slow down the process. We just can’t stop it. What are her symptoms?”

“All I can tell you is that this morning she was trying to figure out how to brush her teeth with a hairbrush. She knew she was doing something wrong, but she didn’t know what.”

“Yeah, that’s typical for someone with Alzheimer’s.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“But we’ll see. I’ll do my best to find out what’s going on with her, Elmo.”

“I know you will.”

“And we should get together sometime. Be sure to give me a call the next time you’re in Dallas.”

“I will. And thanks again, Johnny.”

Chapter 6

“Mom decided to take me up on my offer,” said Cynthia as she walked into the living room.

“She’s moving in with you?” Greg had figured this was coming, but he didn’t think it would be this soon. It was Sunday night. Cynthia had just asked her mom the day before.

“Yeah. And she said she’d be ready to move next weekend. I’ll go over two or three nights this week and help her pack.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“She said she would line up a truck. Would you mind driving it?”

“No problem.”

“You’re wonderful.” She leaned over and gave him quick kiss.

He wanted it to be longer, but that could wait until later.

“I’ll make us some popcorn.” She walked into the kitchen.

“Okay, Baby. I’ll get the movie ready.”

Greg’s cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“I’m glad you didn’t change your phone number.”

Greg wished he had. It was his ex-wife. He had not spoken to her since right after the divorce. And they had been divorced for over five years. Before that, he had been a full-time minister of music. Her cheating and the subsequent divorce had put an end to that job. Fortunately, they never had children.

“Why are you calling me, Susan?”

“Just wanted to see how you were doing. And I had a dream about you the other night. It was crazy. We were in bed together and—”

“—I don’t want to hear about it. And I’m busy right now. If you really need to talk, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“You’re with your girlfriend, aren’t you? That cute redheaded banker?”

“How did you—”

“—I’ve got friends. They tell me things.”

He didn’t know his ex had any friends in town. He had moved from Longview to Coreyville to get away from her and her backstabbing friends. It was hard to believe that many of them had once been *his* friends too.

Cynthia walked into the living room with the giant bowl of popcorn.

“Whatever. Look I’ve gotta go,” said Greg.

“She’s right there, isn’t she? Are y’all in bed? Is she on top of you?”

“Goodbye!”

“Your ex?” said Cynthia.

“Yes. Why did she have to ruin my night?”

“What did she want?”

“To harass me.”

“Yeah, but that can’t be the only reason she called you after all this time.”

“Apparently, she has a friend in Coreyville who told her about us.”

“So now she’s jealous?”

“Maybe. But I don’t know why. Of course, she’s always wanted what she

couldn't have."

"Or maybe she just can't stand to see you happy."

"Maybe."

"So, just show her. Be happy."

Cynthia gave him a warm, luscious kiss. It was short enough so they would still want to watch the movie, but long enough to make him forget about Susan.

*

It was only 9:00 PM, but Macy couldn't wait any longer. She had to see what was going on in the Media Room. She prayed that Elmo and Carsie were just watching TV.

At 56, Dr. L.R. 'Elmo' Mobley was practically a virgin. He hadn't had been with a woman in years. Macy had heard the full account from Mallie Mae years ago, when she first moved in to care for her after she broke her leg. Macy was her full-time nurse at first. But Mallie Mae enjoyed her company so much that she asked Macy to stay on, even after the leg had healed.

When he was 37, Elmo had been giving every ounce of energy to his patients. But he finally grew tired of having no personal life. So he started dating. She was a nurse at Coreyville General Hospital—a very nice lady. And eventually the two set a wedding date. But Mallie Mae did not approve. And she did everything she could think of to destroy their relationship. But Elmo knew his mother was trying her best to break them up. So all *that* did was make him more determined to go through with his marriage plans.

Then Mallie Mae crafted her most devious scheme ever. She paid off a sleazy private detective to produce porn pictures of Elmo's fiancé. It was not that difficult to merge shots of her head with graphic sex pictures he found on the internet.

The doctor showed the photographs to his fiancé and she denied she had ever posed for such lurid pictures. He wanted so badly to believe her. But his mother had planted a terrible seed of doubt. And it grew like Dandelions—every time you pull one out of the ground to destroy it, you just scatter more seeds.

Ultimately, the couple was doomed. He hated Mallie Mae for it. She had made him miserable while he was in medical school. Now she had destroyed his chance for love and happiness. He swore he would never forgive her.

After that, whether consciously or not, he closed himself off to any possibility of a romantic relationship. Because Macy was aware of this, she had never pursued anything but a friendship. But sometimes it was all she could do to keep from telling him how she really felt.

Then, after so many years of loneliness, Carsie had bumped into him at the grocery store and stolen his heart. He had stopped by Kroger's at lunchtime for a fix. Not many people knew he was addicted to Brach's Candy Corn. Couldn't be any other brand—had to be Brach's. He kept a supply hidden in a desk drawer. So he went straight to the candy aisle and there she was—buying Brach's Candy Corn. Supposedly, she was hooked on the stuff too. What were the chances of that?

Macy went downstairs to the basement and started to walk toward the open Media Room door. All she could hear was the TV. What if that woman already had him down on the floor? Macy had to admit that Carsie was hot. She could probably get him to do anything if she really tried.

"Macy," spoke a voice from the darkness.

Macy jumped.

"Easy, it's just me—Carnie. I didn't mean to startle you."

Carnie moved in closer and now Macy could see her—barely.

"Well, you scared me to death. Don't do that."

"Sorry. But I wanted to ask you something."

"What?" Macy wondered why they needed to have this conversation in the dark. And couldn't it wait until tomorrow?

Carnie moved in closer.

"What?" Macy asked again.

Carnie grabbed her by the arms and kissed her on the lips.

Macy pulled back. "What are you doing?"

"Just wanted to see if you were interested."

"No!" As soon as she had said it, she regretted her mean tone. If Carnie was gay, she felt sorry for her. Macy couldn't understand a woman wanting to be with another woman, but that was *their* business. She didn't care. As long as they left *her* alone. "I'm sorry."

"No problem."

Carnie turned and disappeared into the darkness. Within minutes, she was in her car, driving toward Coreyville.

*

"Hi. My name is Jake, and I couldn't help but notice that nobody's offered to buy the pretty lady a beer."

"I already have a beer," said Carnie.

"Well, I can see that. But you're gonna finish that one off soon. So good ole Jake is here to buy you another one."

"Oh, really. Well, you can tell 'good ole Jake' that I don't like drinking with guys who refer to themselves in third person."

"Awe, come on. Have a drink with me."

"Fine. Sit down. And take off your cowboy hat. Have some manners."

"Okay. What's your name, Honey?"

"Well it's not 'Honey.'"

"I'm sorry."

"It's Jennifer."

“Glad to meet you, Jennifer. You’re not from around here, are you?”

Carnie judged Jake to be about 6’2”, 220 pounds. She was only 5’6”, weighing in at 120, but she knew she could handle him.

“Nope. Just traveling through.”

“So, what kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a nurse. Right now I’m in between jobs.”

He took a swig of his Budweiser.

“So, you like taking care of folks.”

She took care of them, all right. But they were sometimes in worse health after she took care of them. Sometimes dead. “You could say that.”

“A man must *love* being married to a nurse.”

“I wouldn’t know. Never asked. Never been married.”

“Well, that’s surprising. Especially considering how beautiful you are.”

Normally, that line would have made Carnie want to stab the guy in the heart. But Jake actually sounded sincere. “Hey, you want to get out of here?”

“Uh...sure. Wanna go for a ride in my truck?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

Jake took a dark narrow road and drove for a couple of miles. Carnie didn’t recognize the Country singer on the radio. But then, she hated Country music.

He turned onto a dirt trail that led to nowhere, parked and turned off the lights. They could see each other in the moonlight.

“I’d just love to hold you in my arms,” he said.

Really? Is that all you want to do? she thought.

He slid over, put his arm around her and started kissing her.

He's a good kisser, she thought. But she pushed him away.

"What's the matter? I thought you wanted to make out?"

"Well, maybe I do and maybe I don't. I'll let you know." Her hand was already in her skirt pocket. And *it* was in her hand. Just the flick of her thumb would pop up the razor blade—ready to perform the deadly deed.

He backed away a little, and said, "Okay, whatever you want, Honey."

He had done it again. He had called her 'Honey.' But this time she didn't mind.

"You wanna go back to the bar for a game of pool?" he said.

"And a couple more beers?"

"Sure. Let's go."

He started the truck.

Carnie liked this dumb cowboy. He was cute, and would take orders. He might just come in handy, she thought.

No need to kill him tonight.

Chapter 7

Monday mornings always went by fast for Greg Tenorly. It was his only weekday morning off from his part-time job as music minister at First Baptist Church, Coreyville. Afternoons and three evenings were spent teaching private music lessons at his little studio in a strip mall near town square.

Wednesday night he had church choir rehearsal and Friday nights he was off. Nobody wanted to take music lessons on Friday nights. And now that he and Cynthia were dating, he was glad to have the night available.

His first lesson on Monday was at 1:30 PM, so he had plenty of time for an easygoing lunch at Jane's Diner, which was just a few yards down the sidewalk from his studio. He ordered the Chicken Fried Steak Special.

While waiting for his food, he surveyed the lunch crowd. Same old faces. Coreyville didn't get many tourists. His cell rang. It was Cynthia.

"Hi, Honey. What are you doing—eating lunch at Jane's?"

"Am I *that* predictable?"

"Yes, you are. But it's one of the things I like about you."

"I'm glad you think it's a plus."

"Well, I'm sure your lunch will be tastier than mine. I'm eating a sandwich at my desk. I'll be leaving a little early so I can get over to Mom's to help her pack."

"Good. I'll get there as soon as I can. I should be done by 7:00 tonight."

"Sounds good. I'll see you there. Have a good afternoon."

"You too. Bye, Sweetie."

Jane brought Greg his food. He ate at her restaurant nearly every day.

"Looks delicious, Jane."

“Thanks. Enjoy. By the way, how’s it going with your banker girlfriend?”

“Great. But you can quit calling her my *banker girlfriend*. Yeah, she’s a bank vice president. Get over it.”

Jane laughed. “I’m sorry, Greg. But I just never thought of you as the kind of guy who would be dating a banker.”

“Me either, I guess. And I’m amazed every day when I get up in the morning and look in the mirror. How could a beautiful woman like Cynthia go for a guy like me?”

“I shouldn’t say it, because it’s just gonna make your head swell, but you’re a great catch, Greg.”

“But what about this?” He pointed to his receding hairline. “I’m losing it fast. And this?” He patted his protruding stomach.

“Yeah, but you can *lose* that. That extra weight doesn’t have to be permanent. And a full head of hair is not that important to a lot of woman. Especially as they get older. I can tell you it’s way low on *my* wish list.”

Jane Appletree was the sole owner of the diner, and had run it by herself since her husband died a few years earlier. At age 60, she was still a very attractive woman. She took pride in her appearance, and the long days on her feet helped keep her thin. She would love to have had Greg for herself if she was a few years younger. Actually, many years younger, since Greg was only 34.

“Yeah, things have been going great, but—”

“—what happened?” Jane frowned.

“Her mother is moving in with her.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry, Greg.”

“No. I think it’s going to be fine. She’s a very nice lady. We had lunch at her house on Saturday, and I really liked her.”

“Well, I wish you luck. I’m afraid you’re gonna need it.”

*

“I won’t hold you for long, Ernie. I know you have lunch plans. But I just wanted to give you a heads-up.”

It was Dr. E.J. Edwards’ first day in the office with Elmo. He had relocated to Coreyville a few months earlier, but still had only a handful of patients. He knew that moving into the office with the popular pediatrician would help bring many new patients to his practice.

“What’s going on?”

“I think my mother has Alzheimer’s.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. How old is she?”

“She’s 75. And I don’t know for sure yet. I sent her over to a geriatric specialist in Dallas today. He’s an old friend of mine.”

“What are her symptoms?”

Elmo described what he had seen Mallie Mae doing with the hairbrush and the toothpaste.

“Yeah, definitely some type of dementia. Might not be AD though. Could be something treatable.”

“Well, of course, I’m hoping for that. But I’m preparing for the worst. And here’s the thing. If it is Alzheimer’s, I’m probably going to want to take a leave of absence.”

“I see.”

“You think you could handle all of our patients for a while?”

“Well, considering how few *I* have right now, I’d say ‘yes.’”

“Good.”

“But if it is Alzheimer’s there’s really nothing you can do for her.”

“I know. There’s no cure. Only medicines to slow down the process of deterioration.”

“But I can understand that you’d want to spend some extra time with her for a while.”

“Actually, I haven’t spent *any* time with her in *years*.”

“But don’t you live in the same house with her?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“I know it sounds awful. And I guess it is. But you don’t know what she’s put me through. Every time I get close to her, she starts trying to run my life. She tried to make me feel like a fool for wanting to be a pediatrician. She still thinks I was an idiot for not becoming a neurosurgeon. That was *her* plan for me. And she is *always* right.

“And she’s ruined every chance I’ve ever had with women. She always finds a way to run them off. Years ago, I was engaged to a wonderful woman. She was a nurse. But Mallie Mae didn’t like her for whatever reason. And you would never believe the horrible thing she did to break us up. She probably doesn’t approve of my current fiancé either. I don’t know, since I never talk to her.”

“But now you feel guilty. Now that she’s probably terminal.”

“Yeah. Big time.”

“But you have to consider your practice. Already, this morning, I’ve seen how the parents and the kids love you. Take a few days off if you need to. But don’t destroy what you’ve worked your whole life to build.”

*

Carsie and Carnie were finishing a lazy, late breakfast on the patio.

“Where did the old lady go with her nurse this morning?” said Carnie.

“I don’t know. Mallie Mae rarely goes anywhere,” said Carsie.

“Well, I saw them leave in a black limo.”

“Really? I can’t imagine where they went. And I wonder why Macy didn’t just drive the Mercedes. That’s weird.”

“Looks like it’s just the two of us here—alone in the house with Hadley.” Carnie raised one eyebrow mischievously. “And where is he, anyway? I wanted him to pour me some more orange juice.” She could get used to a life of luxury.

“I don’t know. But I’m gonna go take a very long bubble bath, Sis.”

Carsie got up from the table and walked away.

“You’ll turn into a prune.”

Carnie went downstairs to her bedroom. She had been up since 6:00 AM. The Exercise Room was right next to the Media Room, just a few yards from her bedroom. She had been working out on one of the machines when she heard a car drive up to the house. The rooms along the front of the basement were mostly underground, but had high windows facing the front yard. Carnie had looked out and seen Macy helping Mallie Mae into the black limo.

After exercising, she had taken a shower, made a pot of coffee in the nearby Pub Room, and plopped down in the Media Room to watch some TV while sipping her coffee. Later, Carsie had called her cell and invited her to come up for a late breakfast. The two had sat around in their robes, eating and talking for an hour or so. Now it was after noon—time to get dressed.

Carnie did a slow strip tease in the mirror. What a nice, tight body she had. Not bad for a 29-year-old, she thought. Any woman would be thrilled to have her body. Or any man.

She went to the closet, picked out a sexy outfit and carried it to the bed. But as she walked past the dresser, she accidentally knocked something off. It was her favorite perfume. She cringed as it hit the wood floor. But the bottle didn’t break. It just fell on its side and began to roll. She noticed that the rolling sound changed as the bottle went under the bed. As though the flooring under there was different.

She put her robe back on and knelt down to retrieve the expensive perfume, which was halfway under the bed. Once she had picked up the bottle, she ran her hand across the flooring. It felt the same as the rest of the floor. She knocked on it. It sounded hollow. Then she tested the floor where she was sitting. It sounded solid.

Carnie's curiosity was revved up to a cat-like pitch. She didn't know what she expected to find, but she could think of nothing else until she found it. She pushed with all her might until the heavy bed broke free and started to slide. She managed to move it over against the wall.

Carnie knocked on the floor in several places, identifying the hollow-sounding area. Then she went to her suitcase and pulled out a Bowie knife, and began to search for cracks in the seams of the flooring, near the edge of the hollow rectangle.

Finally, she found one. She dug the knife down into it and began to pry. She saw movement. Not much—but enough to convince her that she was looking at a secret door. Something was hidden down there. Something forbidden. She had to find out what it was.

After nearly an hour, she got the door opened just a crack and worked her fingers inside. She yanked on it with all her might, until every muscle in her well-toned body ached. Then she heard a ripping sound, as it flew up and open. The musty odor enveloped her body, and she fell away from the opening and started coughing. She grabbed a towel from the bathroom, covered her mouth and nose, and cautiously inched her way to the large hole in the floor.

All she could see was the top of a staircase, leading down into the creepy darkness.

Chapter 8

Carnie stood with the towel over her mouth and nose, looking down into the large opening in her bedroom floor. Well, it wasn't *her* bedroom. It was a guest bedroom in the home of her sister's fiancé. Maybe even *he* didn't know about this secret underground place.

She just *had* to see what was down there. So, she pulled the towel away from her face a little, took a sniff, and decided she could bear the musty odor. Then she took off her robe and threw on some shorts, a shirt, and tennis shoes for her journey into the unknown.

There appeared to be a light switch near the bottom of the stairs. Hopefully the lights down there would work. Just as she was about to take the first step down, her cell phone rang and startled her. She went to the dresser and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sis. Are you going to the Longview Mall with me?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

"Ah, come on, Carnie—Elmo loaned me a credit card, and it doesn't even have a limit. We can go crazy. How can you resist that?"

"It's just that my stomach's feeling a little queasy."

"I'm sorry. You need some Pepto-Bismol?"

"No. I'll be okay. I just need to lie down for a while."

"Okay. Hope you feel better. I'll buy you something."

"Thanks. Have fun. But take it easy. If you come home with a couple of mink coats, he may have second thoughts about marrying you."

"Yeah, yeah. See you later."

Carnie put the phone in her pocket and began to walk down the stairs, half

expecting a spider or a snake to attack her. She could cut the beating heart right out of a man's chest without flinching. But crawling critters gave her the creeps.

When she reached the switch, she flipped it, and lights came on. At the foot of the stairs was a wall. She made a U-turn and walked back past the staircase through a long hallway, and then to the left through a doorway.

"You're kidding me," she said to herself.

It was a laboratory, complete with Bunsen burners, test tubes, *etc.* There was a blackboard with some formulas written on it, and a few journals. Carnie picked one up, and thumbed through it, but couldn't make sense of the scientific jargon. She hadn't been in a room like this since high school chemistry, which she had flunked.

Across the room was a closed door. One of those large doors like they use on exterior walls. She twisted the knob, and pushed the door open with her foot. It was just a bathroom. A very large bathroom. She flipped on the light and stuck her head in the door. But when she looked to the right, she saw a woman looking back at her. She gasped and yanked her head out of the room.

"Hello?"

No answer.

Somebody was living down there, doing who knows what—underneath her as she slept. She should have brought her gun down with her, she thought.

She peeked in—and felt silly when she realized she had been scared by her own reflection. There was a full-length mirror on the wall. It was huge—she figured about six or seven feet tall and three feet wide.

So, why did the good doctor have a secret laboratory in his house? She couldn't wait to show it to Carsie. It was just weird.

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and dialed.

"You're not gonna believe what I found under the basement."

"Dead bodies?"

“What? No. It’s another basement. There’s a lower basement under the regular basement. Weird huh?”

“What’s down there?”

“Some kind of science lab and a big bathroom with a huge mirror.”

“Is Carsie with you?”

“No, she’s gone to the mall. There was a secret passageway underneath my bed. I had to work like crazy to get it open.”

“That’s strange. But don’t get distracted. It’s just a few more days until the wedding.”

“Yes, Ma’am. And our plan is working out perfectly. Nothing can stop us now.”

*

Dr. Mobley’s office hours were 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM. At least that’s what it said on the door. But there was usually a frantic parent or two, calling about their Johnny or Susie and a high fever, and could the doctor please work them in today. And, of course, Elmo would never turn them away. On a typical day, he got home at around 7:00 PM.

So, Carsie had been surprised when he had called her to set up an early dinner. They had agreed to meet at Johnny Caces Seafood & Steakhouse in Longview at 6:00 PM.

“How did you get away so early?”

“Dr. Edwards took my last couple of appointments.”

“Oh, yeah—your new partner.”

Once the waiter had taken their order, Carsie said, “Why couldn’t I invite Carnie? She loves this place.”

“Because we need to talk about something important—just the two of us.”

“Okay.” She was concerned about the tone of Elmo’s voice. This could only be

bad news, she thought.

“Did you notice that Mallie Mae and Macy were gone today?”

“Well, *I* didn’t notice. But Carnie saw them getting into a limo this morning.”

“I sent them to Dallas. Mother needed to see a specialist.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I think she has Alzheimer’s. We’ll know after we get the test results.”

“So, what does that mean—that she’s losing her memory? At least it’s not cancer. It’s not so horrible if you just forget a name occasionally. Or forget where you put your keys. After all, she is getting old.”

“No. It’s much worse than that. Yesterday she was trying to brush her teeth with a hairbrush. She couldn’t even think of the word ‘teeth.’”

“Oh. That’s not good.”

“Yeah. And that’s just the beginning. Eventually, you forget how to get into bed, how to put on your clothes, how to go to the bathroom. Then you can’t walk or even speak. Eventually, your entire body quits functioning and you die.”

“I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“And Alzheimer’s victims only live an average of eight to ten years after the symptoms first appear. I suspect that she and Macy have been keeping it from me for quite a while.”

“Well, can’t you give her some medicine, or chemotherapy or something?”

“There’s no cure for Alzheimer’s.”

“So, there’s not *anything* you can do for her?”

“There are treatments to slow down the process. And some of those seem to work fairly well. But only for a little while. Anyway, I should get her test results tomorrow. And if they come back positive, I want to postpone the wedding.”

Carsie's heart sank.

"I'm sorry, Sweetie."

"Okay. If her tests are positive, I'll take care of notifying everybody on the guest list and canceling everything. But do you mind if Carnie stays with us for a while? I'm really enjoying having my sister around."

Elmo wanted Carnie to move out as soon as possible. There was something about her he just didn't like. But how could he refuse Carsie's request when she was being so understanding about postponing the wedding?

"That'll be fine."

*

Mallie Mae and Macy were riding in the rented limo, on their way home from Dallas.

"What do you say, driver?" yelled Macy. "Wanna pull over and have sex with me?"

"Don't worry—he can't hear us," said Mallie Mae.

"Just making sure."

"Well, what would you have done if he started pulling over?"

Macy turned red. "What did you think about the doctor?"

"He was rather tall and handsome."

"*Medically* speaking," said Macy.

"He was quite good. Very thorough. He ran every test in the book, including the writing tests for memory and math skills."

"How'd you do? How hard was the math?"

"Easy stuff. But I did poorly."

Macy smiled. “I hope you didn’t *overdo* it?”

“No, my dear, I *under-did* it. But I answered correctly on *some* of the problems.”

“You are so bad, Mallie Mae.”

“Well, I needed to be convincing.”

“Yeah, but one of these days Elmo’s going to find out. And then he’s going to disown you and fire me.”

“Honey, he’s already disowned me. But he won’t fire you.”

“Yes, he will.”

“Then I’ll rehire you.”

“Well, I just feel bad about tricking him.”

“Look. You don’t want him to marry that woman, do you?”

“Well, no.”

“I don’t know what it is, but there’s something awful about her. I have a sense about these things.”

“But you’ve never liked *any* of the women Elmo’s dated. What kind of a woman *would* you approve of?”

“One who’s not going to break his heart and run off with all his money. I’ll know her when I see her.”

Macy knew that Mallie Mae loved her like a daughter. She had told her so—many times. But could she love her as a daughter-in-law? It probably didn’t matter. She and Elmo were very close—but only as friends.

Was there really any chance they would ever make the leap from friends to lovers? She had clung to that hope for so many years. So, why give up now? Monica and Chandler had made the leap. And Rachel and Ross. And so many of her other friends on TV.

So, why not Macy and Elmo?

Chapter 9

Carnie was devouring the delicious steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, peas, and yams set before her. Hadley had prepared exactly what she had requested. It was diner for one. Elmo and Carsie were dining at Johnny Caces. Mallie Mae and Macy were on their way home from Dallas.

But her brain didn't have time to analyze the data being sent by her taste buds, or to feel any sense of loneliness. Her entire being was focused on the underground laboratory she had discovered. But something was nagging at her. What was the purpose of that huge mirror in the bathroom? It was as tall and wide as a big door. You idiot! It *is* a door!

Carnie jumped up from the table, still chewing.

"Are you finished, Ma'am?" said Hadley, who had just walked into the dining room.

"Yeah, I'm done. Thanks."

She rushed down the stairs, ran into her room and closed and locked the door. Then she went down into the sub-basement, through the lab, and into the enormous bathroom.

She pushed and pulled on the mirror. No movement whatsoever. Then she remembered seeing a screwdriver in the lab. She raced back out into the lab, found it, and took it into the bathroom and began to pry on the frame of the mirror. It didn't budge.

Carnie was about to start kicking the mirror when she had a thought. She opened the cabinet doors under the sink. All she saw was a few rolls of toilet paper. She ran her fingers across the underside of the cabinet and felt something. A button. She pushed it and heard a click. Was she imagining things, or did the mirror move? She ran to it, and found it ajar. When she opened the mirror door she felt for the light switch and clicked it on.

There were four hospital beds on one wall. And there were various other medical devices in the room. It was a hospital ward. But why would anyone hide a lab

and four hospital beds in their basement—unless it was used for something evil? She was getting turned on by thoughts of a demented scientist torturing his victims to their last agonizing breath.

There was a hallway that led to two smaller rooms. One of the rooms had a couple of cabinets that could be used to store medicine. They were empty.

There was another door off the main room. She opened it and saw nothing but a hallway that seemed to stretch on forever. Carnie couldn't imagine what the passageway led to, but she would soon find out.

She practically ran through the winding wooden corridor. For the moment, she even forgot her fear of spiders and snakes. By the time she reached the other end and saw the stairs, she was gasping. She began to wonder if there was enough oxygen in the underground air to keep her alive.

Once at the top of the stairs, she struggled to open the door. She finally got it open and stepped into a small room with a dirt floor and rusty garden tools hung on the wall. A small snake in the corner made her anxious to get back above ground. Then she saw the door directly across from where she was standing. She unlocked and turned the knob. Then she pulled. She pulled with all her might. She was getting tired of these stubborn doors.

She grabbed an old shovel from the wall and began to pry. After working the shovel in at several spots around the door, it finally broke free.

She had never been happier to see daylight. There was an old tractor and a new riding lawn mower. And a black 1956 Buick. She was in a barn. She walked to the sunlight, looked out the window and saw the back of the house. Then she remembered seeing the barn in the back yard while sitting on the patio.

It felt good to breathe fresh air again.

*

It was 7:00 PM—finally. Greg was ready to jump in his car and head for Marshall. He could get there in fifteen minutes. And even though he was tired, he knew he would be re-energized the moment he saw Cynthia. And he'd *need* some extra energy since it would be a late night of packing Beverly's things.

His last student on Monday nights was Nancie Jo Gristel. Even at the age of 81, she was one of his best music students. Mostly because she listened to everything Greg said and tried to do it. She truly loved playing the piano—unlike many of his younger students, whose parents were forcing them to take music lessons.

“Looks like our time is up, Nancie Jo.”

“Oh, it just goes by so fast.”

“Well, you’re making good progress.”

“I’m sorry I had to drop out for while.”

“That’s okay. I understand.”

“I thought I was going to have to give up my music. But the doctor put me on a new medicine.”

Greg didn’t know why Nancie Jo had been out for several weeks. And he wasn’t going to ask her about her health issues. But he was curious.

She said, “It’s for my Alzheimer’s. The doctor said it should help for now. He doesn’t know how long it will work. So, I’m just gonna try to enjoy whatever time I have.”

“You have a great attitude about it.”

“As long as I can keep playing the piano, I can be happy.”

“Well, just keep working at it. You’re doing great.”

“Thanks, Greg. See you Thursday night.”

Greg locked up quickly, hopped into his car and drove down the alley and onto the street. It was a great night for driving the big convertible with the top down. The early evening September air massaged his scalp all the way down Highway 154 to Marshall. There was no concern about messing up his hair, since he kept it cut short. He only wished he had more of it. His forehead seemed to get taller by the day.

When he arrived at Cynthia's mother's house it looked like all the lights were on. He could see stacked boxes through every window.

Cynthia greeted him at the front door with a full body hug and a very sexy kiss. At 34, Greg was far removed from his teenage years, but since he had met Cynthia he found that his body could still jump to attention. It reminded him of those embarrassing high school years, walking down hallways of pretty girls, hiding unwanted arousals behind textbooks.

"Well, hello, Greg," said Beverly, who was walking up behind her daughter.

Cynthia instinctively turned to face her mother, leaving Greg fully exposed. He quickly moved behind his girlfriend and put his hands on her shoulders. But not before Beverly saw what he didn't want her to see.

"Hi, Beverly." Greg still wasn't comfortable using her first name. And his face was turning red. But Beverly seemed to take it in stride.

"Thanks for coming to help," said Beverly.

"Happy to do it," said Greg. "Now where do I start?"

*

By the time Elmo and Carsie got home in their separate cars, Carnie had closed up the hideaway hospital, as she had named it, and moved her bed back in place, covering the secret door. She couldn't wait tell her sister about it.

Carsie came downstairs and met Carnie in the Pub Room as she walked out of her bedroom.

"I need a drink," said Carsie.

"You don't look so good. What's wrong, Sis?"

They sat down at a table.

"The wedding is probably going to be postponed."

"Why?"

“Elmo thinks Mallie Mae has Alzheimer’s disease. He sent her to a specialist in Dallas.”

“So, that explains the limo this morning.”

“Yeah. They ran a bunch of tests on her.”

“And?”

“They’re still waiting on some of the results, but the doctor believes that it is Alzheimer’s.”

“But we were so close,” said Carnie.

“I know. What do you mean *we*?”

“You know, uh, we were so close to all being family. One big happy family.”

“Yeah, that’s true. I’m sorry. I was just thinking about me.”

“That’s okay. *You’re* the bride. It’s *your* wedding.”

“But, now I don’t know when it will happen. Elmo says there’s no cure for Alzheimer’s.”

“So, what’s he gonna do? Wait until she dies?”

“Carnie!”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. But you and Elmo deserve to be happy. Y’all shouldn’t have to wait indefinitely.”

Carnie hated to see her sister so sad. But even more than that, she hated to wait longer for the money.

Chapter 1_0_

The Tuesday morning sun on Greg's face sent mixed messages to his sleeping brain. The brightness urged him to wake up. But the warmth whispered 'dream on.' Like a mild summer day on a backyard swing.

He rolled over in bed to let the golden rays warm his back. Her sweet scent drew him near to her. He put his arm around her as he kissed her gently on the neck. She awoke with a lovely smile and rolled to her back. And even though she had not yet spoken, he knew what she wanted. As he began to make love to her, he heard something, but ignored it. In her arms, he could have ignored a tornado.

"Breakfast is ready."

It was Beverly. Cynthia's mother was standing beside the bed looking at them, as though they were sitting on the couch watching TV.

"Beverly! Do you mind? We're trying to make love here!" said Greg.

"Now, Honey, don't you talk to my mother in that tone of voice!" said Cynthia.

Greg woke up. Is that what it would be like if Cynthia and he got married, and Beverly was living with them?

Of course, he was getting way ahead of himself. He loved Cynthia. But he had never told her. Why did it take so much courage to speak three simple words? Because she might not speak them back to him. But he would be brave. He would tell her tonight. Or maybe Wednesday night would be better. No, tonight.

*

Greg's part-time job as music minister at First Baptist Church required him to be at the church Tuesday through Friday mornings. Staff meetings were held on Tuesdays at 11:00 AM in the pastor's study.

Greg walked from his office, down the hallway to the pastoral suite. Anybody who wished to see the pastor had to go through Sadie Crumpet's office. She had been church secretary for over 25 years. Sadie was the glue that had held the

church together through six pastors. At least, that was *her* opinion. She had plenty of opinions, and was not shy about sharing them.

Greg could hear Sadie talking on the phone in a confidential tone as he approached her office.

“Well, I knew all along he was gay...I knew he wouldn’t get married. What’s the use? Everybody knows. Why doesn’t he just admit it?”

Greg thought, I am not gay. And how dare you gossip about me. Is this any way for a Christian to act? A church secretary?

He walked into her office and Sadie quickly ended her phone call.

“Is Pete already here?”

“Yes. Pete’s here. The pastor’s here. I’m here. We’re just waiting for you, Greg.”

Not that Greg was late. Pete was just early. He was always early.

The pastor, Dr. J. Marshall Huff, would lead the group in a prayer. They went over the list of prayer requests.

Dr. Huff said, “I got a call from Dr. Elmo Mobley this morning. He asked that we pray for his mother. He got the results of her tests this morning, and it’s not good. She has Alzheimer’s.”

“What about the wedding? I’ve got extra custodial staff lined up to work Friday night,” said Pete Termins. Pete was the volunteer chairman of the Building and Grounds Committee. He had been a life insurance salesman until a year earlier, when he retired at the age of 65. All of his energy, pushiness, and can-do attitude had been redirected to his work for the church. He was annoying at times, but you had to admire his dependability and determination to get the job done, and get it done right.

Sadie said, “The wedding has been cancelled.”

“Postponed,” said the pastor.

“They’ll never get married. And if they do, it won’t last,” she said.

“Now, I’m sure this is just a temporary setback,” said the pastor.

“He’s 56 years old. Never been married. He’s gay,” she said.

“Let just move on,” said Dr. Huff. He would have fired Sadie if he thought he could get away with it. She was always blunt, and always said too much. But she had too many friends whose husbands were deacons. Any attempt to force her out would end badly for him.

Greg felt better. Sadie’s phone conversation had been about Dr. Mobley—not him.

Greg said, “Who are the Mobleys? Are they members?”

Dr. Huff said, “Yes. But they rarely attend.”

“Only on Easter,” said Sadie.

“But they’ve given a lot of money to the church over the years. In the 70s they donated almost all of the funds to build the education wing,” said Pete. “Morford and Mallie Mae used to be regular attenders.”

“Until he died in a freak one-car accident,” said Sadie.

“Okay. Does anybody else have a special prayer request?” said the pastor.

*

Elmo knocked lightly. Macy opened the door and let him into his mother’s bedroom. She knew his reason for being home at midday. There could be no other reason.

Mallie Mae was sitting at a table, staring out the window. She had eaten very little of her lunch.

“Mother?”

Mallie Mae looked up at him in confusion. Then recognition.

“Oh, hello, Lilman.”

Why couldn't she learn to call him Elmo? Everybody else did. "Looks like you weren't very hungry."

"This fruit is too..." She struggled to find the right word. "It's not ready," she finally said.

"Well, I talked to the doctor in Dallas. You know—the one who ran all the tests on you yesterday."

"I know. I'm not stupid, Son."

"Okay. I'm sorry. The results came back positive for Alzheimer's disease."

"What?"

"He says you have Alzheimer's disease."

"Hogwash. There's nothing wrong with me."

"Yes, there is, Mother. And you need to accept it."

"That doctor doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Okay. Then what's this?" said Elmo.

"What do you mean? It's my lunch."

"But what kind of food is this right here?"

"Mashed potatoes and gravy."

"And what about this?"

"It's...that chewy stuff...you know, they make it from those things in the grass."

"Cows?"

"Yeah."

"Mother, you're ill. But don't worry. I've postponed the wedding and I'm taking a leave of absence from my practice. I want to do my own research. I'll find the

best treatment options for you.”

Elmo turned and walked across the room and out the door. Macy followed him.

Macy said, “But Elmo—you don’t want to ruin your practice. What about all your patients?”

“My new partner, Dr. Edwards, will take care of things while I’m out,” said Elmo as he walked to the stairs.

Macy went back into the room and shut the door. Mallie Mae was standing, grinning at her. “See—I told you it would work. He’s postponed the wedding.”

“But what about his practice? He could destroy it if he stays away too long.”

“Nah. We won’t let that happen.”

“I still don’t understand how you fooled that doctor. He ran so many tests on you.”

“The blood test and urine test and even the brain scan only ruled out other causes of my symptoms. Apparently, I passed all of those, but I failed the memory tests, the problem solving, and the math and language tests. On purpose, of course.”

“So, there’s no way for a doctor to tell if you’re faking? Then *anybody* could do that.”

“True. But why *would* they? Why would you *fake* having Alzheimer’s?”

Macy said, “I guess you wouldn’t. Unless you wanted to stop your son from marrying the wrong woman.”

They both laughed.

“But I feel bad about doing this to Elmo. Putting him through the misery and worry,” said Macy.

“It won’t kill him. Besides I had no choice. It was the only way I could stop him from ruining his life.”

*

Carnie needed some advice. The plan was going down the toilet. She paced the floor of her bedroom as she flipped her phone open and clicked the speed dial number.

“The old woman has Alzheimer’s and the wedding has been postponed,” said Carnie.

“It could be postponed indefinitely.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. But what can I do?”

“Have you considered taking her out?”

“Sure. But I’m too close to this one. I’d be the prime suspect.”

“I don’t know about that. I think you could pull it off. But it shouldn’t be your first option. Any idea how long she’s expected to live?”

“Several years, I think. Probably at least five.”

“We sure don’t want to wait *that* long. Just keep thinking, Carnie. I have great confidence in you. You’ll come up with something.”

“Okay. Thanks, Grandma.”

Maybe she could poison Mallie Mae. Make it look like Hadley did it. But what would his motive be? Or what about Macy? She had easy access to the old hag’s food. After years of being ordered around by that old woman, she’d finally had enough. Might work. Probably not.

But Elmo *would* change his mind about postponing the wedding. Carnie would make sure of that.

—

Chapter 1__1_

Elmo's study was on the main floor of the house, between the foyer and the master suite. But he spent little time there. On a typical day, by the time he made it home, after tending to his young patients for nine or ten hours, he was ready to feast on one of Hadley's delicious meals and watch a movie in the Media Room or read in his bedroom recliner. The *maid* spent more time in his study than *he* did. At least she kept it free of dust and cobwebs.

He located the power button and started up the desktop computer. Surprisingly, it still worked. He would be forced to endure countless updates to his various software packages. He leaned back in his leather chair and watched as each file was downloaded and installed.

He had ignored Mallie Mae for years. Now his mother was condemned to slog through an increasingly disoriented life on her way to a slow, miserable death. Couldn't he have found some way to make amends with her before now? He should have tried harder.

But she had nearly destroyed his plans to become a pediatrician. And she had interfered in his love life at every turn, never approving of any woman he dated. She was always there to disrupt his dreams with a punch in the gut. Because she had to awaken him to reality. *Her* reality. Still, he had held tight to his grudge far too long. And his bitterness had turned to overwhelming guilt after learning of her condition.

Finally, all software updates had completed and his computer had restarted. He opened a browser and went to the National Institutes of Health website and began to read about Alzheimer's disease.

Drugs mentioned for early to middle stage Alzheimer's were tacrine (Cognex), donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon), and galantamine (Razadyne). The effectiveness of these drugs was limited. At best, they would delay the symptoms for short period.

Another drug, memantine (Namenda), was approved to treat moderate to severe AD. Also being studied by researchers was the use of anti-inflammatory drugs, antioxidants, ginkgo biloba, and estrogen.

He printed the web page and made notes in the margins, circling the drug name Namenda, and adding the note *try this first*. Then he drew arrows to antioxidants, ginkgo biloba, and estrogen, and scribbled *try these in various combinations and strengths*.

*

Greg had finished his lessons early, thanks to several cancellations. So, Cynthia had decided to wait and ride with him to Marshall. They had picked up a hamburger on the way out of town and eaten it in the car while driving. They would get to Beverly's house by 6:30 PM.

"Have you ever heard of Elmo Mobley? He's a doctor," said Greg.

"Yes. He has accounts at the bank. I've seen him there a few times, but I've never met him."

"Well, his name came up in church staff meeting this morning. He requested prayer for his mother, who's just be diagnosed with Alzheimer's."

"Oh, that's too bad."

"Yeah. But something the church secretary said kinda stuck with me."

"What?"

"She said Elmo's father had died in a freak one-car accident."

"And you looked it up on the internet."

"Well, I was curious. So, I found a Coreyville Courier article from 1984."

"I thought you were busy teaching lessons this afternoon."

"I was. This was during one of my cancellations. And I had way too many today. Didn't make much money."

"Well, did you find anything interesting?"

"Actually, I did. It said that Morford Mobley had crashed his car into a concrete wall under an overpass."

“That’s not so unusual. People drink too much and think they can drive. Or they fall asleep at the wheel.”

“Yeah, but he hadn’t been drinking. And it happened on a sunny morning.”

“But he still could have been sleepy.”

“That’s true. But here’s where it gets weird. He went to a gas station and filled up two five gallon cans of gas. A witness reported seeing him put the two cans in the front seat of his car without the caps. He said gas was spilling out of the cans as he put them in the car.”

“That is weird.”

“Yeah. And then, instead of driving back toward his house, he went the opposite direction. The investigators estimated that he was traveling at least 90 miles per hour when he hit the wall.”

“Whoa.”

“The car immediately burst into flames. There was barely enough left of him to make an identification. Of course, they *knew* it was him anyway.”

“It was suicide,” said Cynthia.

“Clearly. But the newspaper reported it as an accident.”

“The Mobley’s must have a lot of clout. Sounds like the police and the paper were trying to protect the family. And you can understand that.”

“But why would he want to kill himself?”

“I would imagine the only people who know the answer to that are his family.”

Greg pulled into Beverly’s driveway.

Cynthia said, “Well, let’s go in and pack some more boxes.”

It was a lot of work, but they were having fun with it. They got out of the car and started walking toward the back porch.

“Uh, before we go in, I have something I wanted to tell you.”

“Okay.” Cynthia stopped and turned around to face Greg.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you this for while. I mean, I think you know how I feel about you, but...”

“Yes?”

“I love you, Cynthia, and maybe I’m just a fool, but...”

She moved close to him and put her arms around him.

Maybe she just feels sorry for me, he thought. She wants to let me down easy, but she doesn’t know how to do it.

“I love you too, Greg.”

“Really?”

“Couldn’t you tell? Couldn’t you feel it?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure. Sometimes I feel things that aren’t really there.”

“Kiss me, you silly man.”

Greg was more than happy to be a silly man. Yes, he would proudly be *her* silly man, and she could call him whatever she wanted to—as long as she loved him.

They walked into the house, beaming.

“What’s gotten into you two?” said Beverly.

“What you mean, Mom?” said Cynthia.

“You look like you’re on cloud nine.”

Greg and Cynthia smiled knowingly at each other.

“Does it have anything to do with that talking and kissing out in my driveway?”

“Mom, you were snooping on us?”

“It’s *my* driveway. I think I have the right to look at it any time I want. Aw, come here and give me a hug.”

As the three stood there hugging, Greg thought everything was going to work out just fine. Even if Beverly lived with them after they were married. But wait. One step at a time. She said she loved you. She didn’t agree to *marry* you. That’s okay, he thought. He would worry about that some other day. She loves you!

*

After spending all afternoon and evening at his computer, Elmo finally dragged himself to his bedroom at 2:15 AM. He was so tired he didn’t even bother to shower or brush his teeth. He just fell across the bed, fully dressed, and was asleep by the time his head hit the bedspread.

Carnie waited for Elmo to leave, and then slipped into his study. She took his stack of notes to the copy machine and made a copy of each page. Then she placed the papers back on his desk as she had found them.

She waited until she was in her bedroom to read through the papers. Her medical training and nursing experience made it easy for her to comprehend the material. Carnie had worked as a nurse for a several years. Until some patients on her floor mysteriously died.

She saw his notes in the margins and understood that he was planning to try a number of different treatment options. Her objective was to get Elmo and Carsie married. And the sooner, the better. How could she use the information in these papers to her advantage? What if Elmo were to quickly find an effective treatment for his mother? Then he could go ahead with the wedding. But it could take months or years to find something that worked. Maybe he never would. In the meantime, his relationship with Carsie could fall apart. No, she had to speed up the process somehow.

What he needed were a few volunteers for a clinical trial. Some women with AD who would each be given different treatments, to see which one worked best. And if none of the treatments were working, Carnie could always alter the results. Or, what if one of the volunteers didn’t actually have Alzheimer’s? The woman could pretend to have it, and then miraculously get better.

Once Elmo saw that his ingenious treatment idea was working, he would feel free to get married, knowing that he had done his best for his mother, and that her condition would rapidly improve.

Carnie could set it up in the sub-basement. Elmo could work in the lab, and she would act as nurse in their own little hospital ward. But who would volunteer for such a thing? No problem. She would bring them in by force, if necessary. And once Elmo and Carsie had gone off for the honeymoon, Carnie could easily dispose of the ‘volunteers.’

But the whole idea was insane. Elmo would never go along with any of it.

Carnie hashed through plan after plan for hours. There had to be a scheme that would work. And given enough time, she would think of it.

Chapter 1_2_

Wednesday was Greg's assigned hospital visitation day. The pastor took care of it on other days of the week, as needed. Greg would spend time visiting church members who were patients, and sit with the family of those having surgery. But first, there was time for breakfast at Jane's Diner.

"The usual?" Jane poured him a cup of coffee.

"Yeah."

"By the way, how's it going with your girlfriend?"

It seemed like Jane asked that question every day.

"Couldn't be better. She's absolutely wonderful. And I'm so in love with her."

Jane smiled. "Have you told her?"

"Yes. I told her last night." He beamed with pride.

"Well, all I've got to say is: what took you so long?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've known you were in love with her for months. Practically the whole town has."

"But how could everybody else know before *I* knew."

"You *knew*."

"No..."

"Yes, you did, Greg. You had feelings for that gorgeous redhead on the very first day you met her."

"No, that's not true. Besides, she was married then."

“So? You can still love somebody, even though you know you can’t act on it or tell them.”

Was Jane right? Had he been in love with Cynthia all along? Before he could come back with a zinger of his own, Jane had turned to walk away. Did Jane learn this wisdom through personal experience? He wondered who the man could be.

As Greg picked up his newspaper and began to read, Jane watched him from behind the counter. He could be so clueless sometimes, she thought. But in all fairness, why should he suspect? After all, Jane was 59 years old. But it had been a lonely life since her husband had died four years ago. Only her customers kept her going. Particularly the one she was currently admiring.

Greg was still reading the sports section when Jane delivered his scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, and buttermilk pancakes. “So, you’re on your way to the hospital?”

“Yeah.” He lowered his voice. “And I hate it.”

“Why?”

“I’m just no good at it. I never know what to say. The person is lying there dying and I’m supposed to comfort them somehow. Today one of our men is having surgery. But at least it’s only back surgery. He’s not likely to die on the operating table. Those aren’t too bad. It’s the heart surgeries and the terminal patients that get to you.”

“But you’re so empathetic, Greg. I’d just tell people to shut up and get a life. Or at least make the best of whatever time they’ve got left.”

*

“Hello?”

“Carsie, how are you holding up?”

“Hi, Grandma. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. How *could* you be? Your wedding got called off. I’m sorry,

Honey.”

“But I’m okay. Elmo just needs some time to find the best kind of medicine for his mother. Then we’ll reschedule the wedding. It’ll all work out soon.”

“Well, I hope so. But in the meantime, I want you to come stay with me for a few days.”

“Thanks, Grandma, but I need to stay here and support Elmo.”

“But Carnie tells me he’s spending every waking hour in his study. And that he’s totally ignoring you.”

“No, he’s not ignoring me—he’s just busy doing research. And that’s good. Because the sooner he decides how to treat Mallie Mae’s condition, the sooner we can get married.”

“I understand. But I really miss you, Sweetie. And since your sister moved out, I get so lonely.”

“I’m sorry, Grandma, but you know you’re gonna have to get used to that.”

“But just think, Dear—being here with me would make the time go by faster for you.”

“I guess so.”

“You *know* it would. And I’ll even make a batch of my cherry divinity.”

“Now you’re bribing me.”

“Well, is it working?”

“I’ll talk to Elmo.”

“Great. I’ll make meatloaf and yams for dinner.”

Her grandmother could be so pushy. And she nearly always got her way. But maybe she was right. A few days with Grandma Sylvia might do her good.

She found Elmo in his study, glued to his computer.

“Honey?”

Elmo didn't even look up at her. “Yes?”

“Grandma wants me to drive up to Jefferson and spend a few days with her.”

“That's good.”

“So, you don't mind if I go?”

“Sure.”

“Elmo! Are you even listening to me?”

He stopped reading and looked up at her.

“I'm sorry, Baby. What were you saying?”

“Grandma wants me to go stay with her for a few days.”

“Well, that's fine. You should go. At least I wouldn't feel so guilty about ignoring you.”

“Yeah. You've dealing with enough guilt already. I don't want to add to it.”

“Then go to your grandmother's house. Stay a few days. Maybe it'll make us both feel better.”

“Okay.”

Elmo stood and took Carsie in his arms. “I love you, Baby. You know that.”

“I love you too.”

After a quick kiss, Carsie went to her bedroom to back a bag.

*

On his way to the hospital, Greg called Cynthia's cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Who do you love, Baby?” said Greg.

There was a slight pause before Cynthia responded.

Had it all been dream? Had she changed her mind? Was she wishing she had not told him she loved him? How many doubts can the human mind conjure in a mere second?

“I’ll give you a call about it a little later.”

Why was she being so cold to him? Then it hit him. “Are you in a meeting?”

“That’s correct.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Yeah, call me later.”

Greg parked his car and walked into the hospital, to the surgery waiting room. He recognized the wife, sitting with another woman and a young boy.

“How long has he been in surgery?” said Greg.

“Just a few minutes,” said the wife.

She introduced Greg to her sister and nephew.

“How did Jeff hurt his back?” said Greg.

“He was carrying a big bag of cement. I told him he needed help, but he just wouldn’t listen.”

“They never do,” said the sister.

Greg had already run out of things to say. So, he picked up a magazine and began to read as the two women chatted.

“Jacob’s nose is running,” said the wife.

“Jacob, come here, Honey,” said the sister to her son.

She pulled a tissue out of her purse and wiped his nose.

“You think he’s getting a cold?” said the wife.

“Could be. He’s got a doctor’s appointment this afternoon.”

“That’s good.”

“But when I called they said Dr. Elmo has taken a leave of absence. So we’ll have to see some new doctor.”

“Wonder why Elmo’s taking a leave?”

“Hope it’s not AIDS,” said the sister.

That statement jolted Greg from his magazine article. And he noticed that the nurse standing in the Nurses Station perked up too.

“What? Why would you think that?” said the wife.

“Well, he’s in his 50s and he’s never been married...”

“But I heard he *was* getting married,” said the wife.

“He backed out.”

“No. Really?”

Greg butted in. “Actually, he *postponed* the wedding.”

“Yeah. *Indefinitely*, I’ll bet,” said the sister.

The wife looked at Greg. “Do you know why he postponed it?”

“He just found out that his mother has Alzheimer’s disease.”

“That awful,” said the wife. “My aunt had that. And there wasn’t anything the doctor could do for her. All we could do was watch her go downhill until she finally died. She suffered with it for years.”

Greg noticed that the nurse seemed to be straining to hear the conversation. But when she saw Greg looking at her, she quickly went back to work at the computer. He got up and walked over to her. Her name badge identified her as

Mary Magdely.

Greg spoke to her in a confidential manner that could not be heard by the wife and sister. “Do you know the Mobleys, Mrs. Magdely?”

She didn’t look up from the computer. “Uh...yes. Sort of.”

“Well, I just want to apologize. I don’t usually participate in gossip. But I had to speak up and set the record straight.”

Greg figured her to be about 60. She was attractive, and looked very professional.

“I understand. Don’t worry about it.”

She had kind eyes, and a caring face. Just what you’d want from a nurse, thought Greg. But there was something else in her facial expression.

Something she *wasn’t* saying.

Chapter 1_3_

“Our clever deception is working like a charm,” said Mallie Mae.

“I can’t believe he fell for it. You’re such a good actor—it’s scary,” said Macy.

“I do what I have to do.”

“But they’ve only *postponed* the wedding. They didn’t *cancel* it.”

“Give it time, my dear.”

“When I went down for a glass of milk last night, Elmo was still in his study. It was after midnight.”

“That’s good. The more time he spends on the computer, the less time he spends with *her*.”

“Well, I just feel sorry for him. He’s doing all that work to help you because he thinks you’re sick.”

“Don’t feel sorry for him. He brought this on himself. He should have had the good sense to steer clear of that money grubber.”

They both heard the car driving alongside the house. Somebody was leaving. Macy rushed to the window.

“It’s Carsie. Looks like she’s alone.”

“Good. Now we just need to lose the sister.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s coming back,” said Macy.

“Not necessarily...”

“I’ll find out what’s going on.”

Macy went down to the kitchen and poured coffee into one of Elmo’s favorite cups. Then she put a few of Hadley’s chewy chocolate chip cookies on a plate.

They were still warm.

She peeked into the study. “How about a little snack.”

Without looking away from the monitor, Elmo said, “Not right now, Macy. I’m very busy.” Then he caught a whiff of the coffee and the freshly baked Hadley’s. He smiled at her. “On second thought, sure, that would be great.”

Elmo took a big bite of a cookie. “Mmm. Nobody makes them like Hadley.” He washed it down with a sip of coffee.

“Yeah, they’re irresistible,” said Macy. “By the way, uh, I just saw Carsie leaving in her car.”

“She’s going to Jefferson. Gonna spend a few days with her grandmother.”

“Oh.”

“It’ll be good for her. I just can’t spend any time with her right now, and I know she’s feeling neglected.”

“I see. Any idea how long she’s staying?”

“Not really. Probably a week or two. Why?”

“Just wondering. Well, if you need anything, you know I’m always here for you.”

“I know. Thanks, Macy.”

As she spun around to walk out of the study, her flowered skirt twirled to catch up with her body. She pictured Elmo watching her, admiring her perfectly shaped calves, waiting for her skirt to settle back down across her cute little butt.

Macy knew she could make Elmo forget about his fiancée. She only wished she had pursued him before Carsie came along. She had wasted years of opportunity, spending all those nights alone with him watching movies. She should have grabbed him one night and seduced him with a mind-blowing kiss. A kiss that encompassed all the pent-up lust hidden deep in her heart. She had done it in her mind a thousand times. But instead, she just kept waiting for him to make the

first move. And he never did.

Carsie had said that when she accidentally bumped into Elmo in the supermarket she had finally found the man of her dreams. Or had she found the *money* of her dreams? That's what Mallie Mae thought. Macy actually believed Carsie's feelings were real.

But that didn't change the fact that Macy wanted Elmo for herself. And she had been feeling pretty desperate until the wedding was postponed. Maybe there was still hope for her and Elmo. She promised herself that if she *did* get another chance, she would not be so timid.

*

"Thanks for helping tonight. But I hate that you're missing choir rehearsal," said Cynthia.

"It's okay. Henry didn't mind filling in for me," said Greg.

They rode along in silence for a few minutes. Beverly had offered to make dinner, since they would get to her house by 6:00. Then they would pack more of her things. Greg had reserved a U-Haul for Saturday.

"I had another one of my crazy dreams this morning," said Greg.

"What happened *this* time?"

"Well, we were lying in bed and—"

"—in *bed*? I guess our morals aren't as good in your *dreams*."

"No, no. We were married."

"Oh. Is that where you think we're headed?"

"Uh, I don't know. It was just a dream."

"Okay. Go on."

"Anyway...we were making love and—"

“—you had a *sex dream* about me?”

“But we were *married*.”

“In your *dreams*.”

“I see,” said Greg.

“No—I didn’t mean it *that* way. I wasn’t saying we’d never get married,” she said.

“So, you’re saying we *will* get married? Can I take that as a yes?”

She grinned at him and blushed.

He went on. “So, there we were, in the middle of it, and your mother just walked right into our bedroom and announced that breakfast was ready.”

Cynthia started laughing.

“She was standing there staring at us. And I was on top of you!”

Cynthia laughed even harder.

Greg laughed too. He was thrilled that Cynthia was not at all shocked by the talk of marriage. But he would have felt better if she had reassured him that Beverly would *not* be living with them if they ever got married.

“I love you, no matter how goofy you are,” she said.

“Gee, thanks.”

“In fact, your goofiness is one of the reasons I love you. So, don’t stop being goofy.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think I *can*.”

They laughed.

“What about my bald head? Is *that* one of the reasons you love me?”

“Well...”

“And how about this spare tire? Is *that* one of the reasons you love me? Are you gonna tell me that you *like* a man with some meat on his bones?”

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” she said.

“Uh-oh. I finally found the deal breaker. You’re dumping me because I’m overweight, right?”

Cynthia chuckled. “No, no.”

“What then?”

“You should go with me when I jog every morning.”

“Ah-ha! I should have known! If I want to keep you, I’ll have to get into shape.”

“Well, let’s just say that if you really want to *catch* me, you’ll have to *be able* to catch me.”

“Very funny. Okay. Where do I sign up?”

“There’s no sign-up sheet, soldier. Just report to my quarters at o-six-hundred.”

“Sir! Yes Sir! I will be there, Sir!” Greg saluted her.

“Really, it’ll be fun, Greg.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Cynthia punched him in the arm and he smiled.

*

Carnie had finished her dinner and gone down into the sub-basement for further investigation. She looked through one of the notebooks, trying once more to make sense of the formulas, but soon decided it was a waste of time. She went through the bathroom and into the four-bed hospital ward. Yes, this would work just fine, she thought.

She walked into one of the two small rooms off the ward and studied it more carefully than before. There were only two metal cabinets in the room, and they were empty. But something about the floor seemed familiar. It was like the floor in her bedroom. She got down on hands and knees. No, it couldn't be, she thought. She knocked on the floor in several places.

Carnie ran out through the lab and up the stairs and retrieved her Bowie knife. She rushed back to the room and began to search for the edges of a secret door. It didn't take her long to find them.

When she finally got the door open and leaned it up against the wall, she was disappointed to see nothing but dirt. She started to put the door back in place, but changed her mind. Kneeling down, she stabbed her knife into the dirt several times. On the third try she hit something. It was hard, but not rock. It felt like wood. She dug with her knife and her bare hands, throwing dirt to the side of the hole she was making—like a dog digging up a prized bone.

By the time she stopped, some of her fingers were bleeding. It was a door or some type of cover, she decided. She pried it open and was shocked by what she saw. And Carnie Slitherstone was not easily shocked.

“Oh, Elmo, what dirty secrets you have,” she said out loud.

Now she knew her scheme would work. Elmo would be forced to play along. It had been a wild idea, and she had already realized that Elmo would turn her down flat. But that was before she found *this*.

Her cell rang.

“Hello?”

“What's happening there?”

“Elmo's going blind at the computer. Mallie Mae and Macy are upstairs. I'm in the secret basement.”

“What are you doing down there?”

“Just looking around, working out some details.”

“You still think you can talk Elmo into holding secret clinical trials down there?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“He’ll never buy it, Carnie.”

“Oh, yes he will.” She looked down at her discovery. “He’ll have no choice.”

Chapter 1_4_

“It’s 8:55, and we will be closing in five minutes. Thank you for shopping at your Coreyville Pharmacy,” said the assistant manager over the sound system. Then he walked to the entrance and locked the door. If somebody had waited that late to get their prescription, it was just too bad. They could come back tomorrow. His stomach was screaming for an order of Wendy’s biggie fries.

There was only one customer in the store—a long-haired man in granny glasses with a beard, wearing bell-bottom jeans and an oversized jacket. The old guy was straight out of a history book—San Francisco hippies, 1967. The only thing that spoiled the look was the more modern-looking jacket.

The man had been browsing the isles for ten minutes or so, hands always in his pockets. “Sir, could I please get your help for a minute?” he said.

“Yes, Sir. What do you need?” said the assistant manager.

“I wanted to buy the large container of liquid Cheer, but it’s on the bottom shelf, and I just can’t get down that low to pick it up. Bad knees.”

Poor old guy, thought the assistant manager. “Okay, I’ll be happy to get it for you.”

The man led him to the isle and the assistant manager squatted down to pick up the large plastic bottle. “This one?” He turned his head to look at the old man. But all he saw was something black flying toward his face.

The old man examined the assistant manager lying on the floor. He appeared to be out cold. He returned the gun to the holster underneath his jacket and pulled out a roll of duct tape. He wound it around the wrists and ankles very slowly to avoid making the familiar screeching sound. Then one last piece for the mouth.

Now he would deal with the pharmacist.

“Ma’am? Could I ask you a question?”

“Yes, Sir,” said the young female pharmacist. “How can I help you?”

“I need something for my back. An over-the-counter cream. The strongest thing you’ve got.”

“Okay. That would be capsaicin—the extra strength version. It’s on that isle right there.” She pointed to it.

“Okay. Thanks.”

He walked to the isle and looked for it. After a minute or so, he went back to the pharmacy counter. “Ma’am, I can’t seem to find it.”

“Okay. Just a second and I will help you,” she said as she counted out pills and poured them into a bottle.” She glanced at the weird old man walking back to the pain reliever isle. He walks like a girl, she thought.

When the pharmacist met him on the isle, he stepped back to give her room to locate the cream.

She wondered why he hadn’t been able to find it—right there in front of him. She picked up the box and turned to him. “Here it is.”

But her polite smile vanished when she saw the gun pointed at her chest. She automatically raised her hands.

“Put them down! Now turn around and put your hands behind you.”

The old man holstered his weapon, taped her wrists, and told her to lie on the floor, face down.

He taped her ankles and then he flipped up her skirt, revealing her pink panties. “You’re a sexy thing, aren’t you?” But there was no time for pleasure. He had a job to do. He rolled her to her side, ripped off a piece of tape and stretched it tightly across her quivering mouth and around her head.

He whispered into her ear, “Lie still—if you want to live.” Then he jammed ear plugs into her ears.

The old man quickly moved behind the counter, found a stool and sat down at one of the computers, slumped down so he could not be seen from the street. He keyed in a search for every customer who had filled a prescription for Viagra in

the past 60 days. Then he did a similar search on Prozac, Namenda and several other drugs. He printed out the results of each search. When he was finished, he grabbed the printouts and slipped out the back door.

The assistant manager and pharmacist would be found in the morning. They would give their statements to the police, describing the scary old man. But the police would never find that old man. Because he had worn latex gloves. And because he had disguised his appearance and his voice.

And because he was *not* a man.

*

“Hello?”

“Hi, Baby. I miss you already,” said Carsie.

“Hi, Sweetie. Me too. How’s it going there?” said Elmo.

“Okay, I guess. Grandma is about to show me how to make cherry divinity.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever tasted the *cherry* kind. I do like the white divinity. Hadley makes it at Christmas time.”

“Oh, but this is much better. I’ll bring you some when I come back.”

“Okay.”

“Are you still working? It’s getting late. And I’m sure you’ve been sitting at that computer all day long.”

“Yes, but I’m in the middle of something and I just don’t want to stop right now.”

“Okay, Honey. But don’t stay up too late. I love you.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

Grandma walked into the kitchen as Carsie was closing her cell phone. “Talking to Elmo?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Don’t worry, Sweetie. The wedding will be back on before you know it.”

“I hope so.”

“You did a great job snagging him, by the way. You looked so cute that day—he never stood a chance.”

“Yeah. But I really do love him.”

“Well, that’s fine, as long as you don’t forget what this is all about.”

“I don’t want to think about that.”

“But you’ve got to come through for us.”

“I will. But after that I just want to live my life with Elmo.”

“Happily ever after, huh? You can try. But he might find it hard to believe you weren’t in on the deal.”

“He’ll believe me. He loves me.”

“Yeah.”

“He *will* believe me as long as you and Carnie don’t let on.”

“Look, Honey, when you go in on a scam, it’s really hard to come out clean.”

“But I really think I can, Grandma.”

“Okay. Give it your best shot. I won’t rat you out. Neither will your sister.”

“Thanks.”

“Enough of this talk. Let’s make some candy!”

“I’m ready,” said Carsie.

“Okay, then. First, you need to gather the ingredients.”

Carsie would retrieve each item as her grandmother called it out.

“Here’s what you need: sugar...light corn syrup...that package of red candied cherries on the top shelf...vanilla...and eggs.”

“Oh. I didn’t know it had *eggs* in it.”

“So what if it does?”

“Well, I just worry about Elmo’s cholesterol.”

“That’s what you get for hooking up with an old man, Missy.”

“Grandma!”

“I’m just kidding. Besides, you only use the egg *whites*, so there’s no cholesterol. Of course, there *is* a lot of sugar.”

“That’s okay,” said Carsie. “I won’t let him pig-out on them.”

Grandma led her through each step of the process. She learned that it had to be done in a precise way, even using a candy thermometer at one point. Finally, she dropped rounded teaspoonfuls of the mixture onto a sheet of waxed paper. After a sufficient cooling period, they sampled the candy.

“Mmm, yes. Perfect,” Carsie said.

“And now you know how to do it yourself.”

“Thanks, Grandma. Elmo’s gonna love these.”

Her grandmother put her arms around her and held her close. “You’re so welcome, Carnie.”

Carsie expected a big hug. What she got was a long kiss on the lips. She pulled away.

“Grandma! What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry.”

“And why did you call me *Carnie*?”

*

Macy took a break from reading her romance novel to go downstairs for milk and cookies. But first she peeked into the study and said goodnight to Elmo. She was relieved to see him alone. She half-expected to find Carnie in there, trying to seduce him. Maybe it was mean for her to think of Carsie’s sister in that way. But Carnie deserved it. After all, she had made a sexual advance toward Macy a few nights ago. With Carsie out of the house, who knew what Carnie might try to do with her sister’s fiancé?

And even though she was not interested in Carnie or any other woman in a sexual way, Macy was drawn down to the basement by a titillating curiosity. The Media Room was dark. But she saw a faint light under Carnie’s door as she approached it. She pressed her ear against the door, but heard nothing.

The door jerked open, swinging away from Macy. There was Carnie, standing in the doorway. Her smooth, naked skin reflected the soft glow of the nightlight. Her body was beautiful, perfect. It begged to be touched, caressed. Macy stood in a trance as Carnie’s blazing eyes saw right through her nightgown to the steamy flesh beneath.

Macy shook herself and ran for the stairs. She forgot about the milk and cookies and the romance novel. She locked her door, jumped into bed and pulled the covers over her head.

Chapter 1_5_

The living room clock said 5:58 AM. Cynthia wondered if Greg was going to be on time, or if he would even make it at all. They had worked at her mom's house until nearly 11:00 the night before. They were both getting worn down from the lack of sleep over the past few nights. But she had still managed to get herself out of bed every morning to go for her run. This would be Greg's first attempt.

There was a knock at the front door.

"Good morning. I wasn't sure you'd make it," she said.

"Well, it wasn't easy. But I told you I'd be here at 6:00, and here I am. Hey, aren't you going to be chilly in those shorts? It's 65 degrees out there."

"Only for a couple of minutes. After that I'll get warmed up. Actually, you're going to roast in *that*."

"But I thought you were supposed to wear a sweat shirt and sweat pants when you go running."

"You are—if you want to maximize your sweating."

"Oh, great. So maybe next time I'll wear shorts." Although he could never look *that good* in them, he thought. Wasn't it kind of dangerous for her to be out running the streets early in the morning by herself, looking so cute and sexy? She had been doing it every day since moving to Coreyville a few years ago. But now, he would be along with her, to protect her. And he'd do his best to concentrate on the running—resisting the urge to grab her perfectly shaped butt.

"Ready to go?" said Cynthia.

"Yep. But wait—don't we need a flashlight? It's still dark."

"Here you go." She picked up two flashlights from the small table near the door. "We'll get enough light from the street lights to see where we're going. We'll only need to turn on the flashlights when a car's coming—just to make sure they see us."

“Oh—one more thing,” said Greg. He turned her around and gave her a big kiss. “Okay. Now I’m ready to go.”

But as soon as he had said it, he began to have second thoughts. Maybe they should skip the running today and just lie around on the couch. But she had already opened the door, grabbed his hand, and started pulling him onto the porch.

They alternated jogging and walking, spending more time walking than Cynthia normally did.

By the time they got back to her porch at 7:00 AM, it was dawn, and Greg was exhausted. “It feels like I’m wearing concrete shoes.”

“Then you’d better not go for a swim.”

“Gee, I’m dying here, and my girlfriend is making jokes.”

“You’re not *dying*.”

“My legs are so wobbly, I can barely stand up.”

“Poor baby. You’ll feel better after you eat breakfast. Come on in the kitchen. I’ll give you a glass of orange juice. It’ll hold you until you get to Jane’s.”

While Greg was sipping his juice, she said, “You want to eat lunch with me today?”

“Sure. Where do you want to go?”

“Well, I’m afraid we’ll have to eat in my office. I’ll only have about 30 minutes to spare—at 12:30. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring box lunches from Jane’s.”

“If Jane ever went out of business, you’d starve, wouldn’t you?”

“I guess so.”

Once Cynthia’s mother moved in, she would cook for them. At least that was one thing he knew he’d like about Beverly living there.

“I’d better get going,” said Greg. “See you at 12:30.”

He gave her a goodbye, but-I-don’t-really-want-to-go kiss.

“I love you, Greg.”

It sounded so fresh and magical. And his knees were already weak from the running. How much weaker could they get before he crumbled to the floor, he wondered. “I love you too, Cynthia.”

The sparkle in her eyes made him want to say it over and over.

And Cynthia had begun to believe that the life of love and happiness she had always dreamed of was finally within reach.

*

“You want to ride with me?” said the pastor.

“Sure,” said Greg. He wondered if Dr. Huff had seen the clueless look in his eyes. It had taken a full two seconds for Greg to remember that there was a funeral at 10:00. “Just let me throw on a tie and jacket.”

He had learned to keep a couple of sport coats and ties in his office for just such a memory lapse. A suit would be more appropriate for a funeral, but the immediate family would not see him anyway. They should already be in their seats by the time he arrived. And he would be singing over the sound system from a hidden room.

Greg liked the hidden room concept. One time he was singing for the funeral of a fifty-something year-old man who, without warning, had dropped dead in his favorite recliner. The service was held at a small country church. The widow and daughters started crying in the middle of Greg’s song. So there he was, standing at the pulpit, right in front of them, as they cried their eyes out. He hoped he would never have to do that again.

The 83-year-old woman and her husband had been faithful church members. But the congregation had seen little of their three sons after they were grown and out on their own. They were good ole boys. Nice guys by most standards. But Dr. Huff would use their mother’s funeral to encourage the sons to seriously

consider their spiritual condition. He had done the same at their father's service two years earlier.

Greg was surprised to run into Henry Joe outside the funeral home. All three boys were known by their first and middle names. The other two were Harry Jeff and Harvey John. Henry Joe had followed in his dad's footsteps, making a living repairing the old cars in the little town. He had taken over the shop when the old man finally retired. Henry Joe had replaced the fuel pump on Greg's 1965 Bonneville just a few weeks earlier.

"Hey, Mr. Tenorly," said Henry Joe, just before he took another drag on his cigarette.

Greg hated the smoking, but he appreciated being addressed formally. Henry Joe had apparently learned manners from his mama. "How are doing?"

"I'm okay."

"Sorry for your loss."

"Thanks."

Now Greg needed to move on. He never knew quite what to say to a son or daughter who had just lost a parent. He felt so inadequate to handle that part of his job. He couldn't even remember what people had said to comfort *him* when his mother had died. He had felt such guilt for not being there to protect her. If he hadn't been off at college he could have gone to the store for her that night. Maybe *he* could have avoided the drunk driver's pickup.

Greg went in the door and looked down the empty hallway. He quickly walked to the music room. It was a tiny, with just enough space for two people—if one of them was sitting on the organ bench.

"Hi, Greg."

"Hey, Sally." He didn't even know her last name or anything about her, except that she was always there to play the organ.

"So, you're doing *Amazing Grace* and *Abide with Me*, right?" She was looking at the printed program.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...

Greg had sung that hymn hundreds, maybe thousands of times.

Abide with me: fast falls the even tide; the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide...

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Greg was ready for death, in one sense. He knew he would go to Heaven to live with God and his mother and other family members and friends. But first, he wanted to live a long life on earth. A wonderful life with Cynthia. To have children and grandchildren. In that sense, he wasn’t ready to die at all. Funerals are so depressing, he thought.

*

“Wonder where Carnie’s going?” said Macy, standing at a window in Mallie Mae’s room.

“There’s no telling,” said Mallie Mae.

“I went down to check on Elmo late last night. I wanted to make sure she wasn’t bothering him.”

“Bothering him?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what she’s capable of. She might try to seduce him while Carsie’s gone.”

“Honey, Elmo has a lot of flaws, but being unfaithful isn’t one of them,” said Mallie Mae.

“I know.” Macy hesitated, but then blurted it out. “She’s been coming on to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“The other night she kissed me.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was embarrassed.”

“You think she’s gay? Or bisexual?”

“I don’t know. And then last night when I went down to the basement to spy on her, she opened her door and was standing there naked. She just stood there staring at me.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I ran away. That woman scares me.”

“Sound like she *is* gay.”

“I’m not sure if she’s gay or just some kind of wacko—especially after *that*. She just seems dangerous to me.”

“Well then, just stay away from her. She and her sister will be out of our lives soon.”

“I hope you’re right, Mallie Mae.”

Chapter 1_6_

Carnie had studied her printout from the pharmacy and selected Nancie Jo Gristel as the first ‘volunteer’ for her Hideaway Hospital Clinical Trial. She had learned from Elmo’s internet printouts that Namenda was being prescribed for patients with moderate to severe cases of Alzheimer’s. She had selected Nancie Jo at random from the list and located her house on the map. She hoped it might be easy since the house was at the end of a dead end street. If the driveway was on the dead end side of the house, Mrs. Gristel would be a perfect choice.

Carnie’s 2005 white Chevy Malibu was just one of a few dozen driving around in Coreyville. She had swapped out her license plates with a set she took off a junkyard car, just in case some neighbor actually took notice and remembered the plates. She figured nobody would find it odd to see a nurse visiting an 81 year-old Alzheimer’s patient at 11:00 AM.

The house was on the left, at the end of Bowie Street. She parked in the driveway, behind Nancie Jo’s car, and walked to the side door, near the back of the house. She wondered if Mrs. Gristel was fearful about living all alone. The fact that the old woman’s most-used door faced the woods rather than the other homes seemed particularly dangerous.

As she stepped onto the porch with her medical bag in hand, she heard someone playing the piano. She knocked and waited a full minute. Finally the music stopped and she knocked again. Twenty seconds later the door opened.

“Yes?” said the old woman.

“Hi. Are you Nancie Joe Gristel?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, I’m from Dr. Johnson’s office.”

“Really? I’ve never seen you before.”

“That’s because I’m new. Just started this week.”

“I see. Well, what can I do for you?”

“Dr. Johnson is initiating a new treatment regimen for all his Alzheimer’s patients.”

“Okay. But I’m doing fine right now. And if the doctor wants to see me, I could just make an appointment and go in to his office.”

“Oh, of course you could.” Carnie smiled sweetly. “But he’s so excited about this new medicine that he wanted to get everybody started on it right away. It’s getting rave reviews from NIH.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m sorry. The National Institutes of Health.”

“Okay. Come on in.”

Carnie went in and followed Nancie Jo to the living room. The bench was pulled away from the piano, and a piano score was opened on the music rack.

“I heard you playing,” said Carnie, nodding to the piano. “Sounded nice.”

“Thanks. I’m not really all that good, but I’m taking lessons. Now what did you say your name was?”

Carnie didn’t answer. She pulled a small pistol out of her medical bag and pointed it at Nancie Jo.

“What are you doing? I *knew* you weren’t from Dr. Johnson’s office! Who are you?”

“Never mind that. You’re coming with me. And you will do exactly as I say—if you want to live. Let’s go.”

Carnie motioned for Nancie Jo to walk toward the kitchen, and she complied. But when the old woman got close to the door she stopped and bent over in pain, placing her left hand on the stove for support, clutching her hip with her right hand.

“What’s the matter?” said Carnie.

“It’s my hip. It goes out on me sometimes.”

“Just take it slow and you’ll be—”

Nancie Jo swung around.

She seems to moving okay now, Carnie thought. Moving *fast*.

By the time Carnie saw the iron skillet in the Nancie Jo’s hand it was too late. It whacked her on the side of the head and she flew sideways onto the floor, dropping the pistol and the medical bag. Nancie Jo flung the skillet down and scrambled for the gun. Carnie tried to shake off the dizziness and run toward her. But Nancie Jo picked up the pistol and pointed at Carnie.

“Get back!” said Nancie Jo.

Carnie stumbled backward. Her vision was getting clearer. Out of the corner of her eye she noted the knife block, to her right, on the counter. It held eight or ten knives of various types and sizes. “Look, Lady, I was taking you to a hospital for clinical trials—for your Alzheimer’s.”

“Yeah, right. I may have Alzheimer’s, but I’m not stupid.”

“I’m telling the truth. You would be treated by Dr. Elmo Mobley.”

“The *pediatrician*?”

“Yes. He just found out his mother has Alzheimer’s and he’s desperate to find a cure.”

Nancie Jo had heard that Mallie Mae Mobley had Alzheimer’s and that Elmo had taken a leave of absence from his practice.

“There *is* no cure for Alzheimer’s,” said Nancie Jo.

“That’s what I’m saying. He wants to *find* a cure.”

“I see. So, Elmo told you to come to my house and pull a gun on me and force me to participate in his clinical trial. Yeah, that sounds like Elmo alright,” said

Nancie Jo, with all the sarcasm she could muster. She inched her way toward the wall phone on her right.

“You know, you kind of remind me of my grandma,” said Carnie.

“Really? So, your grandmother points a gun at you sometimes?”

Nancie Joe took the receiver off the hook and was about to dial.

“No. But if she did, she’d be smart enough to release the safety,” said Carnie.

In the split second it took Nancie Jo to look down at the gun, Carnie grabbed a butcher knife from the knife block and launched it. When Nancie Jo looked up, it was too late. The handle of the knife hit her squarely in the forehead and bounced off.

Nancie Jo’s glasses flew off her face as she fell backward and collapsed onto the floor. The gun fell out of her hand, but it was only a few inches away. As she focused every ounce of her willpower, rolling to her stomach and reaching for the pistol, Carnie leaped at her.

Nancie Jo picked up the gun and was about to roll back to shoot Carnie. But Carnie snatched the knife off the floor and thrust it into Nancie Jo’s back. And as always, once her anger had been triggered, it quickly escalated into blind rage. She twisted the knife and ripped it out sideways. Then she gripped it with both hands and chopped at the corpse repeatedly with all her might.

*

“Here’s your BLT and Fritos.” Greg handed Cynthia the flimsy white cardboard box and gave her a quick kiss. “And your diet Coke.”

“Thanks. And I suppose *you* got the turkey.”

“That’s right. How’d you guess?”

It was the only kind of sandwich he ever ordered at Jane’s. Cynthia had come to realize that Greg was a creature of habit. And he took comfort in his habits. Fortunately, most of them were good ones.

“I’m sorry we have to rush,” said Cynthia.

“That’s okay. It’s worth it just to see my baby for a few minutes.”

“Thanks. You too, Sweetie.”

Greg said a blessing and they began to eat.

“Oh, yeah, you had a funeral this morning, didn’t you? How’d it go?” said Cynthia.

“Fine—for a funeral. It wasn’t so bad, really. But I would hate it if I had to do the pastor’s job. Talking about how wonderful the person was—especially if they weren’t. And you have to stand up in front of the family and try to convince them that it was for the best—which is not so hard if the person was old and sick. But what if they were young? What if it was little girl who got hit by a car? I’m just glad *I* don’t have to do it.”

“I *couldn’t* do it,” said Cynthia.

“I couldn’t do *banking*. Loaning poor unsuspecting souls a bunch of money and then foreclosing on their house.” Greg frowned playfully.

“I don’t do that. If they can’t pay, I just politely suggest that they sell a kidney.”

“Wonder how much a kidney goes for these days?”

They laughed. He checked his watch. His time with Cynthia always went by so fast. “By the way, do you think your mom will go to church with us on Sunday?”

“I think so. I haven’t talked to her about it, but she *is* Baptist. And it’s the only Baptist church in town.”

“Yeah, but she could drive back to Marshall.”

“I would try my best to talk her out of that.”

“Did you remember that we have to take separate cars tonight?”

“Yes. What time will you be finished with your lessons?”

“I should be done by 8:00—unless somebody cancels. If so, it might be a little earlier.”

“Okay. It seems like there’s still an awful lot left to pack.”

“Oh, I’m sure we can get all done by Saturday, even if we have to pull an all-nighter tomorrow night.”

“I hope we don’t have to do *that*,” said Cynthia.

Greg agreed. He had often pulled an all-nighter with Cynthia in his dreams. But in his dreams they weren’t *packing*.

Chapter 1_7_

“Greg asked me today whether I thought you would be going to church with us this Sunday,” said Cynthia, as she wrapped another plate and put it in the box.

She and her mother were in the kitchen, packing dishes and cookware.

“I guess so. To be honest, that’s going to be the hardest thing about moving,” said Beverly. “I could still go to church *here* if I really wanted to. It’s only a fifteen minute drive.”

“I know.”

“But I don’t think I should. If I’m going to move to Coreyville, I need to be a part of that community. And that includes going to church there. So, I might as well get started this Sunday.”

“Well, I’m proud of you, Mom. I think you’re doing the right thing.”

“But don’t get me wrong—I do plan to stay in touch with my friends here in Marshall. I just won’t see them as often. But we can email and IM.”

“IM? Y’all instant message each other?”

“Sure. We try to stay up with the times. You think we’re too old for technology?”

“No, I didn’t say that.”

“A couple of times I’ve even sent a text message.”

Cynthia laughed. “You’re pretty cool, Mom.”

“You got *that* right, Dog.” Beverly attempted a rapper pose. “Too much?”

“Yeah—that’s a little scary.”

Cynthia heard the Bonneville in the driveway. “There’s Greg.”

She let him in the kitchen door and gave him a long, tight hug.

But before he got too excited, he pulled away.

She pretended to be hurt, but then gave him a quick kiss on the lips and grinned at him. She understood. And she loved the fact that she could turn him on so easily.

She checked the clock. It was 7:58.

“You’re early. So I guess your last student cancelled,” said Cynthia.

“No, she didn’t cancel. She just didn’t show up.”

“One of your teenagers?”

“No, it was Nancie Jo Gristel. She’s 81. And she never does that. She always calls me if she has to miss. She was out for a couple of months because of her Alzheimer’s. But the doctor put her on some new medication, and she’s been fine ever since.”

“One of my good friends just found out *she* has it,” said Beverly. “It’s a terrible disease.”

“Did you try calling her?” said Cynthia to Greg.

“Several times. But then I figured maybe she just fell asleep.”

“It’s easy to do when you’re leaning back in your recliner watching TV,” said Beverly.

“Yeah, that could be it,” said Cynthia.

“Well, I just hope she’s okay. I’ll give her a call in the morning,” said Greg.

*

Before going inside, she sat in her car a few minutes to put on the blonde wig. She was wearing a hot pink blouse, black leather mini-skirt, and knee-high boots. When she walked in, every man in the bar was instantly seduced. Beer mugs hung suspended at open mouths. She could have chosen any one of the poor saps, and they would have gladly barked like a dog at her command.

The anticipation faded in the eyes at each table as she passed them by. She had no intention of spending time with any of them, although her body language suggested otherwise. The man sitting alone in the far corner was her ultimate destination. He had taken a glance when she came in, but then went back to studying the bubbles in his beer.

“Well?” she said.

“Well, what?” said Jake, as he finally looked up.

“Remember me?”

“Jennifer? Is that you?” He stood.

Carnie had forgotten the fake name she had used Sunday night. “Uh...yeah.”

“Well, sit down and let me buy you a beer,” said Jake.

“Okay.”

Jake hollered to the bar tender, “Hey, Bill. Two more beers, please.”

“You look great as a blonde.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course, you looked just as cute before you bleached it. I like brown hair.”

“Actually, it’s a wig. I just wanted to try a different look.”

“So, where have you been keeping yourself?” said Jake. “I thought we had a lot of fun the other night. But then you disappeared.”

“Yeah. I’ve been busy.”

“Okay, I get it. Don’t worry—I’m not looking for a wife, or even a girlfriend.”

Carnie shot him a wry smile. “Me either. So, you’re just looking to get laid, huh?”

“Well, no, not necessarily.”

“Then I’m wasting my time here. See you around.” Carnie stood.

“Whoa, wait a second. I said I wasn’t *looking* to get laid. It’s not that I don’t want it. I’m just not *searching* for it.”

Carnie sat down. “But what if it just came along and bit you in the butt?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it quite like that, but yeah, I’d be interest—if it was somebody I really liked.”

A young waitress delivered their beers and walked away slowly, hoping to hear more of the conversation.

“Somebody like me?” she said with a sexy smile.

“Yeah.”

“Then why are we wasting our time sitting here, Jake?”

“Good point, Honey. Let’s go. I’ve got plenty of beer at home in the fridge.”

Jake threw some bills on the table and they hurried out. The other men watched in envy and amazement. What was so great about *him*?

*

Carnie followed Jake’s truck to his house. As soon as they were inside, he took her in his powerful arms and started kissing her. He was twice her size, and she barely knew him. Most women would not put themselves in such a vulnerable situation. But Carnie was fearless. She kissed him with enough passion to set a *dead* man on fire. But after a few seconds she pulled away.

“Let’s slow it down, Big Boy.”

“What? I thought you wanted to have sex?” He knew he could have had her right then if he wanted to. She wouldn’t have been able to stop him. But he wasn’t that kind of man. He would never force himself on a woman.

“Maybe I do. But first I’d like to get to know you better. Let’s sit and talk a while, and have a drink or two.”

“Okay. Make yourself at home and I’ll grab us some brewskis.”

Jake walked into the kitchen while Carnie sat down on the couch.

The living room furniture looked like a page out of a 1975 Sears catalog. But at least it’s clean, she thought—except for a thousand dust mites living down deep in the fabric. Yuk.

Jake handed Carnie a Coors Light. “So, what do you want to talk about, Jennifer?”

“How about a little question and answer game. You can ask me any question, and I have to answer it honestly. Then I ask you a question. And we take turns until we both agree to stop.”

“Sounds kind of dangerous.”

“Yeah. But *you* get to ask the first question.”

“Okay.” Jake thought for a few seconds. “You acted sort of funny tonight when I called you ‘Jennifer.’ Is that really your name?”

“Oh, good one, Jake. The answer is ‘no.’”

He waited for her to go on.

“So, what *is* your name?” he said.

“Sorry, it’s my turn to ask a question,” said Carnie.

“Ah, come on.”

“You have to wait your turn.”

“Okay. Ask me a question,” he said.

“What is your favorite position?”

“You mean, for sex?”

“No, for the gearshift in your truck.”

“Okay. That would have to be the missionary position,” said Jake.

“So predictable.”

“Hey, I like what I like. Now, my turn. What’s your real name? And remember, you have to be honest.”

“My name is Carnie.”

“Then why did you tell me your name was Jennifer?”

“Nope. My turn.”

“Oh, alright.”

“Have you ever killed anybody?” She watched him closely for a reaction.

“What?”

He’s stalling, thought Carnie. He *has* killed. Good. “Have you ever killed anybody?”

“Of course not. What kind of a question is that?”

“Hey, if you don’t ask interesting questions, the game gets boring real fast. Could I get another beer?” she said.

“Sure.” Jake took her empty can and headed for the kitchen. Then he stopped, spun around and said, “Ah-ha! That was a question. So it’s gonna be *my* turn when I come back.” He walked into the kitchen shouting back to her, “I got you that time, Baby. You ain’t so smart after all.”

When it came time for their third, fourth and fifth beers, Carnie acted as waitress. Jake never noticed she was not really drinking hers. She kept them coming until he was drunk.

“I don’t think you were being truthful earlier when I asked you if you’d ever killed anybody,” said Carnie.

He grinned at her. “Aw, come on, Honey, don’t you trust me?”

“I’m not sure. But I won’t sleep with a man if I think he’s lying to me.”

“But I’m not lying. Not really.”

“Not really? What does that mean?” she said.

Jake lowered his voice and looked around the room and into the kitchen, as though someone else was in the house. “It was an accident.”

She glared at him, waiting for details.

“One night I was on my way home. The old man shouldn’t have been out walking in the dark. It was after midnight. What was he doing out there anyway?”

“Did you call the police?”

Jake didn’t answer.

“So, you were drunk and you ran over a man and you just left him there to die.”

“I was scared. I could have gone to prison.”

“How do you know you actually killed him? Sometimes people get hit by cars and just walk away,” she said.

“It was in the paper the next day.”

“You’re a murderer, Jake.”

“No, no. It was an accident.”

“Okay, fine. Let’s change the subject. How would you like to make some big-time cash?”

“Oh, Honey, you don’t have to pay me,” he said, as he began to unbuckle his belt.

“Very funny. How does ten-thousand dollars sound?”

He seemed to sober up a little. “Sounds *good*. What’s this about?”

“Have you ever heard of a clinical trial?”

“Sure. That’s where doctors get a bunch of people to try some new kind of medicine, to see if it really works. Hey, I don’t want to be no guinea pig. Is that what you want me to do?”

“No. What I need is for you to help me round up some volunteers.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard.”

“The catch is that we’ll be *forcing* them to participate.”

“Oh, I get it. You want me to do something illegal. Well, no thanks. I don’t need the money that bad.”

“Jake, I was just kidding. But, man—I really had you going. You thought I was serious. That’s funny.”

“Well, you sure *sounded* serious.”

“I was just testing you. And you passed. So, let’s get ready for bed.”

“I’m ready,” said Jake, although he was so drunk he could barely walk.

They went into his bedroom. By the time Carnie had stripped to her underwear, Jake had already jumped onto the bed, naked.

“Let’s take a shower first,” she said.

“Together?”

“Yeah.”

Jake hopped up and hurried into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and waited for the hot water while watching Carnie. When she slipped the lacey red bra off her breasts, he said, “Forget the shower. I want you now.”

But she held her hand out firmly. “If you touch me, I’m leaving right now.”

He stepped back. The shower had begun to steam up the room.

She said, “Let’s get in,” and pulled down her panties and kicked them aside.

Jake felt tremors of anticipation as he pulled back the shower curtain and stepped in. Carnie got in at the back of the tub.

“Turn around and I’ll wash your back,” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am.

She located the soap dish, picked up the bar of Dial and began to slowly lather his back. His groin began to suck the blood away from his brain and other vital organs. His hands were against the front shower wall for support.

“If you keep that up, I may not be able to hold it,” he said.

“Then you’ll just have to reload. Okay, now put your arms down at your sides so I can wash them.”

He would have honored any request she made.

It was a shame he had rejected her offer. She really liked him. And she would have enjoyed sleeping with him. But she had told him too much. And he might talk.

His hands were at his sides and he was very drunk. He would never see it coming. She would smash his head into the shower tile as hard as she could. He would offer little, if any, resistance. And if the first attempt had only dazed him, she would pound his skull into the edge of the tub until he was gone.

The police wouldn’t be thinking murder. They’d see a guy who got drunk and then stupidly tried to take a shower, slipped down, and busted his head open. Too bad. Another drunk kicked the bucket. Case closed.

On the other hand, she really liked the big lug.

“Carnie? Where are you going?”

She quickly toweled off, picked up her underwear, and walked out of the bathroom.

“Carnie? You can’t leave me like this. Come back, Honey.”

Chapter 1_8_

“Maybe I should have waited until next week to start jogging with you,” said Greg.

“Why? You’re doing fine. It’s only your second day. You’ll get used to it,” said Cynthia.

“Yeah, but staying up until after midnight packing and then getting up at 5:30 AM is pretty tough. Why don’t we skip tomorrow’s run?”

“Well, I suppose that would be okay since it’s moving day.”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be a long one.”

It was 6:30 AM and Greg didn’t know if his 34-year-old body could endure the second half of the jog.

“I don’t remember some of these streets from yesterday,” said Greg.

“That’s because we didn’t take this route yesterday.”

“Good. I’m glad to know my memory’s still functioning in spite of the exhaustion.”

“Yeah, I like to vary my route. I think it’s a little safer.”

“That’s a good idea. Especially if you’re by yourself. Hey, that’s Nancy Jo Gristel’s street.”

“The woman who missed her piano lesson last night?”

“Yeah. Do you mind if we run down her street?”

“No problem.”

They turned onto Bowie Street.

“Do you know the address?” said Cynthia.

“No, but I think it’s at the end of the street.”

When they reached the dead end, Greg said, “That’s it.”

“Are you sure? How do you know it’s not that one?” Cynthia pointed to the house across the street.

They stopped in front of her driveway.

“See that car? It’s the only ‘59 Plymouth Fury in town. Check out those fins. Her husband kept in tip top shape for forty years. He had it completely restored back in the ‘80s. But since he died it’s beginning to show its age. It has pushbutton automatic transmission. Very weird, but cool.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” said Cynthia.

“But, wait. That’s odd.”

“What?”

“She told me she always parks it in the garage at night—to protect the paint job.”

“Maybe she just forgot.”

“I’m gonna knock on her door.”

“But, Greg, it’s too early.”

“Nah. She gets up by 5:00 AM at the latest. She used to practice piano when she couldn’t sleep—until the neighbors complained. And her lights are on, so she must be up. I just want to make sure she’s okay. She might have forgotten to take her Alzheimer’s medicine. She could be disoriented.”

They walked onto the front porch and Greg knocked while Cynthia looked through the partially opened drapes.

“Greg, come here and look at this,” said Cynthia.

“What?”

“On the carpet, beside the piano—is that a pair of glasses?”

“Yeah. Looks like she dropped them. Now *that’s* a problem. She’s blind as a bat without those glasses.”

“There’s a light on in that other room too. Probably the kitchen. Maybe she’s in there.”

They walked around to the side of the house and up the driveway to the little porch at the kitchen door. Greg began to knock. The curtains on the door window were made of a thin material. They tried to see through it.

“It’s really hard to tell for sure, but do you see something on the floor?” said Greg.

“Like a body?”

“I’ll call the police.”

Greg pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911.

As soon as he had finished and hung up, Cynthia said, “We’re being watched.”

Greg looked across the street and saw the man in his robe. He was just standing there, staring at them.

“I want to talk to that guy.” Greg walked down the stairs.

Cynthia followed him.

The forty-something year-old man had walked out to pick up his newspaper when he saw Greg and Cynthia. He must have thought they were up to no good, thought Greg.

“We think something happened to Mrs. Gristel,” said Greg.

The man said nothing, but continued to stare at them.

“Looks like she’s on the floor in the kitchen. And she’s not moving.”

Still no response.

“She takes piano lessons from me. That’s how I know her.”

“Nurse,” said the man.

“Nurse? What do you mean?” said Greg.

“Nurse came to take care of her. I thought she must feel bad.”

“When did the nurse come?”

“Yesterday. Or today. I thought she must feel bad. I eat spaghetti. My favorite. And garlic toast. Nurse come.”

“I see.”

The man’s wife walked out to meet them. A half-smoked cigarette barely clung to her lower lip. “Don’t pay him no mind. He ain’t right in the head.”

“Nurse came,” said the man, to nobody in particular.

“We think your neighbor, Mrs. Gristel, is in trouble. I called 911.”

“That’s too bad,” said the wife. “Come on, Bubba. Let’s get you back in the house.”

“Uh, Ma’am, do you mind if I ask him another question?” said Greg.

“It’s a waste of time. But go ahead.”

“Bubba? Do you mind if I call you Bubba?” said Greg.

“Just ask the question,” said the wife, stomping her cigarette butt into the grass.

“Did you remember what kind of car the nurse was driving?” said Greg.

“White.”

“Okay, good. But did you notice anything else about the car?” said Greg.

“Ecstasy. Ecstasy on car.”

“See? I told you,” said the wife. “Come on Bubba. You ain’t doing nobody no good out here.”

Bubba and his wife walked away and went into their house.

Greg and Cynthia could hear the wife yelling inside. “How many times have I told you, Bubba? Never go out of the house! Now, sit down and shut up!”

“Nice couple,” said Cynthia.

Greg smiled and shook his head.

A patrol car pulled up in front of Nancie Jo’s house, and Greg and Cynthia walked over to greet the officers.

“Are you the one who called 911?” said one of the officers.

“Yes, Sir,” said Greg.

“What’s your name, Sir?”

“Greg Tenorly. And this is my girlfriend, Cynthia Blockerman.”

The two policemen said hello to Cynthia. They all started walking toward the house.

“Y’all don’t live in this neighborhood, do you?”

“No. We were out for a jog and I decided to check on Mrs. Gristel. I’m her piano teacher, and she didn’t show up for her lesson last night.”

“Are we talking about the old woman who lives here? *She* takes piano lessons?”

“Yes, she does,” said Greg. “So we knocked on her door.”

“And I saw her glasses on the floor,” said Cynthia.

“So, we went around to the side door and saw what appeared to be a body on the floor,” said Greg. “We couldn’t really tell for sure—it’s hard to see through the curtains.”

Greg and Cynthia followed the officers to the side door and watched one of them try to look in. He checked the doorknob to see if it was locked. Then he stepped back and kicked the door several times until it broke free.

They stayed outside and watched the officers go in.

In less than a minute, one of them walked out and said, “Yeah, she’s dead.”

“What happened?” said Cynthia.

“She’s got multiple stab wounds to the back. It’s pretty gruesome. And we’re going to need to get statements, so y’all stick around.”

The officer walked back in. They could hear his partner on his radio, calling for an ambulance.

“When your mom hears about this, she may change her mind about moving here,” said Greg.

“Yeah, but this woman lived alone. Mom will have me to look out for her.”

But Greg wondered why anyone would want to kill this sweet old lady. Knowing the reason behind the murder wouldn’t bring her back. But it might make him feel better. A few months earlier, he only had himself to worry about. Now, he had a girlfriend and a potential future mother-in-law to protect.

*

Macy Golong liked to take advantage of the early morning and late evening hours. These were the only times she knew there would be no interruptions. For the rest of the day, she had to be on-call to meet every need of her employer, Mallie Mae Mobley. If the old woman yelled to her and she didn’t respond immediately, Macy could expect her cell phone to ring within seconds. Sometimes hours passed between calls. But knowing that one could come at any moment kept her in a state of uneasiness.

She took another sip of coffee and turned the page.

Orlando walked onto the porch carrying a whip. His thick, black locks were blown back to one side by the warm summer wind. His unbuttoned shirt flapped in the breeze, revealing his hard, sun-darkened pectorals and abs.

“You will give yourself to me—NOW,” he said, in thunderous tones, cracking the whip on the marble floor.

Jessica wondered how she had gotten herself into this situation. How dare he command her to yield to his lurid longings? She would never give in to him. Never. And yet, as she looked into his smoldering eyes, she was not sure how long she could resist. Surely, unimaginable pleasure awaited her, if she would only submit to him. No. She would not give herself to this savage animal.

“So? What will it be?” he said. “Torture or paradise?”

If she resisted, what guarantee did she have that he would not whip her mercilessly, and then force himself upon her anyway?

But it did not matter. For she had already made her decision.

Macy flipped the page. Her cell phone rang.

“Macy? Please come to my room,” said Mallie Mae.

Chapter 1_9_

The old black phone on the nightstand was coated with a dried up paste consisting of beer and dirt, speckled with Nacho Cheese Doritos dust. And right now Jake wanted to take a sledge hammer to it. Not because it was disgusting. No, *that* he could live with. But the stupid thing wouldn't quit ringing. He had no idea how many times it had already rung.

But his splitting headache discouraged any movement toward the phone. The mere blink of an eyelid might push him over the edge, he thought. And, oh how he wanted to avoid what happened last time, when it felt like a plumber was working his toilet plunger on Jake's open mouth until it sucked out the previous night's pepperoni pizza and beer, and sloshed it all over the floor.

He started counting the number of times his head throbbed between rings, wondering how much pressure the human skull could withstand. It felt like his was about to blow.

Had the old phone finally gone haywire? he wondered. No caller would let it ring that many times.

It had to stop.

"Hello?" he said, choking back the barf.

"Jake? Are you okay?"

"Carnie?"

"Yeah. How are you feeling? You don't sound too good."

"Well, let's see. I'm 32, but right now I feel like I'm 102."

"Yikes."

"In fact, if this is what it feels like when you're 102, I don't want to live that long."

"I guess we had a little too much to drink last night."

“I don’t know how you were able to drive yourself home,” said Jake.

“I didn’t have as much as you did.”

“And why did you leave like that? You got me all lathered up and rock hard, and then you took off. I’m beginning to think you’re just a big tease.”

“No, not at all. Next time, Baby. Next time for sure. But I realized we needed to talk about some things first.”

“Why do women always want to *talk* everything to death? Why not just do it, and talk about it later?”

“This is important, Jake. Do you remember telling me your big secret last night? And don’t say too much—somebody might be listening in.”

Why had he told her? He knew why—because he had gotten drunk and stupid.
“What about it?”

“I looked it up in the newspaper archives online and got all the details. But don’t worry. I won’t tell anybody.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“And you won’t tell anybody *my* secret, right?”

It took him a couple of seconds to remember what she had proposed about forcing people to take part in a clinical trial. “Right. I won’t tell.”

“And you’ll help me, right?”

“Now wait a minute. I told you I didn’t want any part of that.”

“But you’ve changed your mind because you want to be sure I keep your secret.”

Jake wondered how he had fallen into this trap. “Uh, yeah. Right.”

“Good. I’ll drop by your house tonight at around 8:00. See you then, Honey.”

“Bye.”

Why hadn't he gone with his gut feelings when he met her on Sunday night? He knew she was trouble. But her luscious body promised heaven, and her lurid eyes flickered with hellfire. A sexy bad girl was always hard for him to resist. So, he had gambled and lost. Again.

If he was lucky, maybe he could do this job without landing himself in jail...or the morgue.

*

It was Friday morning, and Elmo Mobley realized he had not spoken to his mother since Tuesday. He'd been working practically around the clock researching Alzheimer's, hoping to find some brand new miracle treatment for her. But the hopelessness of the disease was beginning to sink in. He could not save his mother. No matter what he did, she would deteriorate into a pitiful state as she died a slow death. The most he could hope to do was prolong her current quality of life for a little while.

And although he could never make up for all their years of estrangement, he wanted to start spending as much time with her as possible. He loved Carsie, and had been excited about starting a new life with her, but it would be selfish of him to get married right now, he thought.

He decided to go up and have a heart-to-heart with Mallie Mae. She would be surprised to see him, since he rarely went upstairs. When he reached her room, the door was closed. He was about to knock, but then he heard Macy's voice.

"Elmo's still working in his study day and night," said Macy.

"I guess he loves me after all," said Mallie Mae.

"Guess so."

Elmo felt guilty about eavesdropping. He raised his hand to knock, but then hesitated when he heard Macy speaking again.

"But how long do we have to go on with this?" said Macy.

"As long as it takes."

“I don’t know if I can keep it up, Mallie Mae.”

“Sure you can—if you really care about him.”

Elmo knocked.

The conversation stopped.

After a few seconds, the door began to open and Macy said, “Well, I thought you were going to let her starve. Oh, Elmo. I thought you were Hadley, bringing breakfast. Sorry.”

“Who is that man?” said Mallie Mae. She looked frightened.

“It’s Elmo,” said Macy.

“Who?”

“Elmo. Your son,” said Macy.

“Oh,” said Mallie Mae. But she didn’t seem to understand.

Elmo motioned for Macy to follow him out into the hallway.

“Tomorrow we’re going to have a fun day together,” said Elmo.

“Really? Doing what?” said Macy.

“I’m taking y’all to the Dallas Zoo.”

“The zoo?” Macy looked confused.

“Yeah. Have you ever been?”

“No.”

“You’re kidding. I can’t believe you’ve never been there. The TV commercial says it’s 95 acres of fun,” said Elmo. “And it is. So, have her ready to go by 7:00 AM.”

“But do you really think she should be going out in public in her condition?”

“Sure. She’ll be fine. It’ll be good for her,” said Elmo.

“Well, okay then.”

“Great. So, I’ve got to go make dinner reservations for tomorrow night.”

“Where?”

“It’s a surprise. But you’re gonna love it,” he said, as he walked away and went down the stairs.

As soon as he was out of sight, Macy walked back into the bedroom, closed the door, and rushed to Mallie Mae’s bed.

“What’s gotten in to him?” said Macy.

“What did he say?”

“He’s taking us to the Dallas Zoo tomorrow.”

“What?”

“And then to some fancy restaurant for dinner. We’re going to be with him all day. He’s going to figure it out. He’ll see that you’re just faking. I should tell him you’re not feeling well enough to make the trip.”

“No. This is good. If I can convince him that I really *am* in bad shape, maybe he’ll go ahead and dump his fiancée. He’s feeling so guilty about being mean to me for all those years that he’ll want to spend every waking minute with me until the day I die.”

“But you don’t want to have to keep faking Alzheimer’s forever. And what’s going to happen when you finally tell him the truth?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it, Dear.”

That’s going to be an awfully tall bridge, thought Macy.

*

“Hello?”

“Johnny, this is Elmo. I’m surprised I caught you in your office.”

“Hey, Elmo. Yeah, I was just about to see my first patient. How’s it going with your mother?”

“That’s what I called you about. I’ve got a hypothetical for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Suppose somebody was trying to *fake* having Alzheimer’s disease and they came to you for a diagnosis. Could they fool you?” said Elmo.

“Well, yeah, in theory. The only way to know for sure whether someone has Alzheimer’s is to look for plaques and tangles in the brain tissue. And you can only do that after the patient dies, in autopsy.

“So, I run blood tests and brain scans to rule out other causes of the symptoms, and I talk to the patient about general health, past medical problems, and the ability to perform everyday activities. Then I give memory tests, and check language and counting skills. So, a person could lie about how he’s feeling, and he could deliberately blow the language and memory tests, and other tests, I suppose. But why would anybody *want* to?”

“Okay, thanks, Johnny. Bye.”

“Whoa, don’t leave me hanging. What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to tie you up any longer. I know you’ve got patients waiting on you.”

“They’re used to it. Now, what’s this about?”

“I think Mallie Mae’s faking.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I overheard her talking to Macy this morning.”

“Macy’s the one who brought your mother to my office, right?”

“That’s right. I heard mother saying that she and Macy would have to keep doing

something as long as it takes. And when Macy expressed doubt that she could keep it up, my mother assured her that she could, if she really cared about *me*.”

“That’s interesting. Just how much *does* Macy care about you?” said Johnny.

“That’s not the point. I think Mallie Mae is faking so I’ll feel guilty and call off my wedding.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve already postponed it because of her. You know how she loves to interfere with my life. Remember how she drove me crazy when we were in medical school?”

“Yes, I do. So, maybe she *is* faking. But how are you going to prove it?”

“It’s hard to trip her up while she’s lying in bed. So, I’m taking her and Macy to the Dallas Zoo tomorrow.”

“Get her out of her comfort zone.”

“Right.”

“Well, Buddy, I hope it works.”

“Me too.”

Chapter 2_0_

Greg and Cynthia had remained at the murder scene for nearly an hour, watching the police, giving statements and talking to neighbors. So, Greg had arrived at the church later than usual, and stayed later, and now he was in a hurry to eat lunch at Jane's Diner before his first lesson at 1:00.

But as he rushed down the sidewalk to Jane's, he still made the effort to look for new bumper stickers. It was an addiction. He could not pass by a car without checking its bumper. It was always fun to find one he'd never seen before—like the one on the car in front of Coreyville Copy Shop.

If ignorance is bliss, then you must be ecstatic.

Not very nice, he thought, but it was a new one for his collection. He filed it with hundreds of others in his mental database. Not the best use of a brain, but they say most people only use 10% anyway.

"So, I hear you've had quite a morning," said Jane as Greg walked through the door. She was standing behind the counter at the soda fountain, filling glasses with various soft drinks.

"You could say that." Greg wasn't the least bit surprised that Jane had already heard about it. By now, he thought, everybody in town knows. He walked over to the counter. "She was one of my piano students."

"Yeah, I know. But why were you and Cynthia at her house at 6:30 in the morning?"

"We were jogging."

"Oh, yeah. Your new health kick. But why did you stop at Nancie Jo's house? What tipped you off?"

"Nothing, really. I was concerned about her because she missed her lesson last night. And she didn't call to cancel, so I called her. But I got no answer. Now I wish I'd gone to her house last night. Maybe I could have done something."

“Yeah. You could have got yourself killed.”

“That’s true. But I still feel bad about not checking on her sooner.”

“Well, from what I hear, she was already dead by noon. So, there was nothing you could have done. Do the police have any leads?”

“You tell *me*,” said Greg.

“Hey, I don’t know *everything* that goes on in this town,” she said with a sly grin.

“Well, I talked to the neighbor across the street, but he wasn’t any help. I told the police what he said, but they didn’t bother to interview him.”

“Oh, I know who you’re talking about. No wonder the police didn’t care what he had to say. He’s crazy.”

“He did seem kinda *off*.”

“Not *kinda* off. *Way* off.”

“Anyway, he said a nurse came to visit Nancie Jo on Thursday and that she was driving a white car, and something about the word ‘ecstasy.’”

“See? The guy’s wacko,” said Jane as she walked away with the tray of soft drinks.

Greg mulled it over. A nurse...white car...ecstasy... How awful it must be living in a fog, never making any sense. Ignorance is bliss, they say. Maybe not. Where had he just read that slogan? Oh, yeah—the bumper sticker on the white car in front of the copy shop.

If ignorance is bliss, then you must be ecstatic.

Ecstatic. ECSTASY. The bumper sticker on the white car in front of the copy shop! He ran out the door to look at the car.

But it was gone.

*

It was nearly 8:00 PM, and Carnie was driving to Jake's house when her cell phone began to ring.

"I miss you. And I want to get married," said Carsie.

"I know. I miss you too. But don't worry. The wedding will be back on track before you know it."

"Really? Is Mallie Mae doing better?"

"Not that I can tell. But I think he's about ready to marry you in spite of her condition."

"Why? I talked to him yesterday, and he didn't *sound* any different."

"Uh...I don't think you can tell over the phone."

"I should come back."

"No. I mean, you need to give him a little more time. He's missing you more every day. Eventually, he won't be able to stand it. Then he'll beg you to come back and marry him."

"Wow. I hope you're right, Carnie."

"Just be patient, Sis. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay. Bye-bye."

Carnie parked in the driveway and walked up to Jake's front door.

When she knocked, Jake swung the door open immediately. His eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw her. But it was almost too much—like looking directly at the sun. He wasn't sure whether she was wearing a dress or a long, stretchy shirt. But she was definitely not wearing a bra.

"You're on time," said Jake.

"Of course."

"How are you doing tonight?"

“I’m fantastic.”

Yes, you are, thought Jake.

“Because everything’s working out perfectly,” said Carnie. “Sit down and I’ll tell you about it.”

They sat on the couch.

“For our clinical trial I had planned to gather four volunteers. The tricky part was that they had to have Alzheimer’s disease. So, I got some records from the local pharmacy and picked out a few patients. But most people with moderate to severe cases don’t live alone and they certainly don’t go out by themselves.

“So, that meant taking them from their homes and having to deal with a caretaker, which could get messy. But then I realized I could just round up four older women who *don’t* have the disease, and make them pretend they *do*. The whole clinical trial thing is a farce anyway.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Okay. If you tell anybody any of this, I’ll have to kill you. And we wouldn’t want that.”

Jake had no doubt that Carnie was capable of murder.

“My sister, Carsie, is engaged to Dr. Elmo Mobley. They were supposed to get married tonight, but he postponed the wedding after he found out his mother has Alzheimer’s.”

“Okay. But what does the clinical trial have to do with it?”

“Because, if I can get Elmo to believe that we’ll try all of his different treatment ideas to find the best one for his mother, then he will have done all he can to help her. And then he would feel free to marry my sister.”

“I don’t know, Carnie. That’s sounds kinda crazy.” He really thought it sounded absolutely insane. What Carnie was planning was unethical and probably illegal. A respected doctor like Elmo Mobley wouldn’t go along with it—even if he thought it would save his mother. But Jake needed to be careful what he said. He

couldn't afford to make Carnie angry.

"No, you're wrong. It's going to work. And anyway, if it doesn't, I have a sure-fire backup plan."

"What's the backup plan?"

"You know what? I'm getting bored," said Carnie, standing up. She turned her back to Jake and bent over.

He didn't know what to expect.

She grabbed the bottom of her dress and pulled it up and over her head as she spun back around. She was completely naked. "Let's do it."

And they did. Many times and many ways, throughout the night.

After a couple of hours, Jake began to wonder if there was such a thing as *murder by sex*. He knew he had sold his soul to the devil. But for the time being, he just didn't care.

*

Macy Golong didn't have a love life—at least, not in the real world. She loved vicariously, through her romance novel heroines and her dream-life alter ego. If it were not for her job, she might well have been swept away by her intense fantasies, never to be seen again in the physical realm.

A few years back she had purchased *Total Dreamcall*, written by some doctor in Australia according to the internet site. In it, he described a technique for recalling dreams in great detail. He claimed that dreams could be replayed, as though they were movies. She had learned to focus on remembering her dreams immediately upon waking—to think of nothing else until she had total recall, or as the doctor put it, Total Dreamcall.

The so-called doctor might have been a quack. But regardless, she had become an expert at recalling her dreams. They were quite vivid, and included talking and sometimes even background music. So real were her dreams and her recollection of them, that they were beginning to overshadow her waking life.

How do we know what we really did, and what really happened to us yesterday, for example? We know because we remember it. But what would happen if our memory of dreams was the same as our memory of real events. How could we tell the difference? We could ask somebody else who was there. But what if there was no one to ask?

Suppose you remembered breaking into your neighbor's house last night and slitting his throat. And then going home, taking a shower and going to bed. If your neighbor is alive the next day, you know it was a dream. But, what if he's dead? And what if his throat has been cut? Are you certain you only *dreamed* killing him?

This is how real Macy's dreams had become.

The church had been decorated beautifully. And it looked as though every resident of Coreville was in attendance. The pipe organ was proclaiming the glorious entrance of the bride.

Macy beamed as she walked down the aisle. She noticed Carsie in the crowd, on the groom's side. What was she doing there? Macy had won Elmo. Carsie had lost, and should not have been at the wedding. But nothing would spoil her special day.

She stood with Elmo proudly before God and man. She glanced at her handsome groom. Her dearest dream had finally come true.

But she started to feel a laser-like burning at the back of her head. She whipped around and located the source. It was ...HERSELF. The person staring at her was HER. But how could that be?

She blinked and she was looking at Carsie. But they had swapped places. Carsie was now in the wedding dress, standing with Elmo. Macy was in the congregation, looking at her.

No!

She woke up. It took a full five seconds for her to realize it had been a dream.

Sometimes her dreams were no better than real life.

Chapter 2_1_

Hadley was a proud man, and rightly so. He had joined the army as a teenager and served for five years, including two years in the Korean War. Segregation in the armed forces was ended during that war. He had served admirably, and left the army as a decorated Sergeant.

Following his military service, he returned to a segregated society that gave little respect to African Americans. He took a job working for Elmo's grandfather, Milstead Mobley, as a manservant. The salary was more than adequate, but he had planned to look for something better. He dreamed of owning an automobile dealership some day.

But soon, he felt like he was right where he belonged. And when he married, his wife came on staff as a maid. The couple didn't have children, although they tried. But they were never lonely living with the Mobleys. They were family.

And the thing that had kept Hadley there for all those years, even after the passing of his dear Eloise, was respect. A mutual respect. Henderson Benjamin Hadley placed a high value on respect. So, even at age 77, he never had thoughts of leaving.

These days, Hadley was primarily a cook, but readily accepted any duty that was entrusted to him. However, when Dr. Mobley had started to tell him about the trip to the Dallas Zoo, he was less than thrilled, though he didn't allow his feelings to show. But then the doctor had surprised him by saying that Hadley wouldn't need to accompany them.

Dr. Mobley had suggested that Hadley take the day off and go visit his brother. And when he balked, the doctor *insisted* that he take a fishing holiday, and that he was not to come home until Sunday afternoon. Elmo knew Hadley loved to fish.

It was now 6:45 AM. Hadley whistled a tune as he finished arranging the clothing and other items in his old tweed suitcase. He turned to the full-length mirror on the inside of his closet door and checked his attire. Oops. He removed the brown fedora and replaced it with his fishing hat.

His bedroom was upstairs, at the rear. Mallie Mae's door was open, so he decided to stop by. He took off his hat and looked in.

"Good morning, Ladies."

"Morning, Hadley," said Macy. She was brushing Mallie Mae's hair.

"Good morning, Hadley," said Mallie Mae. "Wish you were going with us."

"Me too, Ma'am," he said. "But Dr. Mobley insisted that I go to Karnack."

"To see your brother?" said Macy.

"Yes, Ma'am. And do some fishing." He held out his fishing hat.

"I haven't been to Caddo Lake in years," said Macy.

Hadley's eyes sparkled with excitement. "It's fabulous. We'll spend the whole day out there. And then tonight for dinner, it'll be all the Catfish and hush puppies we can eat."

"Sounds delicious, Hadley," said Macy. "So, you're spending the night?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Dr. Mobley told me to stay gone until tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, y'all have fun," said Macy.

"Oh, I intend to, Ma'am," said Hadley with a big grin.

He walked out of the room and down the stairs to the garage and out the back door. Hadley kept his vehicle in the old barn, which was also where he worked on the car from time to time. It was a shiny black 1956 Buick Roadmaster Riviera with red interior.

He was surprised to see Carnie's Malibu missing. She had been parking it in the barn the last couple of days.

Hadley flipped open his cell phone as he drove away from the house.

"Hello?"

“Is this Horatio’s Fish Camp?” said Hadley.

“Hey, Ben. You on your way?” said Horatio.

“Yes, Sir. And tell Alma she’d better be ready to cook up a huge mess of Catfish tonight.”

“Oh, you wanna do some *serious* fishing, huh?”

“You got *that* right.”

“Well, I already hitched up the boat. So, hurry up.”

“I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

Hadley never drove his prized Roadmaster over 50 mph. He changed the oil every 2,000 miles and waxed it four times a year.

“Sorry about the late notice,” said Hadley.

“No problem. You know I’m always ready to throw a line in the lake. But why did Dr. Mobley wait until this morning to give you the day off?”

He rarely had a full day off, and he couldn’t remember the last time he had done an overnighter. But he didn’t mind. He was part of the family, after all.

“Well, just yesterday he planned an all-day trip to the Dallas Zoo with his mother and Macy, and I guess he realized this morning it would be a good time for me to get away too.”

“Well, that was nice of him. But I’m surprised he didn’t want you to drive them to Dallas.”

“Yeah, me too. It seems like everybody in the house is acting kinda funny lately.”

“Really? What do you mean?”

“We just found out this week that Mrs. Mobley has Alzheimer’s.”

“Oh, Lord.”

“Yeah, it’s awful.”

“I hope me and Alma never get it.”

“Only thing is, I’m not sure she actually has it.”

“Well, didn’t she go to the doctor?”

“Yeah. Dr. Mobley sent her to a specialist in Dallas, and he ran a bunch of tests on her, and they came back positive. But I haven’t seen her having any problems. Her memory seems fine.”

“Yeah, but they say the memory kinda comes and goes. Especially when you first get it.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, hurry up, Man. We’re burning daylight.”

“See you soon, Horry.”

*

“I thought we were going to wear old, worn-out clothes today?” said Greg.

“This *is* old,” said Cynthia.

“It’s just not possible for you to look bad, is it?”

“I’m not wearing *makeup*.”

“See. That’s what I’m talking about.”

“Quit.” She nearly blushed.

“You wanna go through McDonald’s on the way out?”

“Sure.”

“Didn’t it feel good to skip the run this morning and sleep a little longer?” he said, as they walked to his car.

“Well, I...”

“You *didn’t* skip. You got up early and ran without me, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t help it. I never miss my run.”

“I should have known. Well, *I* had no problem skipping it.”

“I hope you’re not quitting on me.”

“No, I’m just going to need a day off every once in a while.”

“That’s fine. I’m so proud of you for getting in to it. I know it’s not easy.”

They picked up some breakfast sandwiches and coffee at McDonald’s, and headed toward Marshall to pick up the rental truck, load it, and move Beverly to Cynthia’s house.

“Did you see this morning’s paper?” said Cynthia.

“Just the front page. I guess the police still don’t have a clue who did it.”

“It just doesn’t make sense. They didn’t even take anything.”

“Honey, shouldn’t we tell your mom about it? Especially since the murder on her street was one of the reasons she agreed to move.”

“Not today. I don’t her to freak out. Besides, what’s she going to do—cancel the truck and unpack all the boxes?”

“Yeah. I guess it’s too late for her to change her mind.”

It was a mild late-September day—perfect for moving. It had been an easy decision to put the top down on the Bonneville. There was not a cloud in the sky. And the bright sun provided enough heat to compensate for the wind blowing through their hair. Not that Greg had much hair. He would throw on a baseball cap for the numerous trips between the truck and the house. On a day like this, an uncovered, balding head was guaranteed to get a sunburn.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you about the car I saw yesterday.”

“What car?”

“When I walked down to Jane’s for lunch there was a white car parked in front of Coreyville Copy Shop. And it had a bumper sticker that read:

“If ignorance is bliss, then you must be ecstatic.”

“Oh, I’ve seen that one before. Or I heard it somewhere.” said Cynthia.

“But do you remember what that man said? You know—the odd guy who lives across from Nancie Jo’s house.”

“No. What?”

“He said a nurse visited her in a white car, and something about the word ‘ecstasy.’”

“Okay...,” said Cynthia, not sure what he was getting at.

“Ecstasy. Sounds kinda like ‘ecstatic.’ If ignorance is bliss, then you must be *ecstatic*.”

“I don’t know, Greg. Seems like you’re grasping at straws.”

“But here’s another thing: I’ve never seen that bumper sticker before. And you know I always read them.”

“So, you think it’s somebody new in town? It could be somebody who’s lived here forever and just put on a new bumper sticker.”

“I should have walked over there to see who it was.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I didn’t think about the ecstasy/ecstatic thing when I first saw it. And once I did, the car was gone. But I think I’m gonna go over there Monday and see if I can find out who was driving that car.”

“You really think they noticed? And that they’ll remember?”

“Maybe. It’s worth a shot.”

“Suppose they do remember, and the person was a stranger—what good will that do?”

“Maybe they paid with a check or a credit card. I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve got to try.”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t hurt to ask, I guess. But don’t you think you should tell the police?”

“Not yet. Not after they embarrassed me in front of all those people. They practically laughed in my face when I suggested they interview the neighbor.”

“Well, who knows? Maybe you’re on to something. You might just solve the case. Then who’ll be laughing?”

Chapter 2_2_

Jake squinted at the clock on his nightstand through blurry eyes. What a night! Carnie had nearly killed him with her insatiable appetite for sex. He reached back to feel the passenger side of the bed. Of course she's gone, he thought. No surprise. But then he smelled the irresistible aroma of fresh perked coffee. Was she still there?

He was anxious to find out, but as soon as he stood, he felt the overwhelming urge to drain his bladder. He could barely hold it until he got the lid up. But when he released, an intense burning sensation nearly brought him to his knees. It was a little late to be questioning whether Carnie had any diseases.

He inspected himself. No wonder he was in pain—it looked like somebody had taken a couple of pipe wrenches to the thing. But he knew it would regenerate. It always did. So, he let go, and the burning began to subside after a few seconds.

Jake walked into the kitchen and saw Carnie sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading the sports section.

“Hey, Sleepyhead,” she said.

“I thought you already took off.”

“Nope. We’ve got to talk about our plans for tonight.”

“What plans?” Hopefully she’s not talking about sex, he thought. He’d need a couple of days to recuperate.

“The Mobley house is empty today. Nobody will be home until late tonight.”

“I see,” said Jake as he poured a cup of coffee.

“So this is the perfect time to go out and get volunteers for our clinical trial. We’ll wait until dark and then go over to the Wal-Mart parking lot. It’ll be easy to round up four old women.”

“Hang on, Carnie. If I walk up close to an old lady in the parking lot at night, she’s likely to scream.”

“You’re right. That’s why *I’m* gonna do it,” said Carnie. “I’ll smile and be polite until I get close enough. Then I’ll show them the knife. All you have to do is drive and hold a gun on the ladies until I’ve got them all in the van. That’s easy enough, huh?”

“I guess. Wait. What van?”

“Don’t worry—I’ll get us a van.”

There must be some way out of this, he thought. Think harder, Jake.

He picked up the main section of the paper and read the headline.

Elderly woman brutally murdered.

Then he read the details of how Nancie Jo Gristel had been stabbed to death in her own home. And that no valuables were taken. And that the police were clueless as to the killer’s motive. “This is awful.”

“What’s that?” she said without lowering her paper.

“This old woman who was murdered.”

“Oh, yeah—I read that story. Terrible shame.”

Jake’s body felt heavier by the second, as though he and his chair would soon sink down through the floor. He didn’t even have to ask. He knew Carnie had killed the woman.

*

“Did they really love us, Grandma?” said Carsie. She was standing in her grandmother’s living room, looking at pictures on the mantel. Sometimes she seemed more like a child than a 30 year-old.

Her grandmother looked up from her crossword puzzle. “Of course they did. Why do you always ask that?”

“But if they had been home with us that night instead of...”

“I know. But they weren’t, and what’s done is done.”

Sylvia Slitherstone had been babysitting her grandchildren when her son and daughter-in-law were killed in a car crash. The girls were both under five years old when she became their new mother.

Their parents knew they were taking a chance every time they went out in that old Ford station wagon. The power steering had grown erratic and the brakes were weak. Otherwise, they might have been able to avoid the dump truck that veered into their lane that rainy night. Sylvia knew that if her family had been wealthy, like the Mobleys, her son and daughter-in-law would still be alive. She was sure of it.

“Were Mama and Daddy happy? I mean, you know—were they madly in love?” said Carsie.

“They were crazy about each other. And about you girls. Y’all were a picture perfect family.”

Carsie turned back to the pictures on the mantel.

“Yes, we were, Grandma. We were picture perfect. We look so happy.”

“And now you’ll have you chance for happiness with Elmo.”

“Yeah, if he can ever learn to deal with the fact that his mother is dying. But Carnie thinks he’s coming around. I just hope she’s right.”

“Carnie is determined to get you two married. And you know Carnie. She always gets what she wants.”

Carsie smiled as she thought about it. “That’s right. Carnie *does* always get what she wants. How does she do that?”

“She just never takes ‘No’ for an answer. That’s just the way she is.”

Carsie walked over and sat on the sofa, slid her shoes off and stretched her legs out across the cushions. So, what’s going to happen after we get married? How are you going to get the money? Am I going to just write you and Carnie a check?”

“Something like that. But we have to wait until you’ve been married a few

months to avoid the possibility of an annulment. Then, if Elmo gives you any trouble over the money, you'll simply divorce him and take your half."

"But I don't want to divorce him."

"Well then you'll just have to get him to cooperate. You're sure you never signed a prenup?"

"I haven't signed *anything*."

"Good. Don't."

"Grandma, I really love Elmo."

"I know you do."

"And I don't want anything to hurt our marriage."

"I understand. But don't forget you agreed to follow the plan. Without it, you never would have met Elmo in the first place."

"I know. But I did, and I fell in love with him."

"Falling in love was *not* part of the plan."

"I couldn't help it. He's wonderful. And I don't want to lose him."

"Maybe you won't have to."

*

"So, this is your best spot, huh?" said Hadley.

"Yes, it is," said Horatio.

"I don't know, Horry. We haven't even had a nibble, and we've been sitting here for nearly two hours."

Horatio sat up straight, faking an air of dignity. "Sir, do you dare question the validity of my Catfishery proficiency?"

Hadley took up the challenge. “On the contrary, Your Highness. I would never impugn the veracity of your asseveration.”

Horatio slumped back down. “I give. You win. I don’t have a dictionary on the boat.”

“I always win.”

“Okay, then. How about a little wager? Whoever catches the most fish gets to watch while the loser cleans all of them.”

“What if the loser can talk Alma into doing it for him?”

“That would have to be some awfully smooth talking,” said Horatio. “And *you* just might be able to pull it off, Brother—if you were thirty years younger.”

They laughed softly, so as not to scare off the fish.

“I’m afraid Elmo may be thinking about reopening the lab,” said Hadley.

“Uh-oh.”

“I told you he took a leave of absence from his medical practice so he could find the best treatment for Mallie Mae.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he’s been on the internet all day long and half the night, trying to find some answers.”

“So, he might go down there and start experimenting.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Of course, he’d have to restock. There are no chemicals or other supplies down there.”

“But he’s a pediatrician, not a pharmacist,” said Horatio.

“That didn’t stop his father. Morford was an emergency room doctor, remember?”

“Yeah. Nothing could stop Morford. But Elmo doesn’t know about the *other*

rooms, does he?”

“Oh, no. Morford didn’t want him to know, so I never told him. Even Mallie Mae still doesn’t know.”

“I can’t believe we actually got it done without them finding out,” said Horatio.

“Mallie Mae was on vacation in Europe with her sister. Remember? And Elmo was working in a clinic in Dallas.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Mallie Mae knew Morford was building a lab down there. But she didn’t know about the rest of it. And she was happy to be away while construction was going on.”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“But I’m kinda surprised none of your crew ever let the secret slip,” said Hadley.

“Hey, I handpicked those men, and I had a lot of faith in them.”

“And you paid them well.”

“Yes, I did, because Morford paid *me* well.”

“Well, I just hope Elmo doesn’t get too nosey down there,” said Hadley. “If he finds the other rooms...”

“Some secrets are best kept.”

Chapter 2_3_

Cynthia was driving Greg's Bonneville, following her mother, who was following Greg in the U-Haul. They had loaded the truck with boxes and all the furniture Beverly wanted in her bedroom. They also took her dining table and chairs because they were much nicer than Cynthia's. Two garage sales, one at each house, would allow them to get rid of the excess furniture.

Cynthia loved Greg's car—mostly because it made her feel close to him. She was sitting where he sat, her hands holding the steering wheel he held with his hands. Hands that sometimes, during a long kiss, worked their way down her back to embrace her butt. How wonderful it would be to wake up next to him every day, and go to bed with him every night.

Her first husband had been abusive. But why hadn't she seen it coming? Shouldn't she have been able to recognize an abuser when she met him? She had been attracted to his big, lean body. The muscles were definitely a turn-on. Surely she had sensed danger just beneath the surface. He had gone into a rage once when they were dating. But even after he hit her that night, she went on with the wedding plans anyway. How foolish. Young women can be so naïve, she thought. We think we can fix whatever's wrong with a guy.

But she was a little older now, and a lot wiser. With Greg, there was very little that needed fixing up. She would help him get in better physical shape. But even that was more about his health than his looks. And she knew that in the worst case scenario, she could live with him not being in optimal shape. Because Cynthia knew Greg's feelings were sincere and deep. He truly cared about her in every way. He wasn't just some guy trying to get into her panties. But he *did* want in—oh, did he ever. But not until marriage.

Cynthia wondered if Greg was going to pop the question soon. It seemed like he had nearly done it a couple of times already. But with her mother moving in, Greg might have put his wedding ideas on the back burner. She hoped not. They could make it work. Or, they might have to get another house...

*

"This is a lovely restaurant, Lilman," said Mallie Mae.

“Mother, you know I hate that name. Please call me ‘Elmo.’”

“Lilman was my grandfather’s name,” said Mallie Mae to Macy.

Macy nodded as though this was news to her.

“Okay, I’ll try—if you’ll start calling me ‘Mom.’”

Elmo couldn’t remember when their relationship had ever been ‘natural.’ He must have been close to her as a child. But if so, those childhood memories were long forgotten. “Okay ...Mom. And I’m glad you like the restaurant.”

Elmo had been surprised at how normal his mother had been all day. If she was faking Alzheimer’s disease, she wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“Very fancy,” said Macy, feeling a bit underdressed in the skirt and blouse she had worn all day at the zoo.

“Very expensive,” said Mallie Mae, perusing the menu.

“I like the live band,” said Macy.

“Yeah, they’re playing music from the big band era,” said Elmo.

Mallie Mae pretended to be reading her menu while she listened carefully to the conversation between Macy and Elmo. She had been observing them all day. They had clowned around a lot, and at one point, were throwing food at the monkeys—until a zookeeper made them stop. She had never seen Elmo act so childishly. It was refreshing.

After several hours of watching them interact, she had a revelation—Macy was the perfect match for Elmo. She had proved to be loyal and trustworthy. And Elmo was obviously crazy about her, although he didn’t seem to know it.

“I love this song,” said Macy. “Do you know the name of it?”

“Sure. *I’m Getting Sentimental Over You*. It was Tommy Dorsey’s theme song.”

Oh children, Mallie Mae thought—if you only knew how much the words of that song apply to you. Lilman had no business marrying Carsie. His eyes sparkled

when he looked at Macy.

Once they had ordered, Mallie Mae said. “Well, Lilman? I mean, Elmo. Aren’t you going to ask this beautiful young lady to dance with you?”

Macy was caught off guard by Mallie Mae’s suggestion, and looked a little embarrassed.

“Well, sure. Macy?” He stood and extended his hand. “May I have this dance?”

Macy looked at Mallie Mae.

“Go on, Honey,” said Mallie Mae. “I’ll be fine.”

Macy stood and took Elmo’s hand, and they walked to the dance floor. But her elation turned to disappointment when the song ended before they could even start dancing. “It’s over.”

She turned to walk back to the table, but Elmo was still holding her hand. And he was not moving. She looked back at him.

“Don’t give up so easily,” said Elmo, in a sweet, playful voice.

The orchestra started playing another tune.

“There we go,” said Elmo.

Macy smiled at him. It was an uncensored smile, and she wondered if she had just given away the long-held secret of her heart.

And in that moment, Elmo finally realized her deepest feelings for him. He wondered how he had missed it all those years. He had always repressed his desire for her. After all, at 37, she was 19 years younger than Elmo. He was just too old for her. But that reasoning no longer rang true, since he was now engaged to a 30-year-old.

“What’s the name of *this* song?” she said.

“*I’m in the Mood for Love*,” he said, gazing into her eyes as though he had never seen them before.

Macy was so afraid she would wake up. What if it was just another dream? “I’m in the mood for love too,” she said.

Elmo smiled as he took her in his arms and began to dance with her. “It’s the name of the song.”

“Huh?” she felt slightly dizzy.

He stopped dancing, leaned over and spoke softly into her ear. “*I’m in the Mood for Love* is the name of the song.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m not.” He kissed her lightly on the forehead. The electricity he felt between his lips and Macy’s warm skin was so magnificent he was caught by surprise, then by guilt. He had a fiancée.

Macy’s entire body surged with emotion, and she nearly fainted.

Mallie Mae delighted in watching them on the dance floor. When the song was over, they returned to the table, talking and grinning.

“Y’all make a handsome couple,” said Mallie Mae, beaming at them.

Macy and Elmo were amazed by Mallie Mae’s stamp of approval. They were still smiling at each other when Elmo’s cell phone rang.

“Just ignore it,” said Mallie Mae.

Elmo glanced at the phone display and said, “It’s Carsie.”

Mallie Mae was perturbed by Carsie’s timing. Things had been going so well.

“Hi, Carsie,” said Elmo. “...No, we’re about to eat dinner. Then we’ll head home...Okay, Baby. I’ll call you when we get home...You too.”

“Sorry about that,” said Elmo to Macy and his mother.

Then he and Macy noticed that something was wrong with Mallie Mae.

“Mom, are you okay?”

“Mallie Mae?” said Macy.

Mallie Mae’s look of confusion morphed into fear. “I...I...wet...”

“Oh, no,” said Elmo.

Macy lifted the table cloth and looked underneath. Liquid was dripping off the sides of Mallie Mae’s chair, quickly forming several spots on the carpet.

“I’ll take her to the ladies room,” said Macy.

“Do you need help?” said Elmo.

“No, thanks. I think I can do it,” said Macy.

“I didn’t mean to,” said Mallie Mae. “I’m sorry.” She began to sob.

Macy helped her to her feet. “It’s okay. I’m here to take care of you.”

Elmo watched as Macy walked his mother toward the restroom. She was holding Mallie Mae’s purse behind her as they walked, attempting to hide the large wet spot on the back of her dress.

The ladies room was empty.

“I can’t believe you did that,” said Macy.

“What? You think I wet myself on purpose?” said Mallie Mae.

“Well, you did it right after Carsie called, so I figured—”

“—hey, you know I don’t want her as a daughter-in-law, but I would never purposely humiliate myself in a crowded restaurant.”

“I’m sorry. What happened? Did you just start peeing without knowing it?” said Macy.

“I don’t know. I was just sitting there, and then suddenly I felt wet. I don’t even remember doing it.”

Poor Mallie Mae, Macy thought. She had faked Alzheimer’s to manipulate her

son. Now, maybe she really did have it.

Chapter 2_4_

Freddy's Fenders was a small used car dealership, located less than a mile from Jake's house. Carnie left her car at Jake's while she went down to give Freddy some business. She didn't need a flashlight, thanks to the moonlight.

She was dressed in a cute little exercise outfit. She figured a sexy 29-year-old seen on the streets of Coreyville after dark might arouse suspicion. But not if Miss Sexy was *jogging*. Some wives might have to put their husbands' eyes back in their sockets, but she didn't mind that.

The sticks in her hands were not really sticks. They were poster tubes—one of which contained a large screwdriver. The ring of auto jiggle keys was in her pocket.

The tiny portable office building had not been *portable* in years. It had a small office, a bathroom and a little storage room. Once you were in Freddy's office and he'd get between you and the door, you'd be hard pressed to escape without buying one of his junky cars.

A lamp illuminated the desk and little else, and a 'Closed' sign hung in the window. Most of the vehicles in the front lot had '\$500 down' scribbled across their sad faces. They seemed to sense they were past their prime—shined up to look their best despite their age. But Carnie had no interest in them. It was the dark blue full-size van that had caught her eye earlier in the day.

This is just too easy, she thought, as she reached into her pocket for the jiggle keys. The first key didn't work. Neither did the second. She looked around to make sure there was still nobody watching. She tried several more. Key number six was the winner. She opened the door. Now she would use the screwdriver to pop the ignition and then work a little magic with the wiring and...

"Hold it right there," said a rumble low-pitched voice.

She turned around and saw Freddy himself—all 363 pounds worth, pointing a pistol at her.

"Hey, don't point that thing at me," said Carnie. "This is *my* van."

“No, Missy, this is *my* van,” said Freddy. “And you are on *my* property, breaking into my van.”

Carnie started to cry. “But you don’t understand. When I broke up with Billy, he stole my van. I reported it to the police, but they haven’t done a thing to find it. So, I started searching all over Hallsville—that’s where I live. Then I looked in Marshall and Longview too. My sister’s been driving me all over the place trying to find it.”

“So, where *is* your sister?” Freddy looked around.

“She already left. I told her I would be fine, now that I found my van.”

“Well, I don’t care what you say. This van belongs to me and I have the paperwork to prove it. I’m calling the cops.”

“Oh, come on, Freddy. You *are* Freddy, right?”

“That’s right. And you don’t mess with Freddy or his cars,” he said as he flipped open his cell phone.

Carnie walked toward him.

“Stay back.” He pointed the gun at her head.

She ignored his warning and moved in closer and placed her hand on his chest and began to rub it lightly and gaze into his eyes. “Now Freddy, I’m sure we can work something out.”

“What are you doing?” Freddy was losing focus. He must call the cops, he thought.

Then she put her arms around his huge body. She still had a poster tube in her left hand.

Freddy was in a daze. When was the last time an incredibly sexy young woman put her arms around him and pressed her smoking hot body into his? Never. Was he still holding his cell phone? He wasn’t sure. And where was the gun? His hands were numb. But his arms were around her exposed midriff. He loved the feel of her smooth, tight skin.

Carnie removed the cap from the poster tube behind his back and pulled out the large screwdriver. She rubbed her breasts from side to side across his chest a couple of times, and said, “How’s that feel, Baby?”

“Don’t stop now,” he said.

“I wonder what would happen if I reached down into your pants?” she said, as she pulled back a little.”

Freddy didn’t speak. He just let his arms fall to his sides as she pulled away. Do whatever you want, Baby, he thought.

Carnie threw her right hand into the air.

By the time he looked up and saw the shiny, sharp object in her hand, it was too late to raise the gun or even step back. He was a dead man, and he knew it.

She thrust the screwdriver deep into his chest. She expected him to fall down, but he didn’t. For a moment she wasn’t sure she had hit the mark. He just stood there, dazed. Then he began to raise the gun.

She jumped toward him and grabbed the arm with the gun and tried to wrench it from his hand. But he twisted the pistol more and more toward her.

“Die, you fat butt!” she said, ripping her fingernails into his hand.

But her words made him stronger, more determined to kill her. Just a couple more inches over and he would blow a hole in her heart—if she even had one.

Carnie realized she was losing the battle. She could not overpower this bull of a man. She swung her right leg back like in high school. She had been captain of the soccer team. This one is for the win, she thought. She threw her leg forward with all her strength, and plunged her shoe up into his crotch. It was a kick that would have rocketed the ball way beyond the length of the field.

Freddy dropped the gun and his cell phone and rolled to the ground in excruciating pain. He was still breathing and moaning when she yanked the screwdriver out of his chest. The blood began to gush. He would be gone in a few seconds, she thought. Nobody would find the corpse until morning. She used his shirt to wipe off the screwdriver. Then she picked up the pistol. Too

easy for the cops to get fingerprints off of it, she thought.

She climbed into the van, popped the ignition, started the engine, and drove to Jake's house.

When she pulled into the driveway, Jake walked out to the van. "Where'd you get this thing?"

"From a buddy," she said.

"A buddy?"

"Well, he *was* a buddy—for about a minute. Now he's not. Get in."

"Okay. Just a minute—I need to turn off some lights and lock the door."

"Get in now!" said Carnie.

Jake walked around to the passenger's side and got in.

"This thing stinks," he said.

"You'll get used to it."

"Smells like your *buddy* used it to haul dead fish."

"My buddy *is* a dead fish."

Jake didn't want to know what she was talking about, so he shut up.

Carnie pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot.

"Now, how are we going to pick up women here?" said Jake. "There's a guard driving around the parking lot."

"That guy on the little electric golf cart?"

"Yeah. He may be old, and he probably doesn't even have a gun, but all he has to do is dial 911 and we're in big trouble."

"He's not gonna be a problem." Carnie parked the van.

“Here he comes.”

“Watch this,” she said, as she stepped out of the van.

She waved to the guard as he approached.

He saw her, and drove to where she was standing. “Do you need help, Ma’am? Dead battery? Flat tire?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you. I just wanted to tell you I’m meeting both of my grandmothers here and taking them out for a fancy dinner. They think they’re coming to help me pick out some material for drapes. In fact, neither of them knows the other’s coming.”

“I see.”

“I hope that’s okay. Because I know we’re really not supposed to do that. You’re only supposed to park here if you’re shopping at Wal-Mart.”

The old guard smiled. “Well, Honey, don’t worry. It’ll just be our little secret.” He winked at her.

“Oh, you’re wonderful. Thanks so much.”

“No problem. Have a nice time with your grandmothers.” He drove away.

*

“Well, at least everything’s out of the truck,” said Greg.

“Sorry about your garage,” said Beverly to her daughter. “I didn’t realize I had so much stuff.”

“That’s okay, Mom,” said Cynthia. “I don’t mind parking my car outside for a while.”

“Y’all getting hungry?” said Greg.

“I could eat a horse,” said Beverly.

“What did you have in mind, Sweetie?” said Cynthia to Greg. “I’m pretty

grungy. I don't think I'd want to go out to eat."

"Why don't we order pizza?" said Greg.

They agreed on a large pepperoni, and Greg pulled out his cell phone and walked out of the room to call in their order.

"Honey, would you mind helping me with my hair in the morning?" said Beverly.

"Sure, Mom."

"I want it to fix it up nice for church. So, I really need to wash it tonight. When we finish eating I'll run down to Wal-Mart and get some more of my shampoo."

"You don't need to go out tonight. I have shampoo."

"No, Honey, there's a special brand I use. It's the only kind that works right for me."

"Okay. I'll go with you," said Cynthia.

"Oh, don't be silly. You just said you were too grungy to go out."

"But I hate for you to go out alone at night—"

"—now wait a second. If I had known you were going to treat me like a child when I moved in with you, I would have just stayed in Marshall."

"Alright, fine. Go by yourself."

"That's more like it," said Beverly.

They both smiled. This living together thing would take some work, but they knew they could do it.

Chapter 2_5_

“Didn’t you forget a couple of things at the house?” said Jake.

“Nope. We’ve got everything we need,” said Carnie.

They were sitting in the stolen van at Wal-Mart, waiting for their first victim.

“What about the knife? You were going use it to scare them and make them get in the van? And you forgot the gun. I was supposed to point it at them to keep them quiet. We better go back. We can do this some other night.”

“Look in the glove box,” said Carnie.

Jake twisted the latch and opened the glove box, and a light came on inside.

“Hey, ain’t this *my* screwdriver?”

He examined it. “What’s this red stuff on the handle? Blood? Don’t tell me you killed somebody when you stole this van?”

“Of course not. That’s probably red paint. Quit getting so freaked out about nothing.”

“And this ain’t *your* gun, is it? I can’t believe I got myself into this mess.”

Carnie grabbed his shirt collar and got in his face. “Do you want to go to prison?”

“No.”

“Then shut up and settle down. Otherwise we’re gonna get caught.”

She grabbed the two weapons and handed the gun to Jake.

He studied the gun a few seconds, and then said, “You’re not so smart.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You gave *me* the gun, and you just have a screwdriver.”

“So, what? You’re gonna shoot me? You think you just might shoot me? Well, go ahead. If you’re gonna do it, do it now, Jake!”

Jake thought seriously about shooting her, but he couldn’t pull the trigger. He wasn’t a killer. The one person he *did* kill was by accident—it wasn’t murder.

“Do it, Jake! Go ahead and kill me!”

She reached out and clamped her hands around Jake’s hand, forcing him to point the gun directly at her chest. Then she latched onto Jake’s trigger finger with both of her thumbs and began to squeeze.

“No! Stop!” He couldn’t point the gun away from her, and he couldn’t stop her from making him pull the trigger.

The gun clicked.

Carnie started laughing as she released Jake’s hand. “You fool—you think I would actually kill myself?”

“Don’t do that to me! And why did you unload it?”

“Look, Jake, what if you were holding the gun on the old women and you accidentally shot one of them? You’re already worried about going to prison for your hit and run. How do you feel about lethal injection?”

The look of fear on his face gave the answer.

“Okay, so I will escort each lady into the van. And you will point the gun at them to keep them quiet and make sure they don’t try to escape. Any questions?”

“No.”

Carnie looked toward the store to see who was coming out. “Look, Jake. See that old woman walking out by herself?”

“Yeah.”

“She looks like a fine candidate,” said Carnie. She got out of the van and put the

screwdriver in her left hand upside down to conceal the blade behind her arm.

The woman was carrying two plastic bags in her left hand, and was holding her keys in her right hand. Carnie wondered where her purse was. Maybe she had her driver's license and credit card in a pocket.

"Ma'am, please be careful out here," said Carnie when she was fifteen feet away.

The woman seemed confused.

At a distance of five feet, Carnie said, "Be careful. The guard told me somebody reported a purse snatching tonight."

"What guard?"

"That guy who rides around the parking lot in the golf cart."

"Oh. And it happened here? Tonight?"

Carnie was standing two feet from the woman.

"Well, I didn't even bring my purse with me."

Carnie laughed. "So, you outsmarted the guy."

"I guess I did." The woman smiled.

"I'm Carnie. What's your name?"

"Harriet."

Carnie put her hands behind her and transferred the screwdriver to her right hand. Then she put her left arm around Harriet.

"Harriet, I have a favor to ask."

"What's that?"

"I need you to come with me, and not make a sound, okay?"

"Oh. I'm sorry, but I need to get home."

Carnie whipped out the large screwdriver.

Harriet gasped.

“Just act normal and do exactly as I say.”

Carnie walked her to the van, opened the sliding door, and told her to get in the back seat.

Harriet flinched when she saw the big man in the front seat pointing the gun at her.

Carnie closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side. Before she opened the door, she checked for another target. She spotted a woman who appeared to be in her 80’s walking out. She had a purse on her left arm, but no bags. Carnie figured the woman couldn’t find what she wanted. But if she was looking for a large, sharp screwdriver, Carnie would be happy to fix her up. She started walking toward the woman.

When she was twenty feet away, the woman yelled, “Hurry up.”

Was she talking to me? wondered Carnie. Sure, I’ll hurry up, lady. But then Carnie saw the old man with the shopping basket.

“I’ll get there when I get there,” yelled the old man.

Carnie walked past the woman, thinking she might try to take her *and* her husband. When she passed the old man, he winked at her. The tight jogging suit showed off every inch of her curvaceous body. The old man turned his head as he walked to get a view of the back side. He crashed his shopping cart into a parked car.

“Jim, if you’d watch where you’re going,” said his wife, “instead of watching that woman’s butt—”

“—Hey, I’m just looking—I’m not buying.”

“Oh, I know *that*—you’re too cheap to spend any money on it.”

Did they honestly think she was for sale? Carnie wondered. Maybe she would go

stab a couple of old farts just for the fun of it. She made a U-turn and walked past the couple, who were still bickering. They didn't even see her this time.

*

"I won't be long," said Beverly as she walked out the door.

Cynthia and Greg were still sitting on the couch, finishing up their pizza.

"Where's she going?" said Greg.

"Wal-Mart. She's out of shampoo, and she won't use the kind I have."

"You're not worried about her going out at night by herself?"

"Yeah, a little bit. But she did it all the time in Marshall. How can I tell her she can't do it here?"

"Yeah, you're right. She'll be fine. And while she's gone..."

Greg set his paper plate aside and slid over beside Cynthia.

By the time he got to her, she was ready. They began to kiss.

Neither of them felt the usual fear of taking it too far. Just knowing that Beverly would be back in a few minutes would keep their hormones in check.

*

The beads of sweat on Jake's face were growing larger. The three women in the back of the van were having pretty much the same thoughts. They didn't know whether Jake's gun hand was shaky because he was scared or because he was just crazy. Either way, they figured their life was hanging by a thread. Any escape attempt would surely lead to a bullet or a screwdriver through the heart.

Carnie saw taillights in her rear view mirror. A car was pulling into the parking spot directly behind the van. Carnie stepped out and saw an older woman getting out of her car and locking it. She was alone. This would be an easy one, she thought.

Carnie approached the woman while she was still beside her car.

“Excuse me, Ma’am. I don’t suppose you have any jumper cables, do you?”

“Uh, no. I’m sorry. I don’t.”

Carnie produced the screwdriver and said, “Just be quiet and come with me and I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not coming with you. Get away from me. Help! Somebody, help me!”
Suddenly she couldn’t breathe. She looked down and saw the screwdriver stuck in her chest. Then she collapsed to the pavement, between her car and a pickup.

Carnie ripped the screwdriver out and wiped it across the woman’s dress a few times to clean off the blood.

*

Greg’s right hand had been at Cynthia’s waist for a couple of minutes. Now it was inching upward. Cynthia knew where it was headed, and was afraid of the stimulation it would surely bring. But her mother had been gone for a good while. She would be driving up at any second. They would hear the car and stop what they were doing. So they were safe.

Greg was beginning to lose control. His body wanted Cynthia’s, but he had promised himself he would wait until marriage. A marriage he had not yet even proposed.

But he began to realize that he was just a puppet. And testosterone was his puppet master. Although in his mind he ordered it to stop, his right hand continued to move up until it found her left breast. He felt the nipple with his thumb. It was very hard, and so was he.

Cynthia said, “Wait,” and pulled away.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that,” he said.

Cynthia was looking at the wall clock. “Look what time it is. Mom’s been gone for over thirty minutes. She should have been back by now.”

“Call her cell.”

Cynthia jumped up and went to her cell phone, which was lying on the kitchen counter. She walked back into the living room with the phone to her ear. “She’s not answering. It’s going to voice mail.”

“Let’s go find her,” said Greg.

They rushed out of the house to Greg’s car.

Chapter 2_6_

“Is she asleep?” said Elmo softly, taking a glance at his mother in the rear view mirror.

Macy turned her head to look in the back seat. “I think so.”

After Mallie Mae’s accident in the restaurant, they had made a quick exit. They went to the first convenience store they could find to pick up some adult diapers. Mallie Mae had reluctantly put on a pair. Then they had stopped for hamburgers at a Sonic Drive In.

“She’s been faking, hasn’t she?” he said.

Macy was glad it was too dark for Elmo to see her face turning red. “What do you mean?”

“She’s been pretending to have Alzheimer’s.”

“Why would she do that?”

“To drive me and Carsie apart.”

Macy didn’t speak. She looked straight ahead.

“And you were in on it, weren’t you?” said Elmo.

She had dreaded this moment. As soon as Mallie Mae had drafted her into the scheme, Macy knew it would end badly. Any chances she might have had with Elmo were about to evaporate. But she might as well get it over with, she thought. “Yes, I was. I’m sorry, Elmo.”

“It’s okay. I don’t blame *you*. If you hadn’t played along, she would have fired you. That is, she would have *threatened* to fire you. But she wouldn’t have actually done it. You’re like a daughter to her. And I guess you’re kind of fond of her too, or you wouldn’t have stayed around for all these years.” He paused for a second. “How many years has it been, Macy?”

“Fifteen.”

“Wow. When you took the job as her nurse you were what? 21 years old?”

“22.”

“I’m surprised you stayed so long. Why didn’t you ever go back to the hospital? They would have gladly taken you back. And you know I would have recommended you highly.”

“Well...”

He finally knew the answer. But how could he have been so clueless? he wondered. Earlier in the evening, on the dance floor, he had seen the love in Macy’s eyes for the first time. Had it been there all along? For fifteen years? They had been great friends, spending most nights watching TV or movies together. At 22, she was a sweet, alluring presence. But because of the age gap, he had forced himself to think of her as a sister. It was the only way he could trick himself into keeping his hands off her. And it helped him quell the powerful fantasies of making love to her.

And why hadn’t she been dating? She should have been married long before now. Maybe a better question was why he had not wondered about these things before. Had he been playing games with himself—and with her? Knowing he couldn’t have her, but not wanting to lose her?

If Macy had not been living in the house, maybe Elmo would have found love years earlier. And if he got married, the wife would probably want Macy to go. Carsie had been aggressive in advancing her relationship with Elmo. She had made him realize he was letting his prime years slip away. He needed to make up for lost time—and she would help him do it. She had replaced Macy as his TV buddy. And she had been relentless in pushing him toward the altar.

“You stayed because of me, didn’t you?” said Elmo.

“Well, I...yes.”

“I’m sorry, Macy. I’ve been so unfair to you. I had feelings for you from day one. But I was 41 then. And you were only 22.”

“I know.”

“I was crazy about you, but it made me feel kinda like a dirty old man. You know?”

“I understand.”

“You were so young and just starting out in life. I figured the last thing you needed was a father figure making passes at you.”

“But I never saw you as a father figure. You were just a kind, intelligent, funny, wonderful man. I never cared about the age difference.”

“So, why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I was afraid you wouldn’t feel the same way. And then it would have been weird for you having me in the house and you’d end up asking me to leave. I couldn’t risk it. I just hoped that someday you’d feel the same way I did.”

Elmo glanced at her. At 37, she was at the height of her beauty and sexual power. He felt incredibly lucky. He would not waste another day. He reached over and picked up her hand and brought it to his lips.

And when he kissed the back of her hand, she knew exactly what he was thinking. He was not going to marry Carsie. Apparently his feelings for Carsie held no comparison to his long-hidden love for Macy.

This was a scenario she had dreamed many times. Elmo finally saw the light, and they would live happily ever after. But this was not a dream. Was it? No, this was real.

Then Macy thought about Mallie Mae. She knew Mallie Mae would be happy about the breakup of Elmo and Carsie. But how would she feel about Elmo and Macy? And what about the accident at the restaurant? Had Mallie Mae faked it? If so, she had left Macy out of the loop. And that would be a first.

Mallie Mae lay content in the back seat with her eyes closed. Now maybe she really would go to sleep.

*

“Where are you taking us?” said one of the women.

“You two are going to spend the rest of your lives in prison,” said one of the others.

“Unless you let us go—now,” said another.

“You old hags better cool it back there. Or I’m gonna let my boyfriend go ahead and shoot you,” said Carnie. “He’s just itching to blow your heads off.”

The women studied Jake. He looked like he really might do it.

Jake was living a nightmare. He should have just gone to the police and turned himself in for the hit and run. He hadn’t meant to kill that man. And he didn’t want to kill these women. But now he was in deep. Carnie had killed a woman in the parking lot, and he knew by Texas law he would be charged with murder too—as though he himself had plunged that screwdriver into that poor woman’s chest. He wouldn’t be any worse off if he shot all four of the old women *and Carnie* right now. He almost wished he could pull the trigger and get it over with. Maybe after that he’d turn the gun on himself.

Then he remembered the gun was not loaded. And why was he kidding himself? He couldn’t kill anybody. Not on purpose.

“Hey, I know this place,” said one of the women. “It’s the Mobley estate.”

*

“I should have gone with her,” said Cynthia.

Greg was driving above the speed limit. “I’m sure she’s fine. Probably decided to browse around for a while.”

“But why isn’t she answering her cell phone?”

“Maybe there’s no signal. I’ve had trouble with that in certain areas of the store. Sometimes a call just doesn’t go through. And it can be noisy in there. She might not hear it ringing.”

“Oh, no,” said Cynthia.

Red lights were flashing in the Wal-Mart parking lot. When they got closer they

could see the ambulance and three Coreyville police cars. There were at least a hundred people trying to get a look.

Greg parked the car and they hurried toward the spectacle.

“No, no, no,” said Cynthia.

“I’m sure it’s not her.”

They made their way through the crowd.

“Look,” said Cynthia, pointing. “There’s her car.”

It was inside the roped area.

“What happened?” said Greg to a man standing with his wife.

“I heard it was an old lady. Somebody stabbed her.”

“Oh, Greg,” said Cynthia as she clutched his arm.

“Come on.” Greg held the rope up while they bent down and went under it.

One of the cops saw them approaching and started walking toward them, holding out his hand, ordering them to stay back.

“We think it might be her mother,” said Greg.

Cynthia started crying. “You’ve got to let me see her.”

“Alright, come on,” said the cop.

When the other officers and paramedics opened a path for them, they could see the body lying on the pavement with a sheet over it.

“No!” Cynthia threw her arms around Greg and pressed her face into his chest. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

“We think it might be her mother. Could you let us see?” said Greg.

Cynthia cried harder.

One of the paramedics uncovered the face.

“It’s not her, Sweetie,” said Greg.

“What? Are you sure?” She turned around. “Oh, thank God.”

A woman had just broken through the crowd and run to the body.

“Oh, Mom!” She knelt down beside the bloody corpse and began to cry.

Greg and Cynthia turned and walked away.

“But where is she?” said Cynthia.

Chapter 2_7_

Carnie drove the van into the barn and killed the engine. She and Jake had successfully abducted four women for her fake clinical trial.

“What are you going to do to us?” said one of the women.

“I’m checking you into Hideaway Hospital,” said Carnie.

“I don’t need to go to the hospital. I want to go home,” said another woman.

“I need volunteers for my clinical trial,” said Carnie.

“So, we’re gonna be the white mice in your laboratory?” a woman said.

“Something like that. Now, let’s go,” said Carnie.

Jake got out, opened the sliding door and motioned for the women to exit the van. He held the gun on them as they stepped out. His hand was getting so shaky it seemed as though it might fire accidentally at any second.

“Okay, let’s get your names and ages,” said Carnie.

“Betsy Holsom. 72.” She was slightly stocky, and appeared to be quite strong and healthy.” She glared at Carnie as though she might try to grab her at any moment and wrestle her to the ground.

“My name is Ellen Pinkly, and I’m 88.” Ellen was skinny and frail. Her skin was whiter than baby powder.

“Marcia Cleggmore. 79.” Marcia was nearly six feet tall, and stood erect and proud.

“Cleggmore, huh? said Carnie. “Aren’t the Cleggmore’s that wealthy family? Yeah. Y’all have that fancy clothing store in Coreyville, right?”

“That is correct.”

“Yeah. What’s the name of that store?”

“Cleggmore’s.”

“Oh, right. Of course.” said Carnie with a smart-aleck grin.

Carnie looked at the last woman. “And finally, we have?”

“Beverly Sonora.”

“Age?”

“67.”

“67? Why you’re just a kid. Looks like I messed up, Jake. This one’s too young.”

“Then why don’t you just let me go,” said Beverly.

“Nope. Can’t do that. You’ll just have to *act older*.”

“Act older for who?” said Beverly.

“For Dr. Mobley.”

“What? I can’t believe Elmo is involved in this,” said Marcia.

“Dr. Mobley is trying to develop the best possible medication for his mother, who has Alzheimer’s. So, we’re going to pretend to have a clinical trial using the various concoctions he comes up with. The big difference in our clinical trial is that we’ll have only four participants and that you’ll be *residents* in the clinic for the entire trial. And I know what you’re going to say. None of you *have* Alzheimer’s.”

“Actually, I think I might,” said Ellen.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. You will fool Dr. Mobley by pretending to have the disease. And then one of you will be miraculously cured.”

“This is crazy,” said Betsy.

“Yes, it is,” said Carnie with an evil grin. “But you will do as I say...or you will surely die. Follow me.”

Carnie led them to the tool shed. Jake followed up the rear with the gun. Carnie turned the knob and kicked the door a couple of times to open it. She stepped in and walked across the dirt floor to the other door.

She opened the door and said, "Follow me. And watch your step." She walked through the door and down the stairs. "Come on—we haven't got all night."

As Betsy took the first step down, she thought about slamming the door behind her, jumping down on Carnie, and snapping her neck like a twig. Then the other women could take care of Jake. He was so nervous he might drop the gun. But then she looked back and saw Ellen already stepping down behind her.

Ellen was working on a plot of her own. What would happen if she fainted or fell down a couple of stairs? she wondered. She might end up breaking an arm or a leg. Then what would they do with her? Would they take her to a real hospital? Or would they shoot her like a lame horse in an old western? Maybe she needed a better plan.

Marcia looked back at Jake and whispered, "Young man, you don't have to go along with that crazy woman. Why don't you release us before you get yourself into more trouble?"

"Sorry," said Jake. "I'm already in it up to my eyeballs. Didn't you see her stab that woman back there in the parking lot."

"But *you* haven't killed anybody, have you? I'm a very good judge of character, and I'm quite certain that you're not capable of murder."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Jake. "Now, hurry up and get down those stairs before I shoot you in the butt, Old Lady."

"Mercy!" said Marcia as she turned to go down. She was more offended by his rudeness than his talk of shooting her.

Beverly thought it best to keep her mouth shut. What must Cynthia and Greg be thinking right now? Surely they had gone to Wal-Mart looking for her. She felt as much concern for her daughter as for herself. Cynthia would be worried sick.

Carnie led the group through the curvy wooden corridor, which seemed to lead to a dead end. But then they began to see light in the distance, growing brighter

as they got closer.

They walked into the large room and looked around.

“Welcome to Hideaway Hospital,” said Carnie with pride.

It was a four-bed ward, like one you might see in a real hospital. Each bed had a nightstand, but they were missing one standard item: a telephone. There was a couch on the far wall and a table in the corner stacked with various medical supplies and linens.

Carnie picked up a stack of gowns and threw one to each of the women.
“Change into these.”

“Is there a dressing room?” said Ellen.

“Yeah,” said Carnie. “You’re standing in it.”

All four women looked at Jake.

“Give me the gun,” Carnie said to Jake. “Now turn around while these ladies change.”

Jake turned around, but the women didn’t move.

“Hurry up!” said Carnie.

Sensing they were in more danger than before, now that Carnie was holding the gun, they quickly selected their beds and began to take off their clothes and lay them on their beds.

“Now fold your clothes and put them on the shelf under your nightstand and get in your bed,” said Carnie.

“Jake, grab that bag and start handcuffing them,” said Carnie.

“Is that really necessary? What if there’s a fire?” said Marcia.

“Then you’re toast,” said Carnie.

Jake picked up the bag, walked over to Carnie and talked softly to her with his

back to the women. “Do we really need to handcuff them? They’re not going anywhere.”

“Not as long as somebody’s holding a gun on them. But how about at 3:00 AM when you fall asleep?”

Jake walked over to Betsy’s bed, set the bag down on her nightstand and pulled out a set of handcuffs. He cuffed her right wrist to the stainless steel bedrail and then went to Ellen’s bed.

“Jake? Both hands,” said Carnie.

“Ah, come on!” said Betsy.

“I think you’ll find that your stay here will be more enjoyable if you learn speak to me in the proper tone of voice,” said Carnie.

Jake had just handcuffed Betsy’s other wrist when Carnie walked over to her bed and slapped her hard in the face.

It gave Betsy such an adrenalin rush, she tried yank the bedrails free and slam them together like crash cymbals against the sides of Carnie’s head. But the only thing she accomplished was to bruise her wrists.

While Jake handcuffed the other women, Carnie walked to the table that had medical supplies sitting on top of it. She picked up four syringes and four vials. She walked to Betsy’s bed and prepared to give her an injection.

As Carnie prepped Betsy’s arm for the shot, Betsy said, “What is that?”

“Just something to help you rest,” said Carnie. “It won’t hurt you.”

“How do you know? Are you a doctor?”

“No. But I’m a Registered Nurse. Or at least I used to be,” said Carnie.

“I need to pee before you put me to sleep,” said Ellen.

“No, you don’t,” said Carnie. “I’m going to catheterize you.”

Jake winced. He *definitely* wouldn’t be helping with *that*.

*

Elmo and Macy spoke softly so they wouldn't wake up Mallie Mae in the back seat. They were about an hour from home.

"I can't wait to tell Mom the good news," said Elmo.

"Hey—you called her *Mom*," said Macy.

"Yeah. I guess I'm already getting used to it," said Elmo.

"You can't wait to tell her what? About breaking up with Carsie...or about us?"

"Both. And I can't remember the last time I was excited about sharing anything with her. She's like the brat who pops your birthday balloons. She always finds a way to spoil your party. But this time I think it will be different. I really think she'll be happy for me. For *us*."

"I think so too." Macy wanted to scream with delight.

"Just think about it, Macy—what it would be like to live in a house without tension. A house where we all love each other and we're all happy."

"It would be wonderful," said Macy.

"Yes." He smiled at her. "Wonderful."

Chapter 2_8_

Greg had looked down every aisle in Wal-Mart, but could not find Beverly. Cynthia was waiting near her mother's car in case she showed up out there.

Finally Greg went to customer service and asked that Beverly be paged. While he was waiting, he noticed a display of flashlights and decided to buy two large ones and some batteries.

There was no response from the page.

By the time he made it back to Beverly's car, Cynthia was getting frantic. "Where could she be?"

"I don't know." He handed Cynthia a flashlight and then clicked his on and began to shine it in and around the car. Then he checked underneath.

"Oh. This is not good," he said.

"What?"

"There's a set a keys under here."

"*Mom's* keys?"

"I don't know." He stretched out on the pavement and reached under the car to retrieve the keys.

"Are these hers? He held them up.

Cynthia reached down and took the keys and shined her flashlight on them.

"Yes, these are her keys. Greg, she must have been kidnapped."

Greg stood up. "It kinda looks that way. But why would anyone kidnap her? It doesn't make any sense."

Cynthia walked over to one of the cops who were working the murder scene. Greg followed her.

“Sir, can you please help me? I think my mother has been kidnapped,” said Cynthia.

The cop yelled over his shoulder, “Captain, we’ve got another one over here.”

He turned back to Cynthia. “So, she came here by herself and her car’s still here, but you can’t find her?”

“That’s right,” said Cynthia.

“Was somebody else kidnapped too?” said Greg.

“Marcia Cleggmore,” said the cop.

Cynthia and Greg knew who that was. Everybody knew about the Cleggmore—the wealthiest family in town.

“And somebody else is missing too,” said the cop.

Is that what Beverly would be to the cops—just another *somebody*? Cynthia wondered.

The officer took down the information, and told Cynthia they would be on the lookout for her mother, but she would need to go down to the station and fill out a formal missing persons report as well.

Obviously, the cops would use every tool at their disposal to find Mrs. Cleggmore, Cynthia thought. After that, they might make an effort to find Beverly.

“Sorry, ma’am, but I’ve got to get back,” said the cop. He turned and walked away.

“Isn’t that the mayor?” said Greg.

“Yes,” said Cynthia. “And look—that’s Alexander Cleggmore talking to him. The only chance of them finding Mom is if she’s with Marcia Cleggmore.”

“Wait a second,” said Greg. “The woman who was murdered was stabbed, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what they said.”

“Nancie Jo Gristel was stabbed to death.”

“Right...”

“What if it’s the same killer? It’s kind of similar.”

“Yeah. These are older women, like Nancie Jo,” said Cynthia.

“Remember that car I saw yesterday at the copy shop? The one with that bumper sticker I’d never seen before?”

“The one you thought might be the murderer’s car because of what Nancie Jo’s neighbor said? But there’s something wrong with that man. He probably didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“But what if he *did*? What if that *was* the murderer’s car?”

“Even if it was, how does that help us find Mom?”

“Maybe the killer paid with a credit card, or accidentally left something there, or threw something in the trash.”

“I don’t know...”

“Sweetie, right now we don’t have *any* clues. And *they’re* not doing anything to find her,” he said, nodding in the direction of the growing crowd of cops, city officials, and Cleggmores.

Cynthia saw Alexander Cleggmores waving his arms and yelling at the police chief.

“Okay, I guess it’s worth a shot,” said Cynthia. “But won’t the copy shop already be closed? It’s after 9:00.”

*

Hadley and his brother were sitting on Horatio’s back porch staring across the moonlit yard. Occasionally, Horatio’s hunting dogs would start barking at something, and he would yell at them. The front and back doors were open. But the screened doors kept the mosquitoes out. The two had just enjoyed a delicious

Catfish dinner prepared by Horatio's wife, Alma. They could hear her in the kitchen washing the dishes.

"So, you having fun yet, Ben?" said Horatio.

Hadley's family called him Ben. Only the Mobleys referred to him as Hadley, which was his *last* name. When they were kids, he and Horatio were known as the Hadley brothers. Or sometimes, the Hadley hucksters, because they tried to sell everything from pine cones to skeeter hawks to naïve little kids.

And this one here costs a dime because he's so colorful. Just look at him. He'll fly around you everywhere you go, eating all the mosquitoes that try to get you. Don't you hate it when you're scratching all night from mosquito bites? Well, you won't have to worry about that anymore when you have one of these pretty mosquito eaters.

"I'll let you know when it starts being fun," said Hadley with a sly grin.

"You *ought* to be fairly disappointed, I guess, since I out-fished you."

"What are you talking about? I caught more fish than *you* did," said Hadley.

"But my fish *outweighed* yours."

"That don't count, and you know it. We've never figured the weight. If we had, I would've beat you a lot more often."

"Oh, I don't think so. My fish have always been bigger."

"You turkey. The only reason you like to take me fishing is so you can tell everybody you beat me," said Hadley.

"Only when I beat you fair and square."

Hadley sat up in his chair and glared at Horatio. "Fair and square?"

Alma walked to the back screened door and said, "What are y'all arguing about now?"

"Honey, tell Ben I'm right. My fish were bigger than his, weren't they?"

“How about both of you little boys just shut up about it.”

Hadley and Horatio looked at each other. They broke out in laughter.

Alma walked back into the kitchen shaking her head.

“Hey, did you bring your shotgun?” said Horatio.

“Yeah. It’s in my trunk. I figured I’d better bring it along just in case.”

“Good. Let’s go get us some doves in the morning.”

“I’m ready, Brother. But wait a minute. First we gotta set some ground rules. Are we counting the *number* of birds or the total weight?” said Hadley.

“Okay, fine. We’ll go by the number.”

“Agreed.”

“You’re mighty competitive, ain’t you, Boy.” said Horatio.

“*I’m* competitive?”

They argued until Alma broke it up.

*

“They’re closed,” said Cynthia.

“But there’s a light on. And I think I see somebody in there,” said Greg as they pulled up to Coreyville Copy Shop.

They got out of the car and walked to the door, and Greg knocked.

The man inside waved his arms and said, “Sorry—we’re closed.”

“It’s an emergency,” yelled Greg.

The man looked perturbed as he walked to the door. He unlocked it and opened it a few inches, and said, “So you think you have an *emergency printing job*?”

“Well, it could be a matter of life or death,” said Greg.

“Does this involve *national security*?” said the man, facetiously.

“We’re really sorry to bother, Sir,” said Cynthia. “But my mother has just been kidnapped, and we think the person who did it might have made some copies here, or used one of your computers.”

“When?”

“Friday, between noon and 1:00,” said Greg. “And it looks like the kidnapper *killed* a woman tonight, and I think it might be the same one who killed Nancie Jo Gristel.”

“Mrs. Gristel and my mother used to play canasta with a group of ladies every week when I was a kid,” said the man. “Come on in.”

He let them in and locked the door behind them. “I’m not sure how much I can help. I don’t remember who came in around that time. And if they just made copies, I wouldn’t have any record of their documents,” said the man.

“Could you check to see if somebody paid with a credit card?” said Greg.

“Sure, I can do that.” He walked behind the counter to the computer and began typing and clicking. After a few minutes he said, “Let’s see, between 12:00 and 1:00... Nobody paid with a credit card during that period. Just a few cash payments.”

“What if they printed documents from one of those computers?” said Greg, pointing to the four desktop computers along the back wall. “Are copies of those documents saved somewhere?”

“Yeah. They’re saved on the print server for a week. I’ll check it.” He worked at the computer a few more minutes and then said, “Here’s something.”

“Can I see it?” said Greg.

“Yeah. Come around.”

Greg and Cynthia walked behind the counter and looked over the man’s

shoulders. The title of the document read:

Informed Consent for Participation in a Clinical Trial

It didn't make sense to Greg. Why would the killer be involved in a clinical trial of experimental drugs for Alzheimer's disease? Beverly didn't have Alzheimer's. But Nancie Jo Gristel did. Who else? He had just heard of somebody else who had Alzheimer's. It was Mallie Mae Mobley. And her son had just taken a leave of absence from his medical practice.

Then he remembered the nurse at the hospital the other day. She seemed to know the Mobleys better than she let on. Maybe he was just grasping at straws. But it might be a clue. And right now it was the only one they had.

"Thanks. You've been a great help," said Greg.

"I have?" said the man.

"Yes, you have." He turned to Cynthia. "Let's go."

As they got into the car, Cynthia said, "What's going on? Where are we going?"

"To see a nurse."

Chapter 2_9_

Macy checked the clock on the instrument panel as Elmo pulled into the garage. It was 9:34 PM. Their day was about to end. And what an amazing day it had been. She wished it could go on until midnight, until tomorrow, until forever. But now she had to walk Mallie Mae to her room and get her ready for bed.

Elmo and Macy got out of the car, and Macy was about to open the back door to wake up Mallie Mae. But Elmo walked around to her and motioned for her to wait. He looked in the back seat. Mallie Mae was in a peaceful slumber.

He took Macy in his arms and spoke softly. “This has been the most wonderful day.”

Macy had so many things to say, but couldn’t manage to say any of them before Elmo began to lean in to give her a kiss. Earlier in the evening, when he had kissed her forehead on the dance floor she had overwhelmed with emotion. This time he was going for the lips. She wondered if she would literally faint in his arms.

Realizing she was holding her breath, she tried to relax and inhale, which only served to fill her lungs with his marvelous scent and radiate quivers throughout her body. The few inches of movement from his lips to hers passed in slow motion—probably because her brain was processing a million thoughts a second. Every nerve ending stood waiting on high alert.

But how could the real thing compare to her fantasies? What if it was a disappointment? Or worse yet, what if it was much better than her fantasies, but led nowhere? One exciting kiss wouldn’t guarantee a happy ever after.

Quit thinking and just kiss him, Macy told herself.

She was surprised at how natural it felt—as though their lips had been created by God as a complementary set. She was kissing the only man she had ever loved. And now she knew her fantasies had been but a superficial portrayal of this exquisite reality.

When he gently pulled away and she came out of her trance, she had no idea

how long it had lasted. But it was not long enough.

“Better get Mom to bed,” said Elmo.

“Okay.”

Macy turned to open the back door.

“And after you get her settled in, why don’t you come down for a while? I’ll be in my study,” said Elmo, smiling.

“Okay, I will.” Macy wondered just how fast she could get Mallie Mae to bed.

*

“Why are we going to see a nurse?” said Cynthia.

“It’s just a hunch,” said Greg. “Wednesday morning I was at the hospital sitting with a church member whose husband was having back surgery.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“And we were talking about the Mobleys, and how Elmo was taking a leave from his medical practice because he had just discovered his mother had Alzheimer’s. And there was a nurse over at the computer who seemed to be taking quite an interest in the conversation. I felt guilty when I started to feel that we were gossiping. So, I went over to the nurse and apologized.”

“Why did you apologize to *her*?”

“I don’t know. I just had the impression she might be a close friend of the Mobley family, and that she might have been offended by what was being said.”

“So, what did *she* say?”

“She told me it was okay. And she acted as though she was no more than a casual acquaintance. But I didn’t buy it. She definitely knew more than she was saying,” said Greg.

He parked the Bonneville in the hospital parking lot and they got out and walked toward the main entrance.

“What’s her name?” said Cynthia.

“I don’t remember.”

“Well, then how are we going to find her?”

“I *do* remember that it sounded Biblical. Her name sounded like a character from the Bible.”

“Okay, this could take a while. Where do we start? Mary?”

“Mary... I think it *is* Mary.”

“Mary who? Is her last name also Biblical?”

“Actually...I don’t know. Maybe,” said Greg.

“Mary Magdalene? Surely not.”

“Wait—that’s *close*.”

Cynthia looked at Greg in disbelief as they walked through the glass doors and into the lobby.

“May I help you,” said the elderly woman at the information desk.

“Yes,” said Greg. “I need to find a particular nurse, but I’m not sure about her name.”

“Uh...” The woman had no idea how to respond.

Cynthia knew what Greg was about to say. The poor woman would think they were both crazy.

“It sounds Biblical. Mary something. Like Mary Magdalene,” said Greg.

When the woman began to smile, Cynthia thought she looked a little scary. But it maybe it was because of the fact that the woman didn’t have any teeth.

“Oh. I think I know who you’re looking for: Mary Magdely,” said the woman.

“Yeah, that’s it,” said Greg.

“She usually works days. But she *could* be pulling a double. If so, she’d be on the second floor.”

“Thank you so much,” said Greg.

He and Cynthia walked to the elevator.

When the doors opened at the second floor Greg spotted her immediately. She was in the nurse’s station.

“Mary?” said Greg.

“Yes?” she said as she looked up. She seemed to remember him. “May I help you?”

“I’m Greg Tenorly. I was here on Wednesday during a surgery and talked to you briefly.”

“Yes, I remember you.”

“Oh, and this is Cynthia Blockerman.”

The two women exchanged hellos.

“We were wondering if we could talk to you in private for just a minute,” said Greg.

“Well, I’m pretty busy tonight...”

Cynthia stepped forward. “It’s a matter of life or death.”

The pain she saw in Cynthia’s eyes was more convincing than her words. She told one of the other nurses she was taking her break. Then she led them into an unoccupied room and closed the door.

Greg told her about the murder and the kidnappings, and Cynthia’s mother. Then he explained how he thought the killer was the same one who had murdered Nancie Jo Gristel. He told her about the crazy neighbor and the bumper sticker and the copy shop and the clinical trial document. Then he explained his theory

that it was all somehow connected to the Mobley family.

“You’re not implying that Elmo is a kidnapper and a murderer, are you?” said Mary.

“No. Not at all,” said Greg.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything that will help you,” said Mary as she turned to leave.

“Wait,” said Greg. “You know *something*. I could see it in your eyes the other day.”

“Look, we don’t have a clue where to look next,” said Cynthia. “You never know what might help us.”

“Okay. But I don’t see how this will help. And I’ve never told *anybody*,” she said. “In the early ’80s I worked in the Emergency Room. And Morford Mobley, Elmo’s father, was an Emergency Room doc. We had worked together for several years.

“One night two men came in. They were fairly new in town, and had moved here from San Francisco. I don’t really know why they moved to Coreyville. I think they chose our town at random. But one of the men looked terrible. He was coughing uncontrollably and spitting up blood. The other man was not in much better shape.

“So, Morford spent an unusually long time examining the men and asking them questions. Then he prescribed some drugs and sent them on their way. Afterwards, he told me in private that he believed the man and his friend both had a new disease called AIDS. Back then, some people were calling it ‘Gay Cancer.’ Everybody was scared to death of it. They thought you could get it just by being in the room with somebody who had it.

“But Morford was the most compassionate doctor I’ve ever known. He wanted to help the men somehow. And in the days and weeks that followed it was on his mind constantly. Finally, he decided to build his own little clinic to care for them. And he would try to develop better medicines and other types of treatment for their disease.

“But as he listened to other doctors and nurses talking about AIDS, he knew it would be extremely difficult to do such a thing. Nobody would want a clinic like that near their home or business. So, he came up with the idea of building the clinic on his own property.”

“But it didn’t work out,” said Greg.

“Actually, it *did*,” said Mary.

Greg and Cynthia looked at each other.

Cynthia said, “I’ve never heard anything about it.”

“That’s because it’s *underground*,” said Mary. “I can see by the look on your faces you think I’m a nut. But it’s true. He waited until Mallie Mae was away on a tour of Europe with her sister. They were gone for over a month. And Elmo was practicing medicine in Dallas. The black men who built it were sworn to secrecy.”

“Wow. I can’t believe nobody ever told *that* secret,” said Greg.

“Mallie Mae knew about the lab. But she didn’t know about the secret door to the clinic. And there was a long hallway that led to the barn.

“Morford quit his job at the hospital to do experiments and run the clinic. They had plenty of money, so he didn’t need the income. Mallie Mae thought it was a little weird, but she didn’t mind as long as he was happy.

“He offered me a job, and I gladly took his offer. I was very much in love with him, but I never told him. He was always faithful to Mallie Mae.

“After a couple of months, the first two men told us about another couple they knew who also had AIDS. Morford agreed to take them as well. So then, all four of the beds in his little clinic were occupied. Most days Hadley, Morford’s manservant, would help me walk them through the long passageway and out behind the barn to sit for a while in the open air. And Hadley prepared meals for them. I don’t know how he did without Mallie Mae finding out, but as far as I could tell, she never knew about the clinic.

“We worked so hard to save them. And the thing I remember most is how much

those men appreciated what we were trying to do for them. They would break down in tears just talking about it. And that would make *me* start crying.

“But it really got tough when they began to give up, and just wanted to die. They were happy that somebody in this world had cared enough to work so hard to save their lives. But they knew the end was near, and they were ready to go.

“But Morford didn’t want to *let* them go. He kept working frantically for a breakthrough. He was only sleeping about two hours a night. Mallie Mae begged him to get more rest.

“Finally one day, he told me to go back to work at the hospital. And when I refused, he became angry, and told me he could no longer stand to have me around.”

“Oh, no,” said Cynthia.

“I was deeply hurt. And then two days later he died in a car crash,” said Mary.

“I heard about that,” said Greg.

“Well, what happened to the AIDS patients?” said Cynthia.

“I don’t know. I assume they died, but I never heard a thing about them after I left,” said Mary. “Maybe their families finally came to get them, although I doubt it. They had basically been disowned by their parents for being gay. Then, once they came down with AIDS, *nobody* wanted anything to do with them.”

“Except you and Morford,” said Cynthia. “What y’all did was amazing.”

“Thank you. But that’s all I know about the Mobleys,” said Mary. “But I doubt these kidnappings and murders have anything to do with Elmo. I can’t imagine him doing anything unethical or illegal.”

But Mary could see the determination on their faces. There was no doubt where they were headed next: the Mobley estate.

Chapter 3_0_

Macy was in a hurry to get downstairs to Elmo. And fortunately, getting Mallie Mae ready for bed had taken less time than usual. Mallie Mae always wanted her to hang around and talk for a while once she was in bed. But not on this night.

Elmo's mother had heard enough of the conversation in the car to know what was going on between her caretaker and her son. And for the first time ever, she saw a match she could be happy with. She and Macy had spent untold hours together over the past 15 years—more than enough time for Mallie Mae to understand the true character of the 37 year-old.

Macy had not dated at all during those years. She had spent much of her free time with Elmo. And Mallie Mae knew the two had a wonderful platonic relationship. But she had wondered how *that* had been enough to sustain the lovelorn beauty.

Macy had been out of college just one year when Elmo had hired her away from the hospital to be his mother's nurse. The lovely young lady had taken the job with the understanding that once his mother had completely recovered from her broken leg, Macy would go back to her job at the hospital.

But by that time, Mallie Mae had taken such a liking to her that she begged her to stay on and be her personal aide. And Macy had agreed, primarily because she had fallen in love with Elmo and didn't want to give up their time together.

Elmo had always looked forward to his evenings with Macy. He had been crazy about her from day one, but quickly taught himself to hide his romantic feelings and limit their relationship to the joy of being best friends. Back then, as a 41 year-old, he couldn't imagine *dating* such a young woman.

But the age gap didn't seem to matter as much, now that she was 37. Macy was not a kid anymore—she was a grown woman. And she was old enough to know what she wanted. And what she wanted with all her heart was love—to love and *be* loved by Elmo Mobley for the rest of her life.

Elmo had never dated a woman as attractive as Macy—until Carsie. Carsie was every bit as sexy and beautiful as Macy. And once she had come into Elmo's life,

Macy feared that her own dreams of happiness would never come true.

But now Carsie was irrelevant.

Macy walked to Elmo's study and stood in the doorway. Elmo was sitting at his desk.

"Come in," he said. "And please close the door."

She closed it and met Elmo behind his desk as he stood up. They wrapped their arms around each other.

"All these years..." he said. "I've been in love with you since you first came here."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were just too young," he said.

Macy was trembling with anticipation, and Elmo could hear it in her voice. "We were so stupid—both of us afraid to act on our feelings."

"But it's okay. We've had great times together as friends. Just think of it as 15 years of foreplay," he said.

"Oh, Elmo..."

He leaned in and began kissing her.

She let herself slowly sink deep into the passion, as though her body was easing its way down into a steamy bubble bath.

He opened his mouth slightly and rubbed the tip of his tongue softly and slowly along her lips until they parted, welcoming him inside. As he gently explored her smooth teeth and quivering tongue, they breathed each others' breath until they became dizzy.

Elmo had never experienced such a combination of physical stimulation and emotional oneness. And he knew he truly belonged with this incredible woman. He wanted her now and forever.

He slid his hands down her back, past her waist and spread his long fingers across her warm, tight cheeks and gently pulled her firmly against his body. Macy could feel how much he wanted her.

Then he worked his left hand up to her back as he placed his right hand on her hip. He massaged the side of her ribcage and then moved upward, just to the right of her breast.

Macy ran her left hand up the back of his neck and into his scalp, which encouraged him to slide his hand onto the side of her breast and begin rubbing her erect nipple with his thumb. She jerked slightly, and he thought he had hurt her. But that fear ended quickly when she pulled him closer and started kissing him harder.

Elmo's fingers found a button on her blouse and unfastened it. Macy could not recall ever being this hot—even in her most sizzling fantasies. She wanted him to go faster—to just rip off her blouse. With each button her burning anticipation soared even higher.

Would he have trouble with her bra strap? she wondered.

He slipped a finger under the front edge of her bra, pulled it outward and up, and her lovely breasts were exposed. She longed for the glorious sensation of his fingertips. But instead, he teased her by kissing the side of her face, then down her neck. As his warm, moist lips inched their way toward the nipple, she knew an orgasm was imminent.

They were lost in their own world. So, it was not surprising that neither of them heard the soft knock at the door.

Then it opened.

“Elmo?”

It was Carnie, standing in the doorway, staring at them—undeniably in the heat of passion.

Macy pulled her blouse together and turned her back to Carnie.

Carnie glanced down at Elmo's crotch.

His face turned bright red. “Carnie, let me explain.”

“What are you doing to my sister?”

“I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have been doing this.”

No, Elmo, thought Macy. Don’t say that. It’s what we’ve always wanted.

“But I’m calling off the wedding—for good,” he said.

“You’re breaking up with Carsie? Just like that?” said Carnie.

“Yes.”

“Well, then you should have had the decency to *tell her* before you go having sex with somebody else,” said Carnie.

“I’m not. I mean, we weren’t.”

“Yeah, right. You think I’m an idiot?” Carnie slammed the door shut and walked off.

Elmo ran to the door and yanked it open. “Please don’t tell Carsie. I promise I’ll call her in the morning and ask her to come here. Then I’ll try to break it to her gently.”

“Good luck with *that*,” said Carnie.

“So, you’ll let *me* tell her?”

“Okay, sure. Whatever.”

Elmo walked back into the study and closed the door.

“Are you okay?” he said to Macy, who was standing at the window looking out into the night.

She turned around. “Yeah.”

But she didn’t *look* okay. Tears were dripping off her face.

He walked over to her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have started this tonight."

"It wasn't just *you*. *I* wanted it too."

"I know. But we should have waited until I settled things with Carsie. It's just not right for us to be doing this when she still thinks I plan to marry her."

"Yeah, you're right."

"But I promise I will take care of it tomorrow. Then we can be together. I love you so much, Macy."

"I love you too."

He kissed her on the forehead. They said goodnight and she went back upstairs.

And Macy knew that dreams and fantasies would never again be enough.

*

Carnie sat at the bar in the Pub Room next to her bedroom and chugged down a beer.

All her planning and work had been a waste of time. The two old women and the fat used car guy had died for nothing. Not that she really cared, except that every murder could be increasing her chances of getting caught. And if there was one thing she cherished, it was her freedom. She would kill herself before going to prison.

And what about Jake and the four women down in the Hideaway Hospital? She hated to admit it, but she needed advice. And the one person she could always depend on was her grandmother, Sylvia.

She loved her grandmother, as most grandchildren love their grandparents. But there was a dark side to their relationship. After her mother died, Carnie frequently had terrible nightmares. And when she did, she ran to Sylvia's bed.

But long after the nightmares ended, her grandmother continued to insist that Carnie sleep with her. And Sylvia began to touch Carnie in a way that made her uncomfortable. The quick peck on the lips of her granddaughter became long,

open-mouth kisses.

Carsie had always seemed oblivious to Carnie's plight—going along her merry way, while her sister was being abused right under her nose. Carnie used to hate Carsie for that. But she had since forgiven her. After all, if Carnie had ever told her sister what was happening, she surely would have helped her. But Carnie could never bring herself to do that. Carnie had *let* it happen, so she couldn't put *all* the blame on her grandmother.

Once Carnie was grown and able to finally move out and get away from Sylvia, she thought she'd be able to live a normal life. But in truth, there was no way she could ever escape Sylvia's powerful hold on her psyche.

And now, as much as she hated to admit it, she needed her grandmother's help.

Chapter 3_1_

“What if somebody sees us driving in?” said Cynthia. “It’s going to be a little hard to explain why we’re coming to visit them at 10:30 on a Saturday night. Especially since we don’t even *know* them.”

They were halfway up the long driveway to the Mobley house.

“We’ll park along here somewhere and walk the rest of the way. Like right there—between those trees,” said Greg.

He steered the big Bonneville off the driveway and into the woods.

“I don’t think anybody will notice the car *here*,” he said.

“Until morning,” she said.

“Yeah. Well, I hope we’re out of here before then.”

“Me too.”

Greg killed the engine and opened his door. Cynthia tried to open hers.

“My door won’t open,” she said. “There must be a little bush or something blocking it.”

“That’s okay. Just get out on my side.”

They walked out of the woods and toward the house.

“When we get closer, we’ll have to turn off our flashlights,” said Greg.

“I heard there were bobcats living in these woods.”

“Bobcats? Could be, I guess. But don’t worry, they only eat *small* mammals,” said Greg.

She looked up into the moonlight and observed the tips of the tall trees lining the driveway. “Well, I’m feeling pretty small right now,” she said under her breath.

*

The last thing Carnie wanted to do was admit failure to her grandmother. As much as she despised the woman, she longed for her approval.

“Hello?”

“I’ve got a big problem,” said Carnie.

“What did you do?” said Sylvia, with disappointment in her voice.

“I got my clinic all set up, but then—”

“—Carnie! I told you that wouldn’t work.”

“I know, but—”

“—you should have just waited, like I told you. He would have come around in a couple of weeks. By then, he would have been missing Carsie so much he would have agreed to marry her right away.”

“I don’t think so...”

“Why not?” said Sylvia.

“I caught him with Macy tonight.”

“Having sex?”

“Pretty close. Her blouse was open and Elmo was kissing her boobs,” said Carnie.

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah. So, see—your idea wasn’t gonna work either.”

“Shut up, Carnie. Let me think.”

After ten seconds of silence, Carnie began to wonder if the call had been dropped.

“Hello?” said Carnie.

“I’ve got plan.”

“Good. What is it?”

“I’m coming over there.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now. And don’t do anything until I get there. You’ve already made a mess of things.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’m sorry.” She wanted to stab Sylvia right through the heart with a dull knife.

“Yes, you *are* sorry. You always have been. You never do anything right.”

Sylvia hung up.

Carnie thought for a few minutes, and then called her grandmother again.

“Carnie, why are you calling me back? I’m on my way.”

“I forgot to tell you about the secret entrance in the barn.”

“I know all about it, My Dear,” said Sylvia, hanging up before her words had completely registered in Carnie’s brain.

*

Greg and Cynthia walked into the barn and began to look around. The interior was faintly illuminated by a single light bulb hanging from the rafters. They saw the dark blue van and knew it must be the abduction vehicle.

They knew there was an underground corridor from the barn to the house, but they had not thought to ask Nurse Magdely for the exact location of the door to that secret passageway. But the only interior door in sight was the tool shed door.

Greg used his shoulder to force the stubborn door open. Their flashlights found the other door inside almost immediately.

“This is creepy,” whispered Cynthia.

Greg opened the door and they went through, and down the stairs as quietly as they could. There was just enough light in the corridor to see where they were stepping. Greg figured the light bulbs along the way to be no more than 25-watters.

Cynthia worried about spiders and snakes. She took shallow breaths, wondering what kind of damage the musty air might be inflicting on their lungs.

Cynthia tripped on the edge of a board and fell forward into Greg’s back.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

He gave her a quick hug and then turned around and they began walking again. They could now see the light at the end of the corridor. Greg was expecting to hear people talking, but heard nothing.

Before they reached the opening, they could see Jake lying on a couch against the far wall. He appeared to be sleeping. But there was a pistol near his hand. They crept into the room and were surprised to see four women, handcuffed to their hospital beds.

Cynthia hoped they were only sleeping. She saw her mother and rushed to her side. She felt for a pulse. Yes—she was alive. She whispered into Beverly’s ear, but got no response. These women are drugged, she thought.

Greg tiptoed toward Jake. If he could grab the gun without waking him up, he thought, then he could make him release the women and they could get away in the van. He was two feet from the couch when he heard something. It must be somebody coming down from inside the house, he thought.

Greg turned and looked at Cynthia. She had heard something too. He figured they would be seen if they tried to escape the way they came in, so he motioned for Cynthia to go off to the right, down the hallway. He had no idea what was down there, but it was the quickest hiding spot.

They ran fast, but softly, into the hallway just as Carnie opened the secret mirror door and walked in and started talking to Jake.

Greg and Cynthia had not been seen, but now they were worried the woman would walk to the other end of the room, where Beverly's bed was located. If she did, and then looked down their hallway, she would see them. And probably shoot them. Or stab them to death, like the poor woman in the parking lot.

Greg decided to take a big chance. They could hide in one of the two rooms off the hallway. But what if the door hinges were squeaky? He went for it anyway. It opened silently and they rushed in and closed the door.

The room was dark, so Greg turned on his flashlight. He planned to turn it off as soon as they—.

He stepped into a hole and fell down. Cynthia shined the flashlight across the floor and saw the big opening. A section of flooring had been pulled up and leaned against the wall, exposing the dirt underneath, and a long wooden box, mostly buried in the ground. They both prayed the noise had not been loud enough to alert the man with the gun and woman who had just joined him.

*

Carnie couldn't believe Jake had already fallen asleep. She picked up the gun. "Wake up!" She shook his shoulder violently.

"What?" He sat so quickly it made him dizzy.

"We've got a change in plans," said Carnie. "We don't need these women after all."

She walked over to Betsy and held the pistol to her sleeping head.

Jake jumped up. "What are you doing?"

"These women have seen our faces, Jake. What do you *think* I'm doing?"

"But you can't just *murder* them."

"Why not?" she said in a flippant tone, as though she was about to squash a

cockroach under her shoe.

He hurried to where she was standing. “Don’t be crazy, Carnie.”

“Are you saying I’m *crazy*?” She swung around and pointed the gun at Jake’s face.

“No, no. Of course not.” He stepped back a little.

Carnie stepped toward him. “Then what *are* you saying, Jake? That Carnie Slitherstone is a cold-blooded killer? Is that what you’re saying, Jake?”

He was afraid to speak or to move.

“Well, you know what, Jake. I *am* a cold-blooded killer.”

And Jake was now a cold-blooded *believer*.

She cocked the pistol.

He cringed. He wasn’t ready to die. Sure, he had killed a man—he was guilty of a hit and run. And he should have gone to the police and let them throw him in jail where he belonged, he thought. At least then he would have still been alive tomorrow.

She squeezed the trigger, and the gun clicked.

Jake opened his eyes in disbelief.

Carnie began to laugh at him. “You idiot. You really think I’d trust you with a loaded weapon?”

His testosterone suddenly revved up a rage in his belly and he lunged at her and her impotent gun.

But she took a quick step back whipped out a big knife.

Where did she get that? he wondered. She had seemingly pulled it out of thin air.

He struggled to catch himself and avoid the outstretched knife, and barely succeeded.

“Don’t you *ever* try anything like *that* again,” she hissed.

He raised his hands in humble surrender. “I’m sorry.”

*

Greg and Cynthia were sitting on the floor, against the wall. They had turned off their flashlights to conserve the batteries.

“We should call the police,” whispered Cynthia.

“But if they come knocking on the front door, these people might kill the women and make a run for it.”

“Not if we warn them about it and have them sneak in through the back way, like we did.”

“Yeah, I guess that might work.”

Cynthia flipped opened her cell phone. “Never mind—I’ve got no signal.”

Greg checked his phone. “Me either. We’ll just have to wait until they go back to sleep. Then one of us can slip out and call the police.”

“Well, I’m not *staying* without you,” she said. “And I’m sure not *going* without you.”

“But you’d only have to get to the barn. You’d have a signal out there.”

Cynthia glared at him.

“Okay. We’ll both go,” he said.

Chapter 3_2_

Greg checked his watch. It was 11:55 PM. He and Cynthia had been sitting in silence, waiting for the man and woman out in the hospital ward to leave or fall asleep. They had heard them yelling earlier, when the woman first came in. After that, there had been only occasional mumbling.

If the man or woman walked in on Greg and Cynthia, they would be caught. There was no place for them to hide in their empty room. And the only weapons they had were plastic flashlights.

“How long have we been sitting here?” said Cynthia.

“About 45 minutes.”

“What do you think is in that box?”

“I don’t know.” Greg turned on his flashlight and walked to the front of the box.

“What are you doing?”

“Now I *have* to know what’s in here.”

“I’m sorry—I shouldn’t have brought it up. Maybe we’d better just leave it alone.”

Cynthia moved over to where Greg was kneeling in front of the box. It was six or seven feet long and about three feet wide. Except for the top, it was mostly buried in the dirt, so there was no way to determine the depth.

Greg handed Cynthia his flashlight and pulled up on the board. It was heavy. He had opened it just a few inches when Cynthia directed the flashlight beam down into the box.

She jumped back, hitting her head on the wall.

Greg quickly lowered the lid and went to her side. “Baby, are you okay?”

She was shaking—as though she’d seen the Angel of Death. “Did you see

inside?”

“What?”

She gulped. “Skeletons.”

“Are you sure?”

She grabbed his wrist and shook it hard. “Yes, I’m sure. Get me out of here, Greg.”

“Okay, but hang on a second. Will you hold the flashlight for me?”

“Do you really have to look? Can’t you just take my word for it?”

“Just stay back here and hold the flashlight. Please?”

“Hurry.”

Cynthia stood up and leaned against the wall and turned the flashlight toward the box.

Greg lifted the lid a couple of feet and studied the contents. There were several skeletons in the box. He counted four skulls and lowered the lid. His skin began to crawl, and he knew it wouldn’t stop until he was back above ground. “Let’s go.”

*

It was only a little after midnight and Horatio was already making his first trip to the bathroom. He couldn’t even remember what it was like to sleep through the night. His enlarged prostate was a pain in the butt.

When he got back to the bed, Alma said, “Ben’s talking in his sleep. Maybe you’d better go check on him.”

“Nah. He’ll settle down in a minute.”

But his brother *didn’t* settle down. He got louder.

“Horry?”

“Alright. I’m going.”

Horatio walked to the guest bedroom and stood in the doorway. He could see his brother clearly, thanks to the moonlight coming in through the windows.

“Ben?”

Hadley continued to mumble.

“Ben, you’re talking in your sleep.”

But he talked even louder. He seemed to be angry with someone.

Horatio walked to the side of the bed. “Ben?” He put his hand on Hadley’s arm.

Hadley jerked upright while grabbing something at his right side.

Horatio flipped on the light.

Hadley woke up, still clutching an imaginary object with both hands.

“Are you okay, Ben?”

“Uh...yeah.”

“What’s that you’re holding?”

He looked down at his hands. “My M1 rifle.”

“From the Korean War? So, you were about to shoot me?”

“Not *you*. I thought you were somebody else,” he said sheepishly, as he lowered his arms.

“I didn’t know you were still having those nightmares.”

“I’m not. Hardly ever. I just get them when I’m worried about something.”

“Well, what are you worried about? You came out here to take it easy. And we had a great time fishing today. You didn’t seem worried then.”

“I know.”

“Just try to relax. And if you feel the need to shoot something, just wait until morning and take it out on the doves, okay?”

“Look, I don’t know what’s bothering me. It’s as though there’s a problem brewing at home.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling.”

“A *feeling*. You sound like a girl. Just be a *man* and shut up and go to sleep.”

“Fine. Turn the light off and get out of my room and just maybe I will.”

*

What kind of people had skeletons in their basement? Who had killed the four people, and when? Greg and Cynthia wanted to leave those questions for the police.

Greg eased the door open just a crack and listened.

Silence.

He opened the door enough to slip out and tiptoed down the short hallway. He saw the four women, still out cold. He couldn’t tell for sure whether they were breathing, but they still had color in their faces—except the skinny one. But then he remembered she had been that color when they first came into the room.

Greg peeked around the corner, hoping the woman was gone and the man had fallen back to sleep. But they were both gone.

He motioned for Cynthia to come out and make a run for it. She took a glance at her mother, and then they bolted down the long corridor. He knew he couldn’t keep up with her, but he would try.

Then Greg heard voices behind him. And he knew he could still be seen from the hospital ward.

“I don’t care if you *do* have to pee. You should have waited until I got back. My grandmother’s coming and—”

Carnie saw someone racing down the corridor. All four women were still in their beds. But whoever it was, she couldn’t let them get away.

“Give me that.” She snatched the pistol from Jake’s hand and ran. And she was a fast runner—maybe even faster than Cynthia. *Definitely* faster than Greg.

Cynthia made it to the stairs and took them two at a time. When she reached the top, she opened the door and turned around to wait for Greg.

Greg was running as hard as he could—or least he *thought* he was, until he heard somebody chasing him. Then he got a second wind. But his pursuer continued to gain on him. And when he reached the stairs, he heard a voice from behind.

“Stop or I’ll shoot.”

He didn’t need to be told a second time.

“And you, up there—come back down here or I’ll shoot him right now.”

When that didn’t get a quick reaction, Carnie said, “Or maybe you’d *like* me to blow his brains out.”

“No, stop,” said Cynthia. She came down the stairs slowly.

“Let me guess. One of those women in there is your mother,” she said to Greg. “Or yours.” She nodded to Cynthia. “Right?”

“Yes,” said Cynthia.

“Well, you two have just gotten yourselves into a heap of trouble. “She followed them back to the Hideaway Hospital. She had done it again—made somebody do what she wanted by threatening them with an empty gun. The secret, she thought, is *attitude*. That’s what fools them every time.

“Looks like we snagged a couple of fish without even trying, Jake,” said Carnie as she threw him the pistol. “One of our volunteers was the bait.”

Jake studied Greg and Cynthia and wondered whether they would live through the night.

“So, this lovely couple was willing to give their lives for one of these women,” said Carnie. “Wonder which one?”

She reached behind her back to the scabbard and pulled out her knife—the one she had nearly stabbed Jake with earlier. She had strapped it on when she went up to her bedroom.

She went to Betsy Holsom and held the knife at her throat.

“Please don’t,” said Cynthia.

Then she tried Ellen Pinkly.

Greg said, “Why are you doing this?”

Next was Marcia Cleggmore. “Is it this one? If so, you must be rich.”

No reaction.

Then Carnie went to Beverly’s bed.

Cynthia gasped.

“Bingo,” said Carnie. She clasped the knife in both hands and raised it above her head and said, “Say goodbye to Mommy.”

Greg ran at Carnie with surprising speed, catching her off guard.

Carnie took the knife in her right hand and tried to stab him.

But he managed to grab both of her wrists.

She couldn’t break free from Greg’s grip, so she pushed and pulled and spun him around the room. They looked like a dance couple at an amateur competition—except for the big, sharp knife in her hand.

Jake just stood there watching, gun in hand.

Cynthia didn't think she could help Greg without getting shot.

Finally, Greg lost his balance and tripped backward, cracking his head on the edge of the table as he went down. He still had a grip on her arms. But he was feeling weaker and dizzier by the second.

Carnie used her body weight to push the knife down closer and closer to Greg's chest.

"No! Don't hurt him!" said Cynthia. She looked at Jake. "Do something!"

But Carnie was determined. The knife was only two inches from his chest. Now she knew she would win. She pushed down even harder. The tip of the blade was touching his shirt. Just one more good push, she thought, and he's a goner.

"Carnie! Stop!" The voice of authority echoed from the corridor.

Carnie pulled the knife away and stood up. "Hi, Grandma."

Chapter 3_3_

“Let’s get one thing straight, Carnie,” said Sylvia. “*I’m* in charge now. And you don’t kill anybody unless I tell you to.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Jake and Cynthia were amazed at Carnie’s metamorphosis. She had gone from monster to mouse right before their eyes. Greg was still too dazed to notice.

“Take these two and put them over there and handcuff them to beds.”

“We don’t have any more handcuffs,” said Carnie.

“Borrow a couple from those women.”

Cynthia didn’t want Carnie to grab her, so she walked to the right side of her mother’s bed and stood.

“No, not there,” said Carnie. “Not by your mother.”

“It doesn’t matter, Carnie. Just cuff her,” said Sylvia.

Jake helped Greg stand up and walked him to the left side of Betsy’s bed—the farthest distance from Cynthia. Greg leaned against the wall and slid to a sitting position on the floor. Jake handcuffed him.

“It was stupid to leave the van in the barn,” said Sylvia.

“I was planning to dump it,” said Carnie.

“Well, it’s too late for that. But it doesn’t matter now.”

Sylvia glanced at Cynthia and then at Greg. “I saw your car. Nice hiding place. In fact, I parked in that area too. By the way, I hope you have a good warranty on those tires.” She pulled out a large pocket knife and held it up, smiling.

Carnie stepped in close to her grandmother and whispered, “What’s the plan?”

“Just be patient, My Dear. Now give me a proper greeting.”

Carnie hated it—even in private. Now she was being forced to do it in front of other people. She kissed Sylvia on the lips.

But it was just a peck—not nearly enough to satisfy her grandmother. Sylvia took Carnie’s head in her hands and gave her an open-mouth kiss lasting five seconds.

In the blink of an eye, Carnie could have unsheathed her knife and gouged out Sylvia’s tongue. And then her eyes. Then she could have cut out her heart and stomped on it.

She *could* have.

*

Macy tossed and turned and thought about Elmo’s eyes and lips and arms. They had both wanted to make love. And they *would* have—if Carnie hadn’t interrupted. Of course, doing it on a hard floor was not what she had pictured for their first time.

She had imagined it thousands of times—waiting naked on a warm bed, under a satin sheet, when he walked out of the steamy bathroom in his robe. They would eye each other with burning desire as he walked toward her. It would be all he could do to restrain himself from running to the bed and leaping on top of her.

He would untie his robe and let it fall open, revealing his lean, muscular chest and his firm lower body, already throbbing for her.

Because Macy had not been with a man in many years, she had trained herself in the art of self-fulfillment. Through graphic visualizations, she could ring her own bell repeatedly—hands free.

But now she really needed to get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a wonderful day, she thought. She got up, put on her robe and went down to the kitchen for a glass of warm milk. When the microwave beeped, she reached to open to door.

“Why are you still up?”

Macy spun around and saw Elmo, standing in the doorway wearing his robe and slippers.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said.

“Yeah, me either.”

“I’m just so excited.”

He walked to her. “I love you, Macy.” He gave her a quick kiss. “Hey, since we’re both having trouble sleeping, you want to go down and watch a movie?”

“Sure.” She smiled. They had watched hundreds of movies and countless TV shows together. And now she could enjoy that with Elmo for the rest of their lives. As well as making love to him any hour of the day or night—any time he wanted her.

*

“Who’s this?” said Sylvia to Carnie.

“His name is Jake. He’s a friend of mine.”

“And he helped you set this up?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Cynthia interrupted. “Excuse me, but could somebody please tell me what’s going on here? Why have you kidnapped these women and drugged them? And why are you holding us?”

Sylvia turned to Cynthia. “Lady, I don’t think you understand the precarious situation you’ve gotten yourself into. I have total power over you and everybody in this room. For example: Carnie, go over there and slap Jake in the face. Slap him as hard as you can.”

Carnie reluctantly followed her grandmother’s orders.

Jake stared at Carnie, dumbfounded.

“No, that wasn’t good enough. You hesitated. Do it again. Now!”

This time, Jake grabbed Carnie's hand before she could strike him.

"You failed, Carnie. Make him pull his pants down. Underwear too."

"Forget it," said Jake to Carnie. "I'm not playing this game."

"Oh, but you *are*, Jake," said Sylvia. "Now, do what I said, Carnie."

Carnie reached for Jake's belt bucket, but he pushed her away.

"Okay, that's it," said Sylvia. "End of game. Kill him, Carnie."

Carnie turned and gave her grandmother a stone cold stare.

"Kill him, now!"

Carnie reached behind her back and pulled out the knife.

Jake grabbed the pistol off the couch and pointed it at her. "What are you doing, Carnie? I love you. Put the knife away."

"Love?" said Sylvia with a sneer. "Boy, you don't even know what love is. Just because you got into her panties, you think she loves you? No. Carnie only loves one person and that's me. Kill him!"

Carnie moved toward Jake with demonic look in her eyes that freaked him out. He pulled the trigger. But it didn't fire. Of course not, he thought. She had never loaded it.

Jake kicked Carnie back and she took a swipe at his leg and missed.

"Do it!" said Sylvia.

It all happened too fast. The knife was in Carnie's hand. She raised it above her head and then threw it at him.

Jake looked down and saw only the handle of the knife. The long blade was buried deeply in his chest. He slumped to the floor and fell over backwards.

Carnie went to his side. She looked as though she had just come out of a trance. "I'm sorry, Jake."

But it was little consolation. If he'd done the right thing and turned himself in, he would have been wearing a one-piece prison suit.

But now he'd be wearing nothing but a toe tag.

*

Mallie Mae got up to go to the bathroom. Soon Elmo would know just how much his mother cared about him. She had disgraced herself at the restaurant for the sole purpose of keeping Carsie and Elmo apart. And bringing Macy and Elmo together. And she was proud of herself for doing it.

But it had not been easy. We are trained as toddlers to only go in the potty. So, after more than 70 years, it took great effort for her to pee in her panties. And not just a little spurt. She needed enough to soak through her clothing and the fabric of the chair, so it would spill over and drip on the floor.

But it had been well worth it. Elmo would now dump Carsie. He was in love with Macy, and always had been. Most of the time Macy and Elmo spent together had been late at night, after Mallie Mae had gone to sleep. She knew they enjoyed watching movies together, but she had never seen the possibility of romance. All three of them had been fools, she thought. But not anymore.

When she came out of the bathroom she decided to check on Macy. She cracked her door and peeked out. Macy's door was open and a faint light shone through her doorway. Mallie Mae couldn't resist. She walked to Macy's doorway and looked in.

"Macy?"

Macy was not in her bedroom or her bathroom. Maybe they're watching a movie, she thought. Or maybe they're *in his bed*.

She went downstairs and checked Elmo's study and his bedroom. Both had their doors wide open. They must be in the Media Room, she thought. She tiptoed down the stairs, listening carefully as she went, and was nearly at the bottom of the stairs when she heard Elmo and Macy talking softly. She peeked out and saw them standing at the closed guest bedroom door—Carnie's door. Bright light shone from the gap under the door.

“Do you really think we should bother her? It’s 1:00 in the morning,” said Macy.

“Well, apparently she’s up. And I just want her to know we’re going to be watching a movie. Don’t want her to worry if she hears strange noises.”

“And you want to apologize again,” said Macy.

“Yes. Am I being silly?”

“No. I understand. I’ll apologize too.”

Elmo knocked on the door and waited.

No answer.

He tried again.

Nothing.

“Wonder why she’s not answering?” said Macy.

“Carnie? You okay?” he said through the door.

Still no response.

“Now I’m getting worried,” he said to Macy.

“Do you have a key?”

“Yeah.” He rushed into the Pub Room and opened a cabinet behind the bar and pulled the key off the hook. Then he went back and opened Carnie’s door.

Macy looked at Elmo in shock. “What in the world is this?”

Mallie Mae gasped, and was surprised that neither Macy nor Elmo heard her and turned around. She knew this day would come.

But why did it have to come now?

Chapter 3_4_

Carnie took the pistol from Jake's lifeless hand. She ejected the clip, began to load it with bullets she had brought down from her bedroom and hidden under a bag on the table.

Sylvia walked over to where Cynthia was standing, handcuffed to her mother's bed. She looked at Beverly and then at Cynthia as she smiled and said, "You know, Carnie enjoys killing old women. Don't you, Carnie?"

Carnie didn't answer.

Sylvia continued. "I'm sure you heard about the poor old lady in Marshall and her nurse. I understand the house was a bloody mess. And her safe was robbed too."

"Why are you telling me this? Now I know who the murderer is."

Sylvia's smile grew bigger and more evil.

"You're planning to kill all of us, aren't you?"

"We'll see."

Sylvia turned and walked toward Carnie. "Where's the bracelet?"

"In my room."

"I want to see it."

"Right now?"

"Right now. Go get it."

*

Elmo and Macy were standing in Carnie's doorway, looking at the hole in the floor.

Elmo led her into the room and showed her the stairs. “It goes down to the sub-basement.”

“How could I have been living here for 15 years and not know about this?”

“We wanted to forget about it, so we closed it off.”

“Forget about what?”

“There’s a laboratory down there. My dad built it so he could do his experiments.”

“Underground?”

“Yeah. It’s a long story. Look, I’ve gotta go down and find out what Carnie’s up to. You stay here. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Elmo went down the stairs, through the hallway and into the lab. He didn’t see anybody, but he heard a woman’s voice. It sounded as though it was coming from the bathroom, so he went over to check it out.

The bathroom was empty, but the voice was louder. He noticed that the mirror had been pulled away from the wall on one side. He moved closer and discovered that the mirror was also a door. The house had secrets even Elmo wasn’t aware of.

He opened the mirror door and stepped into the hospital ward. “What’s going on here?”

Sylvia had been harassing Greg. She spun around and smiled. “Oh, Elmo. I was wondering how long it would be before you joined us.”

“Who are you and what are you doing in my house?”

“My name is Sylvia Slitherstone. I went to college with Mallie Mae. We were suite mates.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re in my basement. Slitherstone? Are you related

to Carsie and Carnie?”

Cynthia shouted, “We’ve all been kidnapped. She’s planning to kill us.”

Sylvia’s smile disappeared.

Elmo turned to run upstairs and call 911.

But then he saw Carnie. She was pointing a gun at him. “What are you doing, Carnie?”

“If you had just gone ahead and married my sister, this wouldn’t be happening. Move over there by that table.”

“You mean *Carsie*’s in on this?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. She was supposed to seduce you into marrying her so we could get our hands on your money.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“But in the process, she fell in love with you.”

Sylvia chimed in. “A fairy tale love story, huh, Doc?” She laughed.

Carnie kept her gun pointed at Elmo as she walked to Ellen’s bed and removed the handcuff from her right wrist. Then she moved away from the bed and ordered Elmo to walk over and handcuff himself.

Elmo looked at Sylvia. “You *couldn’t* be a friend of my mother’s.”

“Oh, I never said we were *friends*. I said we went to college together. I suppose we were friends at first. But that ended when she stole your father away from me.”

“So, my dad dumped you way back in college, and now you want *money*? Is that what this is all about?”

“No, not really. It’s more about getting even. About getting what’s mine. Morford should have been *my* husband. You should have been *my* son.”

“Are you really that petty? To hold a grudge for over 50 years?”

Sylvia stopped smiling. “I want what’s mine. And I’m gonna take it.”

*

Mallie Mae was still standing near the bottom of the stairs watching Macy in Carnie’s room, when she heard somebody come in the front door. Then she heard footsteps coming down behind her. She knew that at any moment Macy would hear too, and turn around. But there was nowhere to go but down.

“Mallie Mae?” said Macy. She rushed to her. “What are you doing up? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just—”

“—what’s going on around here?” Carsie said as she stepped off the bottom stair. “Why is everybody up in the middle of the night?”

Macy and Mallie Mae looked at each other, but said nothing.

“And I think my grandmother is over here too. Where’s Elmo?”

Before they could answer, Carsie saw that Carnie’s bedroom door was open and the light was on. “And where’s Carnie?”

Carsie ran to her sister’s bedroom and saw the hole in the floor. “What’s *this*?” Then she heard somebody below. “Hello?”

“It’s me, Sis.” Carnie walked up the stairs and into the room.

“Carnie, what’s going on here?”

“We’re having a little party down in the basement.”

“I thought *this* was the basement.”

Carnie looked at Mallie Mae and Macy. “Come on, Ladies. Elmo wants you to come down too.”

As they were approaching Carnie’s room, she reached into her suitcase, pulled

out a little plastic bag and put it in her skirt pocket. “Follow me.”

When they entered the lab, Macy looked around and said, “Where’s Elmo?”

“He’s in here.” Carnie led them into the big bathroom and sent them through the mirrored doorway.

Sylvia was standing at the far side of the room holding the pistol. “Welcome, Ladies. Now the fun begins.”

“Who are you, and how dare you break into our home?” said Mallie Mae.

“Don’t you recognize me, Mallie Mae?”

“No. Should I?”

“We went to college together. I was one of your suite mates.”

“*Sylvia?*”

Sylvia’s grin scared Macy.

“Yes. So, I’m sure you know why I’m doing this.”

“I have no idea.”

“You stole my boyfriend, Mallie Mae! I’ll never forgive you for that!”

“Stole your boyfriend? *Morford?*”

“Yes, of course, Morford. When your roommate dumped him, I was there to pick up the pieces. But then she decided to play matchmaker, and introduced him to *you*. She was determined that *I* didn’t get him. She hated me.”

“Martha didn’t *hate* you.”

“Yes, she did. Bring it over here, Carnie.”

Carnie reached into her pocket and took out the little plastic bag as she walked to her grandmother. Sylvia exchanged the gun in her hand for the bag in Carnie’s hand. Then she reached into the bag and pulled out a silver bracelet. “But I

finally took my revenge on Martha.” She held up the bracelet and walked over to Mallie Mae.

“What’s that,” said Mallie Mae.

“I’m surprised you don’t recognize it.”

“It can’t be the bracelet Morford gave her.”

Sylvia turned it over and held it close to Mallie Mae’s eyes so she could read the inscription.

“How did you get that?” The horrible truth sunk in. “Somebody murdered her last week. It was *you*!”

Sylvia started laughing. “She had it coming.”

“Just because she got me and Morford together—over 50 years ago? Because of that you *murdered her*?”

Carnie spoke up. “Actually, I killed her. And her nurse.”

“And you’ve been living in *my house*?” said Mallie Mae.

“That’s right, Old Lady.” Carnie pointed the gun at her. “Now get over there against the wall and sit down! You too, Macy!”

Carsie was dizzy with confusion. “Carnie, why did you have to ruin everything? Elmo and were going to get married.”

“Wrong,” said Carnie. “Elmo wasn’t going to marry you.”

“Yes, he was. He just needed a little time to work things out for Mallie Mae and her Alzheimer’s.”

“I don’t believe Mallie Mae even *has* Alzheimer’s disease,” said Carnie. “I think she was faking it to break up you and Elmo.”

“That’s not true, is it Mallie Mae?”

Mallie Mae didn’t answer.

“Besides,” said Carnie, “tonight I caught Elmo making out with *Macy*.”

Carsie looked at Macy. “They’re great friends. I’m sure Elmo was just giving her a friendly hug.”

“Well, let me see if I can paint the picture for you, Sis. They were in his study. And her blouse was unbuttoned, her bra was flipped up and he was kissing her on the boobs. And if I hadn’t walked in when I did—”

“—Elmo, how could you?” said Carsie.

She looked at Macy. “And I trusted you.” She began to cry.

“Quit being a baby, Carsie,” said Sylvia. “Can’t you see that the Mobleys are all alike?”

*

Horatio jerked from his sleep when Hadley tapped him on the shoulder.

“What’s the matter, Ben?” said Horatio.

“I’m going home.”

Horatio put on his glasses and looked at the alarm clock. “But it’s 1:45 in the morning.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but I’ve got to get home. Something’s just not right. I called the house phone and nobody answered.”

“They’re *sleeping*.”

“Yeah, but then I tried all their cell phones, and nobody answered. And I know Elmo and Macy would answer their cell phones at night.”

“Well, maybe you should call the police.”

“No, I want to check it out myself first.”

“Goodbye, Ben,” said Alma from the other side of the bed.

“Sorry, Alma. Didn’t mean to wake you,” said Hadley.

“Well, call me if you need anything,” said Horatio.

“Okay, thanks. I really enjoyed our day together, and I hope we can—”

Horatio was already snoring.

Chapter 3_5_

The four women in the hospital beds were still asleep. Greg, Cynthia, and Elmo were standing, handcuffed to the bed guardrails. Macy, Mallie Mae, and Carsie were standing near the doorway to the bathroom. Carnie and Sylvia were across the room.

“I’m sorry you were hurt when Morford and I started dating,” said Mallie Mae to Sylvia. “I had no idea.”

“That’s hard to believe. I would have still had a chance when he got tired of you—if you hadn’t pulled him into bed and got yourself pregnant.”

“I didn’t mean to get pregnant. It was an accident.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was your way of stealing him away from me—forever.”

“But he never went out with you. I’ll bet he didn’t even know you were interested in him.”

“He *would* have gone out with me. But then he had to *do the right thing* and marry you.”

“So, what do you want from me?”

“I had a beautiful plan. Carsie would seduce Elmo, make him fall in love with her and they would get married.”

“I really do love you, Elmo,” said Carsie.

“Shut up, Carsie,” said Sylvia.

But Carsie went on. “I was acting at first—but then I really feel in love with you. And I tried to get my grandmother to forget about her plan, but—”

“—I said *shut up!*” Sylvia paused for a moment to regain her composure. “And of course, Elmo would love Carsie so much that he wouldn’t bother with a prenup. But then, after a few months, Carsie would turn into an unlovable witch and make him miserable.

“In the meantime, Carnie would take a nursing job at Coreyville General under one of her many assumed names. She would bump into Elmo at the hospital and go after him with her incredible sex appeal, and eventually make him cheat on Carsie.”

“You don’t know Elmo—he would never do that,” said Mallie Mae.

“Really? He was about to marry Carsie. We were *so close*. Anyway, after Elmo had cheated on his new wife and she had found out, she would have divorced him and bled him dry. Then my granddaughters and I would have enjoyed the dividends of our success.

“So, you see, my plan was to make your son miserable and poor, and thereby, make you miserable, Mallie Mae.”

“You should have left Elmo out of this. *I’m* the one you hate.”

“Yes, but *he’s* the one *you love*.”

“But your plan failed,” said Mallie Mae. “Elmo was about to break up with Carsie. He’s in love with Macy.”

“No, he’s not—he loves me! Don’t you, Elmo?” said Carsie.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Carsie,” said Sylvia. “I have a *new* plan. A much better plan. We’re all gonna stay right here until Monday morning. Then Elmo’s going to the bank to liquidate all his and Mallie Mae’s assets. Then he’ll wire the money to my bank account in Grand Cayman. And if he contacts the police or tells anybody what’s really going on, he’ll never see his mother or any of the rest of you again. At least, not in your current state, with heads attached.”

Cynthia listened in silence. She was a vice president First State Bank where the Mobleys had their accounts. She knew there was no way Elmo could go into the bank and wire all their money to an offshore account without arousing suspicion. She could offer to go to the bank with Elmo. But that would still leave her mom and Greg and everybody else in jeopardy. Should she speak up?

Carsie pointed at Cynthia. “And that woman should go to the bank with Elmo.”

“Why?” said Sylvia.

“Because she works there. I went to the bank with Elmo one time and I remember her. She’s some kind of loan officer or something.”

“Is that true,” said Sylvia to Cynthia.

Before she could speak, Mallie Mae said, “It doesn’t matter. We don’t have any money. At least, not the kind of money *you’re* talking about.”

“Don’t lie to me, Mallie Mae. Carnie, would you like to come over here and shoot Elmo in the leg?”

“Wait a minute. Let me explain,” said Mallie Mae. “We *used* to have money. Until Morford quit his practice and built this underground hospital.”

Sylvia studied Mallie Mae’s face. “I don’t believe you, Mallie Mae. But it’s a long time ‘til Monday morning and I *am* curious. Why *did* Morford build this place?”

“It was the early 1980s and Morford was trying to help some men who had AIDS. And everybody was so afraid of the disease back then. People didn’t even want you driving through their town if you had it.

“So, Morford knew the family name would forever be spoken with disgust if the townspeople found out he was treating those men. But he was determined to help them. So he built this underground lab and clinic to treat them. And he spent a lot of money doing it. Before long, his patients’ friends in San Francisco found out about Morford’s clinic and wanted to come here. But all he could handle was four patients. So, he sent donations—enormous sums of money, to help pay for their medical care. After a couple of years, we were down to a few thousand dollars.”

“But you still have this magnificent acreage and this wonderful house,” said Sylvia.

“Yes. Thanks to Elmo. After Morford died in the car accident, Elmo moved back home to support me and keep me from losing the house. He was so wonderful.” She smiled at her son and he smiled back.

Carnie stepped forward. “But what about the murders?”

“What murders?” said Mallie Mae.

“You thought nobody would ever find them. But you were wrong.”

Mallie Mae squirmed. “Find what?”

“The skeletons.”

Everybody in the room seemed surprised—except Greg, Cynthia, and Mallie Mae.

“Skeletons?” said Sylvia.

“Yes,” said Carnie. “I found four skeletons in a wooden box, buried under the floor in a room off that hallway.”

Sylvia stared at Mallie Mae. “Let’s hear it.”

“Those were Morford’s patients.”

“He *murdered* them?”

“They begged him to. He had done all he could for them, but they were all dying a slow death. Two of them were in worse shape than the others, but they all wanted to die together.”

Carnie was enjoying this part of the story. “So, what did he do? Blow their brains out? Cut their throats?”

“No. Of course not. He just upped their Morphine until they faded away.”

“Oh, that’s no fun,” said Carnie.

“What about their families?” said Carsie. “And what about the police? Didn’t somebody come looking for them?”

“No,” said Mallie Mae. “Sadly, nobody cared what happened to them except some friends in California. But most of them were dying too.”

Sylvia jumped in. “But it was still murder. Morford *deserved* to die in a car accident.”

“Actually, it wasn’t an accident,” said Mallie Mae. “I wanted everybody to think it was an accident because I didn’t want to have to tell the whole story. Somehow while he was treating those men he must have stuck himself with a needle. By the time he killed them, he had discovered that he had the disease too.

“So, he filled up two big gas cans and put them in the front seat of his car and then drove into a concrete wall at 90 miles per hour. It was suicide. Either he couldn’t live with the fact that he had killed those men, or he couldn’t bear the thought of putting his family through the torture of watching him die a slow, excruciating death.”

Elmo spoke softly to his mother. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, isn’t that a sad story,” said Sylvia with a smirk. “I wish I had known about your suffering, Mallie Mae—so I could have *enjoyed* it. I could have basked in the glow of your agony. This is just another pleasure you denied me.”

“What a cruel, bitter old woman you’ve become, Sylvia,” said Mallie Mae. “I feel sorry for you.”

“Well, I can *change that*,” Sylvia turned around to face Carnie. “I think it’s time to start killing some people, Carnie.”

While Sylvia had her back to Elmo, he got Greg’s attention and pointed to the mechanism that locked the bed guardrail in place. Sylvia was obscuring Carnie’s view of Elmo. And Carsie was watching the exchange between her sister and her grandmother.

Greg understood Elmo’s message. The bedrail to which he was handcuffed could be released by flipping a latch.

Sylvia continued, “We’ll start with...Macy. Yes, let’s kill Macy first. That will devastate Elmo. Then we’ll do Elmo. After that, Mallie Mae will be begging us to put her out of her misery.” She laughed.

*

Hadley was just a few miles from home when the Buick began to sputter. He knew his car better than he knew his own body, and diagnosed the problem instantly as a clogged fuel filter. He had installed a new one just two months

early. Must have picked up some dirty gas, he thought.

Fuel filters are great for protecting the carburetor by catching little bits of trash in the line. But after a while the trash buildup begins to choke off the flow of gasoline.

Hadley didn't have a spare fuel filter in the trunk. He hoped he wouldn't have to leave the car on the side of the road and walk the rest of the way—although, he was capable of making the walk. But it would take too long. He sensed his family needed him right now.

He was almost there. So, he would continue to push his old Roadmaster. It had always served him well.

Surely it wouldn't fail him now.

Chapter 3_6_

It was just after 2:00 AM, but nobody was sleeping in the Hideaway Hospital—except the drugged women in the four beds.

Sylvia was pacing the floor, having the time of her life. “Go ahead, Carnie. Do whatever you want with Macy.”

Carnie handed the pistol to Sylvia and walked slowly toward Macy. The fear in Macy’s eyes excited her. She wanted to stab her in the chest fifty times. Or rip her clothes off and have sex with her—right there in front of everybody.

“No, Carnie—please,” said Elmo.

Cynthia, Greg, and Mallie Mae joined Elmo, begging Carnie not to harm Macy.

Carnie reached behind her back and whipped out the knife and held it up.
“Quiet!”

Dead silence.

Carnie turned her head toward the bathroom. “I heard something upstairs. Elmo, do you have own a gun?”

He didn’t respond quickly enough.

Carnie raised the knife over her head, ready to throw it at Macy’s heart. “I’m sure you have a gun. Where is it?”

“In my desk in the study—bottom left drawer. But it’s locked. My keys are—”

“—I don’t need the keys. But you’d better not be lying.”

Carnie ran through the bathroom and the lab, picking up a screwdriver she had noticed earlier. She ran up the stairs, through her bedroom and into the media room. Through the high window she saw the black ‘56 Buick in the driveway.

She flew up the stairs to the main floor and ran through the living room, which was barely illuminated, by light from the foyer. She flipped the light switch in

Elmo's study and hurried to his desk. It was more solid than others she had encountered, but she still managed to pry open the drawer with the screwdriver. Elmo better not have lied, she thought. She found it under some papers at the back of the drawer—a .22 caliber pistol.

She looked up and saw Hadley standing in the doorway staring at her. She pointed and fired. But he was gone.

He's a dead man, she thought. Hadley was thin, and in good shape for a 77-year-old, but there was no way he could outrun her.

She ran into the living room and went toward the foyer. She would nail him on his way out the front door. But he wasn't in the foyer. And the front door was closed. She darted into the dining room and flipped on the light. Then she checked the kitchen. He must have gone downstairs, she thought. She hurried downstairs to find him.

But when she reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard the front door opening. He tricked me, she thought. That old man tricked me! She ran up the stairs, through the kitchen, the dining room, and the foyer, and out the front door.

She expected to see Hadley driving away in his car. Where was he? She strained to find him out in the darkness. There was plenty of moonlight—but her eyes had not adjusted from the brightness of the foyer chandelier.

Then she thought she saw movement. Yes, there he was—running toward the woods. She took aim and fired. He went down. She watched carefully—he was not moving.

She was about to walk out to him and make sure he was dead, when she heard Sylvia calling to her. She ran back into the house.

*

Hadley had underestimated Carnie's shooting skills. He had figured he'd be safe at that distance in the dark. Otherwise, he would have tried going for his shotgun in the trunk. But he thought it would take too long to get it out and load it. By then, she would have been close enough to hit him with her eyes closed.

He felt the blood oozing from his side. How long before he would fade to

unconsciousness? Could he make it to the car? And even if he managed to get to the car, would Carnie be watching and waiting just inside—ready to finish him off?

Mallie Mae and Elmo were not just his employers. They were as much his family as his Horatio was. And Macy had become family too.

Now his family was apparently in grave danger. For all he knew, some or all of them were already dead. He prayed not. But if there was any way he could help them, he would.

But first he had to find out if he could stand up.

*

All eyes were on Carnie and the gun in her hand when she walked back into the hospital ward.

“Who’d you shoot?” said Sylvia.

“Hadley.”

“No,” said Mallie Mae, looking as though her *husband* had just been murdered.

Elmo hung his head.

“Why did you have to *kill* him?” said Macy.

“I thought he wasn’t coming home until tomorrow afternoon,” said Sylvia.

“He wasn’t *supposed* to,” said Carnie. She walked to where Sylvia was, across the room. Carsie was still standing with the prisoners, as though she wasn’t sure whose side she was on.

Sylvia walked up to Macy and gave her an evil grin. “So, where were we, Carnie? I believe you were about to start with this one. What’ll it be first—a shot in the leg? Or chop off a finger? What do you think, Carnie?”

“What about the *money*?” said Carnie.

“You heard Mallie Mae. There *is* no money. But that’s okay. We can still enjoy

torturing her and her clan. Anyway, that *was* my number one goal.”

“That might have been *your* number one goal,” said Carnie, seething.

Sylvia spun around. “What do you mean?”

“The most important thing to *me* is the *money*. I’m getting tired of running your scams. I want enough cash so I can get away from you—once and for all!”

Greg thought this was his best chance—while Sylvia’s back was to him and the two women were arguing. He quietly flipped the latch and released the bedrail his handcuffs were attached to.

“But, Honey, we’re a team. And you don’t break up a great team,” said Sylvia.

“I don’t want to be on your team anymore,” screamed Carnie.

Greg eased the bedrail up and out of its slots, rushed up behind Sylvia and wrapped his right arm around her throat. The he slammed the bedrail across the front of her body, knocking the pistol out of her hand.

Macy jumped forward to reach for the gun, but Sylvia kicked it across the room.

“Looks like we have a change in plans. *This* one wants to go first. Let go of me right now!” said Sylvia. “Or Carnie will start shooting people!”

But Greg tightened his grip around her neck. It looked like they were all going to die anyway. He had to try *something*.

Carnie seemed ambivalent.

“Kill them, Carnie! Start with Macy or Elmo.”

Carnie stood frozen.

“Do it, Carnie! Now!”

“Only if you go along with what *I* want,” said Carnie coldly.

“Are you *crazy*? Shoot somebody!”

“No! I’m tired of following your orders. The woman in that bed right there is Marcia Cleggmore. Her family is very wealthy. We can get a huge ransom for her.”

“I don’t care about the money, Carnie. It’s all about making Mallie Mae suffer—for what she did to me.”

“That was 50 years ago, Old Woman! Why can’t you just get over it?” said Carnie.

“I’m not going to bargain with you—just do what I say!”

“No! I’m sick of it! You made me murder all those innocent people. And you made me kill Jake. I really liked him.”

“Quit being a baby, Carnie.”

“*And* you abused me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You started having sex with me when I was just a little girl.”

“You wanted it too. You *know* you did.”

“I didn’t know *what* I wanted. I was just a kid! You’re the one who turned me into a monster.” Carnie pointed the gun at Sylvia and walked toward her, getting angrier with each step.

“Just settle down, Sweetie. I love you.”

“Let go of her, or I’ll shoot...somebody,” said Carnie. From the look in her eyes, she just might have been ready to kill everybody.

Greg released her and stepped back.

Sylvia turned around and glared at Greg. “Mister, you’ve just earned yourself a bullet in the head for that foolhardy—”

Sylvia’s expression of glee turned to surprise and fear when she felt the bullet rip into her back. She stumbled and turned around to face Carnie. “What are you

doing? I'm the only one who's ever loved you."

"Lady, because of you, I don't even know what love is," said Carnie in monotone.

Sylvia collapsed to the floor. "You can kill me, but you'll never be free of your demons." Even as she was dying, Sylvia found the strength for one last dirty, evil smile.

Carnie stood over her and looked down in disgust as she said her final goodbye. "You're the Satan in my soul."

She pulled the trigger without flinching.

Sylvia was gone, but her eyes stared at Carnie as though she could still see her.

Carnie stepped back and picked up the other gun. "Now, *I'm* in charge."

Chapter 3_7_

The wound was not as serious as he had first thought. The dizziness, he had decided, was caused by running like a maniac to get away from Carnie—not by the bullet that hit his left side. If her aim had been three or four inches to the right, Hadley might have already been dead. As it was, he had minor bleeding and a sharp pain in his ribs.

He was familiar with the sensation of a cracked rib. But this pain was worse—she must have taken a little chunk out with that bullet, he thought. Still, he knew he was very fortunate. He pulled off his shirt, rolled it up and tied it around his ribcage to slow the bleeding.

As he walked quickly and painfully toward the Buick, he remembered his cell phone was on the front seat. The Coreyville cops could be there in five minutes. And if he hadn't thought he could handle the situation himself, he would have called them.

What would happen if the police came charging in? Carnie might start shooting everyone in sight. He couldn't take that chance. The crazy woman thought he was dead. He would use *that* to his advantage.

He quietly opened the trunk, took out his shotgun and loaded it. He hadn't killed anybody since Korea, but he wouldn't hesitate to do whatever it took to protect his family.

He crept up the stairs and into the house. Then he stopped to listen.

It was very faint, but he could hear a woman's voice coming from downstairs.

He went down to the basement, and could hear the voice more clearly now. It was Carnie. Good, he thought. Right now she was too far away to see or hear him.

He peeked into the media room. It was dark. Then he determined Carnie's location. Her door was closed, but he knew she was not in there. He cracked the door and confirmed his suspicion that the sub-basement had been breached.

He would have to call the police *before* he went down there—or not at all. His cell phone barely had a signal in the basement. It would be *worthless* in the sub-basement.

*

Now Carnie had two pistols—Elmo’s .22 and the .38 she snatched out of the car dealer’s dying hand. She set the small pistol on the table with the medical supplies while keeping the .38 pointed at her prisoners. “Well, I’m looking forward to calling in a ransom demand as soon as our Mrs. Cleggmore wakes up. But it looks like we’ve got some time to kill. Come here, Macy.”

Macy walked toward her slowly, not knowing what to expect.

“Untie your robe.”

“Why?”

Carnie glared at her and pointed the gun at her head.

Macy untied it.

“Good. Now, unbutton your gown.”

“Carnie, what are you doing?” said Elmo.

Carnie ignored him. “Now!” she said to Macy.

The buttons on Macy’s gown went from neck to waist. She struggled to unbutton them with shaky hands. Carnie didn’t seem to mind waiting—and watching.

“Now, come closer.”

When Macy was within two feet, Carnie stepped in and cupped her left hand around the back of Macy’s head, and began to kiss her on the lips.

Macy could feel the gun in Carnie’s right hand when she ran it up Macy’s left side and quickly found her nipple—the same nipple Elmo had lovingly caressed a couple of hours earlier.

She knew Carnie might push her away and shoot her at any second. The bullet

would pierce her exposed chest, punching a hole through her heart. She would be dead almost immediately.

Just as Macy's dreams were coming to life, they would die—as would she. Why had she waited so long to let Elmo know how she felt? Even that very night on the dance floor it had been an accident. She hadn't *told him* how she felt. He had seen it in her eyes.

But if she had made a move on him when she first started to work there, she would have been fired. Elmo would not have felt comfortable dating a 22 year-old—not when he was 41. But how about when she was 30 and he was 49? He might have been okay with *that*.

She could have grabbed him and kissed him. Or tried to seduce him. But she knew nothing about seduction—except what she had read in hundreds of romance novels. On second thought, maybe she knew *a lot* about seduction. But reading it and doing it are not the same thing.

She should have at least tried, though. If she had, maybe Elmo wouldn't have been available for Carsie's scam. Maybe he would have already been married to Macy. Then, she thought, none of these lives would be in peril right now.

Macy was relieved when Carnie stopped kissing her. But then Carnie moved her mouth down to Macy's breast. Macy cringed at the realization that her body was responding to Carnie's touch. And now her nipple was getting even harder as Carnie encircled it with her warm, slippery tongue. Macy was not gay. It was just a natural reaction to the stimulation. And in fact, after what she had seen and heard tonight, she figured Carnie was probably not gay either.

Not that any of it matters now, she thought. They were all about to die—unless somebody made a courageous sacrifice for the sake of the others. Could she wrestle the gun away from Carnie? And even if she did—what about the *other gun* on the table?

Carnie pushed Macy back forcefully, nearly knocking her down. “We could have been great together, Honey.” She studied the faces across from her. “Now, who do I want to mess with next?”

“Hold it right there, Carnie.” The voice boomed from the long corridor.

Carnie's mind had been so preoccupied with Macy's shapely body that she hadn't noticed when the lights in the corridor went out. She recognized the voice as Hadley's, but couldn't see him. "You're supposed to be dead."

"I was *supposed* to be dead in 1952. Now, put your gun down on the floor and kick it toward me."

"You're good, Hadley. I'll say that." Carnie squatted and appeared to be following Hadley's instructions. Then she rolled to the floor and started shooting blindly into the dark corridor. She fired all six rounds. Hadley did not return fire.

The room was silent, except for the diminishing echoes of the gunshots.

"You missed," said Hadley. As he had figured, she had assumed he was standing, not lying down. "Now, just stay right there on the floor."

But she didn't. She scrambled to the table, picked up the .22 and fired into the corridor, emptying the gun.

"Are you done?" said Hadley.

"I *know* I shot you in the front yard."

Hadley stepped into the light of the hospital ward, holding his shotgun. The rolled-up shirt he had tied around himself was bloody in one spot. "Yes, you did. But it's not the first time I've ever been shot."

Carnie stood up.

"Just stay right there," said Hadley.

She reached behind her back and pulled out the knife.

"Don't make me do it," said Hadley.

She looked directly at Elmo and raised the knife above her head. "Everybody say 'goodbye' to Elmo."

She pulled her arm back, ready to throw the knife, but before she could release it, Hadley fired the shotgun.

The knife flew against the wall, along with two of Carnie's fingers. The rest of her bloody hand was scattered across the table and on the floor. She lay on the floor, screaming in agony. Her former prisoners looked on in horror.

"Somebody go upstairs and call 911," said Hadley.

But nobody reacted. All eyes were on Carnie.

She felt across the floor with her left hand and found the knife.

"No—put it down," said Hadley.

"I'm sorry for the horrible things I've done," she said, holding the blade at her throat.

Hadley was surprised by the look in her eyes—her remorse seemed real.

"But I'm not going to prison." And with a quick jerk of the knife the blood began to gush from her neck.

Hadley knew there was nothing he could do to save her. He knelt and watched her sad eyes quickly fade.

After a few moment of complete silence, Cynthia said, "Could somebody please get these handcuffs off of us?"

Hadley found the key on the table and took it to Cynthia. She took off her cuffs and Beverly's, and gave the key back to Hadley, who went to the next bed.

Cynthia prayed that the drug Carnie had given her mom and the other women had not done any permanent damage. But they were lucky to have slept through most of the ordeal.

Greg was still carrying around the bedrail he was handcuffed to. He put his arm around Cynthia. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

"Yes. I just hope Mom's going to be alright.

Even before Elmo's handcuffs had been removed, Macy ran to him and hugged him.

Mallie Mae smiled. “I refuse to let you two waste any more time. We need to start planning the wedding.”

Macy wrenched her head around in shock, popping her neck. “What?”

“I said we need to start planning your wedding,” said Mallie Mae.

“But...Elmo hasn’t proposed...”

Elmo dropped to one knee, his left hand still cuffed to the bed. “Macy Golong, will you marry me?”

Macy’s eyes erupted with tears. After waiting so many years, she had not expected it to happen all at once—in *one day*. “Oh, yes, Elmo. You know I will.”

But then she felt bad for Carsie. If things had gone as planned, Elmo and Carsie would have been on their honeymoon right now, she thought. And now poor Carsie was having to watch her fiancé propose to Macy. She looked to see how Carsie was handling it, but couldn’t find her. “Where’s Carsie?”

Mallie Mae said, “She’s right over—”

“—she’s gone,” said Elmo.

Hadley ran upstairs, shotgun in hand. On his way up to the kitchen, he heard the engine starting. By the time he made it through the foyer and out onto the porch, she was too far away. He would have only shot at her tires anyway. She hadn’t killed anybody—as far as he knew.

He ran to his car and jumped in. He would call the police on his cell phone and follow her until they took over. He reached for the ignition.

But his keys were gone.

Chapter 3_8_

“More popcorn, Beverly?” Greg held up the big plastic bowl.

“No, thanks—I’ve had enough,” said Beverly from the other end of the couch.

It had been less than a week since their underground nightmare. But now Greg was beyond just being grateful to be alive. It was Friday night, and the three of them were watching a movie in Cynthia’s living room. He and Cynthia should have been out on a date—not stuck here at home with her mother, he thought.

Cynthia wanted to pamper her mom for a while. She had been abducted at knifepoint, after all. And Greg was sympathetic to Cynthia’s feelings. But he hoped she understood *his* feelings. And right now what he was feeling was her warm leg against his. And her occasional hand on his knee.

It was weird and mildly unsettling—as though he existed in three distinct realms. Intellectually, he was dressed in a business suit, reading a magazine, waiting patiently for a scheduled appointment. Emotionally, he had reached the top of Mt. Everest and was admiring the magnificent view. Physically, he just wanted to pounce on her.

Greg really liked Beverly. He enjoyed being around her. But he needed more *alone time* with his girlfriend. He needed to hold her, kiss her, caress her back, legs, breasts—stop! It was not a good time to get turned on.

*

“Good news, Sweetie. I just got a call—we’ve got the room we wanted at the Hyatt Regency,” said Elmo.

“Great. Come in.” Elmo walked into Macy’s bedroom and she shut the door. “I’m surprised you were able to get it, with just a week’s notice.”

Mallie Mae had lied when she told Sylvia the Mobleys were broke. It was true that Morford had given away most of their money to help AIDS victims. But he had never touched their Texaco stock. Macy wouldn’t have cared if they *had* been broke. She just wanted to be with Elmo.

“Me too. I called the hotel this morning and the lady told me they were booked up. But I explained our situation, and that it would be for our honeymoon and asked her to put us on the waiting list.”

“And I suppose you *knew* somebody there and they pulled some strings for you.”

“No. But I think Cupid might have had something to do with it.” He smiled.
“Are you sure you don’t mind just doing a weekend honeymoon in Dallas?”

“No, of course not. It’ll be wonderful. And then we’ll do the cruise in a few weeks.”

“And you’re really okay with Mom going on the cruise?”

“Sure. She’ll have her own room.”

“But we’ll still see her a lot. So, if you don’t want her to go, just tell me. There’s still time to cancel her reservation. I know she’d understand.”

“No, really—it’s okay. I_ love_ Mallie Mae.”

“Okay, good. I think it will be great for her. It’ll give her a chance to meet some new people her age.”

“Baby, I’ve been wondering. Do think anybody will actually show up for our wedding?”

“Of course they will. What are you talking about?”

“Well, we’ve only given them a few days’ notice. And you just cancelled a wedding last week.”

“Don’t worry. Mom has put the word out. And believe me—her friends are spreading the news like wildfire. In fact, *she* thinks the church will be packed. It is a wonderful love story, you know—best friends finding love in each other’s arms after so many years.”

“It’s definitely *my* favorite love story. And I can’t wait to be Mrs. Elmo Mobley —_Macy Mobley_.” She stepped in close and put her arms around him.

“It *does* have a nice ring to it. Speaking of which...” he dropped to one knee and looked up at her, holding her left hand. “It’s time to do it right.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box and flipped the top open, revealing a dazzling diamond ring. “Macy Golong, will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

Her face beamed with delight. “Oh, Elmo, it’s so beautiful. Yes, I—”

“—to live with me forever in holy matrimony?”

Her smile broadened further. “Yes, Elmo, I—”

“—to love me with all your heart, as I love you?”

She giggled. “Yes, of course, Elmo, I *will*—”

“—to make love to me day and night as long as we both shall live?”

“Yes, my dear sex maniac. And I promise to *do you* in every way known to man.”

“Then it’s a deal.” He slid the ring onto her finger and stood up. “I love you, Macy.”

She pressed her body against his and began to kiss him as though it was already the wedding night.

He moved his hands down across her back and slid his fingertips under the waistband of her pants, and then for the first time, inside her panties. The feel of her firm, bare buns made him want to pull off those panties and everything else, and throw her on the bed.

There was a knock at the door.

Elmo’s hands were instantly out of her panties and down at his sides—fast enough to make a magician proud.

Macy tried to catch her breath and sound normal. “Yes?”

Mallie Mae cracked the door and stuck her head in. “I just got off the phone with my friend Rachel. She says everybody in Coreyville is thrilled that you two are

getting married. First Baptist Church is going to be *the place to be* next Friday night.”

“That’s wonderful, Mallie Mae.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Mom.”

“Oh, and one other thing,” said Mallie Mae. “Try to save something for the honeymoon.”

Macy and Elmo looked at each other, slightly embarrassed.

Mallie Mae grinned as she closed the door. “Goodnight.”

*

Carsie knew the old couple who owned the cabin. They lived down the road from her grandmother’s house. She was sure they wouldn’t mind her living there for a couple of weeks. They hadn’t used it in over a year—since the husband’s stroke.

Sylvia had talked about how they should have sold the place to help pay the mounting medical bills. But the wife still clung to the hope that her husband would recover. Then they would spend nearly every weekend at the cabin like they used to.

Carsie figured the police would eventually question Sylvia’s neighbors, use a little common sense, and come to the cabin looking for her. She had been a fugitive for six days. But her time there would soon be over anyway.

It was 9:20 AM on Saturday, and many of the folks from neighboring cabins were out fishing. Some of them were probably hoping to hook the proverbial *big one* that always gets away. She had her own big fish to catch. She planned to throw it down and watch it flop around until it died. Oh, what revenge it would be. What sweet revenge.

The Mobleys knew nothing of her high school days, and her archery medals. She was a bit rusty, but after four days of non-stop practice, her accuracy was coming back. And her new Browning Mirage ZX compound bow was the best she’d ever used. It was 33 inches, axle to axle, and weighed less than four pounds.

She had pulled off many successful cons with her sister and grandmother, beginning at age 20. She would lure in some poor sap and make him fall in love with her. She had a talent for it. Then, after they got married, Carnie would seduce him. Soon, Carsie would divorce him for his infidelity and take him for as much money as possible. The three women had worked as full-time con artists for ten years. Now her partners and her family were dead.

But for once in her life, with Elmo Mobley, she had not been faking—except in the beginning. She had foolishly fallen in love with him. But why? Elmo was 26 years older than her. It didn't make sense. Maybe it was *because* he was so much older. She had let her guard down because she felt safe. She could relax since there was no way she was going to fall in love with a guy old enough to be her father. But that was exactly what happened.

Carsie despised Macy. If the woman had wanted Elmo she could have had him years ago. Why had Macy waited until Carsie came along to show her true feelings? She knew she could never get Elmo back now. But she didn't want Macy to have him either.

If she had the opportunity to poison Macy, she wouldn't do it. If she had the chance to catch her alone somewhere and stab her through the heart, she wouldn't do that either. Why? Because she wanted Macy to suffer *publicly*. And she wanted Elmo to see his love die right before his eyes. She wanted the whole world to witness the destruction of the happy couple who had ripped the dreams of happiness from her soul.

They would pay for the death of Sylvia and Carnie. And for *Carsie's* death. Because she would soon die also. There would be nothing left to live for...once she had destroyed the Mobleys.

"Yes!" Another bull's eye.

Chapter 3_9_

Greg had never seen his church auditorium filled to capacity. If any more people came, he thought, the usher would be forced to open the balcony. Mallie Mae had insisted the balcony not be used until the main floor pews were packed tight. When her son and her new daughter-in-law turned to walk out as man and wife, she did not want them to see any gaps in the congregation. The more crowded it looked, the more love they'd feel.

On the floor level, there were thirty pews—fifteen on each side, with an isle down the middle. And for weddings, having a center isle was always preferable. The official seating capacity for the auditorium was 350, which included fifty in the balcony. But because it was bench-style seating rather than individual seats, nobody really knew exactly how many bodies could be squeezed in. Certainly more people than they ever saw on Sunday mornings. And probably a much larger number than the Fire Marshall would approve of.

Greg, Cynthia, and Beverly were sitting on the right side. It would have been just as appropriate for them to sit on the bride's side, since they hadn't met Elmo or Macy until two weeks earlier in the hideaway hospital. But it didn't matter since both sides were packed with the Mobleys' friends and Elmo's former patients and parents of patients.

Greg checked his watch. In about four minutes the pastor, Elmo, and his best man would come out and take their places, and the organist would begin to play. Then something to the left caught his eye. An attractive young woman with short, black hair had opened the side door near the piano, and was looking out into the crowd. She's wondering if there's any place to sit, he thought. Then he saw her look up at the balcony.

"Sweetie, does that woman look familiar to you?"

Cynthia broke off the conversation with her mother and turned to him. "What did you say, Baby?"

"See that woman over—. Never mind—she's already gone."

"Mom and I were just talking about what an amazing turnout this is."

“Yeah.”

“The Cleggmores have a huge family, don’t they?”

Greg didn’t answer. He looked as though he’d just thought of something important he’d forgotten to do.

“Greg?”

“I’ve got to go check something.” He stood and walked toward the front of the auditorium.

“But it’s about to start.”

He hurried out the door where he had seen the mystery woman standing.

No sooner than Greg had disappeared through the door, Dr. Huff, Elmo, and Hadley walked out from the opposite side near the organ, and stepped up on the platform. The groom was very handsome in his tux. He was 56 years old, but he looked more like 46—which was great, since his bride was only 37. Hadley looked great too. He was still having some pain from Carnie’s gunshot, but you would have never known it by looking at him.

The organist played the familiar unison notes at the beginning of the Bridal Chorus and over 300 people stood and turned around to see the beautiful bride, ready to enter. Traditionally, the father walks his daughter down the aisle. But since Macy’s dad had passed away, as well as her mom, Mallie Mae offered to walk her down and give her away. After all, she was giving away her nurse and best friend. But at least they would still be living in the same house.

Macy’s eyes were filled with tears of joy. She worried about ruining her makeup, but she just couldn’t control her overwhelming emotions. Nor did she *want* to. It was just like in her dreams, she thought.

Although, she didn’t remember who was walking her down the aisle in her dreams. What she remembered vividly was Carsie standing in the congregation, staring at her as she walked by.

Carsie had escaped, and the police had not been able to find her. But surely she wouldn’t have the gall to come to the wedding. Would she?

*

The woman with the short, black hair could see the bride at the front of the church when she came through the main outdoor entrance into the foyer. She saw Mallie Mae lift the veil and kiss Macy on the cheek.

A young, male usher closed the double doors leading into the auditorium. When he turned and saw the woman, he said, “I think there’s still a little room on the left side in the back.” He eyed her tweed guitar case. “Cool. So, I guess you’re playing for the reception.”

“Yeah. Hey, I don’t want to disturb anybody. I’ll just sit up in the balcony.”

“Uh, Mrs. Mobley told us not to let anybody go up there.”

“Oh, Mallie Mae is so silly about these things.” She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry—if she gripes about it, I’ll take the blame. Like I always do.”

“Well, okay.”

As she walked away, she could feel his eyes checking her out. You’ve still got it, Baby, she thought.

When she stepped into the balcony, she realized there might be a problem. Nobody in the building had a clear view of the balcony—except the pastor. Why hadn’t she thought of that? But then she realized that because the pastor was medium height, she could avoid being seen by him if she hid behind the 6-foot-7 Elmo. So, she crept up to the railing, a little to the right of center.

She laid her guitar case down on the carpet and quietly opened the lid and admired her instrument of choice for this special occasion. By tearing out the fitted padding and replacing it with two sheets of foam rubber, she had created a perfect carrying case for her \$529.00 compound bow. It was a thing of beauty. More beautiful than the bride.

It would have been easier to do it while their backs were to her. But she would wait until the end of the ceremony, when they turned to face the congregation and the minister introduced the newly married couple to the crowd. Elmo and Macy would be so caught up in their happiness that they wouldn’t even notice her.

Family and friends would see Elmo and Macy smiling broadly just before the arrow appeared from nowhere and savagely ripped through the bride's heart. Macy would look up into the balcony as the blood began to flow down her lovely white gown. She would see Carsie standing there proudly, bow in hand, and then fall to the floor.

Afterwards, it would be impossible for Carsie to escape. She would be taken into custody—but they would never have the satisfaction of putting her behind bars. The little poison capsule in her pocket would see to that.

Carsie listened to the vows and thought about how different things *could* have been. If Mallie Mae and Macy hadn't interfered, it would have been *her* down there becoming the doctor's wife.

During the prayer that came right before the kiss, Carsie picked up the arrow and got into position. Her accuracy was back. There was no doubt that she would nail her target.

She watched as the pastor pronounced them husband and wife, and then said, "Elmo, you may kiss the bride."

The crowd ooh'ed and aah'ed as Elmo gave Macy a long kiss. Then they turned to face the congregation, and the pastor said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Dr. and Mrs. Elmo Mobley."

Carsie drew her bow. It would be a perfect shot.

The congregation heard a loud crack and a swoosh, and were terrified to see an arrow slice through the air just above the heads of the happy couple, and fly into the choir loft, piercing the drywall.

Greg stood over an unconscious Carsie with the unlikely weapon still in his hand—a large print hymn book. He had whacked her over the head just in time. He yelled to the stunned couple, "It's okay now. Everything's under control."

He flipped open his cell phone, dialed 911, and reported the attempted murder. He hadn't recognized her at first because of the wig. He shivered when he thought about the disaster that *could* have been.

Then he saw her waking up and wondered if she had a knife or a gun.

“Did I get her? Is she dead?”

“No. Everybody’s fine. You missed.”

She tried to sit up, but didn’t have the strength. “I’ve *got* to kill her.”

“No. You’re not going to kill her. The police will be here any minute.”

“You don’t understand. *She* was supposed to die_ first_—then_ I_ would die.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re going to *die*. You’re probably going to have a big headache. And then you’re going to spend a long time in prison, but—”

“—no. I *am* going to die. I’m dying right *now*.”

“Oh, come on—I didn’t hit you *that* hard.”

“Tell Elmo I love him. He was my only true love—ever.” Her eyes slowly closed.

“Carsie?” He knelt beside her. “Carsie?” Surely he hadn’t killed her. He felt for a pulse, but couldn’t find one. So, he began to perform CPR.

Still no breathing. No pulse. He had not meant to *kill* her.

Though unsuccessful, Carsie had followed her plan—using one arrow. And one little capsule.

Chapter 4_0_

Elmo studied himself in the bathroom mirror. He could not remember ever being so excited about anything. But he was 56 and she was only 37. He hoped she never regretted taking vows with him.

For fifteen years he had wanted her. Every night they spent watching movies, talking, and laughing he had longed to hold her. They were best friends—so, why hadn't he given her an occasional friendly hug? Macy had probably wondered about that, he thought. But he had always feared that the slightest touch of her skin would ignite his pent-up desire for her.

But now they were married. And he was about to make love to his beautiful wife. So, there was no longer anything to fear—except the question of whether he could fully satisfy her.

He sensed her expectations were very high, and he hoped he could meet the challenge. Because, with all his heart he wanted to please her in every way. He would do *anything* for her. Perhaps his eagerness would compensate for any deficiencies.

Elmo walked out of the bathroom into the darkness and saw her standing at the full-length window, admiring the Dallas skyline. They had come so close to losing it all. If Carsie's arrow had been just a few feet lower...

Greg Tenorly, had saved both of their lives. The death of his bride would have done irreparable damage to Elmo's heart, leaving him neither dead nor alive—a pitiful zombie, wandering aimlessly through each meaningless day.

But all that ugliness was behind them now.

The silhouette of Macy's shapely hips against the city lights made him pause and enjoy the view. She turned to speak, which drew his eyes to the profile of her glorious breasts.

"It's so beautiful," she said.

He walked toward her, still eying her chest. "Yes, it is."

She loved that he was in awe of her body. “Elmo, I’ve dreamed of this night so many times.”

“Me too, Baby.”

He began to kiss her.

She untied his robe and surveyed every inch of his chest and stomach with her warm, soft hands.

He gently massaged both of her breasts and felt the response of her nipples to his fingertips.

She journeyed lower and found him so wonderfully firm, and sensed the rising heat and moisture within herself.

“Make love to me, Elmo.”

“Oh, Baby.” The stroke of her fingers was driving him out of his mind.

He pulled away from her hands. “There’s just one thing I’m a little worried about.”

“What is it, Sweetie?”

“I’m a lot older than you. What if I can’t satisfy you?”

“Oh, Elmo. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Well, I’m not so sure about that.”

“But, Baby, can’t you see? The very fact that you’re concerned about satisfying me proves that you *will*.”

“Huh?”

“Just do what I say,” she said.

“Okay. That sounds like fun.”

She slipped the robe off his broad shoulders and let it drop to the floor. Then she

pulled off her silky-thin gown, scooped onto the bed and began to spread her legs. “Come here, Sweetie.”

After that, he didn’t remember *doing anything*. It was as though it all just *happened* to him. To *them*. It was like a dream. His best dream ever.

Her anticipation had grown to a fever pitch, so it didn’t take long for her to go over the edge. And it was such an enormous event that Elmo could only assume the night was over—until she started up again. And she just kept coming back for more.

It was the beginning of what would be a life of loving and living together in the greatest joy either of them could have ever imagined.

*

He glanced down. In the light from the TV, Greg could see the spot on his pants growing. It was a natural response of the body, preparing for something that... would *not* happen. Not tonight anyway, he thought. Not on Cynthia’s couch.

She leaned in for another kiss. It was even more of a turn-on when *she* initiated it. He ran his left hand through her soft, red hair, which seemed to release the faint, peach scent of her shampoo. He wanted to bury his nose in it—to inhale her.

He placed his right hand on her knee and began to work it upward and under her skirt.

She encouraged him by massaging his gums with her tongue and filling his lungs with her sweet, hot breath.

“So, y’all are watching CSI too, I see.” Beverly was standing behind them in the doorway.

“Uh, yeah, Mom.”

“It’s a good one.” She walked down the hall to her bedroom and closed the door.

“That’s it.” Greg whispered loudly as he stood up.

“What?”

“I can’t take this anymore.”

Cynthia stood up. “It’s okay, Baby. It’s gonna get better.”

“But she’s fine. Why can’t you leave her here alone while we go out? You leave her every day to go to work.”

“I know—but that’s different. I’m afraid she’ll be scared at night.”

“Well, I just can’t live this way.”

“What are you saying?”

Greg dropped to one knee. “Cynthia Blockerman, will you marry me?”

“But, Honey, my mom will still be living here, even if we get married.”

“Yes, but then we can go off to *our* bedroom.”

“I see.”

“And lock the door.”

“So, you want me to marry you so you can have sex with me?”

“Well...yeah!”

“That’s *all* you’re interested in,” she said demurely.

“No, of course not. But we’ve already got everything else. It’s the only thing missing.”

“In that case—_yes!_”

He jumped up and hugged her. “Oh, Baby... But it’s got to be soon.”

Cynthia giggled.

“I’m dying here,” he said.

“Hey, you’re not the only one who wants it. It’s killing me too.”

“Good. Now, kiss me.”

Greg wondered how soon a wedding date Cynthia would agree to.

They could elope. Yeah! Just go to a justice of the peace. Would he still be up at this hour?

No. He was just being silly—and horny. Cynthia deserved a beautiful church wedding—which was fine with him. And at least there would be no jilted lovers trying to spoil their day.

But still...maybe he would hire a guard for the balcony.

Just in case.

THE END

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