

FRANCIS GENE COLLINS

Double Redemption
The Story of Mike and Emma

Chapter One

Mike

Live or die. That was the choice facing me. I had faced the same decision twice before, years earlier, and both times I had chosen life. This time I was less certain. I planned to use the evening to discuss the issue with my best friend, Glock. He was loaded and waiting in the top drawer of my nightstand.

Born with the surname Carter, I would eventually become Michael J Michaels, and people would ask me why there was no period after my middle initial. My first conscious memory is of physical pain—I was maybe three years old, give or take a few months. Newt, my designated stepfather at the time, twisted my ear until it began to separate from the side of my head. Then he slapped me because I got blood on his hand. At the emergency room, Newt told the nurse that the neighbor's dog had bitten me on the ear. I hated and feared Newt. But he went away like all of my designated stepfathers did.

My second conscious memory is of deep and lasting emotional pain, just after my fourth birthday. I had come into the kitchen one morning hoping to get something to eat but finding my mother sitting

at the table, slumped over with one arm dangling at her side. The other arm was stretched out across the table, and there was some kind of big rubber band circling her arm just above the elbow. I could see she was awake because her eyes were open, but when I got in front of her, she wouldn't look at me.

"Mommy," I said. "Can I have something to eat?"

She didn't answer, so I asked her again.

Still no answer.

I shook her dangling arm gently, saying, "Mommy, I'm really hungry." She began to move, and I was happy because I thought she was going to make me breakfast. But instead, she slowly slid off the table, then off the chair and onto the floor, coming to rest on the dirty tile, sort of half curled up, with her eyes still open wide. I shook her shoulder gently, and I remember that she seemed very stiff. She wouldn't answer me, and she wouldn't get up. I went out the back door and walked over to our neighbor's house, telling the lady there that my mommy wouldn't get up. She said something like, "You poor child. Let's go see what's wrong."

Then I remember my mom's funeral, or at least parts of it. There was some shouting and a great deal of angry whispering, mostly about me. I remember some of it.

"I don't want the little weasel."

"Somebody's got to take care of him."

"You do it."

"No. He's the worthless bastard son of your drugged-up cousin. It's your job."

No one wanted me, and for a long time I didn't even want myself. My life became a succession of homes of family friends and relatives who were not pleased to have me. Most had barely enough food and necessities for their own families, much less a hungry young mongrel like me. One patriarch even began calling me "Mutt."

I was always hungry. Only those who have known chronic hunger can understand it. It evolves into a palpable, living thing, permeating every cell of consciousness, becoming the entire source of being. It is a human and awful thing, and I wish it for no person, ever.

During my stay with "friends" and relatives, I became quite skilled at finding food, even when there wasn't much to be had. Supermarkets would put expired food on loading docks in the back of the store. Since no one kept track of me, I could pretty much come and go as I pleased, so I developed a set of daily rounds after school during the school year and at random times during school vacation and the summer. My daily rounds consisted of examining loading docks looking for cast-off food. Sometimes I hit the jackpot, finding lettuce, tomatoes, apples, and bread ripe for plucking near the back door of a local supermarket. Every now and then, one of the supermarket's delicatessens would discard some very edible, nearly gourmet stuff, and I was poised and ready to assist in their disposal. In this way, I managed to survive quite well.

I'm sure that most of the families I stayed with wished I would just go away and not come back.

Without fail, after a passage of time, I was “allowed” to oblige them. When I was seven years old, I lived with a distant cousin in a run-down section of Milwaukee, where my bed was an old army cot on an enclosed back porch. I had a cast-off sleeping bag to keep warm and a beat-up pillow for my head. It would be many years before I knew the comforts of clean sheets and pillowcases.

Although I was a grateful for that Milwaukee porch, it was brutally uncomfortable during the humid Midwest summers, even at night. In the winter, I huddled inside the sleeping bag, curled into a fetal position to conserve heat. Most winter nights, I shivered until the morning when I was allowed to come into the house, offered a bare minimum of food, and then shuttled off to school. I stayed at that place for nearly three years until a stroke of fortune—actually misfortune—led me to a far better place.

My ultimate salvation in Milwaukee came in the form of Ronald McDonald, the clown I thought owned all of those McDonald’s restaurants. Ronald had one of his places about two blocks from the house, and I owed my life to the dumpster behind the restaurant. Since I clearly wasn’t wanted around the house, I came and went often. I also stayed out late since there was no reason for me to go home. One night, at almost exactly 10:00 p.m., I was walking through the parking lot of McDonald’s when the back door to the restaurant opened. One of the employees, a pudgy guy, came out of the door and headed toward the dumpster with a tray of burgers. At least it looked like a tray of burgers. I

was cloaked in semidarkness between two parked cars, practically invisible unless someone looked right at me. Pudgy didn’t look to the right or left. He just went to the dumpster, lifted its plastic cover, and tossed the burgers inside. He closed the dumpster’s lid, sneezed twice, and then started walking back to the restaurant.

As Pudgy let the top to the dumpster slam shut, I thought I was seeing things. No one tossed burgers into a dumpster. Did they? I just had to know. I waited until Pudgy went back inside, and then I went to the dumpster and carefully opened the lid. I was too short to see over the rim, but I didn’t have to be tall to smell. I smelled burgers. Fortunately, the dumpster was ribbed, with a stiff steel ledge around its entire perimeter about halfway up from the ground. I hoisted myself up to this ledge, carefully lifted the lid, and looked inside.

With the lights of the parking lot shining over my shoulder, I could see them. Burgers. Lots of burgers scattered on the floor of the dumpster. Still in wrappers. I jumped inside the dumpster, letting the cover close behind me, and cloaked in the fragrant darkness, I picked up one of the burgers. It was still warm, still safely in a wrapper. *What is going on?* I thought.

I unwrapped the burger. It smelled fine. In fact, it smelled very fine, and I was so hungry I was drooling. *What if it’s spoiled?* I wondered. Or poisoned. Or something. No. It couldn’t be. It seemed too fresh, and it smelled too good. I decided to take a chance. I took a bite. Never before or since has anything tasted that good. And with that bite, there began a marriage

that sustained me for the better part of three years. Ronald McDonald's dumpster fed me every day at 10:00 p.m. after the restaurant closed.

Of course, I had no idea that night that the dumpster would feed me every day. I was too busy stuffing my face with the burgers scattered around me. Sitting on the floor inside the dumpster, I heard the door to the restaurant open again and footsteps coming toward me.

I'm in big trouble now, I thought.

As quietly as I could, I scurried to a spot directly below the overhead door, hoping that whoever was coming wouldn't look in and see me. I'm pretty sure it was Pudgy, because he sneezed twice. Then the top to the dumpster opened, and suddenly it was raining French fries. I'd heard of it raining cats and dogs, but I'd never heard of it raining French fries. Most of them landed on the floor, but more than a few came to rest atop the wrappers. At least that's what I saw before Pudgy slammed the dumpster door shut. I waited until he went inside and then opened the dumpster door from the inside, using the muted light from the street lamps to inspect the bounty. Then I ate those rescued fries, along with six of Ronald's finest sandwiches.

There were half a dozen burgers left, so I stuffed them inside my shirt. I was so full of food that I had more than a little trouble climbing out of the dumpster and down to the parking lot. Back home, I hid the burgers in my sleeping bag overnight. In the morning, they were still reasonably warm from my body heat, so I ate all six. When I went inside later that morning,

hoping to at least get a glass of milk, the lady of the house said she was sorry but there wasn't any food that morning. Just then a huge burger belch snuck up on me, and wide-eyed, I excused myself and went back outside. I wasn't even the least bit miffed that her two slightly overweight kids were gorging themselves on Cheerios.

I went to school that day content and not hungry for the first time in many months. In class, I always had trouble staying on task, and the teachers were forever nagging me about my daydreaming. On the morning after my foray at McDonald's, I was especially distractible, with my brain clouded with visions of burgers and fries and a dancing Ronald McDonald, purveyor of the full stomach.

Oh my, it was such a good feeling to have a full stomach. The second grade teacher, Mrs. Watkins, was given to ruler-slaps on the fingers of unruly or inattentive children. She didn't share my contentment that morning, nor was she particularly happy with my inattention. After the third assault on my knuckles with that heavy wooden ruler, I buckled down and paid attention as well as I could for the rest of the day.

Of course, I still had to scavenge at lunchtime, asking other kids, "Are you going to eat that?" Some of them were unsympathetic, but most recognized my black-sheep status and were kind and generous. I could usually put together a decent and adequate lunch from the other kids' cast-offs. On any given day, I spent much of lunch hour wondering if the pudgy

guy was going to throw food into the dumpster that night at ten o'clock.

School ended at three o'clock, and everyone hurried out the door to go home, but with nothing to go home to, I never hurried. I was an unwelcome and unwanted guest at my cousin's house, and they ignored me and deprived me in countless ways.

I trailed after everyone leaving school, with no place in particular to go. At age seven, I learned to fill up my days without a family's direction, and as a second-grader, I didn't have much homework. However, there was an occasional after-school assignment, with specific instructions from the teacher to go to the public library and look up something. Most of the kids hated these assignments. So did I, the first time. After that, I was delighted to go to the library, assignment or not. The library had books. Rows and rows of books. Zillions of books. I had been reading since age four, when one of my designated stepfathers was around long enough to pass on the rudiments of reading to me. I had already learned the alphabet from watching Sesame Street morning and afternoon five days a week. The designated stepfather discovered I was an eager pupil and a quick study, and I guess this provided him with enough positive feedback so he continued teaching me right up to the day he left. I don't even remember his name, but he was one of the nice ones.

Anyway, I always had time to kill. One of the best ways was to go to the public library after school and lose myself in the stacks, sometimes staying until

closing at 9:00 p.m. The more I read, the easier it was to read, even "fat" books without pictures. Over time, I actually came to prefer the books without pictures since I could conjure up the pictures in my mind just by reading the words on the page. During my second-grade year, I made a discovery at the library that would affect my life for many months to come. I discovered Louis L'Amour's westerns, and there were plenty of them! Later, I learned that he wrote other types of fiction and even poetry, but I cared only for his westerns. They were tales of a simpler life, with a code of behavior that I felt was perfect. The first Louis L'Amour novel I read was *Flint*, and it must have taken me two weeks of evenings to plod through it. I wasn't a fast reader, just persistent.

Reading the book, I bonded instantly with the little orphaned boy in the story. He was just like me, only a hundred years earlier. At night, huddled and shivering in my sleeping bag, I longed for a white knight like Flint to come and rescue me and take me away from the pain and rejection I felt every day.

Louis L'Amour kept me occupied most nights. But when the library closed, I would walk slowly to Ronald's place and wait until no one was outside the restaurant or in the parking lot. Then I would scurry over to the dumpster and climb in. I set up paper grocery bags on the floor of the dumpster to catch the torrential rain of food that fell every night at closing time. Some nights, it was burgers and fries and the occasional cheeseburger. Some nights, I gathered up a few Big Macs and, rarely, my favorite, the McRib

sandwich. I had so much food that I couldn't eat it all. I ate my fill, took enough for breakfast the following morning, and left the rest. I left the rest, that is, until I discovered there was a market for that cast-off food. Yes, indeed. There were lots of hungry people like me. I just had to find them, and find them I did.

Chapter Two

Emma

Failed childhood. Failed adolescence. Failed adulthood. Failed marriage. Failed life. I was such a loser, botching everything with unerring precision. I couldn't even get my so-called life in order enough to be on time for my class of off-task post-adolescents trying to understand English literature. Most days, I wasn't sure I understood it myself—and now I was late again. And if I arrived more than fifteen minutes late, my entire class of impatient juveniles would walk out on me. Damn!

Lipstick applied and reasonably presentable, I closed and locked my apartment door, hurried down the steps to the parking lot, and threw my briefcase and a pile of test booklets into the back seat of my ancient gray Toyota. Sitting in the driver's seat, I put the key in the ignition, praying the Gray Lady's engine would start the first time. She was old, that ancient Camry, but still sturdy and generally reliable. And gray. And definitely feminine in a way that some cars are. But she was also old and predisposed to the same vagaries of age that we all face, human or machines.

Someday I would have enough money to buy a newer car—perhaps even a brand new car.

The Gray Lady would not cooperate. I turned the key in the ignition and was greeted by a click. That's it. Click. No sound of aging pistons moving in ancient cylinders. No sound at all except click. Loser. Loser. Loser. Now I would not only be late for class, I wasn't going to make it at all.

"Shit!" I screamed as loudly as I could through the open driver's window.

A voice from outside and just behind me said, "There's a restroom in the clubhouse just over there."

Startled, I felt like I jumped ten feet in the air inside the car and then turned to look at whoever was being the wise guy out there. I saw a tall, rough-looking man in a greasy T-shirt, holding a wrench in one hand and some kind of auto part in the other.

He smiled and said again, "There's a restroom just over there."

Stupidly, I replied, "What?"

"There's a restroom just over there, and you said sh—"

"I know what I said, wise guy, and I don't need a restroom. I need a goddamn mechanic." There was my mouth, getting away from me again. "I don't suppose you know anything about cars, or do you always walk around with a goofy grin, carrying a wrench and car parts?"

"Goofy grin, yes. Wrench and car parts, no. And yes, I do know a bit about cars. What kind of problem are you having?"

"The goddamn thing won't start. It won't do anything. I should just drive it to the friggin' junkyard, if it would drive at all. And I'm going to be late for class. Oh hell, I'm not even going to make it all. Damn!" I got out of the car and stood by the driver's door.

"Well, let's take a look," he said as walked around to the front of the Gray Lady. I could see him fully then, inches over six feet, very muscular, with a pleasant, unshaven, and grease-stained face partially hidden by a Chicago Cubs baseball cap. He said, "Pop the hood."

I reached in through the open window and pulled the hood release. He raised the hood and looked intently at the engine as he set his wrench onto the battery casing. He began tugging at wires and cables, and then he raised his head to look at me. Unfortunately, he didn't know about the Gray Lady's weak hood springs. They didn't hold the hood completely open for more than a few seconds, until it slowly lowered itself to a half-open position. I didn't think fast enough to warn him, and he raised his head to look at me, striking his head sharply on the metal edge of the hood.

"Bleep!" he said, and then he looked at me sheepishly. "Don't tell Ernie about that."

"Who's Ernie?"

"My employer. Sometimes employer. Ernie. From Ernie's Auto Repair Shop over on Twenty-third."

"You work there?"

"Yes."

"You're a mechanic?"

“Well, Ernie would tell you that’s a debatable subject, especially since I nearly crushed my skull on your hood, but yes, I guess Ernie might say I am. A mechanic, that is. Sometimes.”

“Well, this is my lucky day. I say I need a mechanic, and poof, one turns up. So, Mr. Mechanic, can you get my old Gray Lady going?”

He glanced back inside the engine compartment, now barely visible because of the slowly sinking hood. “Yes and no. Yes, I can get her going. No, I can’t get her going right now.”

“No?” I said. “No? What the hell kind of mechanic are you? Why can’t you do it now?”

Glancing at the engine again, he replied, “You threw one of your belts. I mean it gave way, one of your belts, those narrow things you see on the pulleys in front of the engine. Old probably, worn out. It broke, and it looks like it wrapped itself around some of your alternator wires. Part of the alternator cabling is completely transected.”

Alternator, schmalternator, I thought. “OK, how long will it take for you to get the thing going?”

“Well, the easiest thing would be for me to tow it to Ernie’s and take a better look at it there. I just finished a tune-up on the wrecker.” He pointed to a large truck parked fifty feet behind my car. “I could run it over there now and probably have it done by noon.”

Noon. Damn the luck. Somewhat petulantly I said, “Great. Just great. Noon. And I have class in fifteen minutes.”

“Class?” he asked. “You’re a student at the university?”

“Yes, I’m a student in the sense that I’m always learning. No, I’m not a student in that particular class. I’m the instructor, and class starts in fifteen minutes.”

“Well then,” he said, “let’s do this. I’ll tow your car over to Ernie’s and get it fixed. You take my car to class. When you get back, just put it in my garage and bring the keys up to 2B when you get home.”

I was in no position to argue the wisdom of borrowing a car from a man I’d just barely met. I said, “I won’t be home until after six. You may need your car before then.”

“No, I won’t be done at Ernie’s until at least five. I’ll drive your car back here and put it in your garage. So six is fine. Come up to 2B then, and we’ll exchange keys.”

He took me over to his car, a late-model Corolla, essentially a mini-Camry. As he handed me the keys, he said, “It’s pretty much just a smaller version of what you’re driving now, so you shouldn’t have any trouble with it.”

I was carrying my briefcase and a stack of blank test booklets, and as I opened the door, everything spilled out of my arms. “Damn,” I said, and then I looked at him. “Don’t tell Ernie I did that.”

He laughed a deep, warm, honest laugh. I didn’t expect that.

“Let me help you.” He began stacking the test booklets for me while I tossed the briefcase onto the

front seat. He handed them to me, and then he asked, “Must be test day, eh?”

“Yup, test day.”

“What subject?”

“I teach English literature. These poor freshmen are going to have to write an essay on the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I’m tough, and I grade hard.

He smiled. “Accountable is what you mean then, right? You hold them accountable.”

“Damn right, accountable. No freebies. Work or get out.”

Looking at the blank test booklets I was holding, he said, “Who’s the lucky winner who gets to grade all those?”

My smile was rueful. “Yours truly,” I said.

I got into the Corolla, and he closed the door for me. Looking in through the open window at me and the test booklets, he said, “Oh well, I guess we all have our share of albatrosses.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Yes, we sure do.”

He reached in through the window, offering me his hand. “I’m Mike Michaels.”

With great reluctance, looking at that grease-stained hand, I shook it as warmly as I could and said, “I’m Emma Randelli.” I released his hand and drove away, wiping my own hand on the side of the driver’s seat.

Later in the evening, after the test, after all my classes, after I had gotten home, and after I had exchanged keys with the mechanic, I was sitting poolside in a chaise lounge talking to my best friend Randi.

Our apartment complex catered to a younger clientele, with a swimming pool, tennis courts, racquetball courts, a weight room, and running trails. I only used the pool and occasionally a running trail. Randi was in her late twenties just like me, and slender like me, with the same streaky dark brown hair. People frequently got us confused until they knew us better, and even then they thought we were sisters.

Unlike me Randi was married. Happily married. I used to be married. Unhappily married. Big difference. She picked a good guy, Tom, a very good guy. All I could come up with were self-centered losers. It was fitting, since I was such loser myself.

“I met someone today,” I said.

Randi sat up attentively. “Met someone. You mean like *met* someone?”

“No, not like that. I mean I met someone interesting. Nice. Polite. Interesting.”

“Tell me more.”

“Well, I came down to my car this morning, late as usual, and of course the Gray Lady wouldn’t start. I got profane as usual, and then this big semi-ugly, uncouth-looking guy came over and offered to help.”

“That’s the guy you’re talking about? Big, ugly, uncouth? And interesting?”

“Yes. Turns out he’s a mechanic and—”

“You’re interested in a mechanic?”

“Will you stop interrupting me and let me try to explain this? Yes, he’s a mechanic. Yes, he’s interesting. But not because he’s a mechanic. There’s more. So just shut up so I can get my thoughts in line on

this. Anyway, I opened the Gray Lady's hood for him, and he poked around in there for a bit. Then, you know how the hood springs are weak and the hood drifts down? Well, he raised his head abruptly and banged it on the hood. Then he said, 'Bleep.' I swear to God, that's what he said. 'Bleep.' I've never heard anyone say that before. I almost laughed, but held myself back. He said, 'Don't tell Ernie I did that.'"

Randi raised her eyebrows. "Ernie? From Ernie's Garage?"

"Yes, exactly. What of it? How do you know about Ernie's Garage?"

"Never mind. Just go on with your story."

"OK. Then it really gets interesting. There were a few things that I missed this morning, or at least overlooked at the time. One was that he doesn't talk like a mechanic."

"What do you mean? How are mechanics supposed to talk?"

"Will you stop interrupting me? Mechanics are, you know, rough, usually. They have a rough look and a rough way of speaking."

"Aren't you always telling me not to stereotype?"

"Goddamn it. If you interrupt me one more time, I'm going up to my apartment. I need to talk without interruption so I can get this straight in my own mind, much less yours."

"Sorry."

"OK. Again. He spoke gently and confidently. And when he was trying to explain what was wrong with the

car, he use the word 'transected.' He was talking about one of the alternator cables, like I know what the hell that is or care. Actually he used the term 'completely transected.' Looking back now, it seems odd. Oddly intelligent. And yes, I know I'm stereotyping. Get over it. He offered to lend me his car, so I could get to class on time. I was in no position to decline, so I accepted. Then, when I was getting into his car, I did one of my usual Miss Graceful routines and spilled everything out of my arms and onto the pavement. I said to him, 'Don't tell Ernie I did that.' And he laughed, so unexpectedly warm and genuine. It made me look at him a bit closer."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw a tall, young man, obviously fit, if one measures fitness by muscle bulk, but dirty and smelly and greasy. Still, I sat there in his car, *his car*, which was immaculate, and I was thinking, I bet this guy cleans up real nice."

"You're interested in a mechanic. Ha. Good for you."

"Shut up. I'm not interested. At least not interested interested. I just found the guy...nice. But there's more. I told him about my class. He said, 'Ah, you hold them accountable.' I mean, what does a mechanic know about that kind of accountability? Then he asked about the test booklets. You know that I planned to give the kids a killer essay test today on Coleridge. He asked who was going to be the lucky winner who got to grade all of those booklets. Me, I said. Lucky me. And do you know what he said? I missed it completely until

I was halfway to school. He said, ‘Well, I guess we all have our share of albatrosses.’”

Randi looked puzzled. “So?”

“Don’t you get it? He was referring to Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The albatross. It hit me as I was driving. How the hell does a mechanic know about Coleridge? So I sat there at a red light thinking about it. I must have misheard him. Or I was misinterpreting it. He really doesn’t know about Coleridge. He heard that phrase somewhere, and he just uses it randomly. That was it. Random. Not specific. And purely coincidental that I was giving a test on Coleridge today.”

I paused, and we both watched a man swimming laps in the pool, gliding easily through the water, his long strokes pulling him from end to end with amazing speed.

Randi said, “That’s it. That’s your story.”

“No, I’m just taking a break. Just wait a minute. Okay. Then I came home, checked my garage to see if my car was there—it was—then I went up to 2B. I knocked. No answer. I knocked again. No answer. I was just about to leave when the door opened. He stood there, his hair wet, in jeans and T-shirt, freshly shaved and spotless, apologizing that he had been in the shower. He excused himself to get a shirt after inviting me into living room. Did you know all these apartments are laid out the same? His is a mirror image of mine. Weird. I didn’t know. His is very tastefully decorated, by the way. Not sparse like mine. On one of the walls he had hung some kind of religious award from the military. The award was presented

to a corporal, like he had been a soldier or something, and it had this nice picture of a cross. I looked around a bit more, and then after about thirty seconds, he came back, buttoning his shirt, hair dry and combed, smiling, and well, gorgeous. I mean, the guy really does clean up nice.”

“I knew it. You’re falling for a mechanic.”

“Oh, get real. I just met the guy. And I’m not falling for him. I told you, I’m going to be a nun. No more men. Ever. No more relationships, ever. I quit. I can’t do it right, so I’m never getting involved with anyone again.”

“And yet you’re interested in this guy. Interested, not falling for him. I see that wistful look in your eyes. There’s more to the story, isn’t there?”

I rolled on my side in the chaise lounge so I could look directly at Randi. “Yes. And I still don’t know how to interpret it. We were standing there in his living room, with me, I’m sure, looking at him like a gaga adolescent girl, when he said, ‘You saw your car was back your garage?’ Yes, I did. He told me that he had replaced the severed cable, installed a new belt, and charged the battery. I asked for a bill. He said no charge. I said that was unacceptable. He said fine, have coffee with me tomorrow and we’ll call it even.”

Randi grinned. “Coffee? Not dinner? Coffee? Oh I get it. You’re offended because you thought he was trying to soften you up, fix your car for free, then get a cheap payback later, but he offers you coffee? And not even, ‘Let me buy you coffee.’ Nope. ‘Have coffee *with* me.’ Is that what’s bugging you?”

We both watched the swimmer again.

Finally, I said, “No, that’s not what’s bugging me. I had already decided to accept his ‘bill.’ I’d decided I’d have coffee *with* him, as you say. Because he’s interesting, not just because he’s a hunky guy. But I wanted to know more. So I asked him about the albatross thing. He said, well yes, that was a huge bunch of test booklets, not that you could wear them around your neck. I knew then that he had been specific in the morning, not random. And I needed to know how a mechanic knows Coleridge. I said, ‘You know Coleridge, don’t you?’ ‘Yup,’ he said. ‘OK,’ I said, ‘I’ll have coffee *with* you if you can recite to me something from Coleridge’s work. And not from the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.’”

This time, Randi rolled onto her side in the chaise lounge, facing me fully. “Ah ha! And he couldn’t do it, right? And now you’re thinking maybe it was completely random, right?”

“Wrong. He had that sloppy, goofy grin on his face again, and he said, ‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree, where Alph the sacred river ran, through caverns measureless to man, down to a sunless sea.’ I’m sure my jaw hit the floor. Miss Unflappable flaps again. Then he asked what time we would be having coffee in the morning. I said nine. Starbuck’s around the corner. I turned to leave and experienced the jaw-drop thing again.”

“What? He pinched your butt as you’re walking out the door?”

“No. I turned to walk out the door and saw his bookcase.”

“And what? Girlie magazines? Playboy? Penthouse? Porno videos?”

“No. None of the above. Not at all. Randi, you’re not going to believe it.” I paused again.

“What?! For God’s sake.”

“Randi, his bookshelf had the collected works of Charles Dickens. I glanced back at him over my shoulder and asked him if he had read all of those. He said yep and closed the door behind me.”

Randi was quiet briefly, then said, “Wow. Now I get it. Interesting. You meet a guy you stereotype into the rough mechanic, and he turns out to be a clean-cut hunk who knows Coleridge and reads Dickens. Plus he fixes your car for free. Wow.”

“Yes, wow. But only interesting. No falling for anyone. I’m officially retired. I’ll have coffee with the guy tomorrow to satisfy the requirements of my bill, and then I’m done.”

“Well, we’ll see, won’t we?” She had that little conspiratorial smile that I hated. “Hey, you’ll have to point this guy out to me some time so I can see what your Mr. Hunk looks like.”

“He’s not *my* Mr. Hunk. I just met the guy. He’s interesting only. I’ve told you and told you. I am not getting involved again with anyone, and especially not with a mechanic.”

“Fine. If you say so. Just point him out to me some time.”

I said, “Okay, see that guy swimming there. Mr. Mechanic is built something like that, tall and muscular.”

The swimmer paused at the far end of the pool, his back to us, then moved to the ladder and climbed out. He walked around the end of the pool and came toward us. I reached over and grabbed Randi’s arm and said, “Oh my God. Oh my God. That’s him. That’s the mechanic.”

He walked to where we were sitting, arriving just as I released my vise-like grip on Randi’s arm. He towered over us in the chaise lounges, water dripping from the orange T-shirt he was wearing. He said, “Good evening, Randi. Good evening, Emma.”

I’m sure my jaw hit the floor again. Randi, on the other hand, smiled, and said, “Hey, Mike. How you doin’?”

“Well, I’m doing quite well, now that I got that workout done. Listen, is Tom home yet? I need to talk to him about something.”

“Should be home,” Randi said. “Just run on up. Snacks in the refrigerator.”

After the mechanic left, I said to Randi, “You know him? You *know* him? And you let me run on and on with my story?”

She gave me that hated conspiratorial smile again. “Well, I thought you might be talking about Mike, but I wasn’t completely sure. If you had told me his name right away, I would have known, but not from your description of him and events. Sorry.”

“Damn. Okay, how do you know him?”

“Well, he’s best friends with my Tommy. They grew up together, went to school together, played football together. They worked together. They were in the Marines together. I’ve known Mikey as long as I’ve known Tommy. They’re inseparable.”

Chapter Three

Mike

It seemed that no matter how much of Ronald McDonald's fine cuisine I consumed, I still remained rail-thin. This was actually of great benefit, since it allowed me to conceal my good fortune from my Milwaukee relatives. Once hunger was not my primary focus, I began to develop an exit strategy—although at seven years of age I had no meaningful concept of strategy. I simply knew I had to get away from that place. Thanks to reading all those Louis L'Amour books, I knew I needed a *stake*, a sum of money that would see me through. And thanks to Ronald McDonald, I had the means to acquire it.

That Milwaukee house, whose porch was my home, was near what could be generously called Skid Row, with dirty, out-of-the-way streets with lots of bars. Fearing nothing, I visited that street frequently, getting to know the poor souls, mostly homeless, who visited there. But they weren't just visiting. They actually lived on side streets and in alleys. Even in the depths of winter, they would be outside, living in large cardboard boxes placed near a heat vent from one of the buildings. They invariably had a kind word for me; I

guess they recognized a kindred spirit. They also occasionally had spare change, which they offered to me spontaneously. “Here, kid. Grab yourself something to eat. You need to get some meat on those bones.”

In Ronald’s dumpster one night, beneath a torrential downpour of French fries, I realized how I could acquire my stake. Most of the fries dropped into the paper grocery bags I had set up for that purpose. The ones that landed on the floor of the dumpster I left there. After the cascade of potatoes, I put all the fries that had landed in my grocery bags into a single bag. Then I set the bags up again and settled into a front corner of the dumpster. After a few minutes, Pudgy came out of the back of the restaurant, opened the dumpster’s lid, and deposited the second installment. It was a particularly good night for hamburgers, with more than a dozen making their way into my backpack alongside the fries. I folded up the paper bags and placed them in the backpack for use the following night.

Since it was still early, barely after 10 p.m., I wasn’t sure how many of my friends would be out on Skid Row. I walked over there anyway. Just before I got to the street, I took the French fries and all but two burgers out of the backpack and put them in one of the paper bags. Then, with the confidence of youthful ignorance, I marched onto Skid Row.

The street was barely wide enough for two cars to pass, with brick buildings lining each side. The brick walls were variegated red, orange, yellow, and brown, and I thought them stunningly beautiful with their

flashing neon lights. I’m sure most people would have simply considered them old. Each side of the street had a sidewalk with approximately five feet in width from the edge of the building to the curb. Virtually every square inch of the sidewalks was covered with bottles, cans, wrappers, urine, feces, and vomit. In spite of that, it didn’t seem repulsive to me. It seemed like home.

There were businesses there, too, mostly whose purpose was to purvey various forms of ethanol. The purpose was to maintain a comfortable state of inebriation in the local population of winos, drunkards, and bums. In spite of these pejoratives, they were all my friends, and I was theirs. But although singularly individual to me, they were all reprobates in the eyes of the shopkeepers, I’m sure.

Each one of those characters had a story to tell, and truth or fiction it didn’t matter to me. I was always willing to listen, and they became an extended family that made no demands and had no expectations, not even reasonable ones. They treated me kindly at all times. I loved their tales of pre-Skid Row life, some ordinary, some strikingly unusual, and some very definitely x-rated. I learned a great deal about life listening to those special people. I also learned a great deal about colorful language, probably far too much for a boy of that age.

One of the Row regulars was Tigrito, a burly, bearded fellow with shoulder-length black hair that he pulled into a ponytail. Tigrito always spoke kindly to me, although in a language I didn’t understand.

Pa-vee-toe, he called me. Usually it was coupled with *mee*, as in *mee Pa-vee-toe*. I had no idea what a pa-vee-toe was, but he invariably tussled my hair gently while he put a few coins into my hand. “Mee Pa-vee-toe, you are muy flaco. Go get yourself some food.” So, with Tigrito’s coins in my possession, I made the assumption that pa-vee-toe was something pretty good. Much later I asked him to write it for me. He printed the letters p-a-v-i-t-o. Pavito. I had no idea how he could get Pa-vee-toe out of that, and I told him so. He laughed, but after that, he shortened it to a simpler *Ee-toe*.

For the purposes of acquiring my stake, I also assumed that Tigrito, and possibly the other Row inhabitants, might have more than a few spare coins. They might form a market for my Ronald McDonald culinary treasures. I intended to ask Tigrito for advice, but on the night of my very first venture into capitalism, he was nowhere to be found.

Nevertheless, the street was alive with activity. The flashing neon lights advertised saloons, bars, cellars, vaults, attics, and lofts, and “if we don’t have it, we’ll get it for you.” Men and women in various stages of inebriation lined the thoroughfare, and most of them I knew by name. As I walked down the street, I was greeted with hoots and questions from the regulars.

“Yo, Ee-toe, whatcha doin’ down here this time of night?”

“Ee-toe, you need to be home with your mama.”

“Hey, Ee-toe, whatcha got in that bag?”

“Well,” I said, “From McDonald’s. For sale.”

“Food? You have food? Gimme that bag, Ee-toe, before I paddle your pink fanny.”

I looked at the source of the threat, a dilapidated, fairly young-looking man who was nearly as skinny as I was. In later years I would have said, “Billy, before you can paddle this pink fanny, you’d have to catch it. And how do you know it’s pink? Have you been peeking?” But that night I had no rejoinder.

I sold everything that night, probably too cheaply. However, in retrospect, I guess I should have considered them “teaser” sales, the lowball come-on that would allow larger volume sales in the future. My total take that night was one dollar. But it was a start. I folded the dollar until it was the size of a coin and then stuffed it into my one of my socks. The folded dollar grated against my anklebone, but it was a comforting presence.

The next night in the dumpster I harvested a bumper crop of food. They must have had a bad sales night, or they completely mismanaged their cooking. I arrived on the Row with fourteen hamburgers, four Quarter Pounders, two McRib sandwiches, and at least five pounds of French fries. I found an empty storefront and set up shop.

“Ee-toe? You got food again, Ee-toe?”

“Get your butt over here, Ee-toe, and let’s have it.”

“You better have lots of fries tonight, you little twit.”

I listened but didn’t respond at first. Finally, I said, “Yes, I have fries and lots of other things if you have money.”

Billy, the skinny one, came across the street to my storefront. “Okay, worm, whatcha got?”

Looking in the bag, I said, “Billy,” I said, “I have burgers, two QPs, some fries, and two McRibs.”

“What? You got McRibs? Lemme see. Open that bag, maggot.”

“No, it’s mine”

“Fine. Open that bag, *Mister* maggot.”

Looking back, I had to admit it was respectful. So I opened the bag, and Billy looked inside.

“Jesus H. Christ. Jesus H. Christ. You won’t believe what he’s got here.” Billy turned to the other side of the street and motioned for his Row-mates to join him.

Six of them crossed the street—six of the dirtiest, roughest-looking adult males I would ever see in my life. Among the six were Sid, Macro, and Frankie the Ferret. I didn’t recognize the other three. Sid, short and stocky, never talked, made eye contact only rarely, and smiled all the time. But it wasn’t a friendly smile. It was unchanging, as if his mouth and lips were frozen in that position. Macro, even unwashed and wearing dirty clothes, had an aura of mannered elegance. He was taller than the others and both slender and graceful in his movements. I once asked him why he was called Macro. He said it referred to a part of his anatomy. I asked which part. He said I was too young for him to be discussing things like that.

I didn’t care much for Frankie the Ferret. Franklin was his given name, I think, and in profile, he did resemble a ferret. He had greasy blond hair swept back into a ponytail that was even longer than Tigrito’s. In

behavior, the Ferret was usually subhuman. On more than on occasion, when no one else was looking, he had slapped the back of my head so hard that my chin struck my chest. Then he laughed. “Ee-toe...loser.” From time to time, I would see him slap or punch people, including women, who were smaller than he was. Fortunately, there weren’t that many people on the Row smaller than the Ferret. Unfortunately, I was one of them. Another problem for me was that he was incredibly strong for someone so short. Once he came up behind me as I was standing on a sidewalk in the Row. He grabbed one of my shoulders, spun me around, and gripped the front of my shirt. He said, “You’re in my way, puke.” Then he picked me straight up off the ground, swung me to the side, and dropped me into the street. “Now stay there, mongrel.”

At seven years of age, I weighed forty-seven pounds. Figure fifty pounds with clothes and shoes. The Ferret had used a biceps curl and a sweep of his arm to move me out of his way. He had done a single-arm biceps curl with fifty pounds, and he had done it while in a relatively broken down and malnourished state and with no training whatsoever. It would eventually take me years of hard work before I could even come close to that.

Billy and the six hard cases stood before me. Frankie became the spokesman. “Okay, puke, let’s have the bag.”

“Frankie,” I replied, “It’s mine. You can’t have it unless you have money.”

“Money? I got your money. Right here. Swingin’.” He grabbed his crotch with one of his hands.

“Yuh. Swingin’. Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha.” It was the first time I had ever heard Sid say anything. And he could laugh, too.

Frankie slapped the back of Sid’s head. “Shut up, you moron. Now, Ee-toe, give me the bag. You are definitely going to give us a discount. You’re going to give it to us free.”

I smiled ever so slightly. “No, Frankie. For money.”

The Ferret, standing directly in front of me, moved like a striking cobra. Before I could blink, he had the front of my shirt again and lifted me off the ground. “I will crush you to the size of walnut and then crack you till your insides drip out.”

A gentle voice behind us interrupted the Ferret’s plan. “Frankie, put the boy down. Tonight, he is truly a merchant. We should respect that and purchase his goods at whatever discount we can negotiate.”

The Ferret slowly set me back down on the sidewalk. “Do not move,” he said, his dead eyes providing emphasis. Then he turned around slowly. “Macro, you pathetic piece of shit. I’ve been waiting for you to mouth off.” The Ferret continued in a mocking high-pitched voice, “Frankie, we should respect him and buy his stuff at a discount.” As he gratingly spoke those words, he drew back his right arm, closed his fist, and then swung it at Macro in a wide arc. It was a terrible sound, crunching and violent, when Frankie’s fist met Macro’s jaw. Macro literally flew backward, airborne until he hit the sidewalk, rolling over twice and

coming to a rest in the street just off the curb, unconscious. “That’s where you belong. In the gutter. Now where was I?”

The Ferret turned to face me and again, using his biceps, curled me off my feet, this time slamming me up against the brick storefront. One of the bricks must have been protruding because I felt a sharply localized pain in my back. It brought tears to my eyes.

“Oh, look, now he’s going to cry.” I heard a clicking sound. Then in Frankie’s left hand I saw the source of the click: a switchblade knife with a serrated edge. “Let’s give you something real to cry about, Ee-toe. Should we just liven up your face a little bit? Or should we make it so your voice never changes? Maybe both.”

Billy, Sid, and the other three stood in anticipatory silence behind us, clearly enjoying the scene. I was going to get no help there. I could see this was a battle I could not win, so perhaps retreat was the best option. “Okay, Frankie, you can have the food.”

“You little puke. You don’t get off that easy. You should have given up the stuff right away. Now you’ve disrespected me, and you’re going to pay. Why don’t we start with a little piece of earlobe?”

He brought the knife blade up to my right ear. “Say goodbye to it, kid.” I felt hot stinging pain in the earlobe, and then suddenly the pain stopped. Also suddenly, Frankie’s head was bent straight back, parallel with the ground. Just as suddenly, Frankie was screaming, “Ah, ah, ah!”

Behind Frankie, Tigrito had the Ferret’s ponytail coiled in his left hand, pulling his head backward and

downward. Tigrito's right hand was on the Ferret's right shoulder, and for some reason, I noticed the contrast between Tigrito's olive-colored skin and Frankie's dirty-blond hair. Frankie released me, and I slid down the wall, painfully scraping my back. Sitting on the sidewalk, with my back up against the building, I could see that Tigrito had his right knee in the small of Frankie's back.

Tigrito spoke softly, which was very much out of character for him. "My, my, my. What do we have here? We have Frankie the Ferret being a very bad boy. I see my good friend Macro lying in the street, and I see the Ferret about to do very bad things to my very good friend Pavito. Now Frankie, what am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to do? Should I just snap your neck like the little chicken you are? Should I make you eat that little pissant switchblade? Should I slice you into small pieces and drop you into the gutter next to Macro? Tell me. What should I do, Frankie? Tell me."

The Ferret, completely focused on preserving his cervical spinal cord, said nothing.

Tigrito glanced at one of the other men. "Bonzo, dígame. ¿Que paso aquí? Talk to me, Bonzo. What happened here?"

Bonzo, who looked like a smaller version of Tigrito but without the ponytail, began speaking rapidly in a language I didn't understand. Tigrito said, "Stop. In English, please."

Bonzo continued in English. "Well, the kid had food, and he wanted to sell it. Frankie wanted it for

nothin'. The kid said no. Frankie started pickin' on the kid and Macro tried to help. Frankie decked Macro and started to cut the kid's ear off. Then you came."

Tigrito looked at me. "Is that what happened, Finn?" It was the first time Tigrito had ever called me by my real name.

"Yes."

"Are you hurt?"

"My back hurts a little bit, and my ear stings. But I really think I'm okay."

"Fine. Now I want you to go up to Pinelli's Saloon and wait for me by the front door. Got it?"

"Got it." I began the half-block walk to the saloon.

Behind me, I heard Tigrito giving the Ferret wise counsel. "Frankie, I want you out of here, off the Row. I don't ever want to see you here again, ever. If I see you again anywhere, or if you ever bother Finn again, I will remove various portions of your anatomy and feed them to you bit by bit. Before you hit the road, give me that knife."

The Ferret, his head still bent straight back, passed the switchblade to Tigrito. Tigrito, with one deft swipe of the blade, slashed through the blond ponytail, and the Ferret's head flew forward and slammed into the brick wall. Tigrito spun the Ferret around so the two were facing each other. "See this knife, Frankie?"

Frankie said nothing.

Tigrito, speaking very slowly and clearly, said, "Do you see this knife?"

Frankie nodded.

“Then say good-bye to it.” Tigrito, holding the knife’s blade in one hand and the handle in the other, snapped it in two and then threw it in the gutter near where Macro still lay. “Now get the hell out of here before I snap *you* into two pieces.”

Tigrito walked the half block to join me. “Finn, mi Pavito, let’s see what you have in the bag. Um-hmm. McRib. I’ll take one of those for a quarter. That suit you?”

I nodded. Tigrito called up an down the street, “Yo, soup’s on. Come and get it. Okay, Pavito, Let’s say ten cents for the burgers, twenty cents for the Quarter Pounders, a quarter for that other McRib, and five cents for a handful of fries. Okay by you?”

Again I nodded. I, or more correctly we, sold everything that night. Counting all the portions of fries, I took in \$3.85 that night, more money than I had ever had before. I offered to split it with Tigrito, but he declined. He said I owed him a free sandwich of some kind every night forever. I said we had a deal. He smiled. I smiled. We shook hands.

In the distance, just off the Row, I saw the Ferret watching us. Then he turned and walked away, sullen even in departing, and I watched him until he faded into the night. I made a silent observation that would be the last time I ever saw him.

At that point, I was not very good about predicting the future.

Chapter Four

Mike

I walked up to Tom and Randi’s apartment and knocked. Tom opened the door, standing with a slice of pizza in one hand and a bag of potato chips in the other. The guy ate more than any five people and never got fat. If I missed a workout or had an extra serving here or there, I started looking like the Goodyear blimp.

“Come in,” he said. “Food in the kitchen. Games on in the living room. Yankees playing somebody. There’s nothing else on. The networks don’t put any games on except the friggin’ Yankees. Want a brewski?”

“No,” I said, looking forlornly at the pizza. “I’ll take some iced tea, though.”

“You still on that low-calorie kick? Jeez, you look great. You should loosen up a bit.”

“Right. I loosen up. Then I get fat. Then you beat me in *everything*.”

He chuckled softly, almost a rumble rather than a chuckle, like far-off thunder. “Hey, idiot. I beat you in everything now, whether you’re fat or not.”

My turn to chuckle. “Fine, meatball. Downstairs right now. Basketball. You and me, one on one. Let’s go.”

“OK, fine. You can still beat me in basketball. Maybe swimming. Maybe running, on one of your good days. But that’s it. Everything else is mine.”

I sipped the iced tea. “Dang, Tom, this is that flavored stuff again, with sugar. Can’t you guys get just plain tea?”

“Hey, you don’t like it, don’t drink it.”

I sipped again. “I met someone today.”

His hand with the pizza stopped halfway to his mouth. “What? What did you say?”

“I met someone today.”

He picked up the remote control and turned off the television. Too bad. The Yankees were losing. “What do you mean, you met someone? You mean, like a female, like met someone you’re interested in?”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit! I need a beer.” He went to the refrigerator and came back to the sofa, holding two cans of beer, one for each of us.

He looked at me sternly and said, “OK, spill it.”

I paused for a long time. My long-time friendship with Tommy was suffering...from neglect. My neglect. I still couldn’t get myself back on track after a single terrible experience, and I wasn’t able to forgive myself, to let go of the loss of all self-respect. Tommy said I had PTSD. He was probably correct. He said I needed professional help. He was probably correct. He said I was driving us in different directions. He was definitely correct.

“There’s this girl. I mean woman. I mean stunning. I met her. Today.” I paused.

“That’s it. That’s it. Girl, woman, stunning, today. That’s it.”

“No, that’s not it. I mean that’s not all. I mean it’s weird. I’ve gone on so long without feeling anything, without feeling attracted to anyone. You know what I’m talking about. We’ve discussed it before, although not in the detail that *you* want. I can’t do that yet, maybe never. I don’t know. I feel like a eunuch. Empty. Rudderless. And then I met *her* today. There was a connection there, something I haven’t felt before, or at least not for a very long time.”

“Okay. Okay. What do you mean, connection? No, never mind that. It’s one of those Irish things, isn’t it? What does this babe look like?”

“Babe? Well, I guess that’s a good way to describe her. At least that’s what the young guys would call her.”

“Oh, and you’re a really old guy now? No youth left in you?”

“No youth, no joy, no life. You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. We’ve discussed it, and I’ve told you to get help. And you still don’t listen to me. So what happened today? Okay, so you felt something. Fine. No, excellent. Feeling is a good thing. Now what the hell does she look like?”

“I think you probably know her. She was sitting by Randi at the pool. She looks like Randi’s twin sister, tall, maybe five eight or nine. Slender, and with the same streaky dark brown hair. Dark eyebrows. Stunning, almost beautiful face. But it was the eyes

that struck me. Green. Shiny, luminescent green, and piercingly intelligent. And movements with a natural grace, at least until she dropped all her stuff in the driveway.”

“All right. So she’s a babe, albeit a clumsy babe. There are plenty of babes around. All over the place here, in fact. You know that. That’s why we asked you to move here. We’ve been trying to fix you up with someone for months before you moved here last week. What’s the big deal about this one?”

I finished the iced tea, set the glass in a coaster, and said, “There’s a connection. I know you think it’s absurd, my always talking about my Irish ancestors and the gift of second sight. But I know things sometimes. You’ve seen it yourself more than once. This time with this girl, there’s a connection. I can’t explain it. It’s more than physical or emotional attraction. It’s something deeper, almost magnetic. She felt it too.”

“She felt it too? She felt it? How do you know that? Did she tell you?”

“No, she didn’t tell me. I just know. It’s the Irish thing, okay. Let me give you rundown on this morning, and I’ll try to explain what I felt, what we felt.”

“Please do.”

“First get me a glass for this beer.”

Chapter Five

Mike

Things were quiet after Tigrito ran the Ferret off. Some of the Row regulars who occasionally gave me a bit of trouble now gave me a wide berth, thanks to my implicit protection from Tigrito. Macro, after receiving the crushing blow from the Ferret, recovered physically, but his dignity remained shattered. He apologized to me repeatedly and profusely for his being physically deficient and unable to protect me. Hey, I said, I didn’t do a very good job of protecting myself either. He replied that one wouldn’t expect physical strength from someone so small. I asked him how he knew I was small. Had he been peeking at my macro part? He brightened considerably after that, though he never completely recovering his refined manner.

Thanks to Tigrito’s intervention, I was able to continue my business as a mobile restaurateur. Each night, I added to my stash, sometimes only a dollar or two and sometimes as much five or six dollars. By that time, I had my own wallet and kept all my money on my person at all times. After three months, I had more than \$250, and I had converted it bit by bit into larger bills. In my wallet on that particular day were

two one hundred dollar bills, a fifty, and some ones. Thank you, Ronald McDonald.

I attended school faithfully, frequented the library nearly every night, read every Louis L'Amour book I could find, and unerringly headed off to the dumpster at 9:00 p.m. when the library closed. I worked at my business almost every night, even through the winter, unless the weather was inclement or the wind off Lake Michigan was too brutally cold to be outside. By the time spring rolled in, I had acquired a stake of slightly more than \$800, which sat comfortably in my wallet as eight one hundred dollar bills and a few ones. The only fly in the ointment was my nagging feeling that I was being watched or followed. The feeling was so strong sometimes that it was almost overpowering. I was nine years old and not yet aware of my Irish ancestry or my occasional special gift—or curse, depending on your point of view. It's not always a good thing to see into the future and be aware of difficulties about to arise.

Once, on the way home, I saw in the shadows of a building a darkly clothed figure that I would swear was the Ferret or his twin. Another time I heard something behind me, whirled, and saw a flash of movement as someone or something moved out of sight behind a building. I would periodically get a feeling of impending doom so strong that I couldn't ignore it. It's hard to describe that feeling, but it was as if my insides were suspended in a sling that was suddenly pulled straight up. "It feels like my heart gets stuck in my throat," I explained to Tigrityo one day.

"I know the feeling," he said. "I get it, too, but not often. When I get that feeling, I listen to it, because it is usually correct. You should listen to it, too."

I hit my tenth birthday in May, but no one noticed or cared, including me. By the end of the school year in June, my wallet contained ten one hundred dollar bills, a fifty, and the three ones I had earned that night from selling my dumpster cast-offs. It was early to go home, but I didn't have anything more to sell. So I began the short walk, for some reason wanting it to be even shorter than usual. That meant using a shortcut through one particularly dark alley, a risk but a time-saver nonetheless. When I got to the alley and entered it, my abdominal sling did an abrupt double-clutch, sending my heart through the top of my head and into the stratosphere. For the first but not the last time in my life, I ignored that feeling. Big mistake.

I started down the shortcut alley, with creepy-crawly, almost electric feelings cascading down my arms and legs. Twice I stopped, thinking I should turn around, but of course, dumb me, I didn't. As I approached the end of the alley, a figure shrouded in black stepped into my path. The moon had just set, its tendrils of streaming light outlining what was unmistakably the Ferret. My heart, which had completed its journey into outer space and rejoined my body, now leaped into my throat, leaving me speechless, breathless, and immobile.

"My, oh my," the figure said. "You didn't think I had forgotten you, did you, you little prick?"

My voice rejoined my body. “No, Frankie, but I hoped so.”

“Live or die. That’s your choice. Chose now.”

I knew I was in serious trouble. The alley was narrow, and I couldn’t easily skirt past him. Even if I did, or if I turned and ran, I was certain he could catch me with little difficulty. I said, “Live.”

“Give me the money, and I’ll think about it,” he said.

I considered a thousand retorts, such as, “Money? What money?” But none of them, even clever or humorous, would serve me now. Instead, I asked, “Can I keep some of it?”

“Kid, the best you’re going to get out of this is your health, and I’m not even sure about that. So give me everything. All of it.”

I took the wallet from my back pocket and opened it, intending to take out the money. He said, “Hold it. Just give me the whole thing. Toss it over here.”

I threw it to him, and he caught it with the deftness of a first-baseman. He looked inside the wallet, doing a preliminary count. “Nice. Nice job, kid. Seed money for me. Now, let’s attend to your health.”

I knew he had strength. I had seen proof of that. But I didn’t know he had such speed, such quickness. Before I could blink, he had grasped the front of my jacket, backing me up to one of the walls in the alley and lifting me off my feet. He said, “Payback time, asshole. Oh, don’t worry. I won’t mark your face. But you won’t be doing sit-ups for a while, and you may puke blood for a week or two.”

What followed was the singular most unpleasant experience of my life. The Ferret, true to his word, left no mark on my face. However, he did shatter ribs, and the bruises on my abdomen didn’t fade for nearly three weeks. And yes, I did vomit blood, and no, I couldn’t possibly have done sit-ups. He left me there, in the subfreezing cold of the Milwaukee night, battered but not beaten. I had not uttered a sound, accepting each of the Ferret’s shattering blows with a petulant silence. Perhaps if I had cried or cried out, he would have been less harsh. Perhaps if I had resisted or tried to run away, he would have been less cruel. Perhaps if I had begged for mercy, he had would have been less persistent, less thorough. But I said nothing, let no sound, no bleat, no moan escape my lips. Foolish boy. Stubborn boy. Irish boy.

I don’t know how long I lay there after the Ferret left. I just know I couldn’t move and could barely breathe. It was Macro who found me and carried me to Tigrito. We were in an alcove outside of one of the closed businesses on the Row. He looked at me, eyes wide, face etched with worry. “Dios, Pavito. ¿Que paso?”

By then I had acquired a smattering of Spanish. “El hurón,” I said. “Mucho dolor. Me duele el estomago y...y ribs.”

He removed my jacket and my shirt, seeing the flesh of my abdomen swollen and already becoming a nasty bluish-red. “¿El hurón? The Ferret? The Ferret did this to you?”

“Yes. And he took all of my money.”

“Cabron! How much money?”

“All of it. Lots. Everything I made here. Lots.”

“Madre de Dios,” Tigrito said. “I will get it back.” Turning to Macro, he said, “Macro, take mi Pavito here to the Castle. Tell the night clerk you want room number six. Tell him to call this number and ask them to send Miguelito.” He gave Macro a phone number, and then he turned back to me. “Pavito, where did this happen?”

I told him, told him of the bad feeling I’d had prior to entering the alley, told him of the encounter, the beating, my perverse silence during it. He said, “You were both very stupid and very brave. Muy estúpido and muy hombre. Listen to me, Pavito. Do not ever, *ever*, ignore the bad feeling again. Do you understand me? ¿Me entiende, Pavito?”

“Yes. I understand. Si. Entiendo.”

“Good. Now Macro will take you a place and to a person who will help you. You know we cannot take you to a hospital, yes?” I nodded. My arrival at a hospital would likely land me with Milwaukee’s Child Protective Services. “Bueno. Go with Macro. I have a bit of business to attend to myself.”

Macro carried me to the Castle Hotel, an establishment that I would later call a fleabag hotel. But on that day, being indoors out of the cold and lying on a soft comfortable bed was succor beyond belief. I dozed fitfully, awakening occasionally to see Macro sitting in a chair, deep lines of concern etched into his thin, hawk-like face. I asked for water. He said no, to wait for the doctor first.

I awakened at dawn, with hints of muted sunlight slipping around the curtains of the hotel room. Macro was talking softly to a man who looked like an older version of Tigrito, with smooth, olive-colored skin, a crooked nose that had probably been broken more than a few times, and a straight scar from the corner of his mouth to his left ear. If this was the guy who was going to help me, I thought, he better get some help for himself first.

Macro, seeing that I was awake, walked over to the bed. “Ito, this is Miguel, one of Tigrito’s cousins. He was a doctor before, in another time and another place. He will help you.”

I rolled slightly so that I could extend my arm and hand. It took great effort, and I’m sure they could both see the pain in my face. I shook Miguel’s hand, as firmly as my infirmity would allow, and said, “Buenos dias. El gusto es mio.”

“Excelente,” he said. “You speak Spanish.”

“Solo poquito, doctor. Mi español no es tan bueno.”

“Then we will proceed in English, my friend. Begin by telling me exactly what happened last night—the full details of how you were injured.”

I told him in full, leaving out the part about how I stubbornly remained silent during the beating.

“So he never struck your head, no? You never lost consciousness, no? He focused on your chest and abdomen, no?”

“Yes.”

“Groin?”

“No, he skipped that.”

“Kidneys? Your back?”

“No, he skipped that, too.”

“Bueno. Now tell me about your health. Have you ever been hospitalized for anything?”

“Well, I guess I was when I was born, but I don’t remember it.”

“Besides that.”

“No. Not that I remember.”

He asked many more questions, all the while carefully and gently examining my chest and abdomen. The skin from my neck down was irregularly swollen, with huge purplish areas like mountain peaks surrounded by fiery red valleys. If it didn’t hurt so much to breathe and move, I would have thought it was artistically beautiful. He listened with a stethoscope for long time in several different places.

Miguel was muttering under his breath, and I was able to pick up a few words: Dios, Madre de Dios. Cabron. I took that to mean he wasn’t very happy with the Ferret’s work. “Pavito,” he said, “this is a pulse oximeter. It goes on your finger like this, and it measures the oxygen in your blood. Actually not the oxygen but rather the oxygen saturation. It does not hurt. You are breathing rapidly, and you are not getting your lungs fully expanded.”

He was prodding my abdomen and finding some very tender spots when Tigrito arrived. He and Miguel embraced and spoke rapidly in Spanish. I was able to pick up only a few words. “Costillas fracturadas...punctura in el pulmón...aire fuera del pulmón...hígado y bazo...hospital...”

“No hospital,” I shouted. “No. No. No.”

Miguel smiled at me. “Pavito, I thought you said your Spanish was not so good.”

“Well, it’s not bad enough that I’m going to some hospital. I don’t want to go to foster care.”

“Es correcto,” Tigrito observed. “Besides, I have a better plan.” He spoke to Miguel again in Spanish, this time so rapidly that I had little chance of picking up a few words, much less the line of thought. The one word I consistently caught was *familia*. Family. Well, I thought, *if you’re talking about my family, Tigrito, forget it. I’m the black sheep, the one nobody wants. Nice try.*

They stopped talking. Macro, who had remained silent during my examination and after Tigrito’s arrival, left the room with Miguel. Tigrito pulled a chair next to the bed and sat down. He set an envelop on the bed next to me. With great grimacing effort, I picked up and opened it. Money. Tigrito counted it for me. Nine hundred and seventy-eight dollars. “From the Ferret?” I asked.

“Si.”

“He spent some of it.”

“Si. You are very lucky I found him so quickly. He will not bother you again. Ever.” I started to ask him what that meant. He said, “Don’t ask.”

Instead, I asked for water, which he brought to me. Sitting down again, he said, “Miguel was a doctor in another country, a very good doctor. Circumstances did not allow him to remain, and they do not allow him to practice medicine here. But nevertheless he is a very good doctor. Miguel says you have many

broken ribs, and one of them poked a hole in your right lung so that air leaks out on the inside. That is called a pneumothorax, I think. He is also worried that there is blood around the lung and that perhaps your liver and your spleen have been injured. We are going to try to take care of you here as long as it is safe. But if Miguel thinks at some point that you must go to a hospital, then that's what we must do."

"Okay," I said with a marked lack of conviction. But I really had no choice. Live or die, the Ferret had said. Live, I had replied. So fine. *I will live*, I thought. *I will get through this. I will be better for it. I will. I will. I will.* My internal dialog was forceful, with the conviction that my reply to Tigrito had lacked. I will!

Tigrito said, "Now I need to know everything about you, your background, your family. You can't be here, in this place. I have to find a place for you. You are muy guapo, muy inteligente. You do not belong in a place like this. You do not belong with a family like the one you're staying with now."

I told him everything I knew, every place I had stayed, all the names I could remember.

When I finished, he said, "Dios, Pavito. Your life has sucked. Now I have more respect for you than ever. Sleep now. Soon Miguel and Macro will return, and Miguel will begin treating you. Some of the treatment will be very unpleasant. You must do everything Miguel tells you to do, and you must be strong. You must not cry out. ¿Me entiende?"

"Si."

"I know you do, Pavito. To remain silent through such a beating, to give your attacker no pleasure in your tears, that is very strong. Muy fuerte. Well done, hombre. Now sleep."

I slept.

Chapter Six

Mike

Tom brought me a glass for the beer, which I didn't really want but dutifully drank anyway. More calories to burn off later. "Okay," I said. "I met her this morning."

"Right. You said that already."

"Yes, I know I said that already, butthead. You're as bad as Randi, interrupting all the time. Anyway, I had gone down early to do a tune-up on the wrecker. You know how I can't sleep, so I was down there about five-thirty. I hosed it down and vacuumed out the inside. Ernie is such a pig. By that time it was light enough to see underneath the truck and inside the hood. I changed the oil and filter, and then the fuel filter, and then I swapped out the plugs. I had just gotten back from a test drive when I heard this woman scream."

"Scream? What do you mean scream?"

"Look, Randi. I mean Tom. She didn't really scream. She shouted profanity."

"What profanity. What did she say? Exactly."

"Dang. You know how I dislike profanity, but okay, she said the excrement word. Actually, she screamed it. She was sitting in her car, an ugly old Camry, banging

on the steering wheel because it wouldn't start. So I said something like, 'There's a bathroom over there.' You know, I was trying to be funny because she had used the excrement word and—"

"The excrement word? The excrement word? Jesus H. Christ, you slay me. The excrement word? Okay. Continue."

"Yeah, Tom, I'll continue. But what is wrong with absence of profanity? We don't need profanity to speak civilly. We don't need it to punctuate conversation. We just don't need it."

"Okay," Tom said, "Absence of profanity is fine. What's so goddamned odd about it, though, is that you used to be better at it than anyone. Remember that time in boot camp when—"

"That was then. This is now. You know we're both different now. Different good and different bad, both of us. I just don't like that stuff anymore."

He looked at me, his eyes pools of sadness. He knew that I, in particular, was different. Different bad and very different sad. Scary sad. I knew that look. I knew the worry. I knew that every day when he said goodnight to me, he was worried it would be the last time he ever saw me.

What he didn't know was that every time I said goodnight to him, I was also afraid it would be for the last time, not knowing if I would make it through the night. Every day, every night, was a struggle for me. When I closed the door on apartment 2B in the evening, it took a masterful effort to get me through to the next sunrise, to go on to another gloomy, dis-

mal day, sunshine or not. My days were always overcast and sunless. Most nights when I closed my eyes to sleep, my last thought was "Please let this be the last night." Some nights I unlocked the nightstand next to my bed and took out my aging but fully loaded nine-millimeter Glock pistol. I would cradle it gently, cuddle it actually, wondering how many of the eleven rounds I could get off if I held it against my head or put it in my mouth.

"Okay," he said. "She said the excrement word, and you tried to be funny. And probably failed, as usual. Then what?"

"Then she treated me like I was some kind of idiot mechanic. Granted, I probably looked like an idiot mechanic. No, that's not right. You and I both know that most mechanics are pretty smart, even gifted. Problem-solvers. Masters of logic and deduction. Jeez, Ernie is the smartest guy we know. But she doesn't know that. She saw a greasy, dirty guy who had snuck up on her from the rear and tried to be funny. Dumb. Actually very dumb, but lately very much in character for me. The upshot of it was she asked me to help her get her car started."

"Excellent," he said. "Hero to the rescue. You got her car started, then asked her for a date, right?"

"Wrong, wrong, and wrong. She is such a babe, as you say, that I'll never be a hero to her. I couldn't get her car started. And I didn't ask her for a date. But I did coax her into having coffee with me tomorrow."

He looked at me, mouth agape. He said, "What did you say?"

I said, “What I said was, ‘Wrong, wrong, and—”

“For Christ’s sake, I got that part. What did you say about a date?”

“Not a date. Just coffee. Tomorrow. At nine. At Starbuck’s. If she shows up.”

“My God. This is great. Excellent. Cool. I can’t wait to tell Randi. I can tell Randi, can’t I? That you’re honest to God going on a date. I can’t believe it. It’s a miracle.”

“You still have it wrong. It’s not a date. We’re just having coffee together. Besides, there’s more. And I’ll tell you if you promise to keep your mouth shut for two minutes.”

“Okay. I promise. To shut up and to keep my mouth shut.”

“Fine. So I towed her car—”

“You mean, don’t open my mouth like this? How about like this?”

He was making goofy faces with his mouth open in a variety of ways, mocking me in his good-natured way. I balled up my fist and hit him as hard as I could on the high point of his shoulder.

“Ouch! Damn. Nothing wrong with your left jab. Okay, I’ll shut up.”

“Fine. Don’t make me hurt you again.” He smiled, and I continued. “I towed her car to the shop. Ernie was there, hobbling around on his knee brace. I told him he was stupid and that he should go home and rest and that you and I would cover things until he was ready to come back. He said, ‘Bite me.’ Then he went

into the office and did paperwork. I replaced one of the belts on the Camry and rewired the alternator where the old belt had shredded the wiring. I put the quick-charger on the battery and then went to work. Ernie’s project du jour was a 1986 Volvo that needed exhaust repair. God, I hate working on any Volvo.”

Tom nodded at me sympathetically. Some cars were harder to work on than others. The Volvo, Jags, most Italian cars.

“At five we shut down, and I drove the Camry back here and parked in her garage. That was the plan. I would bring her car here and park it in her garage. She would return mine, park it in my garage, and then bring the key up to me.”

“What? You let her borrow your car? Are you nuts? You won’t even let me borrow your car. You let a woman you just met borrow your car? What were you thinking?”

“I know it sounds weird, but I trusted her. We connected, remember. And she trusted me enough to borrow it to get to her class on time.”

“Ah, she’s a student at the U. Going to be late for class, so big Mikey comes to the rescue, lends her his car, and now he’s the big hero.”

“Well, she’s not a student. She’s a teacher. English lit. And I already told you, this woman is beautiful and intelligent, and letting her borrow my car is not going to make me a hero.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Fine. What happened when she brought your car back?”

“It’s not what happened when she brought my car back. It’s what happened when she brought the keys up to my apartment.”

Tom brightened with interest. “She brought the car keys up to your apartment? You invited her in, right? You had a drink together? Long conversation? Evolving interest? Perhaps...more?”

“You are such a dork. No. None of that. Well, not exactly. I was my usual master of timing. I had just rolled out of the shower when she got there. I slipped on some pants and ran to the door and looked out the peephole. I was a microsecond from opening the door when I realized I hadn’t put a shirt on. I was bare from the waist up.”

“Holy shit. You didn’t open the door, did you? Jesus Christ. Did she see you without a shirt?”

“No. I backed off, ran back to the bedroom, got a T-shirt, put it on and sprinted back to the front door. By that time she was turning to leave just as I opened the door.”

“You opened the door. And...?”

“Well, she was standing there, looking at me, and I was looking at her. She was absolutely stunning, and I’m sure I looked like some star-struck teenager. She was dressed in the matching brown blouse and brown skirt she’d had on in the morning, but again, the most striking things were those eyes. Emerald green. And piercing. I swear, Tom, she looked right into me. Right into my soul, if I still have one. I excused myself and went to get a shirt. That took a few seconds. When I came back, she asked me for a bill. I told her there

was no charge. I’m sure she thought that meant I was trying to hit on her, but I was really just trying to be neighborly. She said, no that wouldn’t work, so I said fine, just have coffee with me some time.”

“Duh. You idiot. Just coffee. Couldn’t you at least get a real date out of this?”

“Tom, come on. There’s more. Just shut up for thirty seconds. Jeez, you and Randi are perfectly matched.”

“Sorry.” He wasn’t sorry, really.

“It’s weird, Tom, what happened next. She said, ‘You know Coleridge, don’t you?’ I’ll admit I was puzzled by the question, but I said yes, I did. She said, ‘Fine. I’ll have coffee *with* you if you can recite to me something from Coleridge, but not from the *Ancient Mariner* poem.’ I almost went brain dead for a minute, but then I remembered the beginning to *Kubla Khan*. I recited it, and my God, you should have seen the look on her face. I wish I’d had a camera. Then I said, ‘When are we having coffee?’ I have to give her credit. She didn’t miss a beat. She said, ‘Tomorrow at nine, at Starbuck’s around the corner.’”

“Yes! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! My God, my God. Mikey is going on date.”

“I keep telling you, it’s not a date. Just coffee. But heaven help me, she is one beautiful woman.”

He looked smug and self-satisfied, but said nothing.

“One more thing,” I went on. “I was trying to get her out the door so I could really finish getting dressed, not that she could see anything through the

shirt *and* T-shirt. I just felt uncomfortable. So I got her turned around and headed out the door. That's when she saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The bookcase, idiot. She saw the bookcase. I'm not sure what she expected, but she sure acted surprised." Tom knew that the bookcase was filled with the works of Dickens, Twain, Hemingway, and others, plus contemporary literature, including all the works of Louis L'Amour, Dick Francis, John D. MacDonald, Elmore Leonard, Michael Connelly, and Dean Koontz. "She turned around and asked me if I had read all those. I said yes and shooed her out the door. I still wonder what she was thinking. Guys don't read? Did I look that stupid to her that I didn't seem literate?"

"Now who's the idiot? Don't you get it? You knew Coleridge, and then you have a bookcase with mostly classics. What did you expect? She pegs you as some bumbling, fumble-fingered, low-IQ mechanic, and you recite Coleridge and read Dickens. No wonder she's confused."

She hadn't looked confused. Puzzled, perhaps, but not confused. And I could not get those striking green eyes out of my mind.

Chapter Seven

Emma

Some people seem destined to a lifetime of bad luck. Before I was much into my teens, I had lost most of my family, and then I was spirited away to live with my grandparents, two of the most inflexible and controlling humans to have ever walked the earth. While I liked living in Grand Junction, Colorado, it wasn't the Hilton, as Grandpa used to say. On the other hand, it was generally safe and predictable in a Midwest kind of way. Good people.

And it was a good life, too, at least the little bit of life I was allowed to experience under the stern tutelage of my grandparents. They knew all the gory details of my past, my chronic lack of direction, and the tragic event that culminated in their taking me in as their own. They set out to reconstruct for me, in as short a time as possible, a childhood with limits, guidance, expectations, and consequences for misdeeds. At the time, I was too docile, too overwhelmed by tragedy and the speed of events, to resist very much. I became, in effect, a choirgirl, quiet, submissive, and obedient. I made few friends at school, always came home on time, and excelled academically in all my classes.

I withdrew into myself, maintaining a superficially ebullient exterior, a functional carapace that hid a putrefying core. I deserved punishment for my transgressions, but none was forthcoming—and none would be, at least not officially. But over time, I managed to punish myself far more thoroughly and frequently than any court, tribunal, or judge ever could. And I did it in ways that led unerringly and unremittingly to a downward-spiraling self-devaluation.

But that was then, and this is now, as Grandpa used to say. The now, today, was one of those impossible Sacramento days in late spring, about a million degrees and very humid. The old adage that women don't sweat but glow didn't apply to me. I looked and felt like someone had poured a bucket of warm spit all over me. Classes completed for the day, I went home to my apartment and took a quick shower. Then I got into my swimsuit and headed for the pool.

Randi, already comfortably ensconced in a lounge chair, greeted me with a smile. "My, my, Miss Randelli. You are looking especially lovely today. Are you wearing that brand-new red two-piece suit for the benefit of your new beau?"

"Will you get off it with this 'beau' stuff. I don't have a beau. I had coffee with the guy, OK? We just talked. That's all."

Her smile was more of a half smirk. "Well, have some iced tea, and then tell me about your day." She knew that Wednesday was my hard day, with all three of my classes meeting back to back in the afternoon. She also knew that it helped me to talk about it, and

our late afternoon meeting at poolside on Wednesdays was now a tradition. It was also an opportunity for me to see Mike, who did an afternoon pool workout that would have drowned most people. He was there now, moving across the water, back and forth, from one end to the other.

I picked up the pitcher on the small table between us and poured some tea into one of the extra glasses she had brought. Hot, tired, and thirsty, I took a long drink, half gagging as I realized too late it was flavored tea. "Don't you guys ever drink plain tea? What is this, anyway? It has some kind of berry flavor."

"It's raspberry tea, sweetie. And you sound just like Mike. Well, as Tommy says to Mikey, if you don't like it don't drink it."

Instead of telling her about my pitiful day of teaching, I said, "We had coffee together again today, Mike and I, a second time."

"What? You didn't tell me you we're doing that again. Wow, this is getting serious."

No, I hadn't told her that Mike and I were meeting again. But I had told her about the first coffee at Starbucks. At that first meeting, he was already there when I arrived, sitting at an outside table. I quietly sat down, said hello, and asked him if he was ready to order. He said yes, and we both got up to go inside. I saw that he was wearing khaki pants and a blue long-sleeved shirt. He didn't look like a mechanic about to go to work. I pointed this out, and he said, "Oh, yeah, that. Well, it's Tommy's day to help out Ernie. I'm off today."

I was puzzled. “Tommy works at Ernie’s? Tommy’s a doctor, not a mechanic.”

He smiled. “Tommy *was* a mechanic, before the Marine Corps. Once a mechanic, always a mechanic. We both worked for Ernie after high school, taking Juco courses part time.”

“Juco? What’s Juco?”

He smiled again. “Junior college. Junior college courses, that is. We actually continued while we were on active duty in the Marines. It was like a contest between us to see who could get the closest to a degree before our enlistment was up.”

“Let’s see. You went to high school together. You worked for Ernie together. You served in the Marines together. You went to school together. Gee, you guys have done a lot of stuff together.”

This time he didn’t smile. “More than you could possibly know.”

The way he said it, and the way he looked when he said it, I instantly knew this subject was off-limits. I didn’t pursue it, although I was certainly curious.

Changing the subject, I asked, “Where did you go to high school?”

He smiled again. “Hey, let’s quit standing outside here. Let’s go get some java, and then we can sit and talk a bit.”

His choice was coffee, black. I got my usual grande latte. We went back outside and claimed a table, sitting across from one another.

He seemed so honest, so approachable, and so unpretentious. I suddenly wanted to know everything

about him, from infancy to present. Not practical, I realized. I decided to begin simply. “So,” I said, “did you ever get a degree?”

He gave me that quirky, cockeyed grin and said, “Not only did I get a degree, I got it before Tommy.”

“Is it like some kind of contest with you two, always trying to do something first or better?”

“As a matter of fact, it is. Does that bother you?”

“Well, I’m not sure why that would bother me, even if I knew the motivation. But I am curious.”

“OK, we do compete. It’s a guy thing. We can’t help it. But we don’t do it in a mean-spirited way. We don’t do it in a vindictive way. We do it in a ha-ha kind of way, like ha-ha, you are such a loser, I got done before you did, or I ran faster than you did, or I threw the ball farther than you did, ha-ha. It’s just how we are. Guys, I mean.”

Frankly, I didn’t understand any of this. But then men sometimes have trouble understanding a woman’s approach to life, too. I said, “What was your degree in?”

He smiled. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I said, ‘What did you get your degree in?’”

His smile grew broader. “OK, let me see if I understand this. You’re a professor or instructor in English literature, right?”

“Yes.”

“That means you have a bachelor’s or advanced degree in English or English literature, right?”

“Correct. Bachelor’s and master’s degrees.”

“And you just asked me what I got me degree *in*, right?”

I was trapped, and I knew it. I knew exactly where he was headed. So I said, “Yes, I asked you what you got your degree *in*. And I know that you’re smart enough to realize that we all speak colloquially much differently from how we would write or speak professionally. And you know that in a more formal setting, I would *never, ever* end a sentence with a preposition. Now, what did you get your degree *in*?”

I said it so emphatically that he almost choked on his coffee.

When he stopped chuckling, he said, “My degree is in architecture.”

“Did you say your degree was in architecture?”

“Yes.”

“You’re an architect?”

“No, I’m a mechanic.”

Randi’s laughter interrupted my narrative. “What’s so damned funny?” I asked her.

“It’s the dialogue, silly. It’s so cute, so refreshing. And the way you’re telling it is, well, just funny. You know. Humorous.”

“Yeah, right. So what’s funny? The way I’m telling it, or the content.”

“Actually, both. You have a humorous style of presentation, and then that last thing about not being an architect but rather a mechanic. I just thought it was funny.”

“Ha ha. Do you want me to finish this story or not?”

“Please continue.”

He had told me he was a mechanic. I wasn’t sure if he was serious or if he was mocking me. “Fine,” I said. “Now be serious. What are you really? Architect, mechanic, or neither?”

He gave me that lopsided, goofy-looking grin again. “Well, did you see me one morning, dirty and greasy, having just finished a tune-up on a big truck called a wrecker?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And did I tow your car to an auto repair shop with that wrecker?”

“Yes, you did.”

“And did I repair your car at that auto repair shop?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Now, are those all things that a mechanic would do?”

“Yes.”

“Then, I rest my case. Now let’s talk about you.”

We talked a bit longer, although not as long as I would have wished because of my class closing in on me. I was able to dodge most of his questions about my remote past. He was accepting in that regard, and we reached a tentative and unspoken mutual understanding to discuss things about ourselves based more on the here and now rather than on the there and then.

When I explained all that to Randi, she said, “Well.” She said it with a kind of false breathlessness. “Well. My, my. You got very much further along than I would have expected.”

I glared at her. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” she said again, breathlessly. “I just meant that you’ve been unfeeling and untrusting for such a long time. And here you are actually engaging someone, trying to find out a bit about him and perhaps giving him a bit of yourself.”

“Whoa. I gave him none of myself. Nothing. Zippo. Nada. He got nothing from me.”

“OK. If you say so.”

Chapter Eight

Mike

I awakened in the starkness of room six in the Castle Hotel, awakened by the sound of the door opening and bustling activity as Miguel and Macro brought things into the room. The only thing I could identify for sure was an oxygen tank. The rest of it looked like something out of a Frankenstein movie. I glanced at the bedside clock—just after eight in the morning. I had slept for two hours, if it could be called sleep.

Miguel said, “Now, Pavito, I’m going to ruin your day, and I am going to make you feel better at the same time.”

“What? Ruin my day? Why? How? It’s already ruined anyway. But I’ll take the feel better part for sure.”

He pulled the bedside table away from the wall to a position at the side of the bed about halfway down. Then he set up a strange-looking appliance next to the bed. It had cords and tubing coming out of it. Macro placed a wrapped package on the table, and Miguel opened it in such a way that it looked like he didn’t want to touch anything on the inside. Macro placed another package at the foot of the bed and opened it,

taking out a long yellow gown that Miguel put on with the opening facing to the back.

Pulling a chair over to the side of the bed, Miguel sat down, smiling. He said, “Pavito, even without an x-ray, I can tell that you have a hole in your right lung and perhaps blood around the lung. Air is leaking through the hole into the space around your lung. You have been very lucky so far because the hole isn’t large enough to cause big problems yet. But it will soon, unless we give the air another way to get out.”

I didn’t like where this was heading. “How?”

“Pavito, I must put a tube into your chest from the outside. This will allow the air to get out. It will also let your lung expand. Right now you can’t take a deep breath because of the trapped air.”

“You have to put a tube into my chest?” He nodded yes. “You’re going to cut a hole in me for the tube?”

“Not exactly. What I will do is give you a local anesthetic, a kind of numbing medicine. Then I will use a scalpel to make a small incision in the skin—a small cut made with a very sharp instrument. You should not feel much pain when I do that. But then I must push this tube between two ribs and into the chest. I will not lie to you. That will be very painful. But once that is done, you will be able to breathe much better. Macro is setting up the oxygen tank. He should be quite skilled since he was a respiratory therapist a long time ago. I may take him back to Chicago with me to assist in a little medical business I run there.”

“I need oxygen? I’m breathing okay.”

“You are breathing too rapidly and too shallowly. That will improve once the tube is in. The oxygen will assist your body in getting rid of the air around your lung. Accept that explanation for now. Also, you see this machine? It is called an atrium express chest drainage unit. It has three parts: the collection chamber, the water control chamber, and the suction control. It is an older type of unit, but still a bit too technical to try to explain in a short time. Even though it’s old, it will remove the air around your lung and keep it from coming back. Me entiende?”

“Si.”

“Good. Now let us proceed.”

We proceeded. He was absolutely not kidding about the pain when he poked the hole into my chest, but that was the only bad part. He pushed a tube into the hole and then secured it onto my chest with stitches and about a thousand pounds of tape. Then he and Macro hooked up the tubing to the atrium thing and put oxygen tubing around my head with little pointy things that went into my nose. As soon as they were done, I felt like a million bucks. “Wow. Cool,” I said.

“Si. Excelente.” Miguel smiled. “Do not be frightened by blood in the tubing. I will watch that carefully. Now I must start an IV and give you fluids and medicine. Then you will sleep again.”

With my lung expanded and fluids dripping into my arm, I slept again, and this time it was a restorative, nourishing sleep.

I spent six days in that small room, with a tube in my chest for three of the days. Macro was more nurse

than respiratory therapist, I thought, keeping me clean and helping me to the bathroom and in and out of the shower. Tigrito checked on me at least twice each day, bringing food and discussing my progress with Miguel in rapid-fire Spanish of such verbal velocity that I couldn't understand any of it. In later years, I would wonder about those men, why they took such an interest in me. I knew very little about their pasts, only bits and pieces about their present lives, and nothing about them after we parted. I told myself that someday I would go back and look for them, but in my heart I knew that I wouldn't.

On the fourth day, Miguel said, "Ito, you are no longer draining blood from your chest, and the bubbles are few. Today I think we can remove the tube."

"Is it going to hurt as much as when you put it in?"

"No, very little. A bit of discomfort perhaps when I take the stitches out from around the tube, and a bit when I withdraw the tube, but nothing like when I put it in. Also, I will remove your IV, since you are eating like a mule and need it no more."

He removed everything, and I stood up, unteethered for the first time in days. I wobbled over to the bathroom, happily able to attend to my own toileting. Bladder empty, I wobbled back to the bed and lay down again, a bit out of breath.

Miguel, sitting backward on the room's single chair, nodded. The chair was wooden and high-backed, and he had his chin resting on the crossbar at the top. "Ito, it may be many weeks before you feel normal again. We will remain here now until you can walk from the

bed to the door and then back to the bed ten times without stopping."

I looked at the door, looked at the bed, and estimated the distance. Ten feet over, ten feet back. Twenty feet. Times ten. Two hundred feet. Piece of cake. "I can do it now," I said.

Miguel smiled. "Proceed then, hombre."

I got out of bed again, walked over to the door, back to the bed, turned around for the next trip, and felt the floor begin to shift. Then the room began spinning. *Wow*, I thought, *this is like being at an amusement park*. I would have fallen, but Miguel, still smiling, caught me and lifted me onto the bed. "Not bad, Ito. Twenty feet. Later today, you will do more, and tomorrow more still."

On the sixth day, I walked two hundred feet without getting dizzy. I could have done more, but Miguel made me stop. He used a cell phone to make a call. Once again, his Spanish was too rapid for me to understand fully, so I suspected he was speaking to Tigrito. I was able to catch a few words. "Ito...mejor...dos cientos pasos...bueno..."

Tigrito arrived in the late afternoon of the sixth day. Before he came, Miguel and Macro had taken all the gear out of the room, leaving it as bare as the day we arrived. We were alone in the room when Tigrito spoke softly to me. "Ito, I have found a place for you. You have an aunt in California. She is...how do you say, encantado?"

"Ecstatic?" I replied.

"Si, ecstatic. Delighted. Very happy. She wants you to come there immediately. Inmediatamente."

“Okay,” I answered. “Where?”

“¿Que?”

“Where doe she live?”

“Ah. Si. She lives in Auburn, California. I will take you there. I could pay for the travel myself, but I think it is wiser for you to do so. That way you will not feel indebted to me.”

Not indebted to you, I thought. You’ve got to be kidding me.

“How will I pay?” I asked. “And how are we getting there?”

“We will use your money that you earned from your business selling food. We will travel by bus, leaving soon I think, since your aunt wants you there muy pronto. To fly, to travel by air on short notice, will be mucho dinero and will not leave you much money at the end of the trip. The bus is cheaper. Also, it will give you a chance to see much of the country that you have not previously seen. It will also give me a chance to talk to you at great length about how you must conduct your life from now on.”

As it turned out, Tigrito’s “muy pronto” departure didn’t happen for seven days. He explained the mechanics of the trip to me, noting that a nonstop bus trip from Milwaukee to California would be harsh for a healthy person. I was still pretty far from being healthy. So instead, he broke the trip into three segments, with the first one from Milwaukee to Denver, then Denver to Salt Lake City, and then Salt Lake City to Auburn. It would take nearly five days, he said, because we would be spending a day each in Denver

and Salt Lake City so I could rest. He wanted to know what things I needed to get from house of the family where I had been staying.

“They’re my cousins, yes, but I wouldn’t call them family. There’s really nothing there that I need or want.”

“Good,” he said, “because they have reported you missing. We will leave in the morning and travel discreetly. When you get to your aunt’s house, she will call your cousins and tell them you arrived at her doorstep. And that you will be staying. I do not think your cousins will be too disappointed.”

The bus fare for the trip, even with advance-purchase discount, was \$314 for the two of us. Tigrito explained that it would have been much less if we had gone nonstop, but that it was better to spend a bit more and be rested. Low-budget motels in Denver and Salt Lake City, plus food for five days, cost me another \$170. Still, on arrival at Aunt Mae’s house, I had nearly \$500 left.

The trip took us through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada. I had no idea the country was so huge and that places were all so different. Tigrito used the time to lecture me on life. He stressed education, loyalty to family, and respect for all life.

“Ito, I tell you these things, things that I have learned over my life. I pass them on to you so you may not make the same mistakes that I made, that your path through life may be straighter and less troubled than mine. First, don’t talk when it is better to remain

silent. Next, if you promise something, you must always keep the promise no matter what the cost to you. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.”

“Good. Always speak kindly about people. Always seek out the best and not the worst in someone. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.”

With each thing, he gave me examples of his own failings, how his failure to follow his own advice had led to a hurtful outcome for himself or someone he loved. Sometimes he would be silent for long periods, and we would watch the scenery passing by at seventy miles per hour, the green rolling hills of western Missouri, the incredible wheat-filled plains of Kansas, the stunning mountains and canyons of Colorado.

“Do not boast,” he said. “Do not look for...I do not know the word...espaldarazo.”

“Patting yourself on the back? Compliment?”

“Si. Compliment is close, but not exact. It is okay, though. Do not seek compliments. Let them come to you naturally.”

As we passed through Cheyenne, Wyoming, I noticed that I was having trouble breathing. I was worried that something had happened in my lung again, that the puntura had come back.

“No, Ito, I think it is because we are at a high place. This part of the country is many feet above the sea, and the amount of oxygen in the air is less. I, too, am feeling out of breath, poquito. So do not worry. We will begin descending soon into Salt Lake City, which

is lower than this place, but still high compared to the sea. This makes me think of another lesson for you, that in bad situations you can usually find good. When you are faced with difficulty, you will usually have two choices: oportunidad o calamidad.”

“Opportunity or calamity. And calamity is the bad thing, right?”

“Si.”

“And I should always chose oportunidad, no?”

“You are quick, Ito. Muy inteligente. Opportunity, yes. But do more than chose. Seize. Seize opportunity. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si. Got it. But what opportunity is there in a place where I can’t breathe?”

“Ah, Ito. Seize opportunity. Here, where the air is thin, if you stay for a while, your blood gets thicker, with more of the red blood cells for carrying oxygen. Then when you go to the places by the sea, you can run faster and farther than those who live in the low places.”

Weird, I thought. I couldn’t see myself ever wanting to seize that particular opportunity.

“Okay, Ito. Now let us talk about the ending, not the beginning. By that I mean you have not had an easy life. The beginning has been difficult. But remember that it is not where you are from, it is where you are going. It is not where you start. It is where you finish. Life is, for most, a long journey, not a short one. Be persistent in all things. Do not ever give up. Ever. Just as you have done for these ten years you have had already.”

We stayed overnight in Salt Lake City. After we had eaten and rested, he walked around town with me. I was struck by how clean everything was, a sharp contrast to the shabby part of Milwaukee I knew. There was a huge temple there, marvelous in stature and architecture. I asked him what church that was. He said it was one of the churches of the Mormon religion, but he did not know much about the religion itself. “You will have to learn about it some time on your own, Ito.”

Tigrito left me in the motel room in the early evening, returning after only an hour or so. He had done some shopping, I saw, looking at the bags he was carrying, and he was wearing a baseball cap with a big red C on the front. Odd, I thought, since he didn’t usually wear a cap. As he walked into the bathroom and before he closed the door I could see the back of his head. I was momentarily stunned. It looked like his ponytail was gone.

I heard sounds of shower and sink and toilet, of rustling bags and the chinking of things in the sink and on the counter. After nearly thirty minutes, the door to the bathroom opened, and a strange man stood in the doorway. It was not Tigrito. He looked something like Tigrito, but he was definitely not Tigrito. He was clean-shaven, with short hair. He had on clean, pressed, expensive-looking gray trousers and a plain white shirt that might have been silk. His black shoes had a glossy shine.

“Tigrito?” I asked hesitantly.

“Si, amigo. I must look good when we arrive at your aunt’s house tomorrow. You, too, little friend. Now come. For a small consideration, the barber said he would wait for us to return. Your hair is too long and too wild. We will go fix it now. And then we will get you some different clothes. My dinero, not yours. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

We went. I had never had someone shampoo my hair before. Nice. When the barber had finished, I barely recognized myself. After shopping, after my own time in the bathroom showering and making chinking sounds, and after putting on the new outfit Tigrito had selected for me, I was a completely different person, too, at least in the mirror.

In the morning, we got on the bus and headed west. Outside of Salt Lake City there was a huge lake. No fish, Tigrito said. Too much salt. Some tiny shrimps, he said, but no fish.

Nevada is desolate, I thought as we drove toward the sun. Desolate was how I was beginning to feel, too, since I knew that Tigrito would leave as soon as he brought me to Aunt Mae. I think he felt it, too, since he kept up a nearly constant chatter.

“Ito, when you meet a situation, and you cannot face it head on, find a different direction. Do not waste energy and time on a direct attack that will not be effective. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.”

Outside the bus, there was nothing but scrub pine, mesquite bushes, sand, and rattlesnakes. Inside the bus, chatter.

“Ito, in life you do not get to do things over. So you must do the best you can in everything the first time. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.”

“Bueno. Now I must be sure you understand this. Listen to me carefully now. There are no do-overs in life. It is one time, straight through, do the best you can. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.”

“Good. Like a promise you must keep, if you say you are going to do a job, then you do it. And you do it as well as you can. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.”

We passed through a town called Elko. Buildings, streets, scrub pine, mesquite bushes, sand, and rattlesnakes.

Back on the road, the chatter resumed. “Do not let a bad decision ruin your life. If you make a mistake, learn from it, and look forward, not back. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si.” Somewhere west of Winnemucca, I fell asleep.

I felt something nudge me. It was Tigrito poking me in the ribs. “Ito, we are in a place called Truckee, in California. Soon we will be in Auburn. There is one more thing I must tell you, so listen carefully. Of all the things we have discussed, the most important one is honor.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Are you asking me what is honor?”

“Yes.”

“The best way I can explain it is to live your life so that no one can say bad things about you. And if someone does say bad things about you, then no one else will believe it. To have that is to have everything. It is to have lived an honorable life, to have lived honorably. This you must do. You must promise me this.”

“I promise.”

“Do you promise on the blood of the Holy Mother?”

“I’m not sure what that is, but if you want me to, I will.”

“Si. I forget. You have not had religion. You are not Católico. No, it is enough that you promise me. Because you are who you are, already a man of honor.”

Auburn, California, had a fresh, clean, friendly appearance, with lots of trees and greenery. I liked it immediately as we pulled into the bus station. At a pay telephone, I listened to Tigrito talk to Aunt Mae.

“We are here,” he said. “Yes, uneventful. No, we will take a taxi. At your house, I will come to the door first, without Ito. Without Finn. You and I will speak. Then I will return to the taxi to say good-bye to my small friend, who has the largest heart I have ever known. Then he will come to you, and I will leave. Yes. Soon. Ten minutes perhaps. Yes. Yes. It has been my pleasure. He is especial, this one. Yes. Good-bye.”

Fifteen minutes later, the cab pulled up in front of a small house that was surrounded by porch on three sides, with perfect grass and flowers everywhere.

Tigrito walked to the front door, which was already open, where a tall, slender woman stood. I could see she was still quite pretty in spite of her graying hair. They shook hands and spoke briefly. Tigrito handed her an envelope that I knew held my money, or what was left of it. He talked some more, probably explaining where the money came from and why only that much was left. Then they shook hands again, and Tigrito started to turn away. But Mae still held his hand and gently pulled him to her, embracing him with what seemed to be overwhelming gratitude. Tigrito seemed embarrassed, nodded, murmured something, nodded again, and then turned to walk back to the taxi.

In the taxi he sat beside me, looking straight ahead. “You’re not coming in?” I asked.

“No, amigo. You are beginning a new life. This is your time now, a new time with new people. You must put the past behind you and move forward. You do not need to forget all that has gone before, and you must not forget those who have helped you along the way. But it is time now, time for you to move ahead. You will not see me again, I think, and I will not see you. I will not forget you, though, and you must not forget all I have taught you. ¿Me entiende?”

“Si. Entiendo.” I spoke those words through the warm, salty tears cascading down my cheeks. I saw he was crying too.

He leaned over, hugged me, and placed the baseball cap with the big red C on my head. “This cap is

your memory of me. Go now, mi Pavito. Live a good and long and honorable life.”

I got out of the taxi and stood next to it. He reached through the open window, and I took his hand in one final handshake. “Adios,” he said.

“Adios,” I replied, releasing his hand as the taxi pulled away.

As he predicted, I never saw him again. The taxi disappeared, and I turned and walked up the sidewalk to the waiting arms of my Aunt Mae, an embrace as warm and comforting as anything I have ever felt.

And that’s how I ended up in Auburn, California.

Chapter Nine

Emma

Sitting poolside with Randi, I reflected on my earlier conversation with her, where I had said I didn't give Mike even the tiniest bit of myself. And truly, I didn't feel like I had given Mike any meaningful information.

Randi, pouring herself some more of the disgusting raspberry tea, said, "So tell me about round two. When did you have coffee *with* him again?"

We watched Mike doing his workout, pulling himself through the water with grace and speed, his bright orange T-shirt almost luminescent in the afternoon sun.

"Today. And it was coffee *with* him. Just talk."

"And did he tell you what he really does for a living?"

"What are you talking about? He already told me. He's a mechanic."

"Sweetie, I guarantee you he's not a mechanic. At least not a full-time mechanic. Or rather, that's not his current vocation. I also guarantee you that, except for that one time, he never directly said he was a mechanic. He fooled you, honey. He's good at that. I

can tell you from long practice that it's almost impossible to get a straight answer out of the guy."

"Are you telling me he lied to me? He's not a mechanic? He's something else?"

"No, he didn't lie to you. No, he's not currently a mechanic. Yes, he's something else."

"Jesus H. Christ, now you're talking in riddles. You sound just like a goddamned lawyer." Actually, she was a lawyer, and a very good one. I reflected on things briefly and then said, "He didn't lie? But he's not a mechanic? Then what the hell is he?"

Randi took a sip of her tea. "He was a mechanic, and as I'm sure he told you, once a mechanic, always a mechanic. So he is, was, is. So he didn't lie. And as to what he is now, you'll have to find that out yourself. But to find out, you have to phrase your questions precisely, almost like a lawyer. Otherwise, he will dissemble, misdirect, and confuse, sometimes all at the same time."

"I don't get it. Why don't you just tell me?"

"Because I want you to find out yourself, so here's what you do to get straight answers from him. You ask questions that require a yes or no response. You say, 'Are you currently a mechanic?' Then you ask, 'Are you currently an architect?' Then you ask, 'What is your current vocation or profession?'"

"Damn, this is all too much. Whatever happened to plain and simple talk?"

We both paused briefly to admire Mike swimming in the pool a short distance away. He swam effortlessly, seeming to glide across the water rather than through

it. I wondered why he always wore that obnoxious orange T-shirt when he was swimming. I asked Randi.

"Well," she said, "why don't you ask him yourself? Maybe he doesn't wear it just for swimming."

"Now who's dissembling? Why can't you just tell me why he wears it?"

"Because I'm not sure I know everything, at least not sure I know the whole story. Besides, these are things you should be finding out for yourself."

"Fine," I said, admiring Mike's muscles rippling under the thick orange T-shirt. "Fine, I'll just ask him myself the next time we have coffee."

Chapter Ten

Mike

Aunt Mae insisted that I call her Mae, not Aunt Mae. “For one thing,” she said, “it makes me feel old. And heaven knows, I’m old enough already. For another thing, after what you’ve been through, you deserve adult status. I’m Mae. You’re Finn.”

We sat at her kitchen table, eating chocolate chip cookies and looking out a bay window with a view of so much green that I thought I was on a golf course. She said, “Now tell me about your life, everything you can remember.”

I gave her the same details I had given Tigrito, but with a few extra things I had remembered. I also told her, leaving nothing out, about my time on the Row, the friends I had made, my restaurateur business, the Ferret, Tigrito, Miguel, and the trip to Auburn. It took a long time to tell it all, and when I was done I felt better.

“My poor child,” she said. “So much for one so young. From this day forward, you have a home here. You will go to school here. You will grow tall and strong here. You will learn love here, and contentment. You will also learn dignity and responsibility and hope.

As far as responsibility, you will begin immediately. Life isn't free. You will assist in day-to-day household chores here, including inside and outside. This isn't punishment, you understand. It's education. When you reach adulthood, for real and not the figurative adulthood you have now, I want you to be a fully functioning, independent man capable of taking care of himself in all ways."

"I can do that already," I said.

"Fine," she said. Then she went to the refrigerator, opened it, took out several items, and set them before me. "Make meat loaf for supper. With a fresh salad and baked potatoes. I'll be back in two hours."

As she got up to leave, I said, "I don't know how to make meat loaf."

She stopped abruptly. "Oh. Fine. Just a moment." She went into a bedroom and came back with a pair of jeans and some other things, setting them on the table. "These blue jeans have holes in the knees. Here are patches, sewing gear, and an iron. Let me know when you're finished with the repairs."

As she got up to leave, I said, "Okay, I get the point. I don't know everything. I know some things, but not everything. Where do you want me to start?"

She smiled a patient and understanding smile. "First, you will learn how to do dishes. Clear these things off the table and put them into the sink. I'll show you what to do after that."

And so it went. I learned to cook and sew, and eventually I could run a vacuum cleaner better than just about anyone on the planet. I learned about yard

work, names of plants and flowers, types of fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide, and principles of watering and landscaping. Since her job was selling real estate, I learned about property, mortgages, loans, interest rates, amortization, and creative financing. My brain was a sponge, soaking up everything with a rapidity and efficiency that astonished Mae. For my part, I wasn't astonished. I was happy. There was so much to learn, and since much of her job involved math-related processes, it was easy for me.

Her house was a small bungalow with a second floor added on. The upstairs had Mae's bedroom—complete with a master bathroom—and a sewing room. The downstairs had a living room, a small dining room, a kitchen with a breakfast nook, an office, my bedroom, and a large bathroom just across from my room. I would sometimes use Mae's office to study if I needed Internet access for school projects. If I had any serious homework, I would usually sprawl out on my bedroom floor and do it lying on the big fluffy area rug next to my bed.

The backyard was large by California standards, and maintaining the lawn and greenery took much of my weekend time. It took me almost a year to become comfortable with that backyard maintenance project, but eventually it looked very good, like something out of a garden magazine. In the not-too-far-off distance behind the house, I could see the Auburn State Recreation Area, a thirty-five-thousand-acre prize of rivers, trees, plants, and trails. On weekends and holidays, Mae and I would hike along the north and

middle forks of the American River. She was in her early forties, widowed for about five years, and just getting back to living after a long period of grieving for her husband, who had been taken away abruptly by pancreatic cancer.

Aunt Mae's neighborhood was close to perfect, but not quite. There were interesting neighbors to the north and south. This had no meaning for me then, since I had no concept of direction. The neighbors to the north were eccentric, although at that age eccentric had about as much meaning for me as direction. The neighbors to the south, on the other hand, were heaven-sent. They were a middle-aged man and his slightly younger wife, given to bonhomie and incredible patience for a wide-eyed boy of ten years, and I enjoyed them immensely, calling them Mister and Missus at their suggestion. Of course, I had no idea that Mister was dying of metastatic prostate cancer, with all its pain-ridden agony. I only knew their gentle guidance and love as my surrogate grandparents.

Mister, a carpenter by trade in his younger years, still had the physique of a working man: thick through the chest, with powerful forearms and scarred and sinewy hands. He was well over six feet tall, with a posture that I would recognize later as military. His hair was dark brown and wavy and very thick. He told me that as a boy his hair had been fiery red, a perfect match for his gray eyes and Irish ancestors and short-fused temper. While parts of his body looked healthy, his face looked thin and had an unhealthy appearance that was obvious even to a boy of ten years. Even when

he smiled or laughed, which wasn't often, there was something missing, or perhaps something added—pain. I could see pain etched in his face, unremitting and harsh.

Missus, probably fifteen years or so younger than Mister, was tall herself, but several inches shorter than her man. Her black hair was lightly streaked with gray, and it swirled uncontrollably about her face. Mister said that her frizzy, uncontrolled hair defined her personality as a young girl: undirected but passionate. Missus said that Mister was much more fortunate as a boy, having had no personality whatsoever, and he still wouldn't have had one if he hadn't met her.

They always spoke to me as if I were an adult, and they expected that I would respond in kind. My vocabulary grew immeasurably just by visiting with them and listening to them talk. Remarkably, I thought later, in spite of Mister's illness and suffering, they never dwelled on its severity, never let it be a depressive weight, and never let me know how bad it really was. They were a remarkable pair, and for me, for a time that was far too short, they were tour guides on the road of life, a brief look at what the end-time could be like.

A part of their guidance included a dog, an average-sized dachshund named Snoot, whose unconditional love, depth of character, and courage changed my life forever. Snoot took me under his wing, so to speak—or more correctly, under his paw. He taught me the basic concepts of canine behavior, even though that wasn't his intention. His initial intent was to teach me

submission, which is paramount in canine behavior, although I didn't know it then.

One day I made the mistake of calling Snoot a wiener dog, which is what he was. A dachshund is a wiener dog, the canine equivalent of a giant tan or black or variegated wiener. I meant no disrespect. I was merely making an observation. Mister, though, took exception to the observation. "Snoot," he said, "is a highly intelligent, well-mannered, emotionally perceptive canine, a perfect representative of *Canis familiaris*. If you call him a wiener dog, he is both offended and distressed by your comment. Canines have feelings, more than you could possibly know. They are very forgiving creatures, but they definitely have feelings. Always treat your dogs with respect."

"Yes, sir," I replied with sincere respect and understanding. "But Snoot isn't my dog."

"Yes, he is. And you are his human. He has accepted you. You belong to each other now. You are a valued member of his pack."

Pack behavior, I would eventually learn by reading about wolves, was predicated on a stable hierarchy. And among wolves, as I was to understand later, this hierarchy is overseen by an alpha-dominant male and directed by underlings, including a dominant female as well as a beta and an omega wolf. Omega, being the last letter in the Greek alphabet, is an apt description for the position of the omega wolf...dead last, rock bottom. The job for the alpha female is to be the propagator, the designated pup-bearer for the pack. The beta wolf's job is to be the caretaker for the pack,

especially making sure that the pups are accounted for and fed. The beta also makes sure that with each kill everyone gets something to eat, including, size of kill permitting, the omega wolf. The poor omega wolf is a functional pariah and designated whipping boy or girl. When something goes wrong in the pack, such as a failed hunt, everyone takes it out on the omega wolf, following which everyone, except the omega, feels better. And order is restored to the pack.

At first, Snoot treated me like I was the omega wolf, the lowest form of life, growling and snapping at me, demanding submission. I had no idea what he was doing, but he certainly seemed to dislike me. But as I spent more time with him, especially throwing a ball for him to retrieve and return, he changed. He advanced from a state where he barely tolerated me to one where he began to rejoice when I would visit him after school. Mister and Missus let me take him on walks, pour the dry dog food in his dish, and sit with him inside his tiny doghouse. Snoot, over time, began to regard me as more than the beta in his pack, perhaps as an equal. It probably helped that I brought him illicit treats, mostly in the form of the chunks of liver that I smuggled off my dinner plate. I hated liver. Mister caught me one day as I was hand-feeding Snoot small chunks of the contraband.

"Finn, what are you doing?"

"I'm giving Snoot some treats."

"And what might those treats be?"

"They might be some leftover liver, and in fact, that's what they are."

“*Leftover* liver. Hmmm. Fine. Liver treats are fine. But be careful not to feed him human snack food. Do you understand, Finn? No snack food. No cookies. No chips. No candy. No snack food. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Do you know why you shouldn’t feed him the snack food?”

“Because then he won’t eat his regular food?”

“Correct. Plus, the things we call snack food have too many calories and too much sodium for a dog.”

“What’s sodium?” I asked, and Mister spent the next twenty minutes talking to me about nutrition. At the end of the discussion, I got up to leave, but Mister asked me to sit down again.

“One more thing,” he said. “When you hand-feed Snoot, be careful. Sometimes he gets a bit rambunctious, acting more like a piranha than a polite canine. If he does that, and if he happens to catch one of your fingers on his molars, you may regret it. The bite force on those back teeth in a dachshund approaches a thousand newtons.”

I had no idea what that meant, except that it sounded like a lot.

Mister also lectured to me on numerous things, although never in a pedantic way. It was always in the form of conversation and, as I would understand later, a type of Socratic dialog. One of the things we discussed was Ireland, especially the Irish people. I was fascinated by the concept of second-sight, the gift that some Irish seemed to have. He also explained the legendary Irish temper, which he himself had had as a

young man who was not infrequently subjected to the red haze, which he described as a seeing-red loss of control. This, he said, was difficult to explain to someone who had never experienced it.

“It’s like asking someone what vanilla ice cream tastes like. It’s impossible to describe unless that other person knows what vanilla tastes like.” What I didn’t know then was that I was half Irish, and that in later years I would be subjected to both the vagaries of second-sight and the troubling aspects of the red haze.

Time passes slowly for a ten-year-old, but with inexorable swiftness for those of more advanced age, especially those who are unwell. And cancer, especially the metastatic kind, is an unforgiving illness. Mister eventually succumbed, and even with my limited pre-adolescent experiences, I could see that his passing was a blessing. Missus, despite losing the love of her life, held up well, focusing on the good life they had together and rejoicing that someday they would be together again in a better place. I wasn’t sure exactly what she meant by that, but I was pleased the thought brought her comfort. Snoot, of all of us, was the one who fell apart. He was the one who found Mister slumped in the porch swing, a rueful smile on his face and a glass of iced tea nearby with a baseball game playing on the radio.

Snoot must have known immediately that his master was gone because he began wailing mournfully, escalating into a true howl. I came running to their porch from our front yard, arriving just as the Missus came out of their front door onto the porch. “Oh,

dear,” she said, recognizing immediately that Mister had passed on. Snoot continued his plaintive howling, stopping intermittently to sniff Mister’s shoes before resuming. Missus finally asked me to get Snoot’s leash and take him to the backyard. I think she wanted some time with Mister as much as she wanted Snoot to be somewhere else.

Snoot and I spent a long two hours in the backyard. Nothing I did distracted him from his howling and his focus on the front of the house. He wanted nothing to do with the backyard. He wanted to be with Mister. It was during those two hours that I began to understand something of the loyalty of canines to humans—it was an almost indescribable and certainly unbreakable bond. Snoot’s purpose in life lay lifeless on the front porch, and that’s where Snoot wanted to be.

Waiting in the backyard for those two hours, I remembered my early encounters with Snoot. I was very keen on observation. In short order, I discerned the obvious: that Snoot did not think of himself as a dog. Rather, he perceived himself as *Homo sapiens* and acted accordingly. I explained this in great detail to Mister during one of our long visits on Mister’s front porch. I remember Mister telling me about pack behavior, explaining that no, Snoot didn’t consider himself human. Rather, he considered me a different kind of dog, one that walked upright and smelled bad. I said I took a shower every day. Mister said that to Snoot, I smelled bad, but it wasn’t a truly bad. It just wasn’t a regular dog smell.

“Yeah, fine,” I said. “Snoot doesn’t exactly have a prize-winning odor himself.”

“But,” Mister said, “Snoot thinks it *is* a prize-winning smell. Now go get him a Milk Bone.”

The funeral was three days later. I spent as much time as I could spare with Snoot, but they were not productive hours. He was listless, ate little, and had none of his usual *joie de vivre*. Every now and then he would show some signs of life, but then, upon passing some object that belonged to Mister, he would stop, lie down, and whine. On the day of the funeral, I managed to distract him enough to walk through the living room to the front door, his interest piqued by the tennis ball I was tossing hand to hand. As he got to the door, he spied a pair of Mister’s shoes, sniffed at them for a long time, then lay down next to them and began the canine equivalent of sobbing. I sat down next to him and bawled like a baby myself.

Snoot attended the funeral, start to finish, behaving remarkably well until the end. On the way to the cemetery, he sat with me in the back seat of Mister’s Buick, leaning against me for the entire trip. At the cemetery, he left the car gingerly, without his customary verve. He stayed by my right heel, head slightly bowed, and followed me to the gravesite. The grave was freshly dug, in the clean, dark earth. It was hot enough that even a boy of ten years perspired like an adult. The adults, in turn, also perspired like adults, hastily removing jackets and shawls. Snoot, lacking the ability to sweat, let his tongue hang from his mouth while he panted nearly uncontrollably. I squatted down beside

him and told him to go to the other side of the grave and lie down in the dirt. That mound of dark earth, freshly turned, was as cool as the ground from which it had come, and Snoot obediently plopped himself in the middle of it. Seconds later, already cooling off, he gave me look of gratitude.

He remained atop the cool dirt, supremely attentive while the minister rendered a eulogy. He lay breathlessly still while the coffin was lowered into the grave. As the ropes, which had been used to lower the coffin into the grave were removed, he slowly got to a sitting position. Then he remained motionless, sitting with his head lowered, while we sang “Amazing Grace” a cappella. As the ceremony moved into “ashes to ashes, and dust to dust,” and as family members ceremoniously began dropping handfuls of dirt over the coffin, Snoot raised his head slowly in a wolf-like posture, until his nose was pointed toward the heavens. Then he began a mournful wail, softly at first, and then with a striking crescendo, holding a high note for breathtaking seconds. He repeated this two more times, and at the end of the third wail, every single member of the funeral party was sobbing uncontrollably, including me.

Yes, Snoot was a highly intelligent, well-mannered, emotionally perceptive canine, a perfect representative of *Canis familiaris*. And yes, that day Snoot taught me a lesson that I have never forgotten: canines have feelings, more than you could possibly know.

Chapter Eleven

Emma

We were sitting poolside, Randi and I. I was thinking that she must have the world’s largest bladder, endlessly sipping that tea but never heading off to the ladies’ room. She said, “Tell me how things went at your meeting with you-know-who today.”

We had met a third time at Starbuck’s. Mike was already waiting for me when I showed up. Also waiting was a grande latte for me, while he sipped his plain black coffee. “For me?” I asked, pointing the latte.

“For you,” he replied with his devious crooked smile.

“What happened to having coffee *with* me?”

“Hmm. Well, we’re friends now. So it’s just a friend buying coffee for a friend.”

“OK, friend,” I said. “Cheers.” We clinked our paper cups together and drank.

“So, Mr. Mechanic, why is it that you have degree in architecture but you work in an auto shop?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I just find it odd that a mechanic would have college degree.”

“Au contraire. Most mechanics are very smart. They use logic and deduction and diagnostic techniques that are not all that dissimilar from what doctors do with humans, what veterinarians do with animals, and what horticulturists do with plants.”

“So you admit you *are* a mechanic?”

“Yes.”

“You have training in mechanics?”

“Yes.”

“You have a lot of experience as a mechanic?”

“Yes.”

“Are you currently employed full time as a mechanic?”

That question stopped him cold. He looked at me firmly, his eyes locked on mine. Now who had trapped whom?

“You’ve been talking to Randi, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Now answer the question.”

“You’ve been talking to Randi the lawyer, haven’t you?”

“Yes. And you’re not going to get out of answering the question by answering with a question. I’m on to you.”

“Randi told you to use lawyer-like interrogatory techniques, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she does that with me, too.” His smile was less cocky, more rueful.

“OK, Mr. Mechanic. Let me restate the question. Are you currently employed full time as a mechanic?”

“No.”

“Fine. Thank you. Now let’s continue. Are you currently employed as an architect?”

His cocky smile returned. “Let’s play a game,” he said. “Let’s play one for one. I give you an answer to a question, and then you give me an answer to a question.”

“Go for it. Ask away.”

His sloppy, crooked grin appeared. “Are you single?”

“Yes. Are you currently employed as an architect?”

“No. Are you serious about anyone?”

“No. What is your current vocation?”

“I am currently between jobs. Are you seeing anyone?”

I liked his line of questioning since it seemed to show his interest in me as more than a friend. I said, “If you mean am I dating anyone regularly, the answer is no. Now, what was your job, your vocation, your occupation before you came to be between jobs, as you say?”

“My immediately prior job was as a mechanic, working for Ernie. Have you ever been married?”

He was getting dangerously close to where I would have to beg off further questions. “Yes. And messily divorced, so I’ll save you that question.” I said it with enough emphasis so he would know not to pursue that line of interrogation any further. “Now, when do you expect to be employed again?”

“July first.”

Excellent, I thought. Now I’ve got you. My next question will be to ask you exactly what you will be doing July first.

Before I could gloat even a bit, he said, “What can you tell me about your marriage?”

Oh no. We were not going there. Absolutely not. My face reddened, partly with embarrassment, partly with rage. “No, I won’t do that. We’ll have to cut this short today. I want to get to class a bit early and put some things on the blackboard.”

“Next week?” he said hopefully.

I was resolute, thinking, *Fine, you got me today instead of the other way around. But this isn’t over, Mr. Dissembler. Mr. Confuse-the-issue. Mr. Answer-a-question-with-a-question.*

I said, “No, not next week.” He looked devastated until I said, “Tomorrow, same time. Right here. Tomorrow.”

Randi, in her lounge chair, rolled to look at me. She was wearing a one-piece, very bright green swimming suit that fit her snugly. She was, as the old guys would say, voluptuous. Actually, the really old guys would use a simile, something very descriptive like, “She was built like a brick you-know-what.” But there were no really old guys around the pool that day. On the other hand, there were plenty of young guys, all doing their share of staring, mostly at Randi, but a bit at me, too. Randi said, “So you thought you had him cornered, and instead he trapped you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I told you he was good. A master of deception. Did you set up the meeting tomorrow because of your competitive drive? You feel like you have to get right back in there?”

“Yes. Damn it. He’s going to tell me what he does for a living. He’s also going to tell me why he wears that dorky-looking orange T-shirt when he goes swimming.”

“Hmm. We’ll see. Let me make a few suggestions how you should proceed tomorrow. First, tell him you really enjoyed his one-for-one game and that you would like to play again. But also tell him that you would prefer to leave some subjects off-limits. Your marriage for obvious reasons, but maybe also your childhood, for very obvious reasons. Sound OK?”

“Yeah, that sounds fine. I have to be very alert tomorrow to his tricky little avoidance maneuvers. And I damn sure won’t let him trap me again.”

On the far side of the pool, Mike climbed out, wearing his orange T-shirt above white swimming trunks. As he walked toward us, I could see the muscular ripples in his thighs and calves with each step. It looked like he was a solid slab muscle with no body fat at all.

He walked over to where we were sitting, pulled up a small stool, and sat down. “Good evening, Emma. Good evening, Randi.” Damn, he spoke to me first and called me Emma.

Randi said, “Wow. You were really in there a long time.”

“Yes. Penance for that pizza your husband made me eat last night.”

“It didn’t look like he *made* you eat anything. You were scarfing it down pretty good.”

“Yeah. Well, I admit I overdid it. But I paid for it today with those hundred laps.”

I decided to risk a question. “So do you always wear that same orange shirt every time you go swimming?”

“Actually,” he replied, “I have several orange shirts that I use for swimming. I’ll usually wear blue or green for running or playing basketball with Tom. Speaking of Tom, Randi, is he home yet?”

“Yes.”

“Great. I’ll just run up and see him. Bye, you two.”

After Mike had left, I turned to Randi and asked, “He just did it again, didn’t he? I mean, he used that little ploy to duck further questions, right?”

Randi grinned broadly. She had the kind of smile that would look good in toothpaste commercials. She said, “Good for you, hon. You spotted that nifty bit of footwork, slipping in the comment about basketball with Tommy and then asking if Tommy was home so that he could scurry up to our apartment. Sneaky devil. But he got out of any further questions from you tonight, didn’t he?”

“He’s off the hook for now. But he’s not off forever. Look out tomorrow.”

Sipping her iced tea, she said, “Tell me about your school day.”

So I gave her the rundown on my afternoon of classes, lamenting the lack of passion in the current crop of students. “Is it just me, or does no one seem interested anymore, in anything? These kids go through the classes in the most perfunctory way, doing the minimum, not seeming to care.”

Randi, always wise beyond her years and certainly wiser than I, said, “Emma, my friend, I will guaran-

tee you that ten years ago, when we were taking those classes, the instructors and professors said the same things about us. You’re the one who’s always preaching patience. So be patient. Some of them will wake up and be filled with passion for English, both literature and language. Watch for them. Nurture them. Same thing happened to you, remember?”

Chapter Twelve

Mike

Things were never quite as idyllic in that neighborhood after Mister died, and I learned that the passing of a good friend can leave a void in any life, including the life of a ten-year-old boy. The sky was still blue, but with a hint of gray. The trees and grass were still green, but seemed less bright. The neighborhood was still clean and bustling, but with a barely perceptible aura of staleness. A death will do that, I guess.

No one demonstrated this more than Snoot. He languished in the shade on cool days, and on hot days he refused to even come out of the house. It was only with patience and persistence that I was able to engage him, drawing him into some activity, however brief. In later years, I would recognize that Snoot was depressed, an affliction not unique to humans. As Mister said, canines have feelings.

I was becoming depressed myself, or more correctly, disappointed in Snoot's persistent funk. Missus said that I would have to continue to be patient and understanding and wait a bit longer. Then she would go into the house, close the door, and pull the shades. Sometimes, standing outside her kitchen window, I

could hear her crying. Humans have feelings, too, and depression is not unique to canines.

The weekend before Labor Day, I was in my own backyard, lamenting the end of summer and the beginning of school the following Tuesday. From the yard to the north, the yard of our eccentric neighbors, I could hear low-pitched growling through the sturdy wooden fence that separated the two yards. I recognized it at once and felt a chill over my entire body, something that happens, Aunt Mae said, when someone stepped on your grave. Once, shortly after arriving at Aunt Mae's house, I had ventured over to that tall fence, jumped up, grabbed the top of one of the slats, and pulled myself up enough to see over the top. I found myself looking into the yellow eyes of a monstrous pit bull, a formidable canine whose name, I would learn later, was Nightmare. After that encounter, every now and then, I would have a nightmare about Nightmare sitting next to my bed and piercing my soul with those eyes, a puddle of drool on the floor beneath his huge head and shark-like teeth.

"Hello, Finn," he would say. "Want to play?"

The grade-school boys in the neighborhood had seen those eyes, too, having braved the fence for a quick peek just as I had. They reminded me, as I was explaining my own encounter, that those were the Yellow Eyes of Death. The same boys talked in soft, conspiratorial whispers, noting that Nightmare supposedly weighed 250 pounds and could take a man's arm off with one bite of his massive jaws. At that point in my life I didn't understand hyperbole.

The mailman refused to deliver there, and the eccentric owners had to pick up their mail at the post office. In the same soft whispers, I would hear that Nightmare was responsible for the disappearances of dozens of cats, more than a few dogs, and at least two young children. He would escape from his fenced yard, run down his prey, rip its throat out, and then drag the carcass home to devour, bones and all. He was reputed to be able to capture and fully dismember a cat in less than ten seconds, and I had no reason to dispute that. Looking over the fence on that day, into those dead yellow eyes, I knew true evil for the first time.

The evil Nightmare was a striking contrast to the intelligent, loving, and patient Snoot. Perhaps, I thought, it was a function of size, with the bigger dogs being mean and smaller dogs being gentle. That theory became suspect after I met a neighbor's very gentle German Shepherd, and it died a richly deserved death when I met another neighbor's mean-spirited Chihuahua. Dogs are born with behavioral traits and personalities, just like humans. And just like humans, they can be influenced by environment. A puppy may turn out to be a nearly perfect adult canine in one situation, or it may turn completely bad, the personification of evil, if raised improperly. Case in point: Nightmare. Anyway, one look into those deep evil eyes was enough for me. I dropped off the fence and made it a point to steer clear of that side of our backyard.

Fortunately, it was a large yard, bordered on the south by Snoot's yard, where there was no fence, and

that's where I spent most of my after-school free time. On that pre-Labor Day weekend there was no school and no homework, and I was sitting on Snoot's back porch. Snoot lay at my feet, dozing. We had just finished playing Snoot's favorite game of run and fetch. On that particular day, I had done most of the running and fetching, with Snoot continuing his remarkable indifference to the everyday work of living. I reflected that it was I who should be dozing since I had done all the work, but I was having difficulty reflecting on anything over Snoot's snoring.

I sat in the shade on that porch in the late afternoon on that nearly perfect day watching Missus hanging laundry on the clothesline to dry. She was perhaps fifty feet from me, toward the far end of the clothesline structure, her face rosy and bright in fading afternoon sun. In profile to me, she presented a still-girlish figure, something that I was just beginning to notice. I wondered if she would ever marry again. I must have been staring a bit too long.

"Finn, what are you looking at. Don't you like my dress?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's fine dress, made even lovelier because you're wearing it." I had just given her a direct quote from Mister, or at least my recollection of what he had once said.

"Very smooth recovery, young man. You should do well with the ladies."

I was about to reply that I wasn't really all that interested in girls when I was interrupted. From the

north, at the fence that enclosed the evil Nightmare, we heard the sound of wood cracking and splintering. Much later I would reflect on Nightmare's motivation, on what drove him to batter and destroy that part of the fence at that time on that day, but I would come up with no reason. But batter and destroy he did, leaving a gaping hole in the fence and gaining entry into Aunt Mae's backyard. Even from a distance I could see his huge yellow eyes were glazed with fury, menacingly looking at the three of us not more than a hundred feet away. Nightmare's low-pitched growl, easily audible, gave me goose bumps over my entire body. I tried to move and tried to speak, but I had a momentary, terror-induced paralysis. Finally I screamed, "Missus, run! Run here! Run for the house!"

I guess she must have had a momentary paralysis, too, because, eyes wide and mouth agape, she stood motionless for a precious second. By the time she started moving, Nightmare was in full gallop, racing directly toward her. Missus turned to run for the house, but as she did, she tripped over the basket of clothes, falling face down in the tall grass. She managed to get to her hands and knees quickly, but I could see that she would not be able to stand up or start running before the swift and powerful Nightmare reached her. As she stood up, Missus grabbed the basket, probably intending to use it as a shield.

As Nightmare approached Missus, things seemed to be happening in slow motion, and I could see everything with astonishing clarity: Nightmare's massive

chest, his jaws opened wide in a deadly predator's grin, his teeth that belonged in something from pre-historic times. I saw his splayed nostrils and the saliva pouring from his mouth like a frothy waterfall. But especially I saw his huge, wide-open eyes, the Yellow Eyes of Death, clearly focused on one thing and only one thing: the fallen Missus. As Nightmare closed on his prey, I had a terrible vision of the monstrous pit bull astride Missus, jaws tearing at her throat, ripping flesh away, the scene awash in blood.

Then with remarkable suddenness, Nightmare stopped, as if he had run into an immovable object. He was quite literally in full gallop one moment, and in the next moment he was at a full and complete stop. And then he began howling. Actually, it was more the canine equivalent of screaming in pain.

Reconstructing the event in my mind, I have no idea when Snoot roused from his contented afternoon dozing. I have no idea when he began moving. I have no idea how he traveled the distance between the porch and Missus faster than Nightmare. I have only the slightest memory of a small brown blur appearing suddenly between the fallen Missus and the oncoming purveyor of death. I have no idea how he did it, but he did. And Nightmare, focused fully on his prey, committed a grievous tactical error. He placed his right foreleg within jaw-strike of that tiny brown impediment, the sausage-shaped Snoot.

One of Snoot's favorite games was tug-of-war. I would give Snoot the end of a towel, or any object, and hang onto the other end. Then Snoot would try

to pull it away from me. Tug-of-war. Once, months before, we had been playing tug-of war with an old broom handle. On that day, I was not letting him win. Finally, in apparent disgust, he took the broom handle in his jaws about halfway up the shaft and bit cleanly through it, the wood cracking and splintering.

I heard a nearly identical sound when Snoot's jaws clamped shut on Nightmare's leg, bone cracking and splintering. I remembered Mister telling me about the bite force of a Dachshund's molars, but at the time I had no idea what it meant. Watching the pain-stricken Nightmare futilely trying to disengage himself from the tiny brown dog, I knew. One thousand newtons can stop just about anything.

Nightmare, unable to dislodge the crushing jaws of the small Dachshund and unable to turn his head far enough bite his tiny opponent, continued his howling as if something were trying to bite his leg off, which is exactly what was happening. Missus got to her feet and calmly fashioned a leash from a loose piece of clothesline rope. Slipping the leash over Nightmare's head, she said, "Snoot, release."

Snoot was having none of the release business.

"Snoot, release," she repeated.

Snoot seemed to answer, *Fat chance, Wonder Woman. I am not giving up this opportunity.*

"Finn," she said, "make him listen to you. We don't want him to destroy poor Nightmare's leg."

Looking at Nightmare's leg, I would say it was pretty much already destroyed, but I obliged her anyway. I walked over to the two dogs and told

Nightmare to shut up. Nightmare continued his wailing. I squatted down and leaned forward, getting as close to Snoot's ear as possible so he could hear me over Nightmare's howling.

Looking back on that day, I should have said, "Snoot, look at me. Look at me, Snoot. The day is yours, my friend. You have conquered evil. You reign supreme. Few other dogs in history could have accomplished what you did. You will become legend, and hundreds of years from now, canines from every corner of the world will celebrate this day, the day you conquered the Yellow Eyes of Death. Now let him go." But I still lacked the vocabulary, even after long conversations with Mister and Missus. So I said, "Snoot, you win. Release."

Snoot gave me his are-you-nuts look, but then he released the fallen and humbled Nightmare. Missus took the limping pit bull back to his house. I will never know exactly what happened that day between Missus and Nightmare's owners. What I do know is that two days later, a moving van arrived at Nightmare's house, and by day's end both human and canine occupants were gone.

In the days and weeks that followed, everyone's mood improved. Missus bonded with Snoot, showing her gratitude with an abundance of attention, grooming, petting, and an unlimited supply of doggie treats. Snoot, now known as the Vanquisher of Death, came out of his funeral funk. He ran, he jumped, he ate, and he played. Just like old times. And he developed a swagger, a true canine strut, with his chest puffed out

and a look on his face that seemed to say, "That's right. It's me. It's Snoot. Do you want to mess with me? Do you want to mess with these jaws? No? I didn't think so."

And I was affected, too. I saw Snoot in a new light. He was courageous and selfless in a way that transcended species, and I wanted to be like that. I wished with all my heart that someday I would have an opportunity to be like that little brown dog, to be able to demonstrate that level of courage and selflessness.

One should be careful what one wishes for.

Chapter Thirteen

Emma

Randi's words about my students echoed in my brain. "You're the one who's always preaching patience. So be patient. Some of them will wake up, be filled with passion for English, both literature and language. Watch for them. Nurture them. Same thing happened to you, remember?"

I did remember. I remembered my own perfunctory approach to classes, to life in general. Just after I had my twenty-third birthday behind me, I thought I knew everything. By then I had survived the deaths of my biological parents and another tragedy, lived in near-poverty with my grandparents for six years, worked as waitress, cook, dishwasher, and bookkeeper, finished two years of junior college, and learned hard lessons about life and love. By then I had gone through a series of boyfriends and one husband, all of them immature, unintelligent, and abusive to varying degrees, mostly emotionally and verbally, but occasionally physically abusive as well. The worst of the lot was Marco Randelli, he whose name I still carried. I still carried the emotional scars he inflicted on me, too, though they were hidden almost as well as the

fracture lines in my nose and mandible and orbital ridges. Someday I would get around to reclaiming my maiden name. Someday.

On my twenty-third birthday, fully recovered from physical injury, I realized I would have to leave Grand Junction, Colorado, home of my aged grandparents, and start over somewhere else. I needed to start over because remaining in Grand Junction meant almost certainly repeating all the same mistakes I had made over and over in my short adult life. The only somewhere else I knew was the Sacramento area in California, home of my parents and home for me until I was a teenager. I didn't remember it very well, and I didn't remember it as a particularly happy place, but it was the only somewhere else I knew about.

I went to the library and did some research. Sacramento was home to Sacramento State University, part of the state of California's higher education system. They had classes I was interested in, especially English and English literature. I knew I could write fairly well, or at least I could write a simple declarative sentence. Frugal from childhood, I had managed to save quite a bit of money, and my grandparents were generous in providing me with additional funds. They, too, realized that I needed to seek fame and fortune elsewhere.

I moved to Sacramento, found a small efficiency apartment, and had no trouble getting a job in a nearby restaurant. I applied and was accepted to Sacramento State University, entering as a junior. One of my first classes was on major American poets. The profes-

sor, with his ponderous belly and long white beard, looked like Santa Claus. His grading system, however, was far less generous than one would expect from jolly old Saint Nicholas. Professor Prewitt. Tough old guy. From him, in addition to all the classroom topics, I learned the concept of accountability. I was accountable to him and only to him for all the assignments, quizzes, tests, projects, and in-class discussion. Hard work earned praise and good grades. Conversely, he despised slackers and rewarded them accordingly.

At that point, though, I still hadn't "gotten" it. I still didn't understand the concept of learning for the sake of learning. By the time I made it through his class, I was a very driven woman. On the first day, he said, "Students, we will use this semester to educate each other on some of the greatest and most poetic minds in the history of literature. Actually, you will be educating each other. I will assign to each of you one poet. It will be your job to review one work from your assigned poet each week, and you will present this review formally to your classmates."

He made the assignments alphabetically, beginning with Auden, who went to a student named Ashe, Stephen Crane to a student named Caswell, and then Cummings, Dickinson, Emerson, Frost, and all the way through to William Carlos Williams. As he worked his way through the alphabet, he finally got to me. "Ah yes, Miss Randelli. Where are you, Miss Randelli?"

I raised my hand.

"Ah, yes." He looked at me briefly and then did a quick double take. I was used to this.

His look was more discerning, though, as if to say, “Your looks have no market-value here, young lady. You will work for everything you get.”

“Ah yes, Miss Randelli. Your assigned poet is Edward Arlington Robinson. And I will expect you to be in the vanguard, presenting the first class review next week. Will that be acceptable, Miss Randelli?” He unnecessarily emphasized the Miss in Miss Randelli, as in “MISS Randelli.”

“Yes, sir. That will be perfectly fine.”

“Excellent, MISS Randelli. Then next week you will tell us about a poem entitled ‘Richard Cory.’ We will be absolutely unrestrained in our excitement. Now, class, let’s take a look at the structure of poetry, beginning with meter and rhyme.”

Although I had said it would be perfectly fine for me to do this first review, it really wasn’t. Truth be told, I was terrified. Terrified of going first. Terrified of failure. Terrified to be in front of a group, speaking. Too bad, girl. Get over it. And who the hell was Edward Arlington Robinson? Never heard of the guy.

That night, in the confines of my tiny efficiency apartment, I read about Richard Cory for the first time. I read the poem a second and third time, each reading leaving me dazzled and amazed at the content and the nearly perfect iambic pentameter. After the fourth reading, I knew how I would present the review. It would begin as a performance, with me reciting the poem, almost like an actor. Then I would explain my understanding of it, projecting and interpreting feelings and motives.

I used the weekend to practice my presentation, getting the inflections just right. I put a therapeutic pause between lines fourteen and fifteen. Standing in front of the full-length mirror on my closet door, I recited the poem over and over again. And then, on the day of the class, I stood in front of my classmates, pretending that I was talking to my reflection in that mirror, nerves calmed by that pretense.

I had decided to present the poem with an occasional dramatic inflection, with a therapeutic pause between lines fourteen and fifteen, I recited:

*Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him.
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.*

*And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked:
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good morning,” and he glittered when he walked.*

*And he was rich—yes—richer than a king
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.*

*So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread.*

Pause

*And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.*

From the shocked look on my classmates' faces, I could tell they were unprepared for the ending and also that I had done a pretty fair job with the therapeutic pause. In my summary of the poem, I explained that the first fourteen lines were a painstaking setup for the last two, showing a striking contrast between what people perceived of Richard Cory and what was truly going on inside him. Suicidal depression can afflict anyone, including those who are rich and imperially slim. And suicidal depression is not a good thing for anyone, in any time.

There were other presentations that day, most of them quite good, but none had the same effect on the class as mine. At the end of the hour, Professor Prewitt said, "Ah yes, class that was all quite good, close to excellent." He gave review assignments to the next group and then dismissed the class. As I gathered my books and started to get up, he said, "Ah, Miss Randelli." This time he put no emphasis on the Miss. "Would you be so kind as to join me in my office for a moment?"

We walked a short distance to his office, and he asked me to sit down in one of the chairs across from his desk. "Ah, Miss Randelli. Your presentation, as I sure you know, was clearly the best of the day. I most enjoyed the short pause you inserted between the body of the poem and the final two lines. It had a noticeable effect on your peers, don't you think?"

"Yes, it seemed that way to me, too."

"Er, good. Anyway, well done. Now I would like you to begin preparing your next presentation, this time

Robinson's poem entitled 'Eros Turannos.' I'm sure you will again find a scintillating way to get your point across. And next time I will expect a bit more in the way of analysis. In addition to your Broadway-style presentation, that is. Have it ready the week after next."

"Yes sir, I will."

I had never heard of "Eros Turannos," but then I had never heard of "Richard Cory" either. Reading "Eros Turannos" was a life-changing event for me. In that poem, and in my interpretation of it, I found my salvation, my understanding of who I was, where I had been, how I had gotten there, and how I could secure my future.

Chapter Fourteen

Mike

After I had lived with Mae for a year, on one of our hikes through the state recreation area, Mae asked, “Would you like to know something about your family?”

“Very much so.”

“Good. I don’t know much about your father except that he was a soldier when your mother met him. He was a tall, very muscular, very handsome Irish man, with a true gift of the blarney. Your mother was smitten. They never married, and you were born out of wedlock. That means nothing nowadays of course. Your father had an absolutely terrible temper, and he was sometimes mean to your mother. Never physically, though. But sometimes words can hurt more than fists.”

No kidding, I thought.

“He was a heavy drinker. He got your mother started on alcohol after you were born, and something happened to her after that. She was twelve years younger than I was, so we were never really close as sisters. But it pained me see her sink into alcoholism and then drug-dependency. She tried so hard to quit.

Did rehab several times. She loved you so much, but she couldn't overcome the irresistible pull of alcohol and cocaine and narcotics. I lost track of her...and you. I had no idea she had died, no idea that you were being passed around like a bad penny. I was so happy when your friend Tigrito called."

Tigrito. I stopped next to a native oak tree, admiring its steadfastness. Steadfast like Tigrito. "How did he find you?" I asked.

"He didn't say. But I know he was very resourceful. And very powerful in his own way, in...the business he was in."

"What business?"

"Oh dear. You don't know, do you?"

"No."

"Well, he was a drug..."

"Drugs?"

"Yes."

Irony cuts deep sometimes. Tigrito, my Flint, my guardian angel, was into drugs, perhaps distributing the very things that led to my mother's addiction and death. Was that why he went to such lengths to secure a future for me? Did he feel guilt or remorse? Somehow I doubted it. I think—no, I truly believe—that he took care of me, fed me, healed me, and brought me to Mae simply because, underneath it all, he was basically a good man. Without him, I would have most likely ended up a street person myself, either into drugs or, as Mae would say, a purveyor of them. More likely I would have been dead, if not from the Ferret's hand then from someone else's. I decided to keep all of my

good memories of Tigrito and not dwell on any negative possibilities.

Mae continued. "Your mother was mostly British, like me. That makes you half British and half Irish, an interesting combination. I certainly hope you don't develop the love of drink that seems so prevalent in people with that heritage. And you don't seem to have the legendary Irish temper, with blood coming to a boil in the blink of an eye."

Little did she know.

She told me everything she could remember about my maternal grandparents and great-grandparents. She apologized for knowing so little about anyone on my father's side of the family. I asked what had become of my father.

Mae said, "I'm not sure, but I think he died overseas in one of those conflicts that we always seem to be stuck in. I believe he died honorably, if such a thing is possible, with all sorts of military decorations and such. Someday, perhaps, if you wish, we can try to find out."

I reflected that yes, someday I would want to know more about my father. But not that day. Not just yet.

Whether we were hiking or sitting at the kitchen table or driving in the car, Mae always insisted that I speak properly, always in an adult-like way, always respectfully. She had a game called she called the word du jour, a functional exercise in the English language that expanded my vocabulary. Every day she would come up with a new word for me to define, understand, and use in my speech that day. She would

say, “Finn, your word du jour is disingenuous. Tell me what it means, and tell me how you would use it in a sentence.”

I would trudge off to the computer room, where there was a huge dictionary, and look up the word. She wouldn’t let me use the computer or Internet for that particular kind of research. “You will learn how to use a real dictionary. And when you have free time, it would be good for you to read the dictionary. That’s what Abe Lincoln did when he was a boy. He read the dictionary. You will, too. With good fortune and hard work, someday you may be able to use the English language with a small fraction of the ability that Mr. Lincoln had.”

I looked up the word disingenuous and went back to Mae. “It means pretending to know less about something that you actually do know, making you crafty and sneaky. Like the sneaky ways you get me to do stuff.”

“Fine. Now look up acrimonious.”

“Wait a minute. I thought du jour meant only one word per day.”

“Oh. Did I say *word* du jour? I meant *words* du jour. Now go look it up.”

Dang. I went and looked it up. “Acrimonious. Bitter. Nasty. Like the way politicians behave toward one another.”

“Good. Obdurate.”

Trudge to the dictionary again. “Obdurate. Hardened against influence. Like how you get when I try to stall on my homework.” Obdurate was a word that actually made sense to me because the Spanish

word for *hard* is *duro*. I loved how words could have remarkably disparate meanings. Redolent, for example, as one of Mae’s words du jour, could refer to something emitting a pleasant odor or it could be used as a synonym for reminiscent. Weird. But all that said, her lessons grew my vocabulary. Those lessons, coupled with my time with Mister and Missus, taught me to speak more like an adult than most adults.

It also helped that Mae liked to read, and in me she recognized a kindred spirit. She said, “Enough with the westerns, young man. You’re going to read Dickens.”

“I’m going to read like the dickens? What does that mean?”

“Not like the dickens. Charles Dickens. He was a nineteenth century author, and a very good one.”

As I worked my way through Mae’s entire collected works of Dickens, I would come to agree with her. He had a masterful use of language, plot, and pace. After a while I didn’t mind that some of the books were so long they took me three months to finish. It was a great exercise in developing an appreciation for literature. After Dickens I tackled Thomas Hardy, whose *Far From the Madding Crowd* became my favorite book. And on and on. Hemingway, Maugham, Fitzgerald. Mae was pleased. I was happy.

As much as I liked reading, I liked hiking in the state recreation area more, mostly because there was so much to see, and on any given trip I wanted to identify all the native plants and trees. Mae, on the other hand, had one purpose in mind: hike fast. Get a nice

little aerobic workout. I told her she didn't have to do that, that she looked just fine. "In fact," I said, "you could pass for someone a lot younger."

She sniffed. "Well, young man, then why is my cholesterol creeping upward?"

I wanted to tell her it was because of the way she ate, with too many stops at all those fast-food restaurants. Finally, one day, I told her in no uncertain terms that she was courting disaster. "You might be a lady," I said, "but you can still get atherosclerosis."

"And just how did you get to be such an expert on this?" she asked.

"School," I replied. "And the library. And I've seen your lab results the past few times. Not spying, you know, but you do leave them on the dining room table."

"You looked at my lab tests?"

"Yes."

"I should paddle you."

"No, you shouldn't leave things out."

"Fine. I won't. And you're getting too big to paddle."

"Way too big. Now, do you want to talk about diet?"

"What about diet?"

"Yours. It sucks."

"I don't like that word. I've told you that."

"Okay. Your diet stinks."

"That's better. Why does it stink?"

I stopped to look at some poison oak. "See this plant?" I said. "The way the leaves are arranged? It looks so perfect, with one leaf pointing straight off the

stem and these two others perpendicular to it. Cool. Except the leaves have a resin that causes you to break out if you get it on your skin. Poison ivy and poison oak. Very itchy. The native Indians here used to chew these leaves to get some kind of immunity."

"Very nice, oh great, intelligent one. Now tell me why my diet stinks."

"You eat too much fast food. You need to eat at home more. You need to let me do more of the cooking. We need to get down-and-dirty healthy."

She actually liked that idea. We began doing some meal planning and stopped at a fabulous fruit stand on the way home. We loaded up her Volvo with about a ton of fresh fruit and vegetables. And that began another type of education for me: in the culinary arts. I eventually became quite adept at running a kitchen, and Mae's cholesterol and lipid profile soon resembled that of a sixteen-year-old.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma

Under the stern direction of my maternal grandparents, I excelled academically in school, with my grade point average ranking fifth among graduating seniors that year. I did well on the SAT exam even after intentionally answering three questions incorrectly. I liked the number three, and I was so confident that I had gotten all of the other answers correct that I decided to get three answers wrong. On purpose. I did it as a form of rebellion against grandparental oppression, or at least what I saw as oppression. No way was I going to get a perfect score on the SAT so they could gloat. In the end, I missed more than three but still scored very high. And my grandparents gloated anyway.

Academically sound, I was still emotionally immature and still suffering from self-flagellation, self-loathing, and self-deprecation. And based on what I had done, I certainly deserved personal self-devaluation. I know now that my grandparent's repressive approach to my upbringing was well-intentioned, but ultimately counterproductive. When I finally cut loose, I did it in a big way, a downward-spiraling kind of self-destructive pathway that would linger for years.

I applied for admission to Grand Junction's Mesa State College and was accepted without reservation. I enrolled in a curriculum of liberal arts, science, and general studies, with an emphasis on the liberal. I became a naughty girl, doing things I now regret and causing all kinds of grief for my saintly grandparents. I picked boyfriends who lacked depth and direction, who preferred Coors over college, Jack Daniels over jurisprudence, and parties over penance.

I lost track of the number of guys, the numbers of liaisons. I did the minimum amount of work in my classes, and it showed in my grades. I didn't care. At the end of the school year, with my reputation as a party girl firmly established and my academic future clearly soured, I went home one afternoon to find a stack of suitcases on the front porch. My grandparents were sitting in the swing off to one side, watching me as I walked up the sidewalk. I said hello.

Grandpa, with a blank-faced look that always meant bad news, said, "No need to go inside, Emma. All of your things are right there in those suitcases. That envelop on top has one hundred dollars to get you started."

"Started? What do you mean, started?"

"It means you don't live here anymore. Can't live here anymore. You have chosen a path that is foreign to us. Bottom line, we don't want you here. You want to be the town's party animal? Fine with us. Just do it somewhere else. You already have a job. At that saloon where all your party friends hang out. Ask the owner if he can take you on full time, now that you're on your

own. I would suggest finding a small apartment close to your employment and close to school. You can keep using the Camry for now, although by the fall we will expect you to assume responsibility for all of your auto expenses, including insurance. In September, I'll sign the car over to you for a nominal amount, probably a hundred dollars to keep the bureaucrats happy."

I felt stunned, as if I had been struck in the head, with a ringing, whooshing sound in my ears. "You're kicking me out?"

"No. We're setting you free."

"You're kicking me out."

"You may chose to view this separation in any way you please. You are now a free woman."

Unwittingly, or perhaps intentionally, he had emphasized the word free. I was a *free* woman. Free as in unencumbered? Free as in emancipated? Free as in spirit? Free as in placing no value on myself? I wasn't sure which one he intended, perhaps all, perhaps none. It didn't matter. They were kicking me out. I saw no point in arguing. There was never any point in arguing when Grandpa got that blank-faced look. Case closed. Move on.

Without another word, I put the envelope into my purse and loaded the suitcases into the Camry's spacious trunk, getting no assistance from the elderly couple in the swing. I got into the car and drove away, red-faced and angry. In later years, grandpa would confide in me that it was the most emotionally difficult decision he had ever made.

Well, fine, I thought. I'm on my own. Let's look at this logically, using the perspective of hierarchy of needs. Air? Got it. Free, too. Water? Abundant and available. Shelter? Food? Hmmm. Takes money.

At an interminably long red light, I reached in my purse and took out the envelope. Inside there were five twenty-dollar bills. That wouldn't go very far. I decided to take Grandpa's advice and ask for full-time employment and the same restaurant and bar that gave me occasional weekend work.

I drove to the Bear Claw, a small pub and restaurant near the college. The large sign hanging outside the pub had paintings of a bear's head and, adjacent to it, a profile of Czeslaw Czerwinski. Czerwinski was the owner of the pub, and the paintings of the bear and the bear-like Czerwinski had remarkable similarities. Since no one could pronounce his real name, he preferred to be called by his Polish nickname, Niedzwiedz, which is Polish for bear. Unfortunately, no one could pronounce Niedzwiedz either, and ultimately everyone simply called him The Bear. For me and only me, and only in private, he allowed a contraction of his nickname to Needs.

Needs had arrived from Poland forty years earlier at twenty years of age. He had no money, no English, and no future. However, he did have something: a determination to succeed. In New York City, he worked at series of tasks ranging from less than menial all the way up to minimum-wage jobs. He approached everything with a smile and a laugh and a zeal that astonished his employers and made all of them want to give him

more work and responsibility. At night, in low-rent, one-room hovels, he would study English by watching television, especially commercials. Eventually, he saved enough money to buy a small hand-held tape recorder that he used to ablate his thick Polish accent.

In the Bear Claw, after closing hours, as he and I would do the final cleanup, he would talk about those times. "Miss Emma," he would say in nearly perfect, unaccented English, "I used that recorder until I wore it out. I made myself say words and phrases and sentences and idioms over and over until I wore that poor recorder out. Then I would buy a new one, over and over again. Finally, technology advanced to the point where I could buy a digital recorder. Ha! No more tiny little tapes to buy."

"How did you get all the way to Colorado?" I asked.

"Ah, my little missee. That is a mystery to you, I think. But really not so mysterious. I worked hard at all my jobs, sometimes three at a time, always saving the pennies and nickels and dimes. They add up, you know. The best jobs for me, I found, were those where I could interact with people. I love people. I love talking, as you well know. I love schmoozing, as my Jewish friends say. I kept looking for those kinds of jobs."

"Is running a pub one of those kinds of jobs?"

"Yes, Miss Emma! Yes! Excellent observation."

It wasn't an excellent observation as much as it was an honest question, but Needs used times like that to make me feel valued, feel better than I was. Over time, I came to realize that he was doing that not as an

employer but more as a surrogate father, encouraging and complimenting his daughter.

“Did you work in pubs in New York?”

“Yes. And Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. God, I loved Chicago. My kind of people. Polish. But I kept moving west. Why I don’t know. The magnetism of the sun perhaps. No, the sun is not magnetic. No, I don’t know. I just kept moving west. I worked in Deadwood, South Dakota, and Butte, Montana. Did you know there is no speed limit in Montana? Very strange. If you drive at a speed that is safe for the conditions, there is no limit. I loved Montana, too, almost as much as Chicago. Then I began a trek toward the south, through Idaho and Utah. For some reason, as I was traveling south on Interstate 15, I felt an overpowering urge to turn east on Interstate 70. I ended up here in Grand Junction, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“And then you bought the Bear Claw?”

“Not hardly, Miss Emma. I bought this place only fifteen years ago, after five years of long, hard work here. By then I had saved a substantial sum, and I looked for a property to develop. This place was a run-down, roach-infested dive not worthy of anyone’s attention. I got it for a song. Then the real work began.”

He told me how he had personally renovated the place, doing all of the work except the electrical revisions on his own. He had acquired, over time, a working understanding of carpentry, plumbing, plastering, and painting. He worked eighteen hours a day in his developing pub, sleeping on the floor at night and

arising at dawn to plan the next day’s work and purchase materials.

“And you know, Miss Emma, I needed a signature piece for my pub. I decided it would be the bar, placed near the entry. I needed exactly the right piece, so I shut down everything. Closed up. Boarded up. Gone. I took two weeks off from my project, and I flew to the Philippines.”

I interrupted. “You’ve been to the Philippines?”

“For certain, my young and dark-haired and beautiful Emma.” There he was again, in his surrogate-papa mode, building up his daughter.

He continued, “Did you know it is very hot and humid there, almost like your Gulf coast here. Oppressive humidity. And bugs. My God, the bugs. And the time zones. Oy! Now I am beginning to sound like my Jewish friends. I spent eight days there searching. Finally, I found what, or more correctly whom, I was looking for.”

“And who was that?”

“I found someone who could make, in one piece, a forty-five-foot bar of solid mahogany.”

* * *

I parked the Camry in front of the pub, picked up my purse and the hundred dollars that was all the money I had in the world, and walked inside. Needs was standing behind his signature bar, that lengthy, beautiful and solid piece of mahogany.

“Ah, the lovely Emma. What brings you to see an old man so early in the day?”

“I need help.” I said it quickly, barely able to stifle a sob, and then unable. I tried to hide my tears with my hands, but he came around the bar, moved my hands away, looked in my face, and then embraced me gently.

“Emma, Emma, Emma. Of course I will help you. Now tell me what has happened.”

“Oh, God. I’ve been so stupid. So reckless. So... selfish.”

Everything spilled out as I huddled in his embrace, pouring out my heart. He held me tightly but gently, close to his massive chest, and through the open top buttons of his shirt, I could feel fur. Actually, it was simply chest hair, but there was so much of it, so pelt-like, that I thought of it as fur. I was being embraced by a bear, and I imagined ursine paws on my back, gentle and clawless, cradling me into safety.

When I finished, he pushed me away slightly so he could look into my face and said, “Well, there is no doubt that you have made bad choices, but none that is very much worse than expected for one your age. So let’s talk about future choices. Let’s look at where you are now. And where are you now, Miss Emma?”

Sobbing, I said, “I don’t know.”

“Then let me tell you. You have choices. You can run away. Far, far away. Start over. Begin anew elsewhere. Or you can sink into morbid depression and let your life slip into wallowing self-pity. Or you can continue your present lifestyle, the party girl approach to

life that will no doubt make all the boys at the college very happy. Or you can rebuild yourself into something your grandparents will be proud of. Whatever you decide is less important than that you decide to do it for yourself. Whatever you do has to be because you want it and not because someone else wants it.”

“But I don’t know what I want.”

“Yes, you do. In your heart, you know. Perhaps it will be best for now to not think so much about the future, but rather to deal with the present. Do you have a place to stay?”

“No.”

“Good. Then you will stay here. Upstairs, in the back, there is an empty room next to a full bathroom. You will stay there. We’ll get the appropriate furniture and bedding and other essential items later.”

“But I don’t have any money to pay for something like that.”

“Excellent, my Emma! Already you have figured out that this arrangement will not be free. To pay for the room, you must work here, for me. I need a full-time assistant, someone who can fill a jack-of-all-trades position. I need a some-time waitress, a some-time cook, a some-time dishwasher, a some-time bookkeeper, and many other some-time things. You will fill all of those positions, and I will pay you well. Plus tips. I won’t lie to you, Missee. It will be very hard and very long work, but you will do well.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say, ‘I am pleased to accept the position, Mr. Czerwinski.’”

“I am pleased to accept the position, Mr. Czerwinski.”

“Excellent, my little Emma. You will begin immediately. Do you have any money at all?”

“Yes. A bit.”

“Good,” he said. “Go across the street now to the hotel and get a room for one night. You won’t need it for longer than that because by this time tomorrow we will have your room upstairs habitable. Go now.”

I went, and that night he put me to work in my new job. I had a roof over my head, food, a job, and an income. Needs, the furry Mr. Bear, became the surrogate father I so desperately needed.

Chapter Sixteen

Mike

As a sixth-grader, I had a nemesis named Bluto. He was named after the bad guy in those Popeye cartoons, I guess. Bluto harassed me with a relentless zeal that astonishes me to this very day, and I have no idea why he singled me out for emotional and physical torture. Sure, I was smaller than some of the kids, clumsier than most, and the intellectual equal of none. I guess that made me fair game for bullies. And I guess that was okay, because in my own mind, I was the prototypical loser. It was acceptable that Bluto was my nemesis. I was the omega wolf, and I deserved nothing better than Bluto’s abuse.

His name wasn’t really Bluto. It was Blodget. Rodney Blodget. Everyone just called him Bluto, but not to his face, unless you wanted your own face pounded on. Oddly, in later years, he seemed to relish the nickname, preferring it over Rodney. Once, as part of a class exercise, a teacher asked him where his ancestors came from, and he said, “From Hell.” He spent the rest of the week in after-school detention, which was perfect for me because he couldn’t persecute me while I waited for the bus. Although his lineage was

in dispute, his disposition was not. He was singularly mean-spirited and remorseless. At twelve years of age, he was muscled like a longshoreman, and he supposedly had to shave twice every day. I was almost twelve years old, and I looked infantile compared to Bluto.

Whenever something would go wrong in town, his name came up. Once, during a long and miserably hot summer, there was a series of cat-killings in town. The cats were hanged, eviscerated, and burned, not necessarily in that order. Bluto. Someone shot out all the windows in the grade school, using a CO₂-powered pellet gun. The gun and the CO₂ cartridge were recovered near the school with no fingerprints. Bluto. Someone snipped off the inflating stems on all the tires in the local sheriff's fleet of cars using side-cutter pliers. The side-cutter was left behind, inserted into the tail pipe of one of the vehicles, an illustrative "up yours." No fingerprints. Bluto.

Nowhere was his reputation more deserved than among his peers, including and especially me. His brand of after-school torture was mostly verbal ridicule, but he would occasionally cuff me on the head if I didn't seem to be listening.

"Klutzmeister. What's up?" Cuff. Cuff.

"You listening to me, boy? What's up?" Cuff.

"Heard you got an F on your math test, Klutzo. Well, you beat me. I got an F-. Ha ha. Gimme your bag, loser. I know you got some food in there left over from lunch. Ha! I knew it. Fritos. You were holding out on me, weren't you?" Cuff. Cuff. "You don't need this. Thanks. Hey, the bus is here. Lucky for you. Just

in time. I was gonna break your arm for not coughing up those Fritos sooner. See you tomorrow, loser."

I developed a plan to avoid these after-school encounters with Bluto. I walked home, or more correctly, I ran. By not taking the bus, I could avoid him most of the time. I would pack up my book bag just before the last class, and as soon as the end-of-day bell rang, I was out the door running. Bluto, although large, was not fleet of foot, and I needed just the tiniest bit of head start to be safely away from him.

These tactics worked well unless the last-period teacher rambled on past the bell, or unless Bluto for some reason was done early. In those cases, I was subject to Bluto's tyranny. "Yo, moron. Where ya goin'? You weren't trying to avoid me, were you, moron?"

Actually, I was trying to avoid him, and once I told him that.

"What?" he said. "You're trying to avoid me? Now that makes me very sad. Here, let me make myself very happy." Cuff. Cuff. Cuff.

"Good. Now I feel better. Give me your book bag, moron. Good. My, my. Look at all this stuff. Oops. I didn't mean to dump it on the ground. Oh no. Now look. I stepped on your homework. And tore it. Oh my. I am so sorry." He threw the empty book bag onto a low branch in a tree. "Oh gosh. How did that bag get up in the tree? Oh well. Good luck, loser." Then he left, chuckling softly.

Most days, I evaded him, running the entire several blocks to home. I think this is how I came to love running. Not running as in running away, but rather

running as exercise. It was the first thing I was good at. The Bluto-forced training paid off in my performance in gym class. Not good at anything else, I was at least good at running. In that informal setting I was virtually unbeatable, with no one in the class came even close. I was good at running short distances, and I was good at running long distances, and the gym teacher said this was a rare combination. He gave me an A for the semester. Thank you, Bluto.

One day while running home, something flashed past me. It was a girl, running. Not only was she a girl, she was running faster than me. *No way*, I said to myself. *No way*. I sped up to a near-sprint, but I still needed a good half-block to catch up to her. She heard me getting close and sped up. As she began to pull away from me, I said again to myself, *No way, absolutely no way is this girl faster than I am.*

I put myself into my fastest mode, closed the gap between us, and eventually ended up exactly next to her. She glanced at me briefly and then continued running. I recognized her as a fellow sixth-grader, and since she was a girl, not someone I would normally engage, either in school or out of it. We continued running, matching stride for stride for another half-block, when suddenly she turned into a driveway and went up a sidewalk and onto a front porch. It took me a few steps to stop, and as I turned toward her, she reached for the doorknob.

“Hey,” I shouted. “What’s your name?”

“E. J. Sprewell. Rhymes with jewel. Call me Junie,” she shouted as the front door closed behind her.

Junie. Short for June? Junebug? Juniya? What? Or maybe that was her name. Junie. *Well, Miss Junie*, I thought. *I will definitely try to get to know you. I need to know how you can run so fast. And why.*

The next day at school I saw her at her locker moments before the first bell rang. She saw me at the same time, gracing me with a furtive smile. Taking the smile as an invitation, I crossed the narrow hallway and opened my mouth to say hello, hoping to come up with something that modestly approached intelligent dialog. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, just as I opened my mouth, the class bell rang. That’s me, the master of timing, always a second late or a beat behind.

Junie, clutching her books to her chest, slammed the locker shut, turned to me, and said, “Have a good day, Mr. Mercury.”

I was about to say, “Hey, my name isn’t Mercury. It’s Finn Carter.” But she was gone. Master of timing. Years later, I would have said something like, “Thank you. Would you like to play the part of Minerva?” But my study of mythology still lay in the future.

I made it through school that day with a bit more than my usual inattentiveness. One nice thing about sixth grade was that we had not only different classes, but different teachers during the day. I needed this type of variety to maintain any focus at all, and I was really looking forward to seventh grade, where every class had a different teacher.

In math class that day, the teacher, Mrs. Wright had us working on beginning algebra. “Class,” she

said, “today we are going to work on beginning algebra. Today, we are going to learn rules for the order of operations, to evaluate whole-number expressions, and to translate a word problem into an arithmetic expression.”

I was sitting in my designated spot, the position least likely to give me any secondary stimulus. Mrs. Wright had recognized my problems with selective attention, and she had placed me halfway along an interior wall, away from the door to the room and far from the window. That spot, she told me years later, was not quite close enough to her desk to suit her, but it did allow for the least amount of external stimulation. However, my desk was immediately adjacent to the classroom bulletin board, which always had a bunch of interesting stuff. I was looking at the bulletin board and reading a nifty short piece about a famous architect while Mrs. Wright was telling us about algebra.

Unfortunately for me, Mrs. Wright noticed me reading the bulletin board and not paying attention to her. “Finn, what did I just say?”

Fortunately for me, I was so comfortable with my attention problem that I could frequently appear distracted and actually not be distracted. Sure, I was reading the bulletin board. Sure, it was a nifty article. And sure, at the same time I was listening to Mrs. Wright. This was something I was good at—doing at least two things at the same time. In fact, doing two things at the same time was easy for me. “Ma’am,” I said, under-

standing that politeness was usually a remarkably effective tool, “you said we would be working on beginning algebra and something about operating, and expressing, and translating.”

“Hmm,” she responded, turning back to the chalkboard. Score one for me. She picked up a piece of chalk and began writing on the board. I immediately began daydreaming. Dang, it was hard to stay focused. I needed more movement, more activity, more speed. I watched how Mrs. Wright held the chalk, how she made such graceful sweeping movements with her arm, putting perfectly drawn letters and numbers on the board. It seemed incongruous to me that someone with her size and shape could be so masterfully graceful at the chalkboard.

In Milwaukee, I had attended Frank Lloyd Wright Elementary School, named after the noted architect, native of Richland Center, Wisconsin, and subject of the article on the bulletin board next to me. Looking at Mrs. Wright still writing on the chalkboard, I thought that Frank Lloyd would see the irony. Mrs. Wright, with her classic Midwestern build, was nothing like he would have designed. She was squat, sturdy, and indestructible, but lacked pizzazz. About architecture, Mr. Wright had said, “It is at least the geometric pattern of things, of life, of the human and social world.” Mrs. Wright, the block-shaped math teacher, had a geometric pattern, too, but nothing that would have been truly pleasing to the old master architect. But man, she could put characters on the blackboard with

the best of them. And that body habitus would be well suited to harsh Midwest winters.

Of course, I was deep into this internal dialog when Mrs. Wright suddenly stopped writing and spun to face the class, a graceful pirouette. I guess she recognized my inattentiveness. “Finn,” she said. “Come to the board, and show us the order of operations in this problem.”

Dead. I knew I was dead. I could tell her about Frank Lloyd Wright, Richland Center, and novel architecture, but there was no way I was going to be able to tell her about orders of operation on that problem on any other problem. Yes, Finn Carter, master of timing. Except that sometimes the fates smile on you, and they did on that day. I was just about to ask her to explain it again—the equivalent of falling on my sword—when the end-of-day bell rang. Saved.

Everyone got up to leave, including me. Mrs. Wright said, “Hold it, Finn. Come up here, please.”

From dead to saved to dead in a heartbeat. I walked contritely up to her desk. “Finn,” she said, “you were all over the place today. I know that you have no idea what the assignment is for tomorrow, and I know you have no idea how to do the assignment even if you knew what it was. Sit down. Focus with me for fifteen minutes, and we’ll get you caught up,”

I sat. She taught. I learned. One on one, in learning, there were few better than I was. But in a classroom setting, forget it. In fifteen minutes—which was about as long as I could manage—she gave me

the basics of the assignment and a set of problems. I nailed it. Score one more for me. And definitely score one for the Frank Lloyd Wright cast-off, the sturdy, indestructible Mrs. Wright, who was the kindest, most patient, and best teacher I would ever have.

Chapter Seventeen

Emma

As June wound to a close, Mike and I had developed a comfortable bond, meeting daily for coffee around 9:00 a.m. on the days he wasn't working for Ernie. We—or at least I—had become less wary, less fearful, and more open as we met and chatted, sometimes on general things and less often at a personal level. I found that I could only probe so far into his life before he went dumb on me, an absolute clam, even if I used Randi's lawyer-like interrogation techniques. Since he was so reserved, it was hard to get an overall sense of who he was now, much less who and what he had been before. Somewhere along the way, I thought, he had been wounded badly in a relationship or something. For my part, I told him about my present life, my teaching, my students, and the travails of academics, and he was a great listener and great observer of human nature.

On some days, he was a sparkling and humorous conversationalist, and on other days, he seemed painfully withdrawn. In spite of that, I found myself falling for the guy. There was a breadth to him that was drawing me in, making me want to know everything about

him. *Woe is me*, I thought, *setting myself up for another round of heartbreak.*

I also sensed in him a basic kindness, a basic goodness, and a depth of personality that I had never before seen in a man. Well, maybe once before. With Mike, I just had to find a way to plumb those depths. The best times were when we went walking along the river on the American Discovery Trail, as we had done several times. He seemed so relaxed, so open.

We would talk about general things. He would tell me about Tommy and their experiences, both in high school and after. I would tell him about college and grad school, about my job and my students. What was lacking in our conversations was any detail about our younger days. He didn't want to discuss that yet. For that matter, and for very good reason, neither did I. Someday maybe. But not yet. He was also reluctant to discuss too much about the present, the here and now, and I still couldn't figure out what he was hiding.

As we sat outside Starbuck's, having coffee on June thirtieth, he said, "I'm going to be very busy for the next few days, so I'll have to take a rain check for a while."

I was sad, since our meetings had become the most important part of the day for me. "When, then?" I asked.

"After the Fourth. I'll have a bit of time then. How about I call you some time after that, and we'll go out for dinner?"

"Dinner? You mean like a date?"

"Yes, if you'd care to join me."

"You're asking me out on a date?"

"Yes."

"You're asking me out to dinner?"

"Yes."

"Cool. I accept."

"Cool? Did you say *cool*? Aren't you some kind of big English professor?"

"Yeah, wise guy, I am. So what did you expect me to say? Delighted? Enchanted? Or oh, my, I'm overcome with emotion? No? None of those? Fine. How about cool? And why are you getting onto me about colloquial English? You lapse into informal speaking yourself. I've heard you, especially when you're engaged in one of those juvenile I'm-better-than-you games with Tommy."

"Do you mean those one-on-one physical contests where one of us has to show superiority over the other?"

"Yes, *those* juvenile displays. You guys sound like a couple of junior high kids."

"Okay. Noted. You're right. And by the way, it is cool that you're going out to dinner with me. And I'll call you some time after the Fourth."

I knew that when he said he was going to be busy he meant he was going to be at his new job. I still hadn't been able to get him to tell me what he was going to be doing. Mr. Clam. "Someday," he said. "After the Fourth. Over dinner. I'll tell you everything. Everything. Absolutely everything. In great detail. I promise."

Although slightly less than content with this promise, I took him at his word, willing to wait until July

fifth to get the real story. That night, sitting alone in my apartment as usual and reflecting on my loneliness, something happened that hadn't happened for a long time. Part of my peripheral vision disappeared. It was like a big black hole off to the left. The only time this happened was just before I got my period, and it would usually lead to an intensely painful, throbbing headache. Most times I could forestall the headache if I took Tylenol and went to sleep for an hour or two, so I went to my medicine cabinet. No Tylenol. Just an empty bottle. Idiot. I was supposed to get some more.

I walked up to 3G where Tom and Randi lived and knocked on the door. Randi opened the door, but not until she had carefully looked out the peephole, I knew. "Emma. Hello. Jeez, you look terrible. You're so pale. What's wrong?"

I looked at Randi oddly, I'm sure, because half or her face was missing, replaced by a big black blob. Not good, because the vision defect was getting bigger. "It's that headache thing," I said, "and I don't have any Tylenol. I was hoping that you could spare some."

"Come on in and sit. I'll check."

She returned with a small bottle. "No Tylenol," she said. "I just have a few of these naproxen things."

"What's a naproxen thing?"

"It's one of those pain medicines like ibuprofen, Motrin, you know. But it will last maybe twelve hours."

"I'll try it," I said, not quite successfully hiding my skepticism.

"It's your time of month again, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And don't you get these things fairly regularly with your periods?"

"Yes and no. Yes before, years ago. No, not so often now. And it's not the vision thing that bothers me. It's the darn headaches." Yes, I used the word darn. Being around Mike had made me clean up my language since he despised profanity. He was corrupting me in a good way, but I would never ever stoop to saying "bleep."

I looked at Randi, or at least the half of Randi that I could see, and said, "Okay, how much of this stuff do I take?"

"Those are five hundred milligram tablets, so you should only take one every twelve hours. At least that's what Tommy says."

"Wine?"

"Are you asking if you can drink wine and take those at the same time?"

"Yes."

"As far as I know, it's okay. Why wine?"

"Because it puts me to sleep, and if I can sleep, the headache usually goes away."

"Just a minute." She came back with an unopened bottle of wine. "Try this," she said.

"Randi, I have some wine. I don't need yours."

Smiling, she said, "Sweetie, this is a very nice Mondavi Select Chardonnay. Trust me. If you're going to get plotzed to make your headache go away, you might as well do it with the good stuff."

I took the wine, thanked her, and went back to my apartment. I opened the wine, poured a large glass,

and ran a tub full of hot, soapy water. I sipped the wine—which was excellent—and took one of the tablets Randi had given me. Then I languished in the bath for more than an hour, periodically freshening it with hot water. By the end of the bath, the black blob in my vision had receded, and the expected murderous headache was only a minor annoying ache behind my left eye. Thank you naproxen and Robert Mondavi. I got out of the tub, dried off, slipped into the tracksuit that served as my pajamas, climbed into bed, and was asleep nearly instantly.

In the morning, I awakened to find my bed saturated with blood.

Chapter Eighteen

Mike

After playing Mercury to Junie Sprewell's Minerva, I always looked for her after school when I was running home. I could never find her. She either got out of class earlier than I did, or she was a lot faster runner than I thought she was. One day, leaving a bit late myself, I went to the far end of the school hoping that I could slip out of the building in that direction without running into Bluto. The door exited onto a small porch with steps down to a sunken loading dock. As I was standing there trying to decide which direction around the school would give me the best chance of escaping the Bluto-driven persecution that day, I heard the door open behind me. I knew I was dead.

I stood there, shoulders sunk, and waited for the words: "Klutzmeister. You weren't planning on going out this way, were you, klutzmeister?"

Instead I heard a soft voice say, "Well, well, well, if it isn't Mercury boy. What are you doing at this end of the building, Mr. Mercury?"

I turned slowly to face Miss Minerva. "Actually, I was looking for you," I replied. Actually, I wasn't, but it was the best answer I could come up with.

“Well, here I am. So why were you looking for me?”

She was taller than I was, but not by much, and very thin. She resembled Popeye’s lady friend Olive Oyl, but with long, very thick, and very dark brown hair. Her eyes were also a very dark brown, almost black, like bottomless pools. I could see my reflection in those eyes, and for a moment I lost myself in them. I shook my head to clear it and said, “I wanted to ask you why you were running home that day. And also, how did you get so fast?”

“Wow. What makes you think I’m a fast runner?”

“Because *I* am. Fast, I mean. At least that’s what the coaches tell me. I’m fast for a guy, at least one my age. And you’re at least as fast, maybe faster.”

“Yeah, and I’m girl, right? And girls aren’t supposed to be faster than boys, right?”

I thought about that for a moment. “No, that’s not exactly what I meant. I only know that I can run faster than anyone in the school, even the eighth-graders, short distance or long. So if I’m that fast, and you’re at least as fast, then *you’re* fast. Get it?”

“I got it, Mercury boy. Now step aside. I need to get running before Bluto spots me.” She literally flew down the steps, up the loading dock ramp, and then across an open field toward a maintenance road. What she didn’t know was that as soon as she ran down the steps, I was right behind her.

I caught her halfway across the field. Running beside her, I asked, “What did you say about Bluto?”

“Move out of the way, Mercury boy. I don’t want to have a run-in with Bluto.”

“And what would happen if you did run into Bluto?”

“Humiliation. Or worse. It would depend on who was around. I wouldn’t want to run into him after dark or alone somewhere.”

“Why?”

“What are you, dense or something? I’m a girl. He’s a huge lug. For some reason he has taken a shine to me. He wants me to be his girlfriend, if you get my drift. I don’t know why. I don’t want to be caught alone with the guy.”

“I thought Bluto only picked on guys.”

“Jeez. You *are* dense. He doesn’t want to pick on me. He wants to do bad things to me.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? Oh? Is that all you can come up with? Oh?”

“Sorry. I can run fast, but I’m not a quick thinker.”

“Well, then, let’s see how fast you *can* run.”

She began sprinting, but this time I was ready for her. I caught up with her quickly, turned my head slightly so I could look at her from the side. She had a long, straight chin, and she was quite pretty, even in profile. The only flaw was the angular bump on the bridge of her nose. It wasn’t noticeable from the front, but it was definite from the side. From that vantage point, I could also see that she was filling out a bit, looking more feminine and less juvenile, and very much less like Olive Oyl. It wasn’t surprising that Bluto was interested in her. I gave her a quirky little grin and then accelerated just bit to see if she could keep up with me. She increased her speed to match

mine. I made a decision then to not make our running that day into a contest since there was nothing to gain for either of us. I said, “You know we’ve gotten a huge head start. Why don’t we walk for a while?”

“Slacker. Okay, fine. We’ll walk, but what’s the matter? Are you afraid that I’m faster than you are? Are you afraid I’ll beat you?” She slowed to a walk.

I wanted to tell her no, it was just the opposite. Instead, I said, “I am truly humbled by your speed, Miss Minerva.”

She stopped abruptly and turned to look at me, as if seeing me for the first time. She said nothing, but nodded briefly a few times in approval I thought. Yes, I had looked up Mercury, and I had learned that he was the ancient Roman god of commerce and fitness and a few other things. The Roman goddess Minerva also oversaw commerce, so I assumed that they had shared responsibility and were friends at the very least.

We walked again, albeit briskly and silently for half a block, before she asked, “So what’s your name, Mercury boy?”

“Finn. Finn Carter.”

“Finn? What the heck kind of name is Finn?”

I really didn’t want to tell her, but I couldn’t think of a polite way to get out of it. I said, “Finn is actually my middle name.”

“Really? And what might your first name be?”

“Huckleberry.”

Again she abruptly stopped walking and turned to me. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

“You’re not kidding?”

“No.”

“Your parents named you Huckleberry Finn?”

“Yes.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“I guess they liked Mark Twain. By the way, you’re the first person who didn’t fall down on the ground laughing after hearing my name.”

Chapter Nineteen

Emma

Lying in my blood-soaked bed, with the wine-assuaged headache behind me, I faced a larger, apparently more serious problem: I was bleeding to death. At least that's what it looked like. I was bleeding from my vagina to such an extent that the warm, moist blood on the sheet between my legs hadn't even congealed. Instead, it was a massive pool of crimson covering what seemed to be acres. I was afraid to get up, afraid to move. I grabbed the bedside phone and dialed. "Randi," I sobbed, "I'm dying."

She let herself in with the spare key I had given her months earlier, and I heard her gasp when she came into the bedroom.

"God, Emma. What happened? Were you assaulted?"

"No."

"Then what is all this blood? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I've never seen this much blood."

"Randi, you're scaring me. Can you get Tommy? Can Tommy come up and see what's wrong?"

“Tommy left early. Today is July first. He starts his internship today. God, Emma. We have to get you to a doctor. I’m calling 911.”

“No. Don’t do that. I’ll be okay if you can get me something to soak up the blood, like a thick towel or something. I don’t want all the hullabaloo with an ambulance and all that. There’s a spare tracksuit in the bureau over there. Help me get cleaned up a bit, and then I’ll drive over to University Medical Center.”

“Like hell you will. I’ll drive you.

Ten minutes later and reasonably presentable, I walked out to the parking lot with Randi. Actually, I wasn’t walking as much as I was waddling, with a large bath towel stuffed between my legs. We stopped at her garage.

“No,” I said. “Let’s take my old Gray Lady. I don’t want to leak blood all over your car.”

I handed her the keys, and she opened the garage door. The ancient Camry stood there dusty but stately, still adorned with Colorado license plates. I was still technically a Colorado resident and had never gotten around to becoming a full-time Californian. *Dear Gray Lady, please start this time*, I thought.

When Randi turned the key in the ignition, the engine turned and caught, purring like a much younger vehicle. Randi drove slightly over the speed limit all the way to T Street, turned right, and then made a shallow right turn onto Stockton Boulevard. In a few moments, we were parked outside the emergency room of the University of California Davis

Medical Center. Randi scampered inside and returned promptly with a portly gray-haired nurse.

“I’m Mrs. Proctor,” she said. “Are you still bleeding?”

“Yes.” I raised my hands from my lap and both were sticky with blood.

“Wait here.” And then she scampered away. People were doing a lot of scampering on my behalf.

She came back with two young men in tow, both of them pushing a cart that I knew was called a gurney. They helped me out of the car and made me lie down on the gurney’s white sheet. I felt myself rolling rapidly toward the building but not as fast as Mrs. Proctor was firing questions at me.

“Did someone hurt you? Attack you?”

“No.”

“Is this bleeding happening with your period?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever bled like this before, with or without periods?”

“No.”

“Do you have any kind of bleeding problem? Do you bruise easily, bleed from the gums when you brush your teeth, or bleed excessively after injury?”

“No. But I sometimes bleed a lot with my periods.”

“Okay. Do you take any medication on a regular basis?”

“No.”

“Have you taken any kind of medication at all recently?”

“No. Yes. I took one of those naproxen things last night. For a headache.”

“What kind of naproxen thing? What size? And how many?”

“It was just one. One five hundred milligram tablet, I think. And one glass of wine.”

She scribbled some notes on a chart. “Fine. Is there any chance that you’re pregnant?”

I smiled ruefully. “Absolutely no possibility.”

“You’re certain.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sexually active?”

Another rueful smile. “I wish,” I said, not really wishing it.

“Then there is no chance that could be related to pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease?”

I caught her piercing gaze. There would be no way to lie to this woman, ever. “Again, absolutely no possibility.”

She asked me several other questions related to my history, and then I was wheeled into a cubicle with a curtain drawn across the front for privacy. I heard her talking to someone outside.

“Twenty-eight-year old female with menometrorrhagia. No past history similar to this, although she usually does have heavy periods. No history of hemorrhagic diathesis and no current bleeding symptoms. Not currently sexually active. No possibility of STD or pregnancy, she says. No current medications except a single dose of naproxen that she took for a headache last night. Sounds like she has migraines. Heart rate is

100, BP 115 over 65. She tilts just a bit. And there’s a lot of blood.”

Oh, God, I thought. Great. Just great. A lot of blood. There was more mumbling outside the curtain, and then I heard the nurse say, “Yes, doctor. CBC, coag panel, HCG, and type and cross four units. Thank you, doctor.”

I was staring at the curtain as it was pulled aside, and the doctor stepped into the room. He was looking down at the chart, and he began speaking before he looked up at me. “Hello,” he said. “I’m Dr. Michaels.”

Chapter Twenty

Mike

Life-changing events occur unpredictably, and my life changed irrevocably on my fourteenth birthday when I kissed a girl for the first time and exorcised a demon. Both of those experiences would have a profound and lasting effect on me, but to this day I can't say for sure which affected me more. And the future consequences of the kiss eventually rescued me from certain death.

That year Bluto tormented Junie and me with a fury that would put a good-sized tornado to shame. Bluto, larger and more menacing than ever and much meaner, focused his anger on me and directed his hormones at Junie. An eighth-grader then, I was still fairly short and skinny, but I was developing solid muscles. Junie, on the other hand, began to look more like a young woman than Popeye's girlfriend, and her more adult-like figure was not lost on the testosterone-laden Bluto. Junie and I would scramble after school to gather books and assignments and get out of the school ahead of Bluto, running as fast as we could toward home. We successfully avoided him at least 99 percent of the time.

Running home every day made us lean and fit and strong, and it bonded us in a way I didn't understand at the time. The trek home brought us to her house first, and before long, it pained me to see her run up to her door, turn, smile, and wave. It pained me because I knew I wouldn't see her again until the following day, and on Fridays, not until the following Monday. At the time, I didn't understand love or even infatuation. I just knew that I felt something, something painful when I couldn't see her or be with her for a day or a few days.

Fit as we were, we could talk conversationally when we ran, and sometimes we debated. I would like to think we both became very good debaters as we talked of family, friends, future, and past. We talked of school, sports, politics, and history—my favorite. We talked of movies, books, current events, and English—her favorite. My, oh my, we talked. I have never before or since talked so much, so candidly with a woman, and yes, she was definitely already a woman. I have never before or since bared my soul to that extent with anyone, male or female. I trusted her implicitly with my thoughts and feelings and very essence, and she with me.

She learned of my childhood, my mother's death, my travels, my time on Skid Row, and the characters I had met, especially Tigrito. She, in turn, told me of the tragedies in her life, some of which were much worse than mine. We learned that we were nearly the same age, with my birthday in May and hers in July. She said, "Cool. For ten months every year we'll be the same age."

I was a loner by choice, a derivative of my childhood, where I had had adult friends but no really good friends who were my age. It also meant that I could talk more easily to adults, and kids my age seemed put off because I didn't join their juvenile banter. The consequence was that I never learned to make friends easily.

As the months passed, and I began a growth spurt, Junie said, "Look at you, Mercury Man, the almost fourteen-year-old Mr. Mercury. My, but aren't you getting tall and filling out?" True, she was no longer taller than I was. I had grown four inches during the year and added about twenty pounds. Aunt Mae complained that I must have a tapeworm, whatever that meant. I mentioned that to Junie. She said, "No. No tapeworm. Just a hollow leg."

"What?" I asked. "What are you talking about? Legs aren't hollow."

"Jeez, you are so concrete. Loosen up. Think abstractly. No, that's not right. You do think abstractly, at least when you write. You just need to learn speak abstractly, to think on your feet.

"Feet are for walking and running, not thinking."

"Arrrgh! You're hopeless."

Since my name was derived from a Mark Twain character, and since she loved literature, she had begun reading Twain's work. She said, "Did you know he wrote short stories, too? Almost sixty. Some of them are amazing." Her favorites were *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* and *The Death Disk*. She made me read them, and I conceded that, yes, they were very

good. And as with most literature, she made me discuss not the content of a story, but also the intent.

Once I said, “Isn’t it possible that people sometimes write to just tell a story? Nothing more. No deep intent?”

She replied, “No. Not possible. In every writing there is deeper intent, whether the writer realizes it or not.”

“Are you for real? How can a writer have deeper intent if he doesn’t realize it that he’s supposed to have deeper intent?”

“Did you say a writer...he? What about she? Don’t women write, too?”

“I wasn’t implying a single gender there. I was using the accepted grammar, he meaning any writer, male or female. Now answer my question.”

“What question?”

“How can a writer have deeper intent if he doesn’t realize that he’s supposed to have deeper intent?”

“You are such an idiot. Sometimes you seem so shallow, so concrete, so inflexible.” She paused briefly and then continued almost wistfully, “And other times you have this stunning depth of insight. You are maddening, do you know that?” She never did answer my question.

In addition to adult-like conversation, we shared the great love of running. Thank you, Bluto, for that, for giving us that shared enjoyment and that shared time together. We ran like gazelles, and often in later years, I would wish that I could have that again, that

gazelle-like youthful speed and stamina with that brilliant young woman beside me.

Reading novels about the old west had given me a perspective and understanding of the credo that existed in those times, including an understanding of the parlance of those rugged people. They very definitely had a manner of speech unique to the times. One concept was that of a “good man.” A good man was not just someone who was morally good. No, he was more. He was a man who was immeasurably reliable, solid, and responsible. If he said he would be somewhere at a certain time to do a certain thing, then you could bet your paycheck he would be there on time and ready to work. A good man would stand at your side in times of trouble or watch your back if it needed watching. A good man was also a good son, a good husband, a good father, and a good friend. He was someone that you could ride the river with—a good man would never let you down.

In the same vein, a “good woman” was much the same: morally strong and courageous, independent when necessary, and soft and comforting as often as she could be. She was someone who would stand by her man in times of need, tell him he was an idiot when he needed a dose of humility, and ride the river with him when the time came.

At thirteen, with fourteen coming up fast, I strived to be a good man. And Junie, in my eyes, was everything a good woman should be. I would have died for her.

Running also gave me strength, both emotional and physical. In our daily physical education class at school, I could see that I was fitter, faster, and more durable than my classmates. That was my emotional strength. The physical aspect I demonstrated every day when no one could match me in speed or distance. One day after school, on a day when Bluto was absent and Junie was out of town for a family emergency, I was running around the school track just for fun. No Bluto meant no urgent need to hurry home. No Junie meant no point in running home with no one to talk to. So I ran around the track.

As I was running, I watched the high school guys practicing for track events. Pole-vaulters were sailing over bars, as were the high jumpers. Flabby but somewhat muscular guys were putting the shot, something that looked to me like an overweight bowler trying to throw his bowling ball across the grass. Sprinters were sprinting, and I noted that I could run faster than most of them. And finally, there was a small group behaving strangely. They were spinning around and around and then throwing something that looked a chain with a big metal ball on the end of it.

I stopped running at a point near where the spinners were working and asked one of them what they were doing. He said it was a demonstration event, something called the hammer throw. It wasn't going to be an event at the school, and in fact it wasn't an event at most schools. They were just demonstrating it as a more advanced event that would be available later at the college level.

I watched them throw the hammer-thing time after time. After about fifteen minutes, I got the sense of the rhythm it required. The hammer was actually a metal ball attached to wires and a handle. The athlete would grip the handle with both hands and, while keeping his feet relatively stationary, whirl the ball around in a circle above the head and then spin his body around three times. At what seemed to be the point of greatest speed, he would release the hammer upward and outward, and it would sail off onto the grass of the infield. *I get it*, I thought. *It's a matter of speed and leverage. Spin, throw. Easy. Or maybe not, since none of the guys seemed to throw it very far.* I went back to running.

After another twenty minutes or so, I'd had enough, so I cut across the infield, heading toward the showers. At that precise moment, one of the hammers sailed in my direction. There were shouts of warning, which was lucky for me, because if I hadn't dropped to the ground, that hammer would have decapitated me. Fifty percent of me was Irish, and that fifty percent reacted. I was angry. I saw red. It didn't happen often, but when it did happen, it did so with ferocious suddenness.

The sensation of "seeing red" is both frightening and unfathomable, that degree of anger, losing touch with reality, and responding with unparalleled fury. I don't like seeing red. I don't like that loss of control. I don't like that loss of touch with reality and responsibility. No matter. The red wave came over me and my vision clouded. I have no clear recollection of what I did.

My classmates who were on the track team told me later what happened. After the hammer sailed over me, I got up off the grass and walked over to it, seemingly very calmly. I picked it up, inspected it briefly, and tested its heft. Then very deliberately, and with apparently remarkable skill, I began whirling it around my head. Then I spun in a circle three times before launching the hammer back in the exact direction from which it had come. I must have learned my leverage lessons well while I was watching. The hammer sailed precisely in the direction of the spinners but went much farther on its return trip, flying over the group for another forty feet or so. Like I said, speed and leverage, no problem.

The track coach was stunned at that extra forty feet. I learned later that he wasn't angry with me, and he wanted to know who I was and where I had learned to throw like that. Too bad. By then I had run all the way back to the gym and was getting ready to take a shower. I never threw the hammer again.

Chapter Twenty-one

Emma

Mike kept his promise and took me out for dinner, a real honest-to-goodness date, on the fifth of July. He selected the Rusty Duck, a restored fishing lodge on the American River not far from old Sacramento. The inside of the lodge was wood, with a huge rock fireplace and walls adorned with paintings of fishing and hunting. I had never been there before, and I was struck by the rustic appearance and delighted with the food. Mike asked if he could order for both of us, and I agreed, although with trepidation since I thought for sure he would order steak—not exactly my favorite. Wrong. He picked a seafood dish preceded by fresh garlic bread that was exceptional and an equally exceptional Caesar salad. But it was the main course that blew me away: salmon barbacoa with a sweet corn relish. I ate with gusto, snuffling and moaning with each bite. Mike, I noticed, was a quiet eater. Although the wine list that the waiter had thoughtfully provided was extensive, we both had unflavored, unsweetened iced tea, chuckling to ourselves that we didn't miss that disgusting raspberry stuff at all.

I told Mike it was one of the best meals I'd ever had, and he said he was glad. He was feeling penitent about not being fully forthcoming about his life, his past, his education, and his employment. He had apologized a dozen times for the encounter in the emergency room. He said he hadn't read the name on the chart before he stepped into the cubicle and didn't realize it was me until he looked up. Looking back, my anger dissipated, and I could see the humor in the situation. The look on his face when he saw me was priceless, and I wish I'd had a camera. He stammered like a little boy caught with his hands in the cookie jar, which was very unprofessional for a doctor.

But he recovered quickly and sorted through all of the medical things expediently. As we discussed my problem in general terms, I could see that he was uncomfortable with the prospect of continuing the evaluation himself, especially, I think, since a pelvic exam was in order. *Fine with me*, I thought. *He's a doctor. He's seen it all before.*

But it didn't work out that way. Mike, still just an intern, called one of his friends from the obstetrics and gynecology department to assist. That was a good sign, I thought, since it probably meant he had more than a passing interest in me as a woman, and he didn't want to use his position in an unseemly way. Of course at the time, I had no idea what he was thinking. Later, though, on one of our river walks, I pressed him about this, and he confided that my impressions were correct. He was very honest, saying that yes, he had been developing feelings for me—still was, he said—

and that it would have been awkward and uncomfortable for him to do the pelvic exam, especially since he had competent back-up available.

Our walks along the river had gradually replaced the morning meetings for coffee. We lived near the American River Parkway Trail that started at the confluence of the American and Sacramento rivers near Old Sacramento and continued all the way to Folsom Lake. The whole trail was more than thirty miles long, although we only explored a few miles at a time. The landscape was studded with trees and shrubs, with numerous dirt and paved trails. The whole thing comprised more than five thousand acres of habitat for ducks, quail, blue heron, wild turkeys, hawks, deer, beavers, otters, skunks, coyotes, and an occasional mountain lion. At just about every twist and turn, there were exceptional views of the absolutely amazing river. Most of the trail was pristinely beautiful, making for a very relaxing walk. And on those walks, I began to find out about Mike the man in a bit-by-bit fashion.

I asked Mike to explain my new diagnosis, Willebrand disease, a byproduct of my visit to the emergency room. Mike said, "I'm just an intern. You should get an expert to explain it."

I said, "I'm not looking for dissertation. I just want a simple explanation."

"Fine," he said. "You told me you have always had heavy periods, and one of your doctors a long time ago told you to always take a vitamin and iron supplement. We started with some screening tests and a bleeding time, and those results were suggestive of some type of

clotting problem. That's why the hematology specialist you're seeing did two sets of von Willebrand tests. Actually both sets of tests were abnormal—the ones we did two weeks ago and the ones from yesterday. Your von Willebrand factor is only 50 percent of normal, and that makes you susceptible to bleeding.”

He continued his explanation until he was sure I understood it. I said, “Okay, I got it, but you're going to have to explain why a glass of chardonnay and a pain pill sent a river of blood cascading between my legs.”

“Actually, the chardonnay had very little if anything to do with why you bled so extensively that night. It was that single dose of naproxen. Naproxen is a temporary platelet inhibitor, meaning that it makes platelets less sticky. So you temporarily gave yourself non-sticky platelets along with your chronically decreased von Willebrand factor at a time when you already had a bleeding site, your uterus. Got it?”

“Yeah, I think so. I guess I shouldn't take naproxen again, should I?”

“No, and you're going to have to avoid some other medications, too. I'll give you a list if your hematology doctor hasn't given you one already.”

I was explaining all this to Randi while we were sitting near the pool late one afternoon. She was less interested in the medical details than in the part about where he said he had feelings for me. “What were his exact words?” she asked.

“Well, you know that I did learn from you not to ask leading questions. But I guess that I did anyway, more

than he actually spontaneously said it. You know how hard it is to pry information out of the guy. I asked him if he called his friend down to evaluate me because he didn't want to do the pelvic exam himself. He said yes. I asked why. He clammed up. You know how he gets sometimes—Mr. Clam. No way was I letting him get away with that. So I asked him if he did it because he had feelings for me and that doing a pelvic exam would be outside the bounds of propriety. Yes, he said. But, see, I'm smarter now about how the guy operates. So I said, yes what? Yes, you have feelings for me, or yes, it would have been outside the bounds of propriety? Both, he said. And I pinned him down even further, asking if he still had feelings for me now. Yes, he said.”

“Wow. Wow. Well done on that one, Miss Randelli. We may make you into a trial lawyer after all.”

“No, I'm sticking to teaching. I could never do what you do, all that courtroom stuff. Too scary.”

“And I could never do what you do, standing in front of all those kids day after day. Too scary.”

“There is one more thing,” I said. “After I got him to admit that he had feelings for me, he reached down and took my hand in his. I didn't invite it or expect it, but he did it anyway. He has never done that before. And I have to tell you, Randi, it was totally unexpected what happened when he did that. The touch was electric, and it made me tingle all over. I melted inside, honest to God. I felt like a teenager, like we were two teenagers in love, holding hands, strolling along the river. And something more. I felt like we belonged together, like we had known each other all of our lives.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Mike

“You did not write this! You did not! Now tell me who did write it!”

Mrs. Enterman’s words blasted my eardrums. Short and petite, her voice was low-pitched and resonated like a foghorn. We were in her classroom, shortly after the end of the class, and she was holding up a poem I had written and accusing me of cheating. Earlier in the week, she had given our English class an assignment to write a short original poem using alliteration and a meter of our choice, preferably iambic pentameter. Since the choice of meter was mine, I had chosen iambic trimeter, or at least a facsimile thereof.

“I will have you expelled. You will tell me who wrote this because you most certainly did not.” She was shouting loud enough for half the school to hear, and there was nothing I could do to quiet her. Instead, I sat silently, waiting for her wrath to subside. It didn’t. She was livid, her face red and puffy from anger. “You will wait here,” she said with a look on her face that would have turned a block of titanium into a small molten puddle.

As she left the room, she slammed the door, and I remember asking myself, “Jeez, who’s the adolescent here?” I busied myself getting my books together, something I hadn’t had time to do because when the end-of-class bell rang she was at my desk, telling me to remain seated. That was bad news for me since that particular end-of-class bell was also the end-of-day bell. I had to move fast in order to beat Bluto out of the building and even faster to catch Junie, although she would always wait patiently at the loading dock for a few minutes. On the rare occasions when I couldn’t get there quickly, she took off for home without me, fearing the evil Bluto more than she liked running and talking with me. Curse the luck.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Enterman returned with my guidance counselor, Mr. Stevens, in tow. “There he is!” she screamed. “I did a Google search and couldn’t find anything. But it has to be plagiarism. Make him tell us who wrote the poem. Make him!”

I was still seated at the same desk. Mr. Stevens, tall and heavy-set in contrast to the diminutive Mrs. Enterman, quietly asked, “Finn, who wrote the poem?”

“I did, sir.”

“Ahhhhh!” The scream was from Mrs. Enterman.

“Sierra,” said Mr. Stevens, looking at Mrs. Enterman, “hush for a moment, and let me get a sense of what’s going on here. Finn, the poem is actually quite good. You wrote it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When did you write it?”

“Night before last, the day after Mrs. Enterman gave us the assignment.”

“And what was the assignment?”

“To write a short original poem using alliteration and the meter of our choice.”

“And what meter did you choose?”

“Trimeter, or at least I tried. With iambic feet. Sort of. I think.”

He held up the poem. “The title is ‘Bonds of Gold,’” he said. “Let me read it to you.”

He put on reading glasses and began.

*And must we for’ ere be
Enchained by bonds of gold?
Must we repeatedly
Be carefully unbold?
And does time onward climb
While we lag back afraid
Wishing some inward chime
To hail us now unstaïd?
And if so, do we go
When called to excellence?
Or do we shallowly
Recede with impotence?
T’is unclear whether near
Or far as mind perceives.
Often queer, insincere,
And cold as hearts of thieves.*

Finishing the reading, he looked at me thoughtfully. “The issue, Finn, is that this seems to have a

depth beyond what someone of your relatively tender years could conceive. Did anyone help you write this?"

"No."

"Was anyone with you when you wrote it?"

"Yes. Junie Sprewell. We study together sometimes after school on her front porch."

"She saw you write it?"

"Yes. And she proofread it for me. She said it was okay, but the last part was enigmatic—her exact words. She said she had no idea what I was trying to say."

"Perceptive girl," he said, smiling a bit enigmatically himself. "If we ask Ms. Sprewell about this tomorrow, will she corroborate your contention that you truly wrote this piece with no outside assistance?"

After hundreds of debates with Junie, I felt I could hold my own in any repartee with adults, and his question and tone stirred my Irish blood. "Mr. Stevens. Sir. It is not my *contention* that I wrote that poem. It is fact. Hard fact. Not contention. And yes, Ms. Sprewell, as you call her, will attest to that *fact*, although I should probably let her speak for herself."

Mrs. Enterman interjected, "Those two are always hanging around together. She'll say anything he wants her to say."

Mr. Stevens, perhaps a bit Irish himself, turned to her slowly and said softly but with great force, "Sierra, tomorrow we will ask Junie Sprewell what she knows about this poem. And also, tomorrow, after school, you and I and young Mr. Carter will conduct a little experiment."

Turning to me, he continued, "Tomorrow, Finn, here, in this very classroom, you and I and Mrs. Enterman will meet. You will have at hand a pen or pencil and some paper. I will give you a writing assignment and a time limit to complete it. If you do an unsatisfactory job—and I will be the sole judge of that—then you will fail your poetry assignment and very likely the class itself. On the other hand, if you do a satisfactory job with the assignment—and again, I will be the sole judge of that—then Mrs. Enterman will extend to you an apology and tender to you not only an A on the assignment but also an A in the class."

Well, my Irish blood got the best of me again. "Fine, sir." I put great emphasis on the *sir*, as in "Fine, *sir*," and then I continued. "But pardon me. It seems to me that with your advance decision to require further testing of me, it really doesn't matter what Junie Sprewell says. Even if she supports me, you're still going to make me do something additional tomorrow. So let's leave it at that. Don't even bother her since you've clearly already made up your mind about this. In that regard, *sir*, I accept the challenge. Pick something hard or quirky or sublime. Any subject, your choice. I don't care. I'll be here on time, and you better be ready to take your best shot. And further, if I pass your 'test,' I don't want any freebies. I don't want a guaranteed A. I want what I deserve, whatever that turns out to be, both on the poem and in the class, nothing more, nothing less." I gathered up my books and walked out of the room, leaving Mrs. Enterman with a look of astonishment on

her face and Mr. Stevens with what I swear was a look of smug self-satisfaction.

I stopped at my locker to get my book bag, stuffing everything inside. I zipped the bag shut and hoisted it over my shoulder. It probably weighed thirty pounds, full as it was, but it felt like three hundred. There was no way I was going to catch up with Junie that day, not with her speed, and not with my book-laden bundle slowing me down. I walked out the back door and stood on the loading dock. No Junie, meaning she must have left for home already. No Bluto either. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen him all day.

I looked out over the field behind the school at the path that Junie and I ran on every day and beyond to the access road that skirted a small forested area before joining up with main surface roads. I loved running by that little forest. It provided both shade and a sense of remoteness, at least for the minute or two it took us to run by it. As I was about to step off the loading dock, I glanced again at the slight bend in the railing near the stairway. I smiled because Bluto had caused that bend when he unsuccessfully tried to stop himself from falling into the loading pit.

It had happened a few days earlier. Junie and I had just met on the loading dock and were just about to begin the trek home when the door opened behind us.

It was Bluto. "My, my, my. What do we have here? We have the two little lovebirds about to fly away. Well, not today, little birdies." And with astonishing speed for one of his size he skirted around us and blocked

the stairway. He grinned slyly as he leaned up against the railing.

Over the year, there had been a slow but definite change in how I viewed the nemesis standing before us. I had grown a bit myself, both taller and heavier and definitely more muscular. I was still not as muscle-laden as Bluto the Neanderthal, but I was not the rail-thin kid I'd been over the past couple of years either. A further change had occurred, too, in that I was no longer absolutely terrified of him. Wary, yes. Respectful of his size and strength, yes. But terrified, no. I think he sensed this. I said, "Move it, Bluto."

He leaned back even further on the railing, folding his arms over his chest, the same sly smile on his face. "Look, pencil dick," he said. "Here are your choices. One, you turn around, go back through that door, and leave this little sweetie pie to me. Or two, I am going to rip your arms off and feed them to you."

I turned my head toward Junie, who was standing to my left and looking directly at me, wide-eyed and clearly frightened. There was absolutely no one else around to help her, to protect her if I left. The look on her face was the saddest and most imploring thing that I had ever seen. I reached out for her with my left hand, squeezing her right hand gently. "Do you trust me? Are you ready to run?"

Her face relaxed as I said that. "Yes, Finn."

Bluto guffawed. "Yes, Finn. Yes, Finn. God, how touching."

"Bluto," I said, "I choose two."

"What?"

“Are you deaf? I chose two.”

“What do you mean, you choose two?”

“Number two, moron. You’re going to rip my arms off.”

That sunk in for the thickheaded Bluto, and he started to straighten himself off the low-lying rail. Too late. I rushed at him, hitting him squarely in the chest with my right shoulder. Overbalanced as he was, I had the advantage in speed and leverage. He literally flipped over the railing, unsuccessfully trying to catch the railing with his left hand and bending it slightly in the process. He fell the full five feet to the loading dock floor, landing flat on his back. As he hit the concrete, a huge gush of air came from his lungs: “OOMPF.” What a lovely sound.

Junie and I leisurely began running across the field, me smiling and Junie just shaking her head. She was silent until we were in the shade of the small forest. Still running, she turned to me. “He was going to hurt me today, you know.”

“I know.”

“You saved me.”

“Don’t overstate things, Miss Sprewell. You would have figured a way out of it.”

She stopped abruptly, anger suffusing her face. “Don’t *understate* it either, Mercury Man. And don’t you ever deflect my gratitude like that again, or you’ll see real trouble. From me, not from some troglodyte.”

“Okay. Sorry. You’re right. He is malice personified. And maybe, just maybe I was the knight in shining armor today. And...you’re welcome.” I wanted to

tell her that I would do anything for her, that I loved her and that I would die for her. But I couldn’t. Not yet. I was afraid. Afraid of rejection and afraid of my own feelings. Why does that happen? Why do we fear rejection? Why are we so afraid to trust our own feelings? Dumb me, as usual. I didn’t tell her. At least not then.

We ran home. At her house, I asked if she wanted to me to walk her to the door and could we study together. She glanced up at the house, knowing her stepfather was home that day, knowing that Daniel the Terrible was inside. She said no, reaching her hand up to brush my cheek. “Good night, White Knight.” An iambic rhyme. And then she was gone, into her house, into the dungeon that ruled her nights.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Emma

Since it was summer, I had lots of free time. When Mike, too, had free time, we would do things together, usually outdoors, especially walking and hiking. We also went on dates to the absolute delight of Randi and Tommy, who seemed to be gloating as Mike and I spent more and more time together. For us, it was a slow process, not so much from my end as his.

I was truly beginning to trust the guy, and I felt ready to tell him about my past, ready to invest myself in him more emotionally. Not so with Mike. With him, it was thrust and parry. Shuck and jive. Ask a question, and then get ready for the inevitable dissembling. Still, inch by inch, I was making progress, and he seemed to be trusting me, too. I could also sense that we were still a long way from approaching each other in a more physical way, as if we both knew that we had only one chance to get it right this one last time.

“Randi, he is so smart.” We were in chaise lounges next to the pool as usual, and I turned to look at her, admiring her new bright yellow one-piece bathing suit. “He knows so much about so many things. I just wish I knew where he learned all that stuff. By

reading, I guess. I've been in his apartment a couple of times, and you know his bookshelf?"

"The one with all the Dickens novels?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about it?"

"It's like a primer for literature, both English and American. You remember that I asked him if he had read all of those?" She nodded. I continued, "Well, I was talking about the Dickens stuff. I hadn't really seen the others, or chose not to. I mean, jeez, he has Dickens, Hemingway, Harding, Fitzgerald, and Maugham, and you name it, British and American, floor to ceiling. There is also a bunch of contemporary literature, and then in another bookcase nearby, he has a ton of non-fiction stuff, everything from astronomy to zoology. Truly amazing. I asked him again if he had read all of those, and he said yes. I said, 'All? Every last one? On both bookshelves?' He said, 'Yes, every last one, on both bookshelves, and some of them two or three times.'"

Randi smiled appreciatively. "Well, I guess he is a fast reader, like Tommy. They probably have contests about that, too."

I nodded. "No doubt. Contests in everything. Men are so strange in some ways. So amazing and endearing in other ways, and so damn maddening in most ways."

"Well, you got that right. But I'll tell you, based on the time Tommy and I have had together, it gets better. Actually better and better. Intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Better and better."

She saw the look of sorrow on my face. "Oh baby, I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't thinking. I know, or at least I suspect that you and Mike haven't done anything physical yet. I didn't mean anything by that stupid remark. I was just talking."

"No," I said. "It's okay. We have no secrets, you and I. I'm happy for you and Tommy. And, no, Mike and I aren't intimate. We're a long way away from that yet, I'm afraid. Actually, we're both afraid, I think. Neither one of us wants to screw this up, no pun intended."

"Well," she said. "There is no harm in going slow."

I paused, reflectively. "If I could have just one thing, I wish that he would open up more about his past. But he won't talk about anything before high school. He won't talk about his parents or his upbringing or anything. Weird. I feel shut out in some ways."

Randi nodded. "Listen, Emma, he's probably thinking the same thing about you, that he can't get that high-strung woman to tell him anything about her early life, about her parents and her upbringing. Be patient. It will happen. I will tell you that I don't know the full details of Mike's early life. Tommy does, but he's pretty closed-mouthed himself sometimes. He says Mike had a very rough time as a child, that it's all very painful and very personal. I don't think that even Tommy knows everything about Mike's past. So it's no wonder Mike is a bit tentative. He has probably experienced more than his share of grief and loss and disappointment. On the other hand, so have you."

“You’re probably right. I’ll be patient. I’ll be patient because I feel something deeper, more defining, more significant. I can’t explain it. But do you ever think he’ll ever open up, trust me, talk to me...like Tommy talks to you?”

“Well, if you’re patient and lucky, probably. Men are by nature different from us women, and what you see with Tommy and me isn’t what we started with. It takes a bit of fancy footwork to get these Y-chromosome morons to be more feminine. It’s part of their upbringing, all of them, to keep everything inside, to rarely speak, to never complain, to deny illness until they’re half dead. So be understanding. Be patient.”

“Okay. Patience it is. I just wish he had a little more time off. I haven’t seen him for nearly three days, not since I did my Miss Graceful routine at Starbucks Tuesday morning.”

“What did you destroy this time?”

“I didn’t destroy anything. But I did manage to dump the entire contents of my purse all over the sidewalk. We were sitting at an outside table, deciding what we wanted. It was my turn to pay, so I was digging around in my purse trying to get the loose change off the bottom. Poof, it flipped over and everything fell out. Everything. Damn, I must have blushed for ten minutes. Mike was very nice about it, saying, ‘Oops.’ Then he picked everything up for me: coin purse, lipstick, compact, checkbook, pens, and my contact lens case. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘contacts?’ Yes, I said, trying to laugh off my embarrassment. ‘Can’t see without them. My eyes actually got bad enough as a young adult that

I needed glasses,’ I told him, ‘and eventually I went with contacts. Someday maybe I’ll do that Lasik thing.’ He smiled and nodded. Mr. Perfect Vision, no doubt. Anyway, he has been so busy at work that I hardly get to see him. Probably this weekend we’ll do a long walk on the trail.”

“You two sure walk a lot.”

“That’s when I get him to relax, be spontaneous, be goofy, be funny, and occasionally open up a bit. He has this great sense of humor when he lets it show, and he has so many funny stories about high school with Tommy, working at Ernie’s, and Marine Corps boot camp. And that’s another thing. With the Marine Corps stuff, as soon as he gets to the part where they deploy to Afghanistan, he turns into Mr. Clam again.”

“And if you wait a bit, does he get back on track with the funny stuff?”

“Yes,” I replied. “As long as I don’t push him. He’ll get back to funny stories and spontaneity and goofiness. Of course, I’m probably doing all of those things, too, when we’re cruising along the river.”

“Did you get him to tell you why he always wears those idiotic T-shirts for swimming and every other outdoor activity?”

“Yes. I asked him point blank, with the intent of not letting him weasel his way out of answering.”

“And? What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Have you ever heard of melanoma?’ So I guess he wears the shirts in order to avoid skin cancer.”

“Emma Randelli! You actually fell for that? And you were doing so well with your questions for him.”

“What are you talking about? He told me he wears the shirts because he’s afraid of melanoma.”

“No, he didn’t. Tell me again what he said when you asked him why he wears the T-shirts.”

“He said, ‘Have you ever heard of melanoma?’ Ah, I get it. He never actually said he wears the T-shirts because he’s afraid of melanoma. Damn. So he got me again.”

That conversation with Randi took place on a Friday. Sunday afternoon, Mike and I walked along a relatively deserted section of the trail, enjoying the solitude and each other. It was one of those typical July afternoons in Sacramento, sunny and about 110 degrees. We were both dressed lightly—white shorts and lightweight blouse for me, and shorts and a polo shirt for Mike, both light green in color. Mike matched the surrounding scenery much better than I since we were in a full-blown green-belt area that was used for walking, running, cycling, and things on the water like rafting, kayaking, and canoeing. As a functional urban park, it had to be one of the best in the world. Anyway, he fit in there much better than I did.

We had also planned an afternoon picnic on the patio back home, so the walk that day was shorter than usual. When we reached the parking garages outside our apartment complex, I stopped abruptly. Mike stopped, too, a quizzical look on his face. I had rehearsed my approach internally a dozen times.

Finally, I said, “So, mister, back to the dorky shirts you wear when you’re working out. Actually, it’s not my term, dorky. It’s Tommy’s. But I agree, by the way. You look like a dork in orange or green or yellow or red.”

“No problem, as long as you call me *Mister Dork*.”

“Fine, Mister Dork. Here’s the deal. I want to know why you wear those dorky looking shirts for swimming. See, I don’t care that you wear shirts, even dorky-looking ones for activities like running and basketball and whatever else you and Tommy do as part of your juvenile approach to life. What I’m asking is why do you need dorky-looking shirts for swimming?”

“Again, have you ever heard of melanoma?”

“Yes, excellent,” I said. “So you’re telling me you’re afraid of melanoma?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me ask you this, Mister Dork. Do you wear the shirts because you’re afraid of melanoma?”

“Absolutely.”

I grinned. “Yes. Well. Okay, Mister Dork. Is your fear of melanoma the only reason you wear those shirts?”

Stunned silence followed. I could see he had not expected this line of questioning, this turn of events, this precision in cross-examination. I gave him a few seconds to reflect, to ponder, to come up with a way to weasel out of answering the question. Then I asked him again, “Is your fear of melanoma the only reason you wear those shirts?”

Now, one thing I had learned about Michael J Michaels, one absolute, was that if I could corner him with the Randi-type questioning, he would never answer dishonestly.

Softly, he said, “No.”

I was not letting him off easily. “No what?”

“No, it’s not the only reason.”

“It’s not the only reason what?”

“Come on, Emma.”

“It’s not the only reason what?”

“Dang. Okay. Melanoma is not the only reason I wear the shirts when I’m swimming.’

“Good, Mike. Very good. Now tell me exactly why you do wear those shirts while swimming.”

“Emma, I—”

“I don’t want to hear this ‘Emma, I...’ stuff. I want to know why you’re in the water, weighted down with a wet T-shirt when you should be gliding through the old H₂O without being impeded by cloth. Why is that, Mike? And, yes, I want to see what’s under the shirt. What, are you deformed or something? Do you have like three breasts or something? What? I need to know. So take the shirt off.”

“Emma, I—”

“What did I just say? There is no ‘Emma, I...’ Get with the program. Spill the beans. What is up with those shirts?”

“Emma, I—”

“Okay, bullshit. Enough with the stalling. Take the shirt off.”

“What?”

“I said take the shirt off, now!”

“Emma, I—”

The distressed look on his face made me stop my bullying. Softer then, with almost a whisper, I said, “Mike, please. I have to know.”

He had a look of resignation, and I could see that a hint of sadness had crept into his features. He reached down, pulled the shirt out of his shorts, and began to raise it. Then he stopped with an imploring look on his face. I nodded at him. “Keep going, please.”

As he pulled the shirt over his head, exposing his chest and abdomen, I’m sure my gasp of horror was heard as far away as New York City. “Oh my God,” I cried. “Oh, my God. Mike. Oh, my God. What happened to you? What happened?”

I was close to sobbing and about to reach for him, to hold him, to protect him. But at that exact moment he turned around so I could see his back. And then I did sob uncontrollably. “Oh, Mike. I am so sorry. So sorry.”

He had turned back to face me and pulled the shirt back over his head, leaving it untucked. I reached for his face, wanting to pull him into my arms, to comfort him. Instead, he very gently pushed my hands away, saying, “I don’t want your pity.”

Two days later, trying to explain this to Randi sent me into racking sobs again. Finally, I got control of myself, which was a good thing since some of the other people sitting near the pool were becoming concerned. “Randi, it was horrible. He has horrible scars on his chest. One really big one like a crater on the right side and then a bunch of smaller round ones that almost make a pattern over the rest of his chest

and part of the abdomen. Something really bad happened to him to get scars like that. And then, my God, Randi, he turned around. I didn't ask him to—he just did it. So I could see his back, I guess. And whatever horror he experienced on his front part, it was ten times worse on his back. It looked like he had whip marks, like from one of those cat-o'-nine-tails the pirates used. Huge, long, straight, rubbery scars, all over his whole back. God, it was awful. I'm so sorry I made him do that."

I was bawling again, and Randi was patting my hand comfortingly. "What's the lesson here, Emma? I guess I gave you the wrong advice about pushing so far so fast."

I was already living with the consequences. Mike, after gently rejecting me in the parking lot, left me there without saying a word. I had tried to call him, but he wouldn't answer. I went to his apartment three times over the space of a few hours, but he wouldn't answer my knock. Two days later, I still hadn't been able to reach him. I debated going to his apartment door and parking myself there, telling him through the door that I was going to sit there until I withered and died unless he came out. Finally, I decided that might actually be the best approach, so I went up to my apartment to change clothes and prepare for the vigil. When I got to my door, there was a single red rose and an envelope propped up on the doorknob. I put the rose in my hair and opened the note. It said, "Pick you up at eight for dinner. Yes, a real date. Dress nice. M."

Chapter Twenty-four

Mike

The day after I had dumped Bluto over the rail I passed him in the hallway between classes. I couldn't resist. "Yo, Bluto, I heard you fell down." Big mistake.

Catlike, he whirled around, put a meaty hand under my chin and slammed me back against the hallway lockers. "You little shit. You are dead. You hear me? Dead. The first time I catch you alone away from this place, you are dead."

To my left and down low, I heard a click. I knew that sound. I knew that click. Visions of Frankie the Ferret filled my brain. Click. Switchblade. Bluto gave me a brief look at it.

"See this, dickhead? It means you're dead. You know the old saying about how I'll cut you three ways? Long, wide, and deep? That's what's going to happen to you." He released me abruptly, and all my books spilled onto the hallway floor. He kicked them angrily, scattering books and papers everywhere. Then he stalked away.

I was still thinking about that even as I reported to Mrs. Enterman's room after the end-of-day bell to complete my "test." No one was in the room, so I sat

down and waited mournfully because Junie would have already left. I was turning fourteen that day, and I was reflecting that this was no way to spend a birthday when Mrs. Enterman entered, saw me, and with color rising to her cheeks, said, "What are you doing here?"

"Ma'am, you and Mr. Stevens told me to come here after school to complete a special assignment." I said it as politely as I could, although the words were like sandpaper coming out of my throat.

"Well, someone was supposed to tell you that Mr. Stevens is not here today. He's ill. I suggest you come back tomorrow at the same time. You may go now."

I went, still smiling about dumping Bluto over the rail. But that was ancient history, and this was a new day. Today's order of business was to get running, to get away toward home, perhaps finding Junie on her porch, waiting for me, preferably with a cupcake or some other birthday treat. I liked sitting with her and studying. I had never done so well in school thanks to her patient guidance and keeping me reading or writing or on task. My C+ average rocketed toward the stratosphere, an eye-popping experience for me since I thought I was basically stupid.

So, on to home. I walked down the steps of the loading dock and up the loading ramp. At that point, I began running slowly because of the hefty book bag over my shoulder. As much as I loved running, it simply was not as much fun if I ran solo. I focused my attention on the distant porch and the smiling girl already there. I crossed the wide field to the access road and turned right, running along the small forest

on my left. Up ahead, about halfway along the forest, I thought I caught a flicker of movement in the trees just off the road. I focused intently on the spot but saw nothing. As I passed that spot, I heard a muffled scream and slowed, eventually stopping completely. There was another very brief high-pitched sound and then a low-pitched voice speaking softly. I recognized that voice. Bluto. What the heck? And then it hit me. Junie.

I left the access road at a sprint, bursting through the tree line and into a small clearing in the forest. Bluto was there, crouching over Junie, who was lying on her back with her right arm bent upward and lying across her eyes. It was another of those times when things slowed down for me, when everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. We were surrounded by trees and low-hanging branches and no longer visible from the access road. I saw Junie. I saw Bluto standing over her. I saw ripped underwear lying a few feet away from the helpless girl on the ground. I saw the skirt pulled roughly above her waist, the lower half of her body naked and exposed. I saw blood. Her blood.

And then I saw red. The haze descended over my vision as a thousand Irish ancestors provoked me to unleash fury on the evil assailant, the hulking prehistoric Bluto. No! No! No! Not this time. I pushed the red fury aside. I wanted all my faculties present. This time I was going to attend to matters myself, without ancestral intrusion.

"Bluto," I said. "Move away from her and get out of here."

He stood up, squat and powerful, but no longer taller than I was. More muscular, yes, but no longer taller. “Pencil dick,” he said, “nice you could join us. I waited here all day hoping you two would show up. Then it was just her, and that was fine. We were just about to have a good time. I know you’re worried that you missed the party, but nothing important has happened yet, if you get my drift. And now you’re here, too. My, my, the day is certainly going well for me.”

“Leave, Bluto.”

“No, I ain’t goin’ anywhere. And two more things are about to happen. One, you ain’t goin’ nowhere either. And two, you are about to become a multiple personality.” Click. Switchblade.

A plaintive voice from the ground said, “Finn, go. Run. Get out of here. I’ll be okay. Just go. Don’t get hurt.”

Bluto glanced at her briefly. “My, how touching.” Turning to me, he said, “Now, Huckleberry, your turn.” He saw the look of astonishment on my face and said, “Yes, I know your real name, *Huckleberry*. I always knew you were fruity. I saw your real name on some file cards in the office during one of my stops there. I get to spend a lot of time in the office. Ha. Ha. And I can’t wait to tell everyone in the school that you’re Huckleberry Finn.”

“Bluto, if you leave now, I won’t have to hurt you.”

He began laughing almost uncontrollably, and then he stopped abruptly. “You won’t have to hurt me? You won’t have to hurt *me*?” He laughed again. “You don’t have it in you. You don’t have the guts.”

“Maybe not, Bluto, but I’m not leaving. You are. You have nothing to gain here. Hurt me, and you get charged with aggravated assault. With Miss Sprewell there, you will be charged with rape at the very least.”

“Wrong, pencil dick. With you, I will claim self-defense. You attacked me last week, remember? And with the little sweetie pie over there, it will be consensual. You know she’s a slut. Everyone knows what goes on in that house of hers, with her old man banging her every night. Slut with a capital S. She probably puts out for you, too.”

I was flustered. What was he talking about? I looked at Junie, who now had a look of profound despair on her face. And something else. Shame? Dang. Was that why she always seemed sad when going home? Was that why she never invited me in? Was her stepfather abusing her? I became completely distracted from the task at hand, namely Bluto, as cascade after cascade of images intruded into my brain.

Bluto interrupted my mental imagery. “Got you on that one, didn’t I, pencil dick? Points for me. And now I’m going to score many more. So put the book bag down and get ready to bleed.”

Junie cried plaintively again, “Finn, go. Please!”

I felt the red haze descending, but I fought it back. I needed absolutely clarity to get out of this mess in one piece. “Fine, Bluto. It’s time. You and me. One on one.”

He smiled, nodding his head affirmatively with apparent pleasure.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll get rid of the book bag. See that branch?” I pointed to a tree limb high above us, and he looked at it, too. As he glanced up, I moved a few feet closer to him, to within ten feet or so. “Watch this,” I said as I began whirling the book bag around my head. After several whirls, I began spinning my body, and the third spin took me very close to the unsuspecting Bluto. I had a brief mental vision of hammer throwers on the track infield, of speed and leverage and power. As I completed the third spin, I brought the book bag from just below my right ankle upward in a nearly vertical line, the final resting place being not the tree branch above but the point of Bluto’s chin.

The thirty-pound book bag, moving with all the power I could generate, with all my personal anger, and with eons of Irish ancestors looking on, caught Bluto squarely and absolutely perfectly. The sound of the impact was sickening, an audible *crack*. Something broke, I thought. I didn’t care. He was lifted into the air, sailing backward for several feet, landing on his back and rolling slightly onto one side. The switchblade had fallen in the grass. I picked it up and threw it into the trees as far as I could. Then I went to Junie.

She was still bare from the waist down and trying to cover herself. I knelt beside her waist and gently moved her hand away. She resisted. “No, Finn. Don’t.”

“Junie, I have to see how badly you’re hurt. Besides, I’ve kind of seen everything already anyway.” This time she let me move her hand aside. I made a quick visual inspection and then reached into my back pocket for my handkerchief. Her eyes widened slightly, so I said,

“Hey, don’t worry. It’s clean, brand new in fact. Never been used. It’s okay.”

As gently as I could I dabbed away the blood, and then I could see the bleeding source: a small tear. I put the handkerchief over the bleeding site and held it in place. Then I pulled her skirt down so it was covering everything, including my hand. I took her hand, placing it over mine with the skirt in between her hand and mine. I said, “Here, you hold pressure on that spot, right where my hand is.” When she began applying pressure, I removed my hand from under her skirt. Then, with reasonable modesty restored, I leaned away from her slightly, turned to her, and said, “There’s a small tear with a bit of blood still oozing. I’m not sure how bad it is. Part of the problem is that I’m not sure what it’s supposed to look like. Normally, I mean.”

Her face relaxed into a broad smile, and then she began laughing uncontrollably. Finally, she stopped, allowing me to ask, “What’s so darn funny?”

“You. You’re funny. I mean it’s funny, what you said. About not knowing what it’s supposed to look like. I thought guys were all macho about stuff like that, knowing chapter and verse what a girl’s private parts looked like. It’s nice really. Being honest like that, I mean.”

“Hmmm,” I said. “Okay. I can’t help it if I don’t know exactly what it’s supposed to look like. It’s not like I’ve had a lot of experience inspecting female bottoms.”

She laughed again. “You are so honest. And so... unmacho.”

“What?” I asked. “What did you say? Unmacho. Are you retarded or something? Look over there in the grass. Is that or is that not Bluto the Neanderthal, the troglodyte, the personification of malice? Yes, it is. And did I or did I not lay Bluto out? Yes, I did. Now do you want to reconsider your opinion?”

Her right hand was busy applying pressure on the bleeding, so she reached across her body with her left hand, taking my right hand in hers. She squeezed gently. “Yes, you are a macho man, at least in the ways of the physical. And yes, you laid out the evil Bluto. And yes, you saved me again. That’s twice, you know. Twice within a week, and both times where you might have been badly hurt or worse. How did you think of using the book bag, and where did you come up with that spinning thing?”

I explained briefly about the hammer throwers and speed, leverage, and power. I told her about my one and only hammer throw before today.

“Brilliant,” she said. “So you truly are macho, powerful, and smart.”

“Well, as of today, definitely macho and powerful. Also definitely not smart.”

“Oh, hush. You are, too. I’ve seen your writing. I’ve heard your vocabulary. If you’re not smart, then no one is.”

“My grades suck...stink.”

“Your grades are improving. Besides, it’s not just grades. It’s basic intellect and common sense that are important.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so. Now get those panties for me.” She pointed to the ripped underwear lying nearby.

I held them up. “They’re ruined. You need new ones.”

“Got ‘em,” she said. “Pull my book bag over here.”

I leaned across her body and dragged the book bag close to her left hand. She deftly opened it and took out a pair of panties and something that looked like a giant gauze pad.

“You always carry extra panties in your bag?”

“Macho man, you are so sheltered. Girls have these things called periods. That means we *periodically* bleed. From the vagina, that is. And I seem to really bleed a lot. We use these pads or tampons to catch the blood. Sometimes it doesn’t work, and we leak a bit into our underwear. That’s why I carry the spares. Got it?”

“Got it, and I do know about periods. I just didn’t know it was so complicated.”

“Well, it is. Now turn around and don’t look. I’m going to fix things.”

“Like I said before, Junie, I’ve kind of seen everything already.”

“That was before. That was business. What I’m about to do is not your business. Now turn around.”

I turned. In less than a minute, she was on her feet, saying, “Check on Bluto, and then let’s get out of this place.”

“Fine, I’ll check on him after you tell me what he did. Did he...did he...?”

She smiled at my hesitation. “Did he penetrate me? Only with his fingers. See. He still has his pants on.”

But he was definitely working up to something worse, and he would have hurt me badly if you hadn't come along, Mr. White Knight. Making a habit out of saving me."

I reached out and touched the bump on her nose, which was now slightly scratched. "Did he hit you?"

"Yes. He popped me pretty good. But you know that bumpy thing on my nose was there before. Someday, I'll get it fixed."

I walked over to Bluto and looked down at him. I thought how easy it would be to retrieve the switchblade knife and bury it to the hilt in his thick neck. He certainly deserved it, but my doing that would irrevocably change everything between Junie and me. So I stood over him, gloating just a bit, and I could see that he was breathing, though still unconscious. "He's fine. Let's go."

We left the clearing, walked through the tree line to the access road, and began running. Junie stopped nearly immediately, grimacing. "Let's just walk," she said. I understood.

We passed a convenience store, and Junie asked, "Do you have any change?"

"What?"

"Change. Coins."

"Yes, why?"

"Because we're going to call 911."

"Good idea," I said. "I'd like see that scumbag rot in some jail cell."

"We're not calling the police for that."

"What? Are you off your rocker? The guy tried to rape you. As it was, he did some real damage down

there. Just call the police and get his butt hauled off to the slammer."

"No. We're not calling to report a rape. We're calling to report an assault."

"Yeah. Exactly. Bluto assaulted you. Go ahead. Here's some change." I gave her a handful of coins.

"We are not calling to report an assault on me. We are calling to report an assault on Bluto."

I was absolutely dumbfounded. "Are you kidding me? You're going to turn me in? For laying out that worthless pile of humanity? You need your head examined."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not turning you in. I'm getting help for Bluto."

"Now for sure I know he knocked some of your screws loose. Junie, this is the guy who's been tormenting us for two years, me for much longer. We just laid the guy out, got back some of our own. Don't wither on me into some bleeding heart...wimp. Just let the guy rot. He deserves it." I was miffed at the thought of using my money to get help for Bluto.

"Well, maybe. But we're still calling help for him." With my money in her hand, she went to a payphone in front of the store. She dropped money in the slot and then dialed 911. The phone returned the money. Excellent. No charge to me.

I retrieved the coins from the return slot as Junie began speaking, using a disguised to explain where Bluto was.

As we started walking again, I asked, "Okay. Why no police? We have the guy dead to rights."

“A thousand reasons. Not the least of which is that I couldn’t bear the humiliation, the scrutiny, the questions, the knowing looks from all those weasel girls in the eighth grade.”

“But if you don’t call him on this, doesn’t it give him the right to do it again, if not to you, then to someone else?”

“Finn, after today, I don’t think we are going to have trouble with him ever again. I think what you did to him today neutered him.”

I still didn’t understand the logic, but I let the issue drop. There was more to this, I was sure. We walked in silence, and the closer we got to her house, the slower she walked. Finally, I asked, “Junie, something Bluto said back there worries me. Is your stepfather hurting you?”

She stopped abruptly, still looking straight ahead. Her breath came in slow, low gasps. She didn’t answer in words but with silent tears rolling down her cheeks, cascading like a fine waterfall to form puddles on top of her shoes.

“Junie?” I said. “Shouldn’t we tell someone? Do you want me to call anyone?”

She shook her head no and began walking again. I wasn’t sure if that meant that her stepfather wasn’t hurting her or she didn’t want me to call anyone or she just didn’t want to talk about it anymore. We reached the sidewalk in front of her house, where she usually said good-bye before running up to the door. On that day, she took my hand in hers, pulling me beside her toward the house. We went up

the steps and stood together on the porch. She had stopped crying by then, but she was still visibly trembling.

“Do you want me to come in? Is there anything more I can do?”

After a few seconds, she seemed to gather herself, become straight and strong, and turned to me, speaking very slowly with a rueful smile on her face. “Finn. Huckleberry Finn. Mr. Mercury. No, don’t come in. And I’ll take it from here. I can handle it. And thank you. Thank you so much for doing that, for saving me from...from...well, you know. And one more thing. I love you.”

She took my face in her hands and drew it gently toward hers until our lips met. She was soft and sweet, and I lost myself briefly in that physical pressing together of lips. It wasn’t what I expected, but then I didn’t know what I was supposed to expect. That’s a big part of life, isn’t it, learning what you’re supposed to expect? I surely didn’t know it then. Later, yes. But not then.

She pulled away slowly, her dark brown eyes smiling, and then she said softly, “Goodnight, Mercury Man.”

Instead of leaving, I gently took her face in *my* hands, pulling her to me and returning the soft kiss she had given me. “I love you, too. Goodnight, Minerva.”

And I left Junie there, on her front porch, standing motionless with a look of astonishment on her face that matched my own. I suspected it would take us both quite a while to sort out our feelings.

I immediately started my own sorting on the way home, a distance of another mile or so that usually took about fifteen minutes. That night, it took me closer to twenty-five minutes as I shuffled along slowly, hoping Junie would really be OK and that the incapacitated Bluto was sufficiently humbled enough to not seek retribution. I hoped it was the right thing to do, not calling the police. I hoped there was nothing harmful happening to her at night inside her personal dungeon. And I was also struggling with the memory of *the kisses* and recognizing that there had been a change in how I viewed my good friend Junie. Happy birthday to me.

Chapter Twenty-five

Emma

Sacramento, in the early fall, has weather that runs the spectrum from overcast and chilly to equatorial heat, with a bright and relentless sun bleaching the city's bones to the purest white imaginable. It was on one of those bone-bleaching days that Edward Arlington Robinson and Professor Prewitt rescued me from my uncanny and unerring ability to select male partners who would hurt me physically, verbally, emotionally, and sometimes all three.

On that day, the bone-bleaching day, I was scheduled to give my presentation of Robinson's poem "Eros Turannos" to the professor's class, and as usual, I was sweating like no female should sweat. The saline gushers issuing from my pores were much less related to the ambient temperature, which was brutally hot, and much more to my trepidation about being in front of a group once again. I feared public speaking almost more than anything, even though I was facing my understanding classmates and the supportive Professor Prewitt.

Days earlier, the kindly professor had met with me one additional time, at my request, to discuss how I

would present my view of the poem. I was especially interested in what he thought of my interpretation, which was slightly different from conventional wisdom.

“Yes, Miss Randelli,” he said. “that is definitely a different interpretation. Not a bad different, but different. I think it will stimulate some interesting discussion, so please proceed just as you have planned. And afterward, after your presentation, I would appreciate a few words with you privately, in my office.”

And one week before that meeting with the Professor and ten days before the actual presentation, I had read “Eros Turannos” for the first time. The reading had left me shaken and trembling. The shaking and trembling, of course, were related to my interpretation of that brilliant work, not necessarily to what others had thought about it. The conventional wisdom was that the poem described a relationship between a woman and her philandering husband. No way, I thought. It’s deeper than that. And not only deeper, completely different. The poem, written with a brilliant metric precision, began:

She fears him, and will always ask
 What fated her to chose him;
 She meets in his engaging mask
 All reasons to refuse him;
 But what she meets and what she fears
 Are less than are the downward years,
 Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
 Of age were she to lose him.

Having read those lines, I could scarcely move, could scarcely breathe. I knew immediately what this poem described: the futility of a woman’s life because of bad choices, or in this case, one bad choice. I knew because the good Mr. Robinson, in a semblance of iambic tetrameter, was describing me, the master of bad choices. In the second stanza, the woman learns that her choice in life partners is really a scumbag, but she caves in, using love as an excuse to hang onto him:

And love that will not let him be
 The Judas that she found him.

God, why are women so stupid? Why am I so stupid?

Robinson nailed it more than a century earlier, the tendency of women, and men, too, I guess, to hang on to the here-and-now even when the here-and-now is pretty bad. Of course, that’s not the whole story. Most abusive people have long periods of behavioral pleasantness coupled with an unparalleled, masterful, con artist approach to interpersonal behavior. “Baby, you know I love you. I’m really sorry I did that. Can you forgive me?” Damn. I wished I had a nickel for every time I heard that.

And in the third stanza, Robinson uncovered the sad truth for most of us with the tendency to remain in abusive relationships:

And all her doubts of what he says
 Are dimmed with what she knows of days—
 Till even prejudice delays
 And fades, and she secures him.

I was guilty of this myself, over and over again. No matter how bad the relationship seemed, it was better than having no relationship at all, better to have a painful present than an empty future. And for me personally, I didn't think I deserved anything better. I deserved to suffer badly for my own personal transgressions. I deserved the unremitting physical and emotional torture because no outside force would ever punish me for what I had done. I think the poor woman in the poem reached that point, too:

And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide.

And in the final stanza, the poem's narrator makes a dispassionate and objective observation of the situation, summarizing the futility and hopelessness of women and men suffering in relationships that have no present and no future:

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;
Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

And that described me, taking what the god has given, accepting the abuse, keeping the blinders on

during that long, spiraling, downward trip to the sea.

On the day of my presentation, I got to the classroom a full thirty minutes early, bone-bleached, sweat-soaked, and miserable. I was pacing back and forth in front of the blackboard, anxiety a palpable vapor around me, when Professor Prewitt walked by the room. He glanced in, saw me pacing, and called to me, "Miss Randelli, would you kindly join me in my office please?"

In his office, seeing my deer-in-the-headlights appearance, he said, "Please do sit down. No. Not there. Sit next to the air conditioner."

I moved to a chair that sat below a large window-mounted air conditioner, grateful for the cool air blowing across my sweat-streaked face.

The professor went into an adjacent room, returning with a large fluffy towel. Instead of handing it to me, he used it to gently pat away the sweat on my face and forehead, much like a kindly grandfather. Then I accepted the towel from him and used it to wipe away sweat from my neck, front, and back, and then the exposed part of my chest. "Thank you, sir."

"Even on the hottest days young women don't sweat like that unless there is some underlying issue. Anxiety, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"More than perhaps, I suspect. I see the mild trembling, and when I was wiping the sweat from your brow, I could see your heart racing—the carotid artery

behind your ear was simply bounding. It still is, young lady.”

“Okay, anxiety. More than perhaps.”

He walked to a cabinet behind his desk and took out two very expensive-looking glasses and one bottle of what appeared to be wine. His back to me, I could see his thick white hair fluffed out above the collar of his white shirt. His large belly forced him to stand away from the cabinet. He poured from the bottle into each of the glasses, and then holding both, he walked to my chair, offering me one the glasses.

“Sir, it’s awfully early for a glass of wine. It’s barely 10:30.”

“First, these glasses are Vera Wang crystal flutes. I got them in Great Britain many years ago when I was on holiday there. Oh, just listen to me, trying to sound like a Brit. I got them when I was on *vacation* there. And the wine, as you call it, is actually sherry. You’re correct in a sense. It is wine, although fortified, but better perceived simply as sherry. If you know even a bit about enology, you know that sherry was originally produced in the Andalusia region of Spain, near the city of Cadiz, coming from grapes grown in the finest albariza chalk soil.

“One of the first stages of sherry production involves putting the new wine into criaderas -casks - and then the birthing product is closely monitored. With good fortune, by springtime, some of the casks will have developed *flor*, which is really a yeast called *Saccharomyces beticus*. Those casks that develop *flor* have the best chance of becoming the high-quality

Fino sherry that you see in that glass you’re holding. So you see, Miss Randelli, that is not simply wine in your glass. It is the finest Fino sherry from Andalusia, served in fine crystal, and therefore something that may be enjoyed at any time of day on any day, even at breakfast.”

“Professor,” I said, “I sit humbled before your knowledge and before this stunning crystal and its contents.”

“Excellent, Miss Randelli. Then we shall both enjoy this small pleasure before class, indulging ourselves wickedly.”

I sipped the sherry. Wow. I had had sherry before, but it was an off-the-shelf variety, thick, sweet, and with a nut-like background flavor. The professor’s sherry was like nothing I had ever experienced, more dry than sweet, less full-bodied, and more subtle, with the merest nut-like flavor. “Incredible,” I said, sipping again.

He said, “Now, let’s chat for a bit before you return to your pacing at the front of the classroom. I’m an old man now, but no less an observer of human nature and behavior than when I was younger. Although I’ve known you only a few weeks, I see in you great potential. You have a fine future in the study of literature and perhaps in the teaching of it. In the short time we’ve had together, I can see that often you perceive the deeper meaning in an author’s work, whether it be poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. Not everyone can do this. Only a few have that particular gift of translation. I would encourage you to use and develop that gift,

and if you can, to pass it along to others, perhaps to your own students someday.”

“Sir, now I am truly humbled, because I don’t feel gifted in any way.”

“Ah, but you are, Miss Randelli. Trust me. Trust the insight of an old man.”

He told me more, giving me examples of my ability to discern *deeper meaning* in someone’s writing. I thought, when I did that, I was analyzing the work, not realizing I was discerning anything else. Another wow.

“Of course you’re analyzing. That’s how you discern meaning. Some merely read. Some read and absorb. You read and discern. Use your gift, and use it well. Now let’s rinse these glasses and get to class. To use a stage term, I intend to put you on last. That will give a bit of time for that sherry to settle. Can’t have you tottering about half-tipsy in front of the class, can we? Now hold your arms out straight, with your hands and fingers extended.”

I did as he asked, noting that there was not even the slightest tremor in my fingers. God love Andalusia.

“Excellent,” he said. “After class we’ll come back here. There is more I want to tell you, and a question you must answer.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Mike

Excerpt from community news section, *Sacramento Bee*, May twelfth:

Rodney Blodget, age 15, a student in Auburn, was assaulted yesterday as he was walking home from school. The identity of his assailant or assailants is not known at this time. He was taken initially to Sutter Auburn Faith Hospital before being transferred to University Hospital in Sacramento for further evaluation. While the full extent of his injuries is not known, University Medical Center officials report that his neck was broken as the result of the assault. UC neurosurgeons performed a three-hour procedure, successfully stabilizing the fracture in his cervical spine. As of this morning, he does not appear to have suffered paralysis. No other details are available at this time.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Mike

“Will you stop distracting me?” I shouted.

“I’m not distracting you. You’re distracting yourself. Or more correctly, you’re such a loser you can’t stop me.”

I was engaged in a one-on-one basketball game with Tommy, and he was trash-talking me as usual. And usually it didn’t work. I was a better basketball player than he was unless he could distract me.

“No. You’re distracting me because you won’t bleeping answer my questions. And if you think that cheap little drop-step move that you stole from me is going to fool me again, think again.”

He gave me that cocky little grin that I hated and then said, “You mean this little drop-step move?”

I was ready for him. Ball bouncing in his left hand, he dribbled to the left. He feinted left, and I waited for him to drag his right foot. That’s when he would bounce the ball once, step back, and take an easy eighteen-foot jumper with the separation he had caused between us. As soon as he dragged his right foot, I would step in and steal the ball away just as he bounced it before stepping back. Instead, catching me leaning

in, he feinted left, did a nifty little crossover dribble to the right and went around me for an easy lay-up.

“Fine,” I said. “Just fine. First you distract me, and then you lie to me.”

“What? You fell for that line about this little drop-step move? What are you? Stupid besides being inferior?”

My scowl should have melted him. “You know that on any given day I can kick your butt halfway to Sunday on a basketball court.”

“Maybe so, bro. But not today. Today, I am king of the court. And you are one gigantic loser.”

“Shut up and give me the ball.”

“Sorry, bro. You just lost. Ten to seven, or weren’t you counting?”

“Dang!”

“Dang? Is that the best you can do?” He was mocking me.

I took the basketball and heaved it over the fence. It bounced along the grass, heading toward the Sacramento River a hundred yards away.

“Nice,” he said. “Who’s going to go get it?”

“Bite me,” I said. “It’s your ball. Go get it yourself.”

“Sorry, bro. It was actually your ball. You left it at my place last time.”

“Bleep!” I shouted.

“Okay. Bleep means you’re really upset. So tell me what the hell is going on. You played like an amateur today. I could have kicked your ass without even trying. In fact, I did kick your ass without even trying. So

what is up, bro? Give it to me. Don’t make me hurt you to get it out of you.”

“It’s the girl, Tommy. I mean the woman. I mean... bleep. I don’t know what I mean. It’s Emma. It’s those green eyes. It’s those knowing looks and facial expressions and piercing questions. Question after question. Softly relentless. The woman is driving me crazy, getting under my skin.”

He smiled with that depth of understanding that only a brother could have. “She’s making you feel again, isn’t she?”

“What?”

“She’s making you feel emotion again, Mr. Empty Shell. That’s what’s happening, right? You’re pissed because she’s making you open up. You’re pissed because you’re starting to feel something for her, probably already do.” He paused, but for only a few seconds. “You know what? I’m the one who should be pissed. You feel connected to her. To *her*. She can make you feel, but I can’t. Your best friend can’t get you back on track, back to the old Mikey. But *she* can. I should be a whole lot more pissed than you are.”

He was so absolutely correct that it made the red haze appear, albeit faintly. My Irish ancestors were still trying to guide my life. But as correct as he was, I wasn’t ready to hear it. “Bleep you, Miller. Just friggin’ bleep you.”

“Did you just say, ‘Bleep you, Miller?’ Did I just hear you correctly?”

“Yes, you did. Bleep you!”

“You said bleep you to your best friend?”

I glowered. “You bet I did.”

“You said bleep you to the guy who stood beside you in class? On the football field? In Ernie’s shop?”

“Yes. Bleep you.”

“You’re saying bleep you to the guy who sat beside you with the Marine recruiter? Who took the friggin’ oath with you? Who went through boot camp and beyond with you? Who served in Afghanistan with you?”

I was silent. With those words, cutting and deep, he had silenced me.

Before I could answer, before I could apologize, he said, “Well bleep you, too, Michaels. Get a bleeping life. Let’s be straight here. Finally. For a change. At long last. You haven’t been normal since Afghanistan. You have been empty of feeling, empty of direction, empty of everything since then. Oh, sure, you go on like nothing is wrong, and most of the time you do a pretty good job of hiding your problems. And I have tiptoed around the problems, obviously to no one’s benefit. What pisses me off most is that you won’t talk to me about it. I don’t want to be your therapist. Can’t be. I just want to be your brother, your friend. I just want to know what happened, why you’re like this. And you’re shutting me out. You have PTSD, and you won’t get help. I’ve told you this already, you aren’t the same Mike I knew before. It’s been more than four friggin’ years, and I’m goddamned sick of it. I want the old Mike back, not the walking carcass you’ve turned into.”

I started toward him, fist cocked and raised.

“Fine,” he said. “You want to take swing at me, fine. It won’t change a thing. You want more straight talk? No? Too bad, you’re getting it anyway. You don’t feel. You don’t feel anything. You don’t feel happiness, heartache, or hot sauce. You don’t feel shit. And believe me, bro, you need to feel. This woman can do that. This woman can make you feel again. Even I can see that. This woman, your *connection*, can make you want to live again. Oh, I see that look on your face. You think I don’t know what what’s going on? You think I don’t know about that fully loaded Glock you have in the nightstand next to your bed? Goddamn it, I’ve told you to get help! PTSD is treatable, moron. And I can’t do it. I’ve told you that. I can’t be your doctor. I can’t be your therapist. We’re too close. I can’t be my brother’s doctor.”

He was close enough to me for him to put his hand on my chest, and I could see the profound depth of anger in his eyes. He pushed me away and said, “You know what? Fuck you. I quit. You’re a walking dead man, empty of everything. You might as well have fucking died in Afghanistan. That fucking grenade should have taken you out. Fuck you. You’re not worth it.” And then he turned and walked off the basketball court.

I waited until he was gone and then walked outside the fenced enclosure. I walked down toward the river until I reached the basketball. I picked it up and finished the short trip to the river’s edge. I looked at the ball. He was correct. It was mine. It had the initials

MJM carved into it. He was also correct about everything else. I was different, most days barely hanging on. I was empty except for sadness and despair. But could he also be correct about the woman? Was she my way out of the circling-the-drain direction my life had taken?

I took my shoes and socks off and sat on the bank of the river, feet dangling into the water. I put the ball between my legs and let it float in the shimmering surface. Then I slowly pushed the ball under the water until the carved MJM letters were submerged.

I held it there for thirty seconds before releasing it. It popped up gently. I pushed it under again, holding it there for a full minute. When I let go, it popped up again. Bleep! The next time I gave the ball no respite. I held it under water for a full five minutes, looking at the black MJM staring back at me. *Die, you worthless piece of garbage*, I thought. *Die!* No such luck. The ball popped back up, lively as ever. God, if only humans had that sort of resilience.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Emma

After the cooling effect of the professor's air conditioner, his kind words, and his fine sherry, I walked to the classroom. It was a good thing he was putting me on last. The effects of the Fino sherry on top of having no breakfast were close to debilitating. The professor himself remained behind in his office gathering papers, stalling, I suspected, so we didn't walk in together. Can't have the appearance of favoritism, I reflected.

I sat near the back of the classroom, listening to my classmates' presentations with all the attention my mind-numbed state would allow. After thirty minutes, I was much less brain-dead and better able to process the various presentations. Some were very good. Near the end of the ninety-minute class, the professor, true to his word, put me on last. I felt settled and relaxed, much out of character for me, as I walked to the front of the classroom. I stood facing my fellow students, not a trace of anxiety in me.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began. "No one in history has been more masterfully clever with poetic language than Edward Arlington Robinson, and even

Robinson himself was never more masterful than with his poem ‘Eros Turannos,’ written in a not quite perfect iambic tetrameter. This poem, when reviewed with conventional wisdom, seems to be the tale of a woman trapped in a relationship with a man who may be, shall we say, less than true blue. I disagree with that analysis. I think there is deeper meaning and intent, intent quite different from what most conventional reviewers might think. Let me read the poem to you first, and then I will give you my unconventional view of it.”

I read. They listened. And then I laid it out for them, the analysis that I had constructed ten days earlier. I gave them detail, using Robinson’s own words to illustrate the intent that I perceived in his writing. I spoke authoritatively and quickly, far different from my usual fumbling presentations. I finished and asked quietly, “Any questions?”

A girl in the front row raised her hand, and after my acknowledgement, said, “Not a question really, but a comment. You talk like you know something about abusive relationships.”

As she finished those words, something gave way inside me, like an internal rending in my chest. It wasn’t painful. Instead, it was exhilarating. I felt free, unfettered, baggage left scattered. And suddenly, too, I felt less demure, less reserved. I felt commanding, like a general in front of an army, confident and secure. And while I felt no less secure in my own perception of abuse, I definitely felt in charge of that class. Later, Professor Prewitt would tell me that I sounded, well, professorial.

“Yes, I may know something about that. But it’s irrelevant. It’s not the point. The point is the message in the poem, Robinson’s intent. Got that? *Intent!*” I was almost shouting. “Forget the ‘downward years.’ Forget the damn ‘foamless weirs of age.’ Forget the blind descent to the sea. Get real. Get a life. That’s the intent. It means that no present is acceptable and no future is worthy if it contains the torture of verbal, emotional, or physical abuse. Pack up. Move into the next part of your life. And if it appears that the next part will have any form of abuse, move on from that one, too. No more. That’s the message I took away from this poem, and it’s the message I want you to take away from it, too. I look here at all of you, and I know in my heart that someone, perhaps more than one person, is currently experiencing abuse of some sort—or will experience it. If that’s the case, stop it. Stop it now. Or stop it in the future. I don’t care. Just stop it.” God, I sounded like a drill sergeant. “That’s my interpretation of this poem.”

A brief silence followed, which was interrupted by the professor. “Thank you, class. That will be all for today. You all have your assignments for the coming week, and I will expect them all to be as well done as those we heard today.”

I gathered my things slowly, and with book bag and purse slung over my shoulder, I left the classroom, noting a few stragglers remaining to speak with the professor. As requested, I went to the professor’s office and waited outside the door. I didn’t have to wait long since he came shuffling along a few minutes later,

beard flowing, white hair streaming, and ponderous belly overlapping his trousers.

“Ah, Miss Randelli. Thank you for returning. And I saw that disapproving glance at my impressive girth. I was not always so round, as you may suspect. Come inside, and I’ll show you.”

We walked into his office and around his huge oak desk, which was cluttered with books, and folders, and papers. Behind his desk, hanging on the wall at exactly eye level, was a large picture of three young men running in a race, with one of them reaching the tape at the finish line.

He said, “That skinny, dark-haired fellow there breaking the tape is me, believe it or not. That photo finish took place after we had run twenty-six miles and three hundred eighty-five yards—a marathon, you know. The distance originated in ancient Greece, when, by legend, a soldier named Phidippides was sent from the plains of Marathon to Athens with the news of the astounding victory over a superior Persian army. As he approached the leaders of the city, he staggered and gasped, ‘Rejoice! We conquer!’ Then he collapsed, just as I did more than two thousand years later in that photo you see before you. But still, it was the best race I ever ran. Last one, too. That was almost fifty years ago. I retired from competitive racing after that to concentrate on graduate school studies. Worst mistake I ever made, by the way. Retiring from running, that is, not the school part.”

“You look incredibly fit in that picture, sir,” I said.

“Thank you. And may I say that you looked incredibly fit while giving your presentation today.”

“You gave me the confidence, sir, allowing me to present what I felt, supporting me, comforting me earlier today. So thank you.”

“Ah, Miss Randelli. You’re welcome, although you must not overstate any small contribution from me. You did that all on your own. And very well done, too, may I say. Now I have something to tell you before I ask you the question you must answer. Look at the photograph to the left of the one with the runners.”

It was a smaller photograph, in sepia, of two men, each with an arm over the other’s shoulder, both smiling and laughing. One of the two was the professor, looking much the same as he did crossing the finish line in the other photograph, although considerably cleaned up. The second man looked to be about the same age as the professor, although his light hair and fair skin contrasted sharply with the professor’s dark hair and deep tan. I turned to the professor.

“The blond young man is Ernst,” he said. “Ernst was a native German who came here to study and eventually remained as a naturalized citizen. We were together for forty-two years as partners, and much of that time was in a world far less tolerant of same-sex relationships than it is now. It was the finest, most fulfilling part of my life. He has been gone now for seven years, and I still miss him as if he had passed yesterday. He was only sixty-three years old when he died, far too young for anyone to pass in these times of health-awareness and excellent medical care.

“I see by your look that you want to know how he died, but you’re much too considerate to ask. Well, let me tell you. It was the most horrible scene possible. We had gone downtown to do some shopping, and I pulled over so Ernst could get a head start while I looked for a parking place. Sadly I pulled over on the left side of one of those one-way streets they have in the downtown area. That means the passenger door was street-side, rather than adjacent to the sidewalk. Looking back now, I know that Ernst was thinking that he was stepping out onto the sidewalk, because he simply opened the door and got out.

“As Ernst stepped out of the car, he turned, facing oncoming traffic, and immediately saw the oncoming speeding pickup truck, slightly out of control. He had no chance, nor did I. The truck struck him and sent his crushed body nearly fifty feet through the air. He died instantly, I’m sure, and the speeding truck kept on speeding. Police never found either the driver or the vehicle. The most difficult part of the incident for me, besides losing Ernst, besides being witness to his death, was not being able to say good-bye. That haunts me to this day. I had hoped for many more years together, many more decades together, but it was all taken away. Taken away with no good-bye.”

Seeing the professor’s agony, I had no words. I stepped to him and put my arms around him, holding him tenderly, no longer the pupil but the confidant. He accepted my embrace gratefully. “Thank you, Miss Randelli. Now let me tell you about my life

immediately before Ernst. Before Ernst rescued me from despair. That’s the true point of this particular meeting. But first, since I have cast such a gloomy pall upon this early afternoon, we must rescue the day with another small glass of Fino sherry. And my dear Miss Randelli, if you spend much more time with me sipping away at such high-calorie beverages, you will soon have a waistline as generous as mine.”

He poured two glasses of sherry and began to hand one to me, then hesitated. “Driving are you? I mean home, in a car?”

“No. Bus.”

“Excellent,” he said, giving me the fuller of the two glasses. *He’s up to something*, I thought. “Now,” he said, “let’s adjourn to the sofa. I am an old man, overweight and out of shape, and I must sit down now.”

We sat on a sofa that must have been a hundred years old, with scalloped, hand-carved wings that had been polished to a stunning brightness. The cloth fabric, several shades of green interwoven into each other, looked as if it come from the late nineteenth century. The professor leaned back onto the dense cushion and suddenly looked as old as the sofa. He sighed. “Much better. Now, Miss Randelli, let me tell you about my life before Ernst, the life from which he rescued me. I was nineteen years old, a mediocre student but an excellent runner, and fit as a fiddle. I suppose I was reasonably attractive, too. I met and was drawn to an incredible physical specimen, a boy of my own age, Mark O’ Bannon. Everyone called him Marco, a derivative form of Mark O.”

Sitting facing the professor, I wasn't fully able to muffle a gasp as he said the name Marco. Strange, how coincidence can span decades, his Marco and mine.

"Mark O'Bannon was a sociopath, I think," the professor continued, "devoid of conscience and incapable of feeling and incapable of love. On the other hand, he was masterful at pretending those things, a gifted con artist in interpersonal behavior. He was quite muscular and very much stronger than I was, and he was also possessive, restrictive, and vindictive. I was young and foolish, and I didn't recognize what he was doing at first, isolating me, abusing me first emotionally and then verbally. And I should have seen the final chapter coming, his horrifying and volcanic eruption of temper that left me unconscious and mutilated. In the hospital, when I looked into the hand-held mirror the nurse had brought me, when I looked at the destruction that was my face, I wanted to die. I didn't want to live in that disfigured state.

"But as I lay there thinking, I was struck by the fact that Marco would expect me to give up, to let him win. No. Never. Not William Howard Prewitt, marathon runner. Not that day, not any day. I filed a formal police report, dealt with all the attached and unavoidable humiliation, and posed for the post-traumatic photos that had a lasting impact on a jury of Marco's peers. He spent three years and nine months in prison, and I never saw him again.

"A team of plastic surgeons discussed my options, and I elected for the major fix, allowing substantial rebuilding of my face, which had been all but destroyed

by the evil Mark O'Bannon. Six months later I met Ernst, the kindest, most understanding person I have ever known, and he resurrected me personally and professionally. I thought it important for you to know those things, Miss Randelli, and especially that I *too* know something about abusive relationships."

His use of the word "too" was not lost on me. I knew we were headed somewhere that I might not want to go.

"Miss Randelli, I have explained that I am a prudent observer of human nature. You sometimes seem withdrawn, sometimes agitated, sometimes distracted. Never was this more apparent than after I assigned you Robinson's poem 'Eros Turannos.' So I have a question for you, Miss Randelli." He had shifted slightly on the sofa so he could look directly at me. With great trepidation, I met and held his gaze, our eyes locked together.

"Recall that I told you I am an unparalleled observer of human nature and the human condition. I am. Once, in class during a test, I observed you hunched over at your desk, head bowed and your hair spilled forward. You were working so very intently, and all I could see was the top of your head. What I saw though, Miss Randelli, gave me pause. It appeared that you had a long linear scar across your scalp, extending nearly from one temple to the other."

I shuddered, not really wanting him to continue, but he continued anyway.

"And here in my office, I also saw your anxiety before you presented your decisive analysis of 'Eros

Turannos.’ I saw other things, Miss Randelli, such as very narrow scars under your jaw line and in your left eyebrow. Now, would the scar in your scalp be an access point to extensive facial reconstruction? If we could examine your facial bones, would we find that some of them are held together by very tiny titanium microplates, including that nearly perfect nose? So my question for you, Miss Randelli, is this: might all of those things be a result of abuse you experienced and therefore related to your conclusion that Robinson’s intent was to describe an abusive relationship?”

I had been expecting a far less direct question, not something so absolutely dead-on. If I had been struck in the solar plexus, I would have not been rendered any more breathless. How could he see those things? How could he know all those things? Tears filled my eyes. No, no, no. I never cried about that. I never let myself cry, never had, never would.

“You see, Miss Randelli, I wear this beard not only because I am a pompous old man, which I am, but also because it hides the scars on my own face, just like yours. When I had my facial reconstruction all those many years ago, techniques were not advanced to the point where the external scars would be all but invisible like yours. There was no CT scan that gave a computerized 3-D reconstruction of facial injury. There were no titanium microplates. It was all still so primitive. So I use camouflage. A beard. Camouflage for the external scars. But there is nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing that will ever cover the internal ones. Do you know what I mean, Miss Randelli?”

And then I, who had sworn to never cry about Marco Randelli and what he had done to me, suddenly found myself sobbing and clinging to that kind old man. He understood what I had suffered, understood it more thoroughly and better than anyone.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Mike

The day after I kissed a girl for the first time, the day after I exorcised my personal demon, the evil Bluto, I almost literally floated all the way to school. The only mildly bad thing was that Junie was not waiting on her front porch so we could walk to school together. That meant she had either left early or she was staying home. Prudently, because of the malignant stepfather Daniel, I didn't go to the door to inquire.

At school the hallways were abuzz with the news of Bluto.

“...laid out in the woods somewhere...”

“...beaten within an inch of his life...”

“...nobody ever deserved it more...”

“...broken neck...”

“...not paralyzed...too bad...”

I looked for Junie, but she wasn't there. I fretted about this all day, worrying that she was more seriously injured than she had let on. There was nothing I could do about it until after school, so I tried to stay focused—unsuccessfully, for the most part. After the end-of-day bell rang, I walked to Mrs. Enterman's classroom, finding her talking to Mr. Stevens. Standing in the doorway, I knocked on the door. “May I come in?”

“Yes, Finn. Come in,” Mr. Stevens said. “Sit down, please.”

I sat, picking a desk discretely away from where they were sitting.

“Finn, we’ve been discussing the issues, the main one being our concern that someone with limited life experiences could write a poem with the apparent depth that is contained in the one you turned in.”

I reflected on that briefly. “Sir,” I said, “that’s unfair and unmerited.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Why unfair? Or why unmerited?”

“Both.”

“Well, sir. It’s unfair because you’re making assumptions about me without full knowledge about my past. And unmerited because of those assumptions, since you know nothing about the roads I’ve traveled. You see me as a naïve fourteen-year-old with no, or perhaps with only limited, life experiences. And that, sir, is both unfair and unmerited.”

“Well said, young man, and I have noticed that you seen very well spoken. I concede to your logic. Mrs. Enterman and I have already discussed the issues. We decided, before you arrived, that the requirement for you to complete an additional assignment is unnecessary. We reviewed the remarks you made last time we met, about not wanting any gifts as far as grades, but rather simply what you truly deserved. We also reviewed all of your previous assignments, and I must admit you write well for someone so young—

albeit well traveled.” He spoke those last words with a wry grin on his face. “We have concluded that you did indeed write that poem, and please accept my apology for doubting you.”

“And mine,” said Mrs. Enterman. That stopped me dead in my tracks. I would have to reassess my opinion of Mrs. Enterman based on those two simple words.

“Anything you do here today is going to be optional on your part. If you do wish to go ahead with a special assignment, it will count as extra credit, possibly taking your current B-plus grade to an A-minus or higher. But it’s your call. You’re under no obligation to do anything additional at this point.”

“Apology accepted, from both,” I said. “Thank you. And sir, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a shot at whatever you’ve concocted for me. I’ve been looking forward to the challenge all day, and I’d like to take a crack at it. Not necessarily for extra credit, although that would be nice, but just for the thrill of the challenge.”

“Fine,” he said. “What kind of music do you like?”

I thought about that for a while. “Country western,” I said.

“Excellent, Finn. Use about sixty minutes to write a country western song. Just the lyrics, not the music. If it’s any good, maybe will get it published and sung somewhere.”

Mrs. Enterman, rising from her chair, said, “Finn, Mr. Stevens and I are going to leave. When you’re done, put the finished paper on my desk, and note

how many minutes you spent on it.” With Mr. Stevens out of earshot, she said, with a sly smile on her face, “Don’t worry if you go over sixty minutes. It’s okay. When you leave, turn out the lights, and pull the door shut on your way out. It’s already locked.”

They left me there, somewhat stunned. They believed me. They trusted me in the room. They trusted me to do the work. They trusted me to accurately report the time I spent on the assignment. Amazing. I couldn’t wait to tell Junie.

As thoughts of Tigrito’s rules of life flooded my brain, a country western song spilled out onto the paper. I finished in forty-five minutes, and I read it one more time before putting it on Mrs. Enterman’s desk:

My Father’s Face
by Finn Carter

*When I was young, my father was king,
A solid oak in a sapling sea.
I’d look in his face, an unobtainable place,
A place that would never be me.*

*I listened to his words, but never really heard
And ignored the wisdom in his voice.
I went my own way, far, far astray,
Shouting loudly, “I have freedom of choice.”*

*Now years later, I’m wiser and willing to see.
And yes, my father’s words hauntingly echo to me:*

Chorus

*Come early, stay late, work hard.
Always hold your fellow man in high regard.
Don’t be out partyin’ when you should be asleep.
Don’t ever make a promise you know you can’t keep.*

*We went our separate ways, he and I,
Not agreeing on much in the conduct of living.
I grew tall and distant but strong,
While he continued trying and giving.*

*We’d meet now and then, and I still couldn’t see.
So he’d preach those same stale old words to me.*

Chorus

*Come early, stay late, work hard.
Always hold your fellow man in high regard.
Don’t be out partyin’ when you should be asleep.
Don’t ever make a promise you know you can’t keep.*

*Years pass by in the blink of an eye
And now enlightened I could see
The depth of his words, not previously heard.
He’s gone now, but those words relentlessly echo to me.*

Chorus

*Come early, stay late, work hard.
Always hold your fellow man in high regard.
Don’t be out partyin’ when you should be asleep.
Don’t ever make a promise you know you can’t keep.*

*When I was young, my father was king,
A solid oak in a sapling sea.
I'd look in his face, an unobtainable place,
A place that would never be me.*

*With years come wisdom. That's how it should be.
And now when I look in the mirror, what do I see?
I see my father's face lookin' back at me.
Yeah, I see my father's face lookin' back at me.*

Chorus

*Come early, stay late, work hard.
Always hold your fellow man in high regard.
Don't be out partyin' when you should be asleep.
Don't ever make a promise you know you can't keep.*

Chapter Thirty

Emma

I was sitting on Randi's west-facing veranda on the third floor of the apartment complex, watching Mike and Tom playing basketball. In the distance beyond the basketball court, I could see the Sacramento River shimmering in the afternoon sunlight. The river at that point was flowing in a roughly north-south direction on its way from Mount Shasta to the San Francisco Bay. I loved that river. I had spent many hours on it, in canoes and kayaks and in the buff. Yes, I had gone skinny-dipping in that pristine water, far upstream near its mountainous origin, but only when no one else was around. For all my experiences, I was still basically a prude. I especially loved one particular upstream part, a twenty-five-mile canyon that was capped with lava rim-rock. I also loved the trails, and I had hiked and run on many of them. I loved sitting there, above the river, in the relative desolation of that canyon, looking down on everything, watching canoers and kayakers and fisherman catching Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. Mercy me, what a great river.

Next to me, Randi was sipping that disgusting, sugar-laden raspberry tea. I still marveled at how she seldom needed to take a potty break, and in spite of all that calorie-laden tea, she managed to stay so slim. She was perfectly matched to Tommy in metabolism—neither of them ever seeming to gain a pound no matter how much they ate. I, on the other, became Blimposaurus rex if I even walked near an extra serving of anything. Fortunately, I loved running. And even more fortunately, there were plenty of running trails around. The only thing I lacked was a running partner. *Maybe I should get a dog*, I thought, *one with running instincts and stamina*. Oh well, maybe someday, another idea put on the shelf next to all the other maybe-some-day things.

I was drinking unsweetened, unflavored iced tea, my drink of choice. A bit of flavor, no calories...it was my penance for a less than robust metabolism compared to my look-alike, near-sister Randi.

As we watched the ballplayers off in the distance, she said, “You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

Startled by her directness, I looked at her. I could never lie to her because she would know immediately, and also I just plain could never lie to her. I could never lie to Randi. I didn’t even try to be cute. I didn’t even try asking, “What?” It wouldn’t work anyway. Instead, I said simply, “No. I’m not falling for him. I have fallen. Hard. God, Randi, what am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, Emma. What are you going to do?”

“God, you’re just like Mike, answering a question with a question. Jeez, don’t do that now, Randi. What am I going to do?”

Randi reached across the small table between us, touching my hand. “Emma, you’re a big girl. You know what you feel, or what you don’t feel. You have to use that to guide you. You have to put all the hurt behind you. You have to trust your feelings about this time, this situation, this man. You have to trust.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. “Every time I’ve trusted someone...no, every time I’ve trusted a man in matters related to love—except for one time—I’ve been hurt. Oh, I know there are some men who are basically good. My grandfather is a saint. The Bear has been my salvation. Professor Prewitt guided me on my life’s course. But men my age, no way. Losers all, untrustworthy to the core. I just don’t think I could bear to be hurt again, not even once more.” I paused for a long time, looking out at the river, and then at the nearby ballplayers, engaged once again in their I’m-better-than-you conflict. Finally, I said, “Okay, here’s the deal. I see something in this man, Mike, that I haven’t ever seen before, except for maybe one other time. There’s some kind of connection I don’t understand. There is something there that makes me want to take a chance. There is something there that already makes me want to love him, makes me...love him already.”

I stopped talking abruptly. I wanted to take back that last statement. I wasn’t ready to love again. I couldn’t love again. Ever.

Randi interrupted. “I’m glad to hear you say that. And I sense the hesitancy in your voice. I sense your reluctance to accept the obvious.”

My puzzled look stopped her briefly, and then she continued. “Oh, you don’t have to look so befuddled. I know what you’re thinking. You think I don’t see the wistful, faraway look in your eyes when we talk about Mike? You think I don’t see you making a physical appraisal of the Adonis-like Michael J Michaels every time he gets out of the pool? You think I don’t see you drawing back when you start to let yourself get close to him? You think I don’t see that? Do you think I’m stupid?”

“No, I don’t think you’re stupid. God, you’re the smartest woman I know, maybe the smartest person. I know all those things are true. I know. I’m just... afraid.”

“Afraid to take a chance? No. Afraid to take a chance *again*?”

“Yes.”

“Well, let me tell you what else I see. You think you have fallen hard? Look lady, Mikey-boy has fallen so hard for you that he is down for the count. I see everything. I see Mike with a faraway, wistful look in his eye when he sees *you* coming toward him. I see him making an approving physical appraisal when he sees *you* getting out of the pool or coming back from a long run, even when you’re sweat-soaked with your hair plastered to your head. I see him drawing back when he senses that he feels what *you* feel. Jesus H. Christ, you two are so dense that you don’t see what everyone else is seeing. You’re in love.”

“No, Randi. Don’t say that. I can’t be in love. I can’t. I couldn’t stand the result. I couldn’t stand the

stake-through-the-heart outcome. I can’t do it. I can’t. I can’t take the chance.” I was crying again.

She was still holding my hand. “Emma, listen to me. Take the chance. This is the one. This is the guy. This is the guy you’ve been waiting for. Whether you can see it or not, this is the man of your dreams.”

I was still bawling, with tears streaming down my cheeks. I said, “I can’t.”

“You can. Trust. Trust your feelings. Trust this man.”

I removed my hand from hers, gathering myself and wiping away the tears. “You really think that he’s the one? The one I can put my trust in? The one I can trust not to gut me again? The one I can spend the rest of my life with?”

“As sure as the day is long, Emma Randelli. This is your guy.”

We both watched the ballplayers again for a while. I asked, “Do they always play like that, with that same physical intensity? It’s like they’re trying to kill each other out there.”

“Yes. They always play that way, with that I’d-rather-die-than-lose approach. They always have, even when they were young. They do that in everything they do together. They say it makes them better, stronger, more durable for the long run. I still don’t get it completely, this guy approach to life, but they seem content with it.”

The sun was slowing sinking in the far west, and I imagined I could see all the way to San Francisco Bay, to Fisherman’s Wharf, Market Street and Chinatown,

and the Tenderloin. I looked at Randi again and said, “Okay, I’m going to take a flyer. I’m going to take a chance. I’m going to roll the dice on this man, even though he wasn’t completely up front with me about a few things. Even though he is the master dissembler. I’m going to take a chance. God, help me. I’m going to take a chance.”

She took my hand again and said, “Good for you, girl, and if he hurts you I will personally castrate him.”

Looking at her, I had no doubt she was serious. As I was reflecting on that, Randi said, “Oh my God. What is going on down there?”

On the basketball court, something was happening. I watched in puzzlement as the two ballplayers stopped playing. Mike was shouting at Tommy. Then he took the basketball and threw it over the fence, and it slowly bounced toward the river. Then they were shouting at each other again. Then Tommy put his hand on Mike’s chest, shoved him, shouted something again, and then he turned and stalked away.

I looked at Randi. “What was that all about?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

I watched Tommy leave the fenced basketball court and walk toward the apartment complex. Then I watched Mike leave the enclosure and walk toward the river. “But, Randi, what does it mean?”

“I don’t know, Emma. But whatever it is, it’s not good.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Emma

I worked for Needs in his beloved Bear Claw for more than three years, learning from the furry Mr. Bear every aspect of business management that related to restaurant services. He paid me well, and I saved almost all of my salary, including incredible sums of tip money. Needs, true and faithful to his adopted country, and grateful for the opportunities it had given him, insisted that I keep track of my tips to the penny, paying Federal income tax on every last drop. That part was easy, the record keeping. It was simply an extension of the record keeping he had me do for the Bear Claw, and I reached a point where I knew enough to run the place on my own. One day, just after the Fourth of July, Needs finally recognized that I could manage the place without him, at least for a short time. He said, “My fair and lovely Miss Emma, I need a vacation. I think I will visit Cozumel. Do you think you can hold things together for a week or ten days?”

I smiled. “A week, yes. Ten days, no.”

“Then a week it shall be,” he said. “I will leave next Monday and return the following Monday.”

Wow. What a week. I worked from six in the morning until after midnight every day. It was exhausting but exhilarating, and there was no way I was going to disappoint the Bear. No way. We were going to have a week like no other, both in sales and in profits. I met vendors at sunrise, and I swept out the last of the daily detritus under the guidance of a full moon. Five days into the Bear's vacation, Marco Randelli showed up. He showed up as a customer, and he stayed as a lover.

I saw him when he came into the Bear Claw—broad-shouldered, dark-haired, olive-skinned, and stunningly handsome as only some Italian men can be. I was smitten immediately, although I didn't fully realize it then. He did, though. In retrospect, he knew he had me as soon as our eyes met. Clever man, honing in on his next victim: the unsuspecting me. It would take me months of reflection to piece the timeline together to realize how foolish and unseeing I had been.

On the following Monday, a week to the day after he had left for Mexico, Needs walked into the Bear Claw a few minutes before 3:00 p.m. The lunch crowd had dwindled to nothing, and I was sitting on a high stool behind the signature mahogany bar, putting the final touches on the accounting books for the week. Needs, once again in his element, fairly sparkled, he was so happy to be back to his place. At the same time, I noticed that he seemed content and was nicely tanned.

"Ah, Miss Emma, look at you, every bit the business-woman, perched so she can survey her domain. And look at me. I am no longer the pasty Polish pub owner.

I am brown, perhaps not as brown as the natives in Cozumel, but definitely brown. Por Dios, I have never had a tan in all of my life. Just look at me. Y soy muy contento. Listen to me, using all of my new Spanish. You know, I spent hours on the beach every day, walking, swimming, watching all the pretty young women. Oy! Such beauty, and so much of it. Ah, but none as beautiful as you, little Emma.

"Ha!" He touched his paunch. "And I also return with a few extra pounds around my middle. Too much food. Oy vey! Such food, and so good. Still, I feel years younger. And here, today, I am looking around at my pub, and I have never seen the place so clean. What have you been doing here? Did you spend the entire week scrubbing everything spotless? And are those the accounting books on the bar? Yes? Good. Let's look at them now."

He skirted around the bar and stood beside me, slowly turning the pages, scanning the numbers. He moaned with approval. "My oh my. Oh, my. Emma, Emma, Emma. Emma, the miracle-worker. You have had a week like no other. What did you do, work day and night?" He pulled me to him, giving me one of his crushingly gentle bear hugs.

"Actually, I did work day and night. You conveniently left that out when you gave me the job description for pub manager."

"Yes I did, little Emma. But you learned the truth quickly, no doubt. Oy, just look at this place. If there is a speck of dirt anywhere, it will take a microscope to find it." He hugged me again.

Later, when he had unpacked and freshened up, he rejoined me at the bar. “Ah, my beautiful little Emma. I come back from my vacation, tan and fat, and I find my pub sparkling clean, with a record profit for a one-week period. Now for sure I am turning this place over to you.” As he said that, he studied my wide-eyed look. “No, little Emma, I would not do that to you. The Pub is all-consuming, too much for one so young to manage for more than short periods. And later, you will open this envelope that I am handing to you now to inspect the bonus check for your excellent week’s work.”

“But I can’t take a bonus. Not for just doing my job.”

“Ah, Emma. Yes, you can. And you didn’t just do your job. You performed it with passion, diligence, and dedication. You scrubbed my little pub until it glows. You had a week’s profit margin that makes me gush with happiness. Do not disappoint an old man by refusing his small gift.”

“Oh, the furry Mr. Bear. Always charming the ladies with words. Yes, I accept your gift. On those terms, with those words, how could I refuse?” I leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, perhaps we should discuss having you take some time off. You must have a life away from this place. Free time is not so necessary for an old man like me. This place *is* my life. You are too young yet for this place to become *your* life. On the other hand, you did such a good job that I think I

will retire to Cozumel, and you will send me a stipend check every month.”

I laughed. “Ha ha. You’ll never retire. If I know you, you’ll still be working from the grave. But I think I could be happy doing this all the time, at least what I did during the past week.”

“No, my Emma, I see for you a life away from this place, an education elsewhere, success in another field in another time and place. And I see more, little Emma. You have a glow you didn’t have a week ago. What has happened?”

“I met someone.”

“Yes, I suspected so. Well, let us hope he is a good someone, because you certainly deserve a good someone.”

Needs, the diplomat, left much unsaid. He knew my track record, knew my reputation as the town’s party girl who used men to punish myself. He and I had talked about it into the wee hours on many nights after the pub closed.

“Emma, from everything that you have told me, I know that something bad happened to you or that you did something bad or both. I do not yet know which, nor does it matter. I do know that you continue to make some bad choices. And I suspect, but do not know for sure, that your choices are a form of self-punishment, that you select male friends and lovers who will ultimately hurt you, emotionally if not physically.”

I didn’t want to hear this, but he was correct. Mostly correct. What he didn’t understand was that

I was, at best, low-life scum who deserved no better than abuse and rejection. What he didn't know, or didn't acknowledge, was that I invited this abuse and rejection. Yes, I wanted to be punished. Deserved it. Deserved no better.

Behind the bar, the tan and happy Bear said again, "Yes, let's hope he is a good someone. When will I get to meet him?"

"Tonight. He's picking me up after work. I'd like to leave at eleven tonight, if that's okay."

"Of course, my little Emma." But a furrow of disappointment was visible in his forehead.

The next morning, I came downstairs bleary-eyed and exhausted, having stayed out far too late for a working girl. Needs was hunched over at the bar, arranging invoices and payment checks in a neat orderly line—his method of accounting. I smiled at him as I perched myself on a stool across from him. "Good morning," I said.

"I don't like him."

"What?"

"You know I don't mince words, Emma."

Uh oh. Not little Emma. Not my little Emma. Not sweet little Emma. Just Emma.

"I don't like him, Emma."

"How can you say that? You met him one time for five minutes."

"You know that I have spent a lifetime listening and observing. I am good at it. I can now observe and listen in several languages, although I do not advertise that fact. I listen, I observe, and I study. I learn, using

all the things that I have acquired over a lifetime. And I tell you this, my sweet little Emma: he is malevolent. Do you know the word, Emma? Of course you do. I only hope you recognize his malevolence before he hurts you."

I was angry, but I didn't lash out at Needs. *I will show you, I thought, that you are wrong, 100 percent wrong.*

Unfortunately for me, Needs was 100 percent correct. Unfortunately for me, I didn't recognize malevolence, even when it eventually stared me in the face. Unfortunately for me, I was captivated by Marco's charm and blinded by his abilities as a lover.

I was absolutely certain he was my man, the one I would be with forever, certain that I had found true love. Less than two months after I met him, on the Tuesday after Labor Day, I packed my bags, climbed into his BMW convertible, and drove with him to Nevada. We were married on Wednesday in a small, simple ceremony, devoid of family and friends. Looking back now, I marvel at my stupidity, but life is about looking forward with anticipation, not backward with regret.

I was still estranged from my grandparents. Needs would often say, "Emma, you must go back to them someday."

"Not yet," I would reply. "I can't. Not just yet." So I had my Nevada wedding alone, with no family, no Needs, no grandparents, no anybody. It should have been another huge red flag for me that Marco thought the absence of family was both acceptable and preferable. But I still had those blinders on.

The following Monday, I was back to work, apologizing to Needs for leaving abruptly with only a hastily handwritten note in my wake. The note, placed on the center of that long mahogany bar, had read: “Back next week. Sorry. Emma.” The perceptive Needs knew exactly what was happening when I left, knew what I was up to and knew that I was embarking on a new and dangerous course in life.

He greeted me formally when I returned, listened quietly while I told him I was now married, and then asked if I would be moving my things out of my upstairs room. Yes, I said, and later that day I did.

No matter what I did after that, no matter how hard I tried, there seemed to be a chilly chasm between me and the furry Mr. Bear. It didn’t help that Marco insisted I spend less and less time at the Claw. He began making more demands on me, more demands on my time. He insisted that I be home when he got there, that everything be in perfect order.

“You don’t need to work,” he said. “We have plenty of money. We don’t need any extra.” That much was true. He was a stockbroker, and a good one. “And besides, I need you here, at home. This place looks like shit.”

He slowly guided me into a gradually increasing isolation, demanding that I never leave the house without his permission. He would come home from work, electrically bristling with hostility, constantly criticizing everything I did or tried to do. He never had a kind word or appreciative thought, which was for me the worst kind of emotional torture. One afternoon,

coming home early, he found me sitting in a love seat, reading a book. He strode to me quickly, grasping the skin on my upper arm in a vise-like pinch. “What the hell are you doing sitting? Everything better be done, goddamn you, and I mean everything.”

“Good grief, Marco, lighten up. Laundry’s done, supper’s ready. It’s all done.”

He raised an open hand as if to slap me. “Don’t you ever talk back to me again, woman. Ever!”

After supper, as I was doing the dishes, he slipped behind me, putting his arms around my abdomen and nuzzling my neck with his lips. “Emma, jeez, I’m sorry I was such a jerk. I just had a bad day, and I took it out on you. Can you forgive me?”

Fool that I was, I did.

Two days later, again disappointed that I was sitting, he shook me so hard my teeth rattled. Two days after that, he slapped me for the first time. Each episode was followed by an apology, most sounding very sincere, and followed the next day by the arrival of roses or Godiva chocolate.

By late November, I had sensed the pattern. I saw the unrelenting escalation in his violent personality and admitted it wasn’t going to work. I couldn’t stay with him, couldn’t continue to allow myself to be subjected to all his forms of abuse.

On the fourth Thursday in November, coming home for Thanksgiving dinner, the first thing he asked was when we were going to eat.

“About an hour,” I said. “I got a bit of a late start with the turkey.”

“What? An hour?” he said. “What the goddamned hell have you been doing all day? Sitting on your dead ass?” Then he slapped me so hard that blackness swelled around me. I recovered my balance and fled to the bedroom. He didn’t follow. I pulled an overnight bag out of the closet, filled it with bare essentials, and went back to the living room. He was standing by the sofa, sipping a glass of wine. “Baby, I’m sorry, I...what the hell is that bag? Just where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I’m leaving, Marco. You have hit me for the last time. Your Thanksgiving dinner is almost ready. Take the turkey out of the oven at seven. Everything else is ready. I won’t be staying for supper.”

He moved with grace and great speed to where I was standing. “Oh, yes, you’ll be staying. You aren’t fucking going anywhere. Not now. Not ever.”

“I’m leaving,” I said. “I’m not putting up with this treatment.”

“Baby, you try to walk out that door, and I’ll bust you up so bad, no one will ever want to look at you again.”

I pushed him away. “I said I’m leaving.” I turned around, opened the closet door, took out my jacket, and put it on. I stooped to pick up my overnight bag and then turned back to face him just in time to take his right fist high on my left cheekbone. With astonishing clarity, as I was spun back toward the closet, I realized that part of my face had been shattered.

I felt him grab my shoulder as he spun me back to face him. “I warned you,” he said, as his left fist drove

into my right cheekbone and then into the bridge of my nose. Crunch, crunch.

“Yeah, I warned you. Two more, baby, and then I’m done.”

I felt his ham-like right fist, a fist of steel, strike the left side of my jaw, and then his left fist struck the right side of my jaw. Another devastating crunch, crunch. So calculating. So efficient. Five blows. Perfect destruction.

“Okay, bitch. I only hit hard enough to break, not destroy. Otherwise you’d be out cold on the ground, or dead. Now you can leave.”

He took my bag to the open front door and threw it out onto the sidewalk. Then he took me, guided me harshly to the same open door, and pushed me through it. “Good luck with your plastic surgery, bitch. You never were worth much, and you sucked in bed, too. Now get the fuck out of here.” He threw a wad of money at me, and it opened into a fluttering green panorama in the muted glow of the streetlights. I left the bills on the lawn and walked slowly to the Gray Lady.

Now what to do, I thought. I didn’t have health insurance, so I couldn’t go to the hospital. I couldn’t go to my grandparents’ house. Needs was so disappointed in me that I couldn’t go there. It was another fine mess I’d gotten myself into.

I drove around the city for an hour, my pain-filled face preventing any cogent thinking. I tried to come up with a plan, but as the minutes passed, I found it harder and harder to drive because of double vision.

I had never had double vision before, and I didn't know what it meant. I had to keep my head tilted to the left to keep from seeing two of everything. Weird. I could also feel my face swelling, and it was getting harder to breathe through my nose. I think my eyes were nearly swollen shut because everything had a slit-like appearance. The pain was becoming unbearable.

A few minutes after midnight, no longer able to drive safely, I found myself in front of the Bear Claw. I would go the Bear, I had decided, and fall on my sword, telling him he was right and I was stupid.

I still had my key to the front door of the pub, but neither my eyes nor my brain nor my fingers would function well enough for me to get the key into the keyhole, much less turn it. I was seeing two keys and two keyholes, and every time I moved my head, the planes of the key and the keyhole would change. After what seemed like hours of futility, the door opened from the inside. "Who is this scratching at my door so late at night?" The Bear, my salvation, stood in the muted light of the pub, looking out at me.

"My God, Emma. What happened? No, never mind, I know what happened. Tell me, were you knocked unconscious? No. Good. That is one less thing to worry about. I can barely understand you when you speak. That is probably due to the swelling and possibly from fractures in the jaw. Sit here. I will get my car keys and take you to the hospital."

"No. Please. I don't have health insurance."

"Foolish little Emma. Of course you do. I continued your policy even after you left your position. The Bear is a very wise old man, don't you think?"

Strangely and painfully, that made me smile.

Needs drove me to the emergency room, where a sympathetic and no-nonsense nurse took the information about my injury, then hugged me gently. "Don't worry," she said. "We'll make you beautiful again."

I spent much of the night being subjected to assorted x-rays and scans. Just after sunrise, the sympathetic nurse came in my cubicle to check my vital signs and adjust the IV rate. "Are you feeling okay? No pain, I mean."

"Yes," I said. "That Dilaudid stuff is really good. I still have double vision, at least as much as I can tell through the swelling."

"We're almost ready to make a disposition. Your doctors are going over all of your x-rays and scans with the radiologists. Then they'll come and give you details on everything. By the way, the man who assaulted you was brought in an hour ago. He has bruises on his face, two black eyes, some missing teeth and a few broken ribs, I think. There are two police officers guarding him. They're taking him to jail once he gets patched up."

"What happened to him?"

"I'm not sure. One of the other nurses is attending to him. I'll see if I can find out. And don't worry. He doesn't know you're here."

A few minutes before eight, Needs stuck his head into the cubicle. "Sweet little Emma." He came to

my bedside, took my swollen face into his bear-sized hands, leaned forward, and gently kissed me on the forehead.

“Needs,” I said, a bit of accusation in my voice, “what happened to Marco?”

“The police have him in custody. The Colorado laws, I think, are fairly stern and straightforward when it comes to spousal abuse, and in your case, assault and battery.”

“Needs, you know that’s not what I meant. What happened to him? How did he get hurt?”

Needs, leaning back slightly, slowly removed his gentle hands from my face. Through my swollen, slit-like eyelids, I thought I could see cuts and abrasions on the knuckles of both of his hands. “Sweet little Emma. I think that your friend Marco had a small accident just before the police came to pick him up. I think he fell down a flight of stairs.”

“I think you’re full of it, Mr. Bear. If Marco fell down some stairs, he must have fallen down them a few times.”

With his characteristic ursine smile, he said, “Well, perhaps he did. Now, listen to me. In a few minutes, your grandparents will arrive.”

I gasped. “Oh, God. I can’t see them like this. How am I going to explain anything to them? How am I going to avoid disappointing them even more? God, they must hate me.”

“No, they don’t hate you. They love you. They know everything you’ve managed to accomplish over the past three years, and they are proud of you.”

“No, they’re not. And they don’t know anything. I haven’t told them anything. I haven’t talked to them forever.”

He took my face in his hands again. “Emma, sweet Emma. Of course they know everything. Your grandparents and I speak every day, and what you don’t know is that they detached from you not in a malignant way but a benevolent one. I have known your grandfather for more than thirty years. We met in Chicago when he was stationed at the Great Lakes Navy facility, and I was working at one of my schmoozing jobs nearby. Your grandfather, by the way, is a master schmoozer, almost as good as I am. We have remained friends for all these years.

“When it became apparent that your direction needed to change, he came to me. We devised a plan in which you would be cast off by your grandparents, and then you would naturally gravitate to me. It worked to perfection, don’t you think? With a bit of guidance and your natural ability, you became quite the young businesswoman, and you even continued your education. All of these things your grandparents know. And trust me, they love you and are very proud of what you have accomplished.”

I’m sure my mouth was agape, at least as much as it could be in its injured state. “What did you just say? No never, mind. I heard it. I just don’t believe it. You conned me? You tricked me into staying with you? You were dishonest? How could you do that to me?”

“Not *to* you, little Emma. *For* you. We did it because we love you. Yes, I too, like your grandparents, love

you. You are the daughter I never had. And I will tell you this, little Emma: any father would be proud to have you for a daughter. Your direction in life three years ago required a rescue mission, so we rescued you. The rest you did for yourself.”

“But you lied to me.”

“No. Never, little Emma. Misled, perhaps. But lied? No. Never.”

“Fine. You misled me. That’s the same as lying.”

“No, little Emma. Misleading is not the same as lying, but in your case it *is* the same as rescuing.”

“Fine, Mr. Bear. But I’ll need to think about that logic for a while.”

Before Needs could say anything else, the cubicle curtain parted, and two men in long white coats stepped in.

Looking at them, I realized they were not two men, but one—it was my double vision again. The man on the left said, “Hello, Mrs. Randelli. I’m Dr. Johnson.”

Then the one on the right said, “And I’m Dr. Johnson, too. We’re co-directors of the emergency room here. Yes, we’re twins, and no, you’re not seeing double. “

“Oh yes I am, doctors,” I said. “Every time I hold my head up straight, I see two of everything.”

“That’s because you have a blow-out fracture in your left orbit. You also have fractures in your right orbit, your mandible on both sides, and your nose. We’ll explain all of your injuries in a few minutes, and especially what needs to be done. Bottom line, we’re arranging to send you to Denver, where they have a

world-class craniofacial reconstruction team. Ideally, the type of repair you need is done as soon as possible after the injury. But first, before all of that, there are two people here to see you.”

The curtain parted again, and my grandparents stepped into the room.

Chapter Thirty-two

Mike

After I turned in my country western song, I went to my locker and packed up my books, the usual thirty pounds of stuff. Then I shuffled off toward Junie's house, hoping things were okay. She occasionally missed a day or two of school with "female problems," as she called them, or sometimes a bad headache. Her mother had had migraine headaches, she told me, whatever those were. I was hoping it would be one of those things that had kept her at home and not the aftermath of Bluto's assault. I wanted to ask her, too, if she thought Bluto would file a police report or press charges against me. I doubted it because, in doing so, he would implicate himself in his assault on Junie.

I was also thinking that I had a huge amount of homework to get done before the next day, and Miss Junie was going to keep me on task. I was completely unprepared for her appearance when she opened the door. I'm sure my gasp was audible a block away. "My God, Junie, what happened?"

Her lips were swollen, both eyes were black, and there was a small cut in her right eyebrow.

“Finn,” she said softly. “I can’t help you with homework today. I’m going to stay inside. I’m going to be out of school for a few days. It will be best if you don’t come by in the morning, and don’t stop on the way home from school. I know what you’re thinking. I know that you want to help. But please trust me. Please. I know what I’m doing. I can handle it. I *will* handle it. Now, go. Everything will be fine. I’ll see you in a few days.” She closed the door before I could say anything.

I went home moody and angry. She had been beaten. Not by Bluto since he probably had some medieval torture device screwed into his head to keep it from falling off his neck. It had to be her stepfather. Had to be. There was a lot more going on there than she had ever let on, and I was thinking that I might have to make a little recon trip over there that night to investigate. I also knew she would not want me to call the police or Child Protective Services or anyone else. She had been absolutely clear: “I *will* handle it.”

Trying to get homework done was hopeless, so I put all my books and papers in my book bag and turned on the television. Mae hated it when I watched television. “Such a waste,” she said. “All those channels and nothing decent to watch.” I began the male ritual of channel-surfing, scrolling through all 130 channels before settling on a baseball game. I have no recollection of who the teams were or what the score was. My mind was several blocks away, focused on the desperate plight of one E. J. Sprewell, rhymes with Jewel, call me Junie. What on earth was I going to do? What

could I do? Lots, I thought, but nothing she was going to condone. Yes, I would definitely make a reconnaissance run that night. A plan began to take shape in my foggy brain, and lost in thought, with the baseball game in the background, I fell asleep.

Mae came home at just after 7:00 p.m., arms loaded with groceries, and a scowl on her face. “Up and at ‘em, buster. Turn that television off, and you better have your homework done. More groceries in the car. Bring them in, please.”

Roused from a troubled sleep, I more or less staggered out the carport and began bringing in bags of groceries. I loved spring and summer in the Central Valley because there was an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables. And indeed, that was the case that night, at least among the seemingly endless bags of groceries I hauled in from the trunk of Mae’s Volvo. Once I had asked her why she drove a Volvo, a car from Sweden.

“Because it’s built like a tank, and it’s just about as indestructible. It gets decent mileage, and it will last forever. And I have a great mechanic who can fix just about anything.”

“Ernie?”

“Yes. Ernie. If a device is powered by an internal combustion engine, Ernie can fix it.”

“Fine. If a Volvo is supposed to last forever, why do you need a mechanic?”

“Things last longer if they’re maintained properly, and if repairs are done promptly and correctly. And one more thing. I’m in a business where I have a public

face. That car is sturdy and reliable and unassuming. It's a comfort to someone seeking help in buying or selling property. The car has a business-like look."

I took the last of the bags of fruits and vegetables out of trunk, closed everything up, and headed into the house.

Mae was at the kitchen counter slicing celery, carrots, green and red peppers, and lettuce into a large bowl. "I assume since you were crashed on the sofa that you haven't eaten yet."

"Your assumption is correct, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am. It makes me feel old. Older than I am already."

"Well, I assume you're fishing for compliments, so let me point out again that you're actually very young-looking."

"Young-looking? For what? My advanced years? Nice try. And what do you know about assessing woman's looks."

"Mae, come on. I'm I guy. I'm an expert on girl-watching. And so is that real estate agent over on Elm Avenue. He seems awfully interested in you."

"Oh, hush. He is not." She paused. "Is he?"

"Yup."

"Do you think so? How do you know?"

"I can tell by the way he looks at you. When you took me to that meeting, that closing thing where everyone has to sign a bunch of papers, he could hardly keep his eyes off you."

"You're making that up."

"Nope. You were busy helping your client get everything signed. I was watching everything else, including Mr. I'm-Very-Interested-In-Mae. And it's not the first time, either. We went to a showing a few weeks ago, and he was there. Remember?"

"That cute little bungalow over in Bowman?"

"Yup. He was there, showing it to one of his clients. I heard him ask someone if they knew your name. He was interested then, and it's obvious he still is."

"Are you trying to play matchmaker? And how do you know when a man is interested in a woman? You can't tell just by the way he looks at her. And how would you know anything about that anyway?"

I thought about how I looked at Junie. "Sorry, Mae. I'm a guy. I know. And I know that he's interested in you. At the closing, when everything was signed and while everyone else was schmoozing, I scooped up one of his business cards. I also talked to him for a couple of minutes. He's single, a widower, just arrived a few months ago from San Diego. He tried to get information about you from me."

"Oh, Lord, you didn't tell him anything, did you?"

"I told him you were head-over-heels in love with him but were too shy to approach him."

"Oh, you did not. What did you tell him, really?"

"I told him you were my aunt, that you took me in as a scruffy ill-mannered waif, and that you turned me into the prince you see before you."

"Will you stop? Now what did you tell him, really?"

“Actually, the barest of details. You’re a widow, a very successful real estate agent, and the absolute greatest aunt on the planet.”

She smiled at that and started to say something, but I cut her off. “And I told him you weren’t seeing anyone.”

She blushed. “You didn’t.” Noting my deadpan look, she said, “You did, didn’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m afraid I did.”

“I should tan your hide for that. Later maybe. Open a large can of albacore tuna, drain it, and add it to these vegetables. Then put together that incredible homemade Italian dressing you made last week. I’m going to shower, and then you’re going to tell me why your homework isn’t done.”

I was pleased with myself for recognizing that two adults might be interested in one another but were too timid to act. Sometimes it pays to be wise beyond one’s years. I assembled the ingredients for the salad dressing in a tall covered container, added just a bit of extra garlic—experimenting as usual—and shook it vigorously. Then I set it on the counter and put out plates and silverware and glasses. I poured a small glass of Napa Valley zinfandel wine for her and a large glass of milk for me. She would have let me have wine too, but I couldn’t stand the stuff.

When she came back to the kitchen, she was dressed in a dark blue jogging outfit that meant she was going to relax for the rest of the day. We ate in comfortable silence, with Mae periodically moaning about how good the salad dressing was. I got up to

clear the table, thinking that I had escaped any further interrogation about homework.

“Ah, ah, ah, young man. Not so fast. Why isn’t your homework done?”

I could have asked why she thought it wasn’t done, but that would have only forestalled the inevitable. Instead, I decided to dissemble. “Well, I turned on ESPN to check a couple of scores, and I guess I just fell asleep. I’ll get it done. Don’t worry. And I won’t be up too late.”

“Why didn’t you get it done at Junie’s house on the way home?”

Dang. “She’s sick today. One of those migraine things she gets.”

“Well, tell her I’m thinking about her and to get better soon. Now let’s get this kitchen cleaned up so you can get to work.”

We finished cleaning and put everything away. She said she was going upstairs to read. I said, “Presumptuous of me, maybe, but can I suggest something?”

“By all means.”

I handed her a business card. She recognized the name immediately—and my intent. “But I can’t call him. That wouldn’t be ladylike.”

“Are you at all interested in him?”

“Well, frankly, yes.”

“Then it would be *very* ladylike to call him. My opinion, anyway.”

“Hmmm,” she said, “Just when did you get so sophisticated?” She went upstairs, obviously thinking

about my suggestion. I went to the living room and dug into my homework, sticking with it to the best of my ability. A few minutes later, I heard her pick up the upstairs telephone and dial a number. They were still talking two hours later when I went to my room. Just call me Mr. Matchmaker.

Chapter Thirty-three

Emma

I was still on the veranda with Randi, both of us puzzling over the events on the basketball court. We were still worrying when Tommy joined us on the veranda. During the few minutes it had taken Tommy to walk back from the basketball court, I had asked Randi if anything like that had ever happened before.

“No,” she said. “I’ve never known them to argue like that. They tease each other all the time, in that ridiculous masculine way, calling each other losers or whiners or God knows what. But it’s all in mock seriousness. They never fight, not verbally, not physically. I’ve never really known two people who get along so well together. Tommy says they are intrinsically brothers, more like twins than anything, but separated at birth. You know that Tommy is the same age as you and I are, but Mike is a year older. When I point that out to Tommy, that you can’t have twins one year apart, he says, ‘Hey, minor detail.’ And then he laughs.”

At that point, Tommy joined us. The look on his face astonished me. It was part scowl, part anger, part pain, and part despair. Randi saw it, too. She said to Tommy, “Do you want to talk about it?”

He looked at her, and some of his anger rose to the surface. “No!”

She said again, “Do you want to talk about it?” She said it with remarkable equanimity, as if she hadn’t heard his response or the anger in his voice. I wondered if that was how mature people dealt with each other, with equanimity, patience, and love.

He sighed, the look on his face softened, and he glanced sideways at me. I took that as a cue. Standing, I said, “Well, hey, you two. I have a few errands to run. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Tommy said, “No, Emma. Stay. Please. You need to hear this, too. It’s time. And in some ways, it’s about you. So please stay.”

I sat down, clearly intrigued.

“Basically,” he said, “we had a fight. We had an argument, a disagreement. And yes, Randi, I see that look on your face. And no, nothing like this has ever happened before. God, I shoved him. I shoved my best friend. I shoved the man who saved my life twice. Literally. Saved my life. And one of those times, he gave his life for me.” He paused, wiping tears from his eyes. “And idiot that I am, I shoved him. I said awful things. Awful. Awful. God, I wonder what he thinks of me. I didn’t mean any of it. God help me.”

I looked on in astonishment as tears filled his eyes again. *Lord*, I thought, *men don’t cry*. This must be bad. He paused for a long time, looking into the distant sunset. Finally, Randi, in a voice barely above a whisper, said, “Tommy, some of it I know, some of it you haven’t told me, and all of it is new to Emma. Why

don’t you tell us what you can, as much as you can, with the understanding that some it you can never tell? Okay?”

Tommy nodded. Then he said, “Yes, I’ll tell you. But first I need something to drink. Mike wore me down today, almost killed me, dehydrated me like never before. He hasn’t been able to do that for a long time. I need fluids.”

Rising, Randi said, “I’ll get you some tea.”

Objecting, Tommy said, “No. Beer. I want beer. Don’t get me any of that disgusting raspberry tea.”

I gave Randi a smirking, knowing grin as she went into the apartment to get beer for Tommy.

When Randi returned, she handed Tommy a bottle of Sam Adams and then sat down next to him. She took one of his hands in hers. Tommy looked at her gratefully, and my heart melted, watching this level of understanding and affection. I hoped with all my heart I could experience that someday.

Tommy looked directly at me. “I’ll take you from high school forward. The other stuff, especially Mike’s childhood stuff is, for him, intensely personal, and you’ll have to get that from him yourself.” He took a long drink of beer. “We met just before the ninth grade. I was the hotshot athlete, all full of myself, ready to take on the world. My goal was to be in impossible physical condition by August when football practice started, so I went over to the high school one morning to work out on the track. There was somebody already there, running around. He was a tall, lanky kid, kind of dorky-looking, with no hint then of the muscle he

would pack on later. I ignored him and started to run around the track. Then he left the track and moved onto the infield. That bothered me, like I was running him off or something. So I said, ‘Hey, don’t let me rain on your parade.’ Or something like that.”

He paused, with a faraway look in his eyes. Randi said, “Okay. He moved onto the infield. Then what?”

“Well, he said, ‘No problem, I was just going to do some sprint work.’ For me, that was like offering candy to a baby, because over short distances I was faster than anyone. I was pretty good at middle distances, too. I could run a mile in just over five minutes, which is pretty good by any standards, especially for a high school freshman. Anyway, I said to the dorky-looking guy something like, ‘Hey, wait a minute, and I’ll work out with you.’ My plan was to humble the guy with my speed. We did a quick warm-up with four laps around the track. I confess I was surprised that he could keep up with me, even though I wasn’t going all-out. He told me he was impressed with my speed, or something close to that. I can’t remember exactly.”

He paused again, staring off into the distance, and then took another drink of his beer. Looking at Randi, he said, “God, I hope I haven’t hosed things up completely.”

She squeezed his hand. “You haven’t. Don’t worry. Go on with the story.”

“I’ll call him later and apologize. No, I’ll go down there and apologize.”

Randi nodded. “Yes, you will. Now go on with the story.”

“Well, the dork had managed to keep up with me on the one-mile run, but I knew there was no way he could out-sprint me. The year before, in eighth grade, I had done an unofficial 10.6 in the hundred-yard dash in one of our PE classes. That’s about the same as 11.6 over 100 meters. Fairly fast. Very fast for someone in the eighth grade. And I was only going to get better and stronger. So I set the guy up, explaining that we would do four by forty, meaning forty yards up and back twice. I even cheated. I took off first. By the end of the first forty, I was so far ahead, it was laughable.”

He paused again for a long time, with the faraway, misty look in his eye.

Finally, Randi said, “And...?”

He looked directly at me again. “And then something amazing happened. On that second leg, he caught up to me. On the third leg, he pulled away. And on the fourth leg he was so far ahead of *me*, it was laughable.”

Randi chuckled, and again gently squeezing his hand, she said, “My, my, my. The great and speedy Tom Miller got his ass kicked?”

Tommy nodded ruefully. “Yes, he did. Truly humbled I was, too. But not stupid. And then it hit me. What if this guy could catch?”

I didn’t get it. “What do you mean?” I asked. “What difference did it make if he could catch or not?”

Tommy smiled at me. “Wow, that’s pretty much exactly the same question he asked me then. And the answer is still the same. If a guy who could run that fast

could also catch a thrown ball, he would be a dangerous offensive weapon in football.”

“Well,” I asked, “could he catch?”

“Damn straight he could catch. Hands like flypaper. If the ball got near him, he would catch it, and believe me, I ran him all over the field that day. I talked him into playing—football, I mean—even though he hadn’t ever done organized sports. I used a whole month to get him ready, teaching him the basics of blocking and tackling and running routes and terminology. The guy was like a sponge. And the coaches loved him. Loved me, too, by the way. We both started for the JV team that year. Undefeated. My arm, his speed. They couldn’t stop him...us. And I mean, he just kept getting better and better.”

He got up and walked to the balcony’s railing and stood there, looking off into the distant Pacific sunset. Without turning around, he said, “Sometimes, if you’re really lucky, you’ll see a flash of green just as the sun sets. A reward, I guess, in anticipation of the upcoming darkness. I’m worried about Mike—he’s on the verge of darkness without ever seeing the flash of green. God help me.”

Randi walked over to where he was standing. She put her arm around him, cradling him with great tenderness. Neither said a word, but I sensed again the emotional connection they shared. Lucky people. After half a minute, they returned to the table.

“Mikey was more than just athletic. God, he was so smart. He once showed me all the books he had read, classics and modern stuff. It was like an entire

city library. And he could remember things, text from books and poems, almost like a machine. Our football coach was big on academics, meaning if you didn’t perform academically, you didn’t play. In fact, you didn’t even get to suit up for games. One of the things coach liked to do was to play word games and quote games. He would come up with words we had to define or quotes we had to identify. And if someone on the team could define the word or identify the quote, we didn’t have to do extra laps after practice.

“I remember the very first time it happened, maybe two days before a big game. We were on the practice field, all of us exhausted from the workout, from the torture. Coach was standing in front of us, calm, casual, smug. He always looked good, slicked-back hair, sweat-free, dressed in Dockers or chinos and a Polo shirt, usually white. On that day he said, ‘Gentlemen, I am now going to recite five lines from the work of a well-known author. This is an object lesson, and the point will be crystal clear to you once you hear the whole thing. If any among you can recite the sixth line of this particular work, practice will be over for today, and you’ll all get to take an early shower. If not, it’s four extra laps.’

“Well, most of us were brain dead with English and literature and stuff like that, so we were mentally gearing up to do the extra laps. Coach started reciting, ‘Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more.’ And then something absolutely amazing happened—at least most of the guys on the team thought

it was amazing. Not me. I expected it. Coach finished that one line, and that's as far as he got.

"Mikey was way in the back, and he literally jumped up and continued the coach's quote. 'Or close the wall up with our English dead. In peace there is nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility. But when the blast of war blows in our ears, imitate the action of the tiger. Stiffen the sinews. Summon up the blood.'

"Coach never blinked, never turned a hair. He said, 'Showers, gentlemen. See you at practice tomorrow.' We all turned to look at Mikey, to congratulate him and thank him. But he was gone already, halfway across the field, sprinting toward the locker room.

"Another time, coach asked, 'Anyone know T. S. Elliot?' No one answered. 'Excellent,' coach said with that smirky little grin he always had on his face. 'Finish this quote: "There is one who knows the way to your door..."'

"Just then Mikey stepped out of the porta-potty along the sideline, pulling up his gym shorts, and said, 'Life you may evade, Death you shall not.'

"Coach started to say something, probably, 'Showers, gentlemen.' But the whole team had already taken off, sprinting across the field toward the locker room.

"It's weird. Even in high school, Mikey was always studying something, something extra. Later, in the Corps, when everyone else was out in town raising hell, he was studying. He even taught himself ancient Greek so he could read the classics in their original

text. And yes, I was out carousing while he was studying. Weird.

"In our junior and senior years in high school," Tommy continued, "we were CIF football champions, undefeated through twenty-four games. In those twenty-four games, I had thirty-six touchdown passes, and twenty-six of those went to Mike. God, he was incredible. The other teams would double-team and sometimes triple-team him. One game, they had four guys on him. Didn't matter. He would find a seam, an opening. And we were so locked in, he and I, that I knew exactly what he was going to do and when. Boom. Pass. Catch. Unstoppable. He was literally unstoppable. We...were unstoppable. It was we. Always we.

"And something else happened. Early in the season in our senior year, we had a game where some kind of stomach flu made a bunch of the guys sick. God, there was puke all over the locker room. It was disgusting. We didn't have enough defensive backs, so Mike said, 'Hey, I can do that.' And Mother Mary, did he ever. In the next two games he had seven interceptions. I mean, get out of here. Seven? In two games? That's nuts. From then on, he played both ways. And at the end of our senior year, he was first-team all-state in both offense and defense."

I frowned. I knew that Tommy, too, had been selected as an all-state quarterback. They were two superb high school athletes at the top of their game, recognized locally and across the state, probably nationally. How had they ended up working for a

mechanic and going to junior college and joining the Marine Corps? Couldn't they have gotten scholarships to a regular college? I asked Tommy.

"Well, I guess it was the Corps that decided all that," he said.

Chapter Thirty-four

Mike

Excerpt from *Sacramento Bee*, community news section, May fourteenth:

Murder in Auburn

Daniel Merijo, age 47, was found dead in his home yesterday morning, apparently stabbed to death with a kitchen knife. His stepdaughter, fourteen-year-old Junie Sprewell, and a neighbor found the body at approximately 7:30 a.m. after Sprewell returned home from spending the night at a friend's house. Sprewell is currently under confinement at a local juvenile detention facility pending investigation. Full details of the investigation are not available, but neighbors suggest that Merijo had a long history of violent abusive behavior and that Sprewell had suffered numerous beatings in the past at the hands of her stepfather. According to police sources, the girl appeared to have suffered injuries consistent with a recent physical beating, and her fingerprints were found on the murder weapon. The filing of formal criminal charges against Sprewell may occur as early as today.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Emma

“Well, I guess it was the Corps that decided all that,” Tommy said.

He was answering my question about why he and Mike hadn’t pursued higher education. I was sure that with their athletic ability they could have gotten scholarships to just about anywhere, plus they were both solid academically.

“Well, yes, we both got offers from big schools, including back east, and the prospect of a full four-year ride was very tempting. But it didn’t shake out that way. One day, we were running, Mike and I, trying to stay in shape during basketball season. Basketball is different from football, more of a finesse game in some ways, but more demanding in others. It requires both bursts of speed and incredible stamina over a relatively short period of time. So it was a weekend day in December and not raining for a change. You know how winters are in Sacramento. We were running around the high school track, pushing each other fairly hard and ragging on each other as usual. I would say something like, ‘Man, is that all you’ve got? Jeez, an old woman can run faster than you.’ And then

Mikey would say, ‘Fine. Old woman this.’ And then he would take off, moving into that extra gear he has. It would take everything I had to keep up with him. But doggies, we were in incredible shape. Too bad neither of us quite had the stuff to be starters in basketball, but we came off the bench a lot, and we never hurt the team with our minutes.”

He paused, taking a long drink from his bottle of Sam Adams. “Anyway, we were running around the track, and suddenly this older guy shows up, buff to the max with a really stupid-looking haircut with just a bit of fuzz on the top and the sides looking like those old cars with white sidewall tires. And dang, the guy could really run. We watched him do one lap at a full-out sprint. I looked at Mikey, and he looked back at me, both of us with eyebrows raised. The old guy stopped after one lap and walked over to where we were standing. He was shorter than we were by a couple or three inches, but heavier, a solid slab of muscle, maybe 230, 240. And he had this ragged scar on his left cheek starting at the corner of the eye. It looked like a Z, like Zorro had marked him. He said, ‘Gentlemen, you two look like Marines. Care to join me in a little workout?’ I thought, *Dang right, old man. We’ll work you out pretty good.* We ran and beat him, no problem. Then we did sit-ups and pull-ups, and he absolutely crushed us. The guy was incredible. He did two hundred sit-ups in two minutes and then fifty pull-ups without breaking a sweat. Did you get that? Two hundred sit-ups and fifty friggin’ pull-ups. Amazing.”

Tommy paused briefly, went inside, and came back with chips and salsa. After we had all snacked a bit, he continued. “Turns out the old guy *was* a Marine, a Staff Sergeant, not that Mikey and I had any idea what that was. He was also a recruiter and, like I told you, one very fast guy on the track. Not as fast as Mike and I were, but pretty good, especially for an old guy. By old, I mean he was maybe twenty-seven or twenty-eight, absolutely ancient to us then. He was also a hard-core Marine, a combat veteran, and a patriot of the highest order.

“We started working out with him every day. We talked while we were running, and that was the beginning for us, for Mike and me, running day after day with Staff. That’s what he asked us to call him. Staff, short for staff sergeant. With Mike, I truly think he wanted to contribute in a patriotic way, and I mean in a military sense, as a defender of the country. He had talked about it a few times, about not really wanting the college life, not wanting more football, and he was tired of school. He said there was more to life than an oblong, pigskin-covered bladder. He wanted more.”

I interrupted. “You’re saying that a Marine Corps recruiter worked out with you two one day, and that led to your joining the Marines?”

“Yes and no. I think we were headed that way anyway, but maybe not with the Marines and maybe not right away. Mike’s dad had been in the army. He was killed in action in some faraway place, and I think that weighed on him. He felt some driving need to

serve that way, too. For that matter, so did I. I can't really explain it. So we visited with the Marine, the old guy, and the more we heard, the more we liked it. We learned about the one-of-a-kind culture that the Marine Corps is based on: duty, honor, country. It preaches camaraderie and accountability. Staff said the lifestyle wasn't suited for everyone, but for those chosen few, you know, the few, the proud, the Marines, it was incomparable. To be honest, it sounded perfect to Mike and me. Weird, how Mikey and I always seemed to share the same interests, same goals, same hopes and fears, and yes, even the same shortcomings."

Randi interrupted. "Shortcomings? What shortcomings?"

Tom huffed and then smiled. "Too quiet. Poor listener. Bad communicator. Occasionally a jerk. Perhaps more than occasionally. Although I would like to think that we've both improved substantially as we have gotten older."

Now Randi smiled. "You're doing pretty good, Miller. For a male, that is."

I asked, "So did you two join at the same time?"

"Yes. We opted for delayed entry. Mike, for some insane reason, said he wanted to get a feel for auto repair. So we joined, took the oath, and delayed entry for one year. Then we went to work for Ernie at minimum wage, and believe me, Ernie was a taskmaster of the first magnitude. He worked our butts off, but in less than a year, we understood the internal combustion engine and all its accoutrements better than most mechanics with decades of experience. That means

we knew engines, cooling systems, electrical systems, transmissions, brakes, and exhaust systems inside out. God, what a great year."

I reminded him, "And you took junior college courses, too, right?"

"Yeah," he said. "We did. And college courses, too. You must have been talking to Mikey to know that. That means you also know about the contest, about who was going to get a degree first. I had it locked up, I thought, but somehow he managed to get done before me."

He paused for chips and salsa, finishing both before starting again. "Do you want to know how much he beat me by?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Seventeen hours and forty-three lousy minutes after almost six years of hard work. We had asked for and been granted extensions on our enlistments, and we ended up serving six years. Served as warriors, but we were students, too. He was a better student than I was. Still is. He's smarter, too, although not by much. And he definitely works harder. It goes back to his childhood—some amazing stuff, absolutely amazing. I don't know how he survived. You'll have to get him to tell you about it some time."

As Tommy paused, I looked at Randi, my look telling her there was no way I was ever going to get Mike to talk about anything.

Tommy continued. "He's driven. That's why he could finish all those architecture requirements without being in class. He beat me. Damn. And he never

let me forget it. And no, I don't begrudge him that. You should see the guy draw things, buildings I mean, landscaping, roads. He even puts animals into the drawings. Gifted. He could have a great future as an architect, I think."

"Anyway, we were at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. We had both made it back from Afghanistan, back from despair. Well, at least I came back, mostly. Mikey has never completely come back. But I'm getting to that. We were almost done with our enlistment, and one day he got a note to pick something up at the post office. So he trotted over there just before they closed at four-thirty. It was four seventeen, as he likes to remind me. It was his diploma, his degree in architecture, nicely bundled up in a cardboard tube. Mine came at nine the next morning. Seventeen hours and forty-three friggin' minutes too late. Oh well, at least we both made it. Made it through the bad times, made it home, made it to the end of school. Or so we thought."

"Tommy," I asked, "what do you mean when you say Mike has never completely come back? Back from what?"

"Back from Hell, Emma. Part of him is still back there. That's what I'm trying to tell you, although I'm going all over the place and not getting to the point. Mike is different now compared to before Afghanistan. Randi will tell you the same thing."

Randi nodded.

I asked, "How is he different? What's different?"

"Try sullen, morose, moody, quiet. Try depressed. Try PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder of the worst possible kind. Do you know what PTSD is, Emma?"

"Yes. No. Not really. But I'll bet the psychology major and the future psychiatrist Tommy can tell me."

"Yes, he can," Tommy said, and then he turned pedantic. "By definition PTSD is the emotional aftermath of a severe and overwhelming traumatic event or events. It's three things, actually: reliving, avoidance, and hyperarousal. The reliving part means flashbacks, nightmares, painful emotions, stuff like that. I think Mike has some of those things, but I'm not sure. The dirt bag won't talk to me. The avoidance symptoms are things like feeling distanced from family or friends, difficulty feeling emotions, no joie de vivre, and no hope for the future. Now those things Mikey definitely has, big time. And the last thing, hyperarousal, includes stuff like difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and being easily startled. Well, Mikey is never irritable, and there is no way to startle him. Absolutely no way. But he does have trouble sleeping, and unless he's on the job—at the hospital—he gets distracted easily.

"He definitely needs help, probably professional help, and he won't do it. Something very bad or something very exceptional happened there, in Afghanistan, I'm not sure which. He won't talk about it, even to me, and we tell each other everything, and I mean everything." With that he paused, giving Randi

a guilty, naughty-boy look. She returned the look with a stare that said we *will* discuss this later.

I interrupted again. “Tommy, how is that Mike seems so troubled, but you seem to have turned out so normal?” I regretted the question instantly, as I saw a wide-eyed Randi shaking her head vigorously, mouthing the word no. I took that to mean that perhaps things weren’t as completely placid with Tommy as he wanted them to seem.

Tommy, the oblivious male, missed all this feminine body language and nonverbal communication. He continued, “What I am sure about is that Mike is very different now, an exoskeleton with nothing inside. He’s a hollow shell, or at least a shell with the old Mike squashed and hidden in there somewhere. It’s sad because it’s affecting our relationship, his and mine. He’s drifting away, lost, and there’s nothing I can do except be his friend, or try to be, as much as he’ll let me. Sometimes he’s so depressed that I worry that I won’t see him alive the next day. I picture him in his apartment, cradling that Glock like it’s his salvation. I’ve seen him do it. Scares the hell out of me.”

I was stunned. “Are you saying he has a gun and he might kill himself?”

“Yes.”

“But what could possibly lead someone to want to do that? Someone with so much potential, so much to live for?”

“Let me explain,” he said. “But first let’s back up a bit.”

Chapter Thirty-six

Mike

Excerpt from *Sacramento Bee*, community news section, May eighteenth:

Murder Investigation in Auburn Continues

The investigation of the murder of Daniel Merijo of Auburn continues. According to sources within the police department, the murder occurred at approximately 10:30 p.m. on May 12, with the cause of death being a stab wound to the heart.

Merijo’s stepdaughter, Junie Sprewell, was initially charged with the murder, but the investigation appears to have cleared her as a suspect. Her fingerprints were on the murder weapon, a kitchen knife, but a staff criminalist within the police department said, “The knife had fingerprints from the deceased, from Miss Sprewell, and also from an unknown third party. The third-party print is a partial only, but enough to eliminate both the deceased and his stepdaughter as the source.” In addition, there are signs of forced entry at the south window of Merijo’s bedroom, with a partial palm print on the windowsill. The palm print is not from either the deceased or the stepdaughter.

Merijo had a long history of violent behavior, with arrests for aggravated assault and public drunkenness. He was known to be abusive to his deceased wife, Sprewell's mother, with several police reports on file. He also apparently physically abused Sprewell, including on the night he was murdered.

Sprewell recounts a severe beating both the night of the murder and the night before. She was not able to say why Merijo was violent, but she did note, "Something seemed to set him off, and he would get mean." When asked why she never sought help from authorities, she stated, "He said if I ever turned him in, he would kill me. He would hunt me down to the ends of the earth and make me wish I had never been born." After the beating, Sprewell fled the house to stay at a friend's house, arriving there at approximately 9:30 p.m.

Detectives speculate that after beating his stepdaughter, Merijo went to his bedroom. An unknown assailant or possibly assailants entered the bedroom by forcing open one of the windows. There was a struggle, and Merijo was stabbed in the chest twice. One of the wounds was superficial, with the knife sliding along the ribs under the skin. The other wound was direct, deeply penetrating the chest and the heart.

Merijo was a welder at the Port of Sacramento. Criminalists found several fibers consistent with those found in the navy pea-style coat that is favored by dock workers. They found no match for the fiber from any clothing within the home. They also recovered three hair shafts that did not belong to either Merijo or Sprewell. Unfortunately, no DNA was recovered from the hair. The handle of the murder weapon also contained traces of some type of industrial petroleum substance. Similar traces were found on a windowsill. No simi-

lar product was found anywhere on the premises. There were shoe-prints below the window that didn't match any footwear in the house, and next to the window and the victim there was mud that matched the dirt outside the window.

Merijo's death, according to the medical examiner occurred between 9:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. The time on the deceased man's watch, which was apparently damaged in the struggle that ended in murder, was 10:29 p.m. Detectives confirmed that Sprewell arrived at her friend's house at just after 9:30 p.m. Of Merijo's two wounds, the superficial one appeared to have been inflicted in left-to-right direction, suggesting that the assailant was left-handed. Sprewell is right-handed.

In addition to his chronic violent behavior, Merijo was also known to be a compulsive gambler. Detectives speculate that his murder may be related to his failure to pay gambling debts.

In a written statement yesterday morning, District Attorney Robert Mishek said, "In the matter of the murder of Daniel Merijo and the confinement of his stepdaughter Junie Sprewell, after reviewing all the facts of the case, I feel that there is more than sufficient exculpatory evidence on behalf of Miss Sprewell at this time. Accordingly, she will be released from custody today."

Chapter Thirty-seven

Emma

“Let me explain,” Tommy said. “But first let’s back up a bit.

“We went to boot camp at MCRD in San Diego.” Tommy saw my puzzled look. “MCRD,” he said. “Marine Corps Recruit Depot. Boot camp is like basic training in the army. Only worse. Tougher. More grueling. Or at least it used to be. I think the Army’s approach has gotten tougher, too. Anyway, with the Marines, their goal is teach the culture—no, the goal is to inculcate the culture into impressionable young men to such a degree that it becomes second nature. Not everyone makes it through because not everyone gets it. But it’s like that TV commercial for the Marines where they say something like, ‘If you survive the journey, you will be changed forever.’”

He looked far away again for a few seconds and then continued. “We made it through all the training and through the Crucible at Camp Pendleton, and by God, we were Marines. Still are. Always will be. There’s no such thing as an ex-Marine. We survived the experience and were changed forever. You have no idea what it is to be a Marine, to be part of that fraternity, a

one-of-a-kind place. I really don't think there has ever been anything quite like it in military history. Maybe in all of history.

"And one very cool thing happened. Staff came to our graduation. Except he wasn't Staff anymore. He was Gunny. He had picked up E-7, Gunnery Sergeant, and he was outbound for the desert, Iraq. He saw us graduate, glowing and beaming like some proud papa. He came in his dress uniform with medals that we now recognized easily. He had a silver star, two purple hearts, an MSM, and a bunch of other stuff. We didn't need to be more impressed with him, but we were anyway.

"At the end of the day, we shook hands, brothers in arms for all time. We hugged, too. Not exactly Marine-like. Mike and I both treasure that moment since we never saw him again. He was killed in action in a firefight at the Iraqi-Syrian border, but we didn't hear about it until months after he died. We were devastated."

Tears filled his eyes again, and he paused. I wondered what it must be like for these young men, these defenders of our country, to lose a comrade like that. How excruciatingly painful that must be. God, how could they stand the pain?

Reading my mind, Tommy said, "The pain was almost too much to bear. but, we had each other. We talked, we reminisced, we used gallows humor, and eventually we got through it. But we'll always remember him as our primary role model for the Corps."

Quickly wiping his eyes, he saw me looking at him expectantly. Randi, too. "Sorry, ladies," he said, "I keep getting sidetracked. What a wuss I am. So okay, here's how it went. We went through advanced training in combat arms. Combat arms is the term used for infantry, armor—tanks, that is—and artillery."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Doesn't the military give you a choice of jobs? You two were pretty smart. Are pretty smart. Couldn't you have done something like computers or communications or something like that?"

"Could have," he replied. "After almost year with Ernie, we took the ASVAB again." He saw my puzzled look. "ASVAB. The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. We had taken it right after graduation and done really well. Staff said we could have just about anything we wanted then. Anyway, after working with Ernie, when we retook the test, we absolutely crushed it. Murdered it."

"Ernie made you that smart?" I was trying to be funny.

Tommy grinned. "Absolutely. Here's why. The ASVAB has eight sections. Five of those are things like the English, math, and science sections you see in other standardized tests. Easy stuff for us. But it also has three sections on mechanics, electronics, and auto shop kinds of stuff. When we took the test the first time, we killed the English, math, and science parts, but sucked on the other three. After almost a year with Ernie, those mechanical parts of the test had no chance. Dead. We killed it. And one other thing.

You know how Mike is good at remembering quotes and pieces from literature? Well, Ernie is the best I've ever seen at that stuff. You think mechanics are ignorant? Not true. Gifted at logic and well read, at least in mechanics, and sometimes in everything, like Ernie. Anyway, after that year with Ernie, we crushed the ASVAB."

I heard his stomach growling. He excused himself and went into the kitchen, to get food I guessed. "Jeez," I said to Randi, "he eats a lot."

Nodding, she said, "You have no idea. The guy is a metabolic phenomenon. Or metabolic freak."

I said, "Yeah, and it probably takes a lot of food to fuel all that muscle." I knew both Mike and Tommy still lifted weights together regularly.

Tommy rejoined us, carrying a tray with salami and cheese and ranch dressing. "Well," he said, "after the second time we took the test, the ASVAB, Staff looked at the scores and said, 'Guys, take your pick. You can have anything you want.' Mike and I had already decided. We said 'Infantry' in unison. God, you should have seen it. Staff was absolutely radiant, he was so happy."

I was shocked. "Infantry? You could have had any kind of training you wanted and you took infantry? You could have had some safe high-tech job, and you took infantry?"

"Yup. Come on. We were nineteen years old. No, actually Mike was twenty then. He's a year older than we are, but we didn't know that then. Not until the Corps required some research on his birth certificate.

Anyway, we wanted adventure, outside the box. No more school. No more classes. No more tests. Little did we know. I mean, we had no idea how intense and serious the training was. Not like typical classroom stuff. Not tests like we had known before. But absolutely serious stuff. The instructors had all been through it. The bad stuff, I mean. You could see it in the way they approached the mission to train us. Train us to stay alive. You could see it in the way they carried themselves—survivors of experiences more horrible than anyone can imagine. You could see it in their scars, not the emotional ones but the physical scars on exposed parts like neck, face, and arms, and sometimes only when we did PT. In PT gear—you know, shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes—you could see the scars all over the place. They never said anything about that, but that's how we knew it was serious business. And they always taught us that the single most important weapon in the Marines Corps arsenal is the individual Marine. The training is nice they would say, because it gives you job skills. But a Marine is who you are."

He paused to eat cheese and salami and then continued. "I have to give you some sense of how the Corps is organized. We deploy—that means go on missions—in the form of MAGTFs. That's short for Marine Air-Ground Task Force, a combined-arms concept that includes air and ground forces. The MAGTFs are task-specific, meaning they're flexible and designed for the mission, so that in the desert, for example, there might be more emphasis on armor—tanks—but in the mountains, armor wouldn't be very

effective. In jungle and mountainous terrain, we need more rotary aircraft—helicopters—and aircraft with VSTOL capability. VSTOL is short for vertical or short takeoff and landing.”

He paused again, finishing the entire plate of food before him. I wondered what their grocery bill was—probably astronomical. Momentarily content, he continued. “I know I have to truncate this story. I see that I’m losing you. And I don’t want to run on all day about structure and function of the Corps, and you don’t really care about acronyms like MEU, MEB, MEF, MAW, MAG, and PHIBRON. So anyway, we ended up with the Third Battalion, Third Marines in northeast Afghanistan, where we took control of a small forward operating base in the heart of the Hindu Kush mountain range that runs along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. There were pockets of Taliban scattered all over the place, and to get to most places we had to be inserted, meaning taken there by 47s and 53s—types of helicopters.”

He excused himself again, saying he was sorry, but he needed more food. When he came back this time, he was carrying a tray of vegetables. Randi and I smiled at each other knowingly. Tommy said, “To patrol the area, we would send out a fire-team or squad-sized patrol led by a corporal or sergeant. It was on one of those patrols that it happened, that all hell broke loose, and Mike...well, Mike did something heroic. He gave his life for us, for me.”

I was puzzled again. *Gave his life? But he’s alive. What are you talking about, Tommy?* I thought.

“Well, ladies, I see that look on your faces. You are thinking that maybe he did something heroic that led to him figuratively giving his life, something heroic and bad that changed him and left him behind in those mountains. No, ladies. Not figurative. Literal. He did something that should have left him dead. In fact, there is no logical explanation for what happened. Mystical maybe. Miraculous definitely. Here’s how it went down.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

Mike

On the morning of May 18, I went out to the end of driveway at 6:30 a.m. and scooped up the newspaper. Mae liked to read the community news and real estate sections of the *Bee* while she had her after-breakfast coffee. Coffee was something else I didn't understand. I didn't understand the fascination. Perhaps it was an acquired taste, like wine. I suspected I would never acquire the fascination for coffee either. Wrong again.

Mae was sitting at the breakfast table staring out at the backyard when I put the paper down in front of her. "More coffee?" I asked.

"Please."

"What's up with the backyard?" I asked.

"What?"

"What's up with the backyard? You're just sitting there staring out at it."

"Oh. Well I was just thinking that we could put a small gazebo over there in the southwest corner."

"Hmm," I said. "Would we possibly be building this gazebo ourselves, or would we be having it done for us?"

"Well, actually, I was thinking of having it done."

I knew where this was heading. What she didn't know was that I knew a lot more about her new beau than I had let on. He and I had talked several times at showings and closings. Before he went into real estate, he was a master carpenter. "Did you have any particular company in mind?"

She smiled. "Can't go wrong with Home Depot."

She was setting me up. "Well," I said, "you might be better off having it done privately. I know someone who could build it for you at reasonably low cost. Maybe just for materials."

She smiled again. "Who? You?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I could build it. But it would probably fall down in a week. No, I was thinking of Robert."

"Robert? Robert who?"

"You know. Robert. The new guy in your life. He used to be a carpenter."

"Really? You're kidding. He did?"

"Nice try, Mae. You know he was a master carpenter. You just wanted to set me up so I would think it was my idea."

"You're too smart for your own good."

"No, you're just too transparent, at least as far as Robert goes."

Again she smiled. "Well, I hope I'm just transparent to you and not to him. At least not yet."

I poured myself another glass of orange juice. No scurvy for me. Mae unfolded the community news section and began reading. She stopped suddenly. "Oh my goodness. They're releasing Junie today. Look."

I read through the article quickly. "Dang. Not today. Yesterday. See? This statement is from yesterday, and he says they're releasing her today, which was yesterday."

I sprinted down the hall to the downstairs bathroom, hurled myself into the shower, soaped, rinsed, dried off, and dressed in under three minutes. I grabbed my book bag and shouted over my shoulder as I ran out the door. "Bye, Mae. See you tonight." I didn't wait for a reply. I was sprinting down the street toward Junie's house.

When I got there, the house looked different. It looked empty. It was. I looked in the windows. All the furniture was gone. I went around to the back of the house. The storage shed stood open, the lawn mower and everything else was gone. Across the backyard, I could see one of the neighbor ladies watering plants in her own yard. I walked over to her, nodded, and asked politely if she knew why the house was empty and where Junie might be.

She was portly, sturdy, and her manner reminded me of Mrs. Wright, my favorite teacher. "Well, young man, a moving van came yesterday and took everything away. It's such a terrible thing that happened there. And that poor little girl, having to go through that, to live like that. She's gone, too, you know. To relatives somewhere on the east coast, they say. I know she was sweet on you. And you on her. I could tell. I was young once, too, you know."

"Do you know where on the east coast?" I asked.

“No, I don’t. And I don’t think they want anyone to know. You might check at your school. They might have some forwarding information.”

I thanked her and started off for school. Junie was gone, but she must have left me something that would let me know where she went. Must have. At school, I was told that the family had specifically requested that no information about her be given to anyone. “Even friends?” I asked.

“Even friends,” the secretary replied.

I checked at the post office. “Sorry, no information. You can try writing to her. Perhaps your letter will be forwarded.”

Over the next few weeks, I tried everything I could think of to get information about her whereabouts. Dang, the east coast was huge. How was I going to find her? I sent letters, sometimes several each day. Nothing. As July approached, my hopes waned, sagged, and disappeared, to be replaced by despair. *E. J. Sprewell, rhymes with Jewel, call me Junie, where are you?*

But the dark-eyed, bumpy-nosed girl who was my first love was gone. Irrevocably gone. And like Tigrito before her, I feared I would never see her again.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Emma

“Here’s how it went down,” Tommy said. “We had been inserted for that particular patrol, one that had been, up to that point, uneventful. It was nearing dusk, and the weather was foul, overcast, chilly, and drizzling. It didn’t look like we were going to make it to the extraction point—the place where we would be picked up—before nightfall, and none of us was thrilled about spending the night on a wet, cold hillside.

“We came down the narrow trail to a village. I have no idea what the name of that village was because there were villages like that all scattered around, with houses made of rocks or bricks with slate-like roofs. It looked like they would carve out pieces of the mountainside, stick a house in the slot, drop a flat roof on it, and then move right, left, up, and down, sticking more houses into slots, all perfectly stacked and terraced, almost artistic.

“It was also a place of great natural beauty, the Korangal Valley. From heights you could see forever, no kidding. Mountains, rocky hillsides, distant green valleys, villages. Forever.

“Anyway, we walked down the trail and into the village. At that point, the trail became a road through the village, maybe eight or ten feet wide, with stone houses on our left and a cliff on the right. When we looked down over the cliff, it looked like a drop of two hundred feet or more. Up ahead, we could see the road made a sharp curve to the left, just past the last stone house.

“And that’s when it happened. Mike was at the point, maybe fifteen, twenty feet in front of us. As he approached that sharp turn, a grenade rolled right in front of him. No kidding. Right in front of him. Given the terrain and the trail, we were all relatively bunched up. Keep in mind now, there was a narrow trail behind us with no cover, rock walls to the left of us with no cover, and a two-hundred foot drop to the right of us. Ahead of us was Mikey and the grenade and no cover. We all saw it, everyone in the squad. We all knew we were dead. All of us were definitely within the burst radius. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Dead.”

He paused in his narrative, looking at us. “Hooked, aren’t you?” he said. “Bet you want to know the rest of it, right?” Randi and I were literally on the edges of our seats. “Well,” he said, “I’m not sure about what happened next. I can only report what I saw, or what I think I saw. Mike dived on the grenade. He was giving his life for the rest of us—got that? Giving his *life!* But he didn’t stop with just diving on the damn thing. He cradled it against his abdomen and dove over the edge of the cliff. A microsecond after he disappeared over the edge, the grenade exploded.”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it,” I said. “Are you trying to tell us that Mike was holding a hand grenade that exploded, and he’s still walking around?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” Tommy replied. “He went over the edge, the grenade exploded, the side of the hill blew up in a shower of dirt and rocks and debris, and we got away—me and the entire squad—we escaped without anyone getting hurt.”

“But Mike should be dead,” I said.

“Yes, he should be. But he’s not.” Tommy looked befuddled.

I asked, “Is that where he got all those terrible scars?”

“No. Not then. Later. I’m getting to that.”

“Okay, back to the event, the heroism. Why isn’t he dead?” Randi asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve told you, he won’t talk to me about it. Almost everything else, yes. That part, no. I don’t know what happened. I only know that he picked up a live grenade, tucked it into his abdomen, jumped off a cliff, and the grenade exploded. He should be dead.” Tears filled his eyes again. “If you believe in miracles, if you believe in guardian angels, if you believe in magic, then you can explain what happened way better than I can.”

“Okay,” the attorney Randi said, “assume that in some miraculous way, he survived. Then what happened?”

Tommy hesitated briefly, clearing his eyes. “Well, I knew he was dead. So did everyone else. Again, case

closed. Dead. So the first order of business was to survive ourselves. At that point, we were taking heavy small-arms fire from above the road, from the same place the grenade had come from. There was nothing we could do for Mike, so we retreated up the trail to a spot we thought we could defend.

“As the sun set, we secured the area, established a perimeter, and set up a watch schedule. The watch schedule was irrelevant since no one slept anyway. That was the longest night of my life. I cried all night. I relived our life together, Mike’s and mine, more like brothers than friends. From the time we had met in the ninth grade, we had never been apart, even on vacations, not even for one day, except for our honeymoon.” He smiled at Randi. “And then he was gone. Gone from my life. *My* life. A gift from him.” He wiped his nose. “I think I dehydrated that night from crying.

“In the morning, we moved down the trail. My only thought was to get to his remains, to bring him home, or at least as much of him as we could find. It’s a military tradition to not leave anyone behind, never more true than with the Marines. By God, I was going to see him buried with full military honors, maybe in Arlington, with a Medal of Honor on his headstone. He certainly deserved that.

“We reached the spot where he had dived off the cliff. The area was secure. I looked over the side, and I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It was only about a ten-foot drop to a switch-back trail below. I expected to see blood and body parts scattered all over the place, but there was nothing. No blood, no bones, no

entrails, nothing. Empty. Only dirt, rock, rubble from the explosion, but no Mike.”

Randi the attorney went to work. “Okay, wait a minute. Mike picked up a live hand grenade. Then he jumped over the side of the cliff. Then the hand grenade exploded, right?”

I looked at him in befuddlement. So did Randi. Finally, Randi and I, at precisely the same instant, said, “I don’t get it.”

With a rueful smile, he said, “Well, duh. I don’t either. That’s what I’m telling you. Mike should be dead. He should be pink vapor and body parts cascaded all over an Afghanistan mountainside. But he’s not. He’s not. And I don’t know. I just don’t know. And Mike isn’t talking. What I do know is that two days later, when we were patrolling in the same area, we found him tied to a post.”

Chapter Forty

Mike

Penance for culinary indiscretions is part of my life. It means doing strenuous physical activity every day or facing the prospect of looking like the Michelin Man. Fortunately, I had Tom as a workout partner. Unfortunately, he was also usually the basis for my culinary indiscretions, as in, “Hey, let’s get some pizza.” Or, “Hey, pull into that Mexican restaurant over there.” His gift in life, besides being the best friend I ever had, was that his weight never changes. I met him when I was fourteen years old when Mae packed up everything and moved us to Sacramento. That was in July, so school wasn’t due to start until after Labor Day, and I definitely wasn’t looking forward to starting over in a new place, in a new school, and with a new set of rules facing me as a freshman in high school. And I was still grieving over the loss of Junie. I checked the mailbox every day, hoping she would write and let me know where she was. Every day I checked. Every day I came away empty-handed.

I still loved running, so I located my new high school and was pleased they had a brand new track made of some kind of synthetic spongy material that

would be easy on my feet and legs. I spent a couple of hours every morning running around the track, followed by sprint work on the football field inside the track. One morning, when I had been running for about an hour, another guy showed up. He was a bit taller than I was and heavily tanned like me, but definitely more muscular, outweighing me I guessed by about twenty pounds. His dark hair was damp with sweat and swept across his eyes. He kept tossing his head to one side to flip the hair out of his vision. Personally, I would have just cut it shorter.

He began running around the track, and I stepped off onto the interior field. As he ran by me, he said, “Hey, don’t quit on account of me.”

I said, “No worries. I was done with that. I’m going to do some sprint work.”

He stopped abruptly. “You’re a sprinter?”

“No, I wouldn’t call myself a sprinter. I just like running, and I like doing the sprint work. I think it makes me stronger over long distances.”

“Cool,” he said. “Hey, wait a minute while I do a some quick laps to get loose, and then I’ll work out with you.”

Fine by me, I thought, but instead of waiting for him, I joined him on his warm-up laps. We ran counterclockwise around the track, the light orange surface just beginning to pick up heat from the early morning sun and shoot it back at us. I held out my hand, and he shook it firmly. “I’m Mike Michaels,” I said.

Mae had married Robert after a brief courtship—I was the best man—and she had taken his name as

hers, Mae Michaels. We petitioned the court to allow Mae and Robert to adopt me, and I legally became Michael J Michaels. Mike for short. The new name was a bonus for me since I didn’t particularly want to go through life as Huckleberry Finn. So we had a new home in a new city, and I had a new name.

Handshake complete, he said, “I’m Tom Miller.” He might as well have been Tom Miler because on the track he was fairly fast. We did four laps, one mile, in five minutes and forty-five seconds on my stopwatch.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s your warm-up run? Dang. I’d hate to see it if you really got serious.”

He chuckled. “I have to be in perfect shape for football. Starts next month, actually late next month, a bit before school starts.”

We left the track and moved onto the football field. The faint residue of the yard markers was still visible, a series of lines running across the field at ten-yard intervals. We stopped at midfield. He turned to me and said, “You play? Football, I mean.”

“No. Never have. Running only, and only as recreation, never in competition.”

“Oh,” he said. But he said it as disappointment, not as an observation. “Well, let’s do some forties.”

“Some what?”

“Some forties. Forty-yard dashes. That’s four of these stripy things.” He pointed to the yard markers.

“Why forty? Why not the whole hundred?”

“Because forty is kind of the standard football measuring stick. I guess because it’s generally a game of shorter distances rather than longer ones. The

coaches look at how fast we can run forty yards as a measure of football speed.”

“Okay. Fine. Forty it is. How do we do this?”

“We’ll start with four by forty. That’s up and back, then up and back again. Go!”

He began sprinting a full beat before I got untangled and started running myself. He easily reached the turnaround point before I did, but by the time we got back to the start, I was pretty much even with him. I eased ahead of him on the third leg, reached the turnaround point a full five feet ahead, and then put myself into turbo-speed mode for that final forty yards.

He finished well behind me, slowed, and trotted over to where I was standing. Like me, he was breathing heavily. “My turn for wow. You are one fast dude. Have you had coaching? How the heck did you get that fast?”

“Well, I don’t know that I’m fast. I just know I love to run. Long, short, and everything in between.”

“Well, trust me,” he said. “You are truly fast. You say you’ve never played football?”

“No.”

“Can you catch?”

“What?”

“Can you catch? As in catch a ball.”

“Well, yeah, I guess so. I’ve never been into sports much.”

“Wait here,” he said, and then he ran off the field, across the track, and reached between some bleacher seats, extracting a football. He ran back. “I keep it

stashed there, out of sight. Listen, dude. You’re really fast. What I want to find out is if you can catch, and especially if you can catch when you’re running.”

“What’s the point?”

“The point is that I’m the quarterback. No, that’s not true. I am *a* quarterback. I’m going to try out for the team to see if I can become *the* quarterback. Quarterbacks throw the ball to receivers and sometimes to backs.”

“Why not to fronts?”

“What?” he asked.

“Why do you throw it at someone’s back? Why not the front?”

“Okay, right. You never played. Here’s the deal. Some of the players on offense and defense are called backs. I don’t know why. It’s just some kind of terminology. Technically, when the quarterback throws to an offensive player, that player is a receiver. It’s just that some of the receivers are backs. Get it?”

“Yeah, I guess. So what’s the point? I mean in trying to see if I can catch.”

“Because, dude, if you can catch *and* run like that, you would be one heck of a receiver. Here. Catch.”

He tossed me the ball. It wound around itself, a perfect spiraling object. I caught it easily and threw it back. It flopped back to him end over end.

“No, bro. Hold it like this.” He showed me the grip he used on the ball. “Then bring it from behind your right ear, like this.” Perfect spiral.

I got the hang of throwing quickly, although not with the same perfect spiral that he threw. He

gradually increased the distance between us, throwing far with the same ease as short. Not so in my case. The farther apart we got, the more arc I had to put on the ball to get it all the way to him. After a few minutes of that, he said, “Okay, come back beside me.” I trotted back to where he stood. “Now,” he said, “run straight down ten yards, make a sharp left turn, and then look back at me.”

I ran to the next yard marker, turned sharply to the left, and looked back. To my astonishment, the ball was almost to me already. I barely got my hands up in time to catch it. I ran back to him. “Hey,” I said. “What are you trying to do? Kill me?”

“No, bro. That’s how it works. It’s all about separation, timing, and routes. You see, the quarterback and the receiver know the route, that thing you just ran. They each know the moves and speed of the other one from lots of practice. The defensive players don’t know the route. They don’t know how fast you are or how fast I throw. They have to try to anticipate. Sometimes they anticipate really good, and that’s why timing and speed are so important. Timing and speed create separation, meaning just enough time and space for the quarterback to get the ball to the receiver before the defense has a chance to intercept it. Get it?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

For the rest of the morning, he ran me all over that field, and I think I performed fairly well, catching most of his passes. On some that I missed, he would say, “No problem, bro. My fault I led you too much.”

Or occasionally, he would say, “Dang, I didn’t lead you enough.”

Toward noon, as we stood there in the middle of the field dripping sweat onto the short grass, he said, “Okay. One more. Then we quit for the day. We’ll call this play 42-post. Here’s what you do. Line up wide over on the right. Run straight down the sideline forty yards. This is the fifty that we’re standing on. You’re going to run to the ten. At the ten, cut left toward the middle of the field. Your momentum will have you drifting a bit toward the goal line, but that’s OK. After you cut, take ten strides, and then look back for the ball. Absolutely don’t look back before then. I need to see if this works. You should catch the ball at about the eight-yard line. Forty-two yards, 42-post, get it?”

“Well, kind of. So what do I do after I catch the ball at the eight?”

“If you catch the ball at the eight, you turn and run into the end zone.”

“Fine. *When* I catch the ball at the eight, I’ll turn and run into the end zone.”

“Cocky little weasel, aren’t you?”

“Not cocky. Confident. With that cannon you have for an arm, how could I not be?” He liked that. And the smirky look on *his* face was definitely one of cockiness more than confidence.

I lined up, sprinted in turbo-speed mode, cut sharply left at the ten-yard line, took ten long strides, and looked back at him. The ball was literally inches from my outstretched hands, floating into them with

that perfect spiraling grace. I caught the ball easily, cut to the right, and ran into the end zone.

He ran to me this time, shaking his head. “Dude, you are awesome. If you decide to play, you are going to cause big problems for defenses. You sure you never played before?”

“Never.”

“So you know nothing about blocking and tackling?”

“Yeah. A block and tackle is a device with cables and pulleys that you use for lifting things.”

“Right. You never played. Okay. Are you interested in playing?”

“Yes. If it involves running and catching like today.”

“It does. But it’s more than that. It’s fundamental stuff, too. If you’re really interested, we could meet tomorrow, or every day for that matter. I can coach you on some of the fundamental stuff so you won’t look like a complete idiot when practice starts next month.”

I shrugged. “What time tomorrow?”

“Nine. Right here. We’ll go over some basics, do some running, and do some pass-and-catch drills. See you then.”

He ran off. That day was the beginning of a new life for me, a life where he and I were more brothers than friends, where we were together for part of every day, unerringly. Every day. Until one day. One day in a faraway place.

Chapter Forty-one

Emma

“What I do know is that two days later, when we were patrolling in the same area, we found him tied to a post.”

Tommy spoke softly, almost in a whisper. “We swept through again, much more carefully this time when we moved through villages. Better spacing, better distance, better technique. No more mistakes. We moved through the village where Mike had been blown up, and then we moved down the switchback trail where his body should have been. We descended into a canyon, not unlike what you might find in the American southwest, but shielded, shaded, pristine, with lots of green stuff. Off in the distance we could hear some shouting—they knew we were coming—and then a single gunshot.

“We moved forward, with great speed and great caution, if that makes sense.”

I looked at Randi. She looked back at me. Our mutual looks said the same thing: *I’m sorry, Tommy, but we’re never going to get it—never going to fully understand the warrior’s approach, the warrior’s sense, the warrior’s anything. But go ahead with the story.*

“We moved through a clutter of rocky debris and toward a relatively open area. Based on all our past experiences, we were plenty concerned about ambush. But none came. In fact, the only thing we saw was a huge post, like a telephone pole stuck right in the middle of the clearing. And tied to the post, naked, battered, bleeding, and shot, was Michael J Michaels.

“We secured the area, established a perimeter, and then began attending to Mike. None of us could believe he was alive. I was stunned almost into immobility. I walked over to him, touched him, not believing what I was seeing. He opened his eyes and met my gaze full on. He said one word: ‘Medevac.’

“He was asking for medical help, for me a wonderfully good sign. We called for chopper assistance, and I was reminded of the old-time guys in Vietnam, calling for Dust Off, the sixties equivalent of medical evacuation. In the squad on that day, just like two days before when Mike had eaten the grenade, we had a doc with us, a Navy corpsman, the Marine Corps equivalent of an on-site physician. Thank God for corpsmen. If there really and truly is a heaven, and if there’s a place there that’s reserved for special people, it has to be full of Navy corpsmen.

“Docs are amazing, at least the ones who came with us. Our doc, like all docs I guess, was totally in control. Even on routine patrols with no problems, he would come around checking stuff. I mean, jeez, God help you if you weren’t doing good foot care—you know, taking care of your feet, changing socks, and stuff like that. He was a small guy, maybe 130 pounds dripping

wet, and yet he would grab some two hundred-pound guy by the front of his shirt and say, ‘Listen, motherfucker, if you don’t start taking care of your feet, I’m going to kick your ass halfway to Sunday.’ And the weird thing is, the two hundred-pound guy would cower meekly and say, ‘Okay, Doc. Okay. I’ll do better. Okay.’

“Anyway, with Mikey, the doc made an assessment, basically amounting to, ‘Holy shit. This guy should be dead.’ Bottom line, Mike had been tortured. Burned, disfigured, whipped, and then shot. From a purely male perspective the worst things were the wire-shaped burns on his scrotum. He should have been dead. I don’t know many men who could have survived what he survived. Tough guy.”

“So that’s where the scars came from?” I asked. “The round marks on his chest and abdomen are burn scars?”

“Yes.”

“The big crater on the right side of his chest is where he got shot?”

“Yes.”

“And those awful marks on his back are actually whip marks?”

“Yup.”

“And what did you say about something on the scrotum?”

“Electrical burns, Emma. And trust me. You really don’t want to know.”

Tommy continued his the narrative, explaining that he was inferring much, not being able to get the

story directly from Mike. During the two days tied to the post, Mike had been tortured horribly, probably burned on the chest and abdomen with the end of a red-hot stick. “Near the post, we found a whip, probably the one they used on Mike. There’s no way to know, short of getting it directly from Mike, which came first, the burning stick or the whip, or if they were part of the same torture sessions. And there was an old car battery nearby and some wires. I don’t even want to think about what that means, how bad that must have been, when they hooked those wires onto Mike, and especially where they hooked them. The only thing that’s certain is that the gunshot wound to the chest came last, almost certainly just as we were closing in on the clearing. If he had been shot sooner, or if we had come later, he would have died from bleeding into his lung.

“The doc did as good a patch-up job as he could under the conditions, and we were lucky because there was a forty-seven en route to do an extraction a few miles from where we were. We diverted it to the clearing, used a makeshift litter that we put together from small posts and a couple of ponchos, and got Mike out of there. I went with him, talking to him the whole way, bent over so my mouth was right next to his ear. I kept telling him that if he gave up, if he died, I would find him in the afterlife someday and kick his ass. He laughed when I said that, and that’s when I knew he was going to make it. What I didn’t know is that he wouldn’t make it all the way back. Back to the old Mike, I mean.

“We flew to a field hospital, where I swear, now looking back with a more professional perspective, there were some of the finest physicians and nurses on the planet, ever, in the history of mankind. To be able to handle trauma cases of that degree under those conditions is beyond incredible. They were cool, methodical, and professional, even though they had to be dying inside from the unending barrage of explosive-damaged bodies, most of them still alive when they arrived, and an astonishing number of them saved with that prompt resuscitation, stabilization, and transport to rear-echelon medical facilities.

“With Mike, once we were on the ground and rolling toward the hospital itself, a bunch of things happened almost simultaneously. The triage leader did an initial survey, calling out the obvious wounds and injuries to one of the team acting as a recorder. He, the triage guy, listened to Mike’s chest with a stethoscope and said, ‘Probable hemopneumothorax.’ They rolled him onto his side so they could look at his back. When they saw the whip marks, one of the young nurses said something like ‘Mother of God.’ One of the corpsmen had some more colorfully descriptive terms. When they rolled him onto his back again, they put an x-ray plate under him so they could get a film immediately after they got inside.

“I heard them talking about low BP—low blood pressure—and the need for fluids and blood. They were talking about cracking his chest to secure bleeding sites, and then he was gone, into the OR, the operating room suite. I tried to go in, but one of the young

doctors—a Navy medical officer—said, ‘No, corporal. We’ll take it from here. You go on over to the mess tent and get something to drink. I’ll personally come find you as soon as we know something.’

“I waited a long time, or at least it seemed like a long time. Finally the young doctor, not much older than I was, came into the mess tent. ‘Corporal,’ he said, ‘it’s good news and bad news. The good news is that he’s stable. The bad news is that he has been badly injured. Part of the problem is that he was brutalized before he was shot, and he was probably already hemodynamically unstable from those wounds and the torture. Then there’s the chest wound. He has air and blood around his right lung. Looking at his chest wall, it looks like he had a similar injury in the past, with placement of a chest tube on the same side. Do you know anything about that?’ No, I said, although I was lying.

“The young Navy doctor went on to say that the ultrasound of Mike’s abdomen and pelvis didn’t show any significant injury. The chest CT, on the other hand, showed extensive injury to the middle and lower lobes of his right lung. All of those things they could manage, he said, and it looked like they might be able to keep him out of irreversible hypovolemic or septic shock. But, he went on to say, the round—the bullet—that penetrated his anterior chest wall had not exited his back. Instead, it had met solidly with his spine and partially imbedded into one of his thoracic vertebrae. There was a real good chance, he said, that Mike would have a spinal cord injury, possibly causing paralysis in his legs.

“That got to me more than anything. I knew in my heart Mike was going to survive. But I wouldn’t be able to stand it if he couldn’t walk again, couldn’t run, couldn’t go one on one with me in basketball. There I was, a twenty-something United States Marine Corps corporal, steadfast warrior, skillful with small arms and large weapons, a veteran of a dozen fire-fights, witness to the deaths of enemies and comrades, hardened to titanium toughness, and then suddenly I was sobbing uncontrollably at the thought of a permanently disabled Mike. Mike recovered fully from that, thank God, although he still has metal fragments in and around his spine. But I’m sure the young lieutenant was embarrassed because it didn’t seem like he knew what to do with my bawling. After a minute or so, I calmed myself and asked when I could see Mike. ‘Right now,’ he said, and he took me to the post-op area.

“I stayed with Mike for maybe ten minutes, way longer than I was supposed to, but I didn’t care, and no one came to run me off. I kept whispering into his ear. I kept saying, ‘One on one. You and me bro. One on one. When we get back, back to the world, and when you’re better, it’s going me you and me again, one on one. And you’ll be so fucking weak, I’ll be able to kick your ass every time. I can’t wait, bro. One on one.’

“I know he heard me, too, understood me, remembered, because months later, at Lejeune, when he had gotten most of his strength back, we were playing basketball, one on one. Up until then, he had been so weak and so slow that I beat him every time. And no, I

never let up. I never let him win even once. He would have decked me if I slacked off. But then, one day, he hit a lucky J, a jumper, from about thirty feet to win the game. He looked at me and said, ‘Not so weak now, eh, bro?’ Anyway, I’d like to think I had something to do with bringing him back, at least this far.

“In Afghanistan, before he got sent to the rear and then home, he asked to see our company commander. Mike already knew he was a candidate for a Medal of Honor. The Captain, our company commander, spent about thirty minutes with Mike, which is twenty-nine minutes more than I expected. The Captain came out of that meeting shaking his head as he walked over to me. I saluted, and he returned the salute, saying, ‘Damn fool kid. But I’ll do what he wants.’ He went on to say that Mike insisted that the recommendation for a Medal of Honor not go forward, that if anything, the award should be for a Navy Cross. Much later, when they gave it to him, the Navy Cross that is, I was on leave with Randi. I think Mike set it up that way, so I wouldn’t be there even though we were both sergeants by then and would have looked like functional poster boys for the Corps. Mike keeps that award in a frame in his apartment, but without the citation. It just has his name and the award, the Navy Cross. It’s the only show-off thing he has ever displayed.”

I interrupted. “Wait a minute. Are you talking about that religious award I saw, the one next to his bookcases in his living room?”

“Yes, Emma. Except it’s not a religious award. It’s a Navy Cross. It’s the nation’s second highest mili-

tary award for valor. It should have been a Medal of Honor, but for some misguided reason, Mike talked the Captain out of it. He has other awards, too, that no one ever sees. Two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star from another action, but the only one you ever see is that Navy Cross.

“Anyway, we completed our enlistments, time-locked start to finish, and we came home. We both applied for admission to medical school at Davis, and we both got accepted. After those nearly four years of medical school together, we both finished our graduation requirements a few months early, and we had some time to kill. Good thing, too, because Ernie needed us. Good old Ern. He had war wounds himself, left over from Vietnam, and they finally caught up to him. Shrapnel in his femur worked its way into the knee joint and wreaked all kinds of havoc. With the old injury, plus normal wear-and-tear on his knee joint, plus the new stuff caused by the wandering shrapnel, there was no way to make that knee joint functional. So he had it replaced with one of those spiffy titanium jobs. Mike and I covered for him at the shop for almost three months, doing just enough to keep the place open and maintain a customer base.”

I interrupted again. “Wait. That’s why you two were working there? That’s why Mike had the wrecker the first day I met him?”

“Yup. Ernie came back to full-time status, although not quite 100 percent, on the first of July, the same day we started our internships, together as usual. Our first rotation was in the emergency room, as you well

know, Emma. Funny, he doesn't talk much anymore. But he does talk about that, in a self-deprecatory way, making fun of himself for walking into the exam cubicle where you were sitting, flipping through the chart, introducing himself, and then looking up. Actually, I wish I could have been there to see the look on his face. Must have been priceless."

I smiled at the memory. "It was," I said. "Priceless. He was so...so un-Mike, so flustered and embarrassed. And ashamed, I guess, because he hadn't told me anything up to that point, although he was going to. He had already set a date for that, his confess-all date. It's all okay now, though. We're getting along... nicely." I looked at Randi, and she nodded, meaning that Tommy was up to speed on how I felt about Mike. "Actually, we're getting along very well. But at a god-damned snail's pace." There went my mouth again. "I just wish I could speed him up, read his emotions better. I wish I knew if we're going anywhere."

"My advice," Tommy said, "is to not push too hard. If you do, he will back off, scuttle away, and hide until he feels safe again. He's making progress, although he could do it faster with professional help. Or a good kick in the ass, if the right person or situation came along." He paused briefly, looking off into the darkening sky in the west, which was punctuated by lightning flashes in the distance. Then he continued, "Bedtime for me, ladies. Sorry. Shift starts at seven tomorrow. Have to be there at least half an hour early. See you tomorrow."

Randi and I talked casually for another hour, and then we both went off to our respective beds. I slept like death, scarcely moving until the phone rang the next morning at 6:45. It was Tommy, frantic at the other end of the line. "Emma. Mike didn't show up for work this morning. Something terrible must have happened. I mean something really terrible."

Chapter Forty-two

Emma

Sometimes my mind wandered back to that day long ago, after Marco's beating, after I had been transported from Grand Junction to a hospital in Denver. The least personable man I've ever met walked into my room, over to my bed, and started talking without even introducing himself

"Mrs. Randelli, the best way to prevent severe post-traumatic facial deformity in your case, or in any case like yours, is to provide treatment as soon after the injury as possible."

He sounded pedantic, this surgeon of mine, and I didn't like him. More correctly, I didn't like his bedside manner. He was too remote, too aloof, too...clinical. I needed someone with a personal touch. Too bad for me. Too bad for the loser, Emma Randelli. *Serves you right, I thought. You got just what you deserved. Deserve. You picked another loser male, he beat you up, destroyed your face, and then you got sent to a cold, calculating surgeon, a heartless surgeon in a city far away from home.*

No matter that Needs said he was one of the best craniofacial surgeons on the planet, he still wasn't

warm and fuzzy. And I definitely needed warm and fuzzy.

I was lying in that hospital bed in Denver, reflecting on my poor decision-making when the stone-hearted surgeon's assistant arrived, a young woman who was not much older than I was, it seemed.

"Emma," she said, "I'm Susan Petroski. I'll be assisting on your surgery in the morning."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes, sorry. I'm *Doctor* Petroski."

"You don't look old enough to be a doctor."

"Well, thank you. I guess I have good genes. All the women in my family look younger than they are. Now let's talk about you." She pulled a chair over to the bedside and sat down next to me.

I studied her through swollen eyes in my swollen face. She was strikingly pretty in a Scandanavian way, with fine, light brown hair, prominent cheekbones, and eyes set deeply. When I met her gaze directly, I thought I could see—no, I could sense a piercing intelligence.

"Emma," she said, "for the purposes of your procedure tomorrow, and for the after-care that I'll be directing, I want you do something for me."

"What?"

"I want you to be Emma. And I want you to call me Susan."

"Now," she continued, "let me lay it out for you, what you're up against, what the surgery tomorrow entails, and your long road back. It's going to be important for you to not focus too much on your post-operative appearance, which will be ugly and will

frighten you. Don't focus on that. Instead, I want you to focus on the future." She reached into a large bag that she had brought with her. She took out a large hand-held mirror and gave it to me. "Don't look in the mirror yet," she said.

No worries there, Susan, I thought. I had already seen the aftermath of the Randelli-wrought battering. I had seen it shortly after the beating, and it was no doubt ten times worse now.

She reached into the bag and took out a sketchpad and a piece of charcoal. She looked at me and began sketching, her hand almost literally flying over the paper. Every few seconds she would look at me and then draw again, her speedy hand blurring my vision. In a few minutes, she finished, put the charcoal away, and wiped her hands on a tissue.

"Emma, listen to me. Everything in life boils down to three questions. One, what do I want? Two, how badly do I want it? Three, what price am I willing to pay? Got that?"

I nodded.

"Good. Now, I want you to look at this picture."

I looked at what she had drawn, a picture of an almost stunningly beautiful woman. "Who is that?" I asked.

"You."

"What?"

"It's you. It's what you can look like. Now, Emma, look in the mirror."

I held the mirror in my left hand and started to raise it.

“Wait,” Susan said. She stood up, set the sketchpad on the bed next to me, and took my right hand in hers. “Okay, now look.”

I looked into the mirror. And gasped. And started sobbing. I was squeezing Susan’s hand so tightly that I thought her bones would break. Instead of drawing away, she took my hand to her cheek and held it there. What startled me out of my own sobbing was realizing that I could feel her tears on my hand. She was crying for me. I looked into those blue eyes again, and I sensed something else. Compassion. My God, I sensed compassion. *Thank you, Lord, I thought. Thank you for sending me warm and fuzzy.*

We both settled ourselves. “Now, Emma, what do you want?”

“I don’t understand.”

She held up the picture next to the mirror. I could see my crushed and ugly face next to a charcoal figure, the drawing of someone I could never be, now or ever.

“What do you want?” she asked again. “Do you want what’s in the mirror? Or do you want what’s in the picture?”

“Are you serious? I mean is that even a serious question? I could never look like that picture. Even before. But especially now. I mean, are you serious?”

The look on her face was certainly one of seriousness, fully lacking doubt, a hint of a smile in her eyes. “Emma,” she said again. “What do you want?”

Without hesitation I said, “I want to look like that picture.”

“How badly do you want it?”

“With all my heart.”

“What price are you willing to pay? And I don’t mean money. I mean *what price* are you willing to pay?”

“I will do whatever it takes. I will suffer to whatever degree is necessary. I will do whatever and everything you ask if I can look like that.”

“Great answer, Emma. Now let me explain how you’re going to get from the face in the mirror to the face in the picture.”

She put the mirror and the picture into the bag at the side of the bed while I waited with anticipation. She sat down, took my hand in hers again, and said, “What do you know about microplates?”

Chapter Forty-three

Emma

“Emma, dear God.” I could hear Tommy at the other end of the phone, almost weeping. “Something terrible happened. I mean something really terrible.”

His screaming voice echoed in my ear through the phone. He went on to explain that after he left us the night before, he hadn’t gone straight to bed. He had gone down to see Mike, and they had talked briefly. Tommy had apologized, and Mike had accepted, saying that no apology was necessary, that he thought Tommy was absolutely correct in everything he had said, and that further, he, Mike, was going to try to do better. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll take care of it. I’ll take care of *everything*.” And then they both had said, “Hey, see you in the morning.” But at the hospital that morning, Mike hadn’t shown up.

Tommy went on. “Mike is the legendary iron man, Emma. He has never missed a day of anything, school, practice, work, Corps, anything. Jesus Christ, he didn’t show up. I’m scared, Emma. I think something bad might have happened. Something really bad. I keep getting this mental image of Mike and that goddamned Glock. Emma, I hate to ask you this, but

Randi's on her way to Fresno for a trial there. I don't have anyone else I can trust. I'm so sorry to be asking you this, but please go down there now and see what's going on. If he doesn't answer, there's a key to his apartment in Randi's key file on her desk."

"Tommy," I said. "It's storming outside. You can see that. It's pitch dark, and the electricity is out here." I knew that because there was no comforting glow from the bedside alarm clock, and the lightning and thunder had made for fitful sleep.

"Emma, for Christ's sake, I know it's storming out there. I had to drive to work in that mess. But it's no problem," he said. "Just inside our door, on the hallway table, there's a flashlight. Use it to find Mike's apartment key before you go down there. You know where the keys are. That will save a bit of time. You'll need the flashlight in Mike's apartment to...to make an assessment...to see if...to..."

"Tommy, shut up. I get it. I know what to do. I've seen worse and done worse. I'll handle it. Now get your butt back to work. Save lives. Get busy. I'll handle this. Just leave your goddamn beeper on, so that I can find you if I need you." I spoke with far more confidence than I felt. His anxiety had spilled over onto me. No tragedy today, please. No tragedy today.

Outside, there was weather that was very uncharacteristic for Sacramento in July, with an almost midnight-like darkness and rolling thunder in the distance, punctuated by kaleidoscopic lightning flashes. I felt like I was still half-asleep, but rousing rapidly as I jogged up to 3G. I used the key to open the door and let

myself in. I fumbled along the hallway table looking for the flashlight. Damn. It wasn't there. Semi-blind in the darkness, I picked my way along the kitchen, stubbing my toe on a chair and lighting up the room with four-letter expletives. Miss Graceful, Miss Demure. I stumbled into the kitchen counter, knocking something over as I did so. The something, bless me, was the flashlight that was supposed to be on the hallway table. I used it to navigate to the guest bedroom that Randi used as her office, and in the dim glow from the flashlight, I pulled Randi's roll-top desk open. One of the lateral sides of the desk had key hooks, and one of the keys was labeled "Mike." I took that key and ran, as close to full speed as the darkness would allow, down to 2B.

I knocked on the door. No answer. "Mike," I shouted through the door. "Open up, Mike. It's Emma." No answer. I knocked again, waited a precious few seconds, and then hearing nothing from the inside, I slipped the key in the lock and opened the door. Standing briefly in the doorway, I sniffed the air rushing out from the apartment, expecting the smoky cordite smell of gunpowder. Instead, my nose was greeted by a male smell, a combination of after-shave, stale coffee, and sweat. I stepped through the door, inside Mike's apartment, steeling myself for the inevitable, steeling myself for tragedy, steeling myself for another loss.

As I stepped inside, I could see nothing in the power-outage darkness of the living room, even with the door open behind me. Just at that moment, lightning flashed behind me, briefly illuminating

the apartment ahead of me, and I could see Mike in the semidarkness of the living room slumped to one side on the love seat on the far side of the room. He was as still as death, and my heart sank to my shoes, dying inch by inch on its cold descent. *Oh, God, no*, I thought, tears welling in my eyes. *Please, no. Please, God, no*. I fumbled along the wall, using the flashlight, trying to find the hallway light switch, suddenly realizing the futility—there was no electricity.

From the muted darkness came a sound, Mike's voice. "Emma, don't try to turn on the light. The electricity is out, and besides, I like it dark and quiet in the morning." I muffled a sob, although not completely, and ran through the darkness to the love seat. Internally, I was saying, "Mike, you son of a bitch, if you ever scare me like this again, you're going to be missing a testicle or two." But externally, I was quiet, saying nothing, feeling that silence, or at least no conversation, might be the best order of business. I stood there, eyes adjusting to the darkness, looking down at the huddled shadow on the love seat. Looking down at him, and with as much blandness and matter-of-factness as I could muster, I said, "Good morning, Michael J Michaels."

"Good morning, Emma Randelli. What brings you out so early on a stormy Friday morning?"

"Well, I thought I would check on my...my boyfriend." It sounded nice to say that. I paused, and then I said, "My boyfriend Mike who didn't show up for work today."

"Boyfriend? Wow. Nice. I like it. Well, girlfriend, I was up all night, reflecting on things. And one of the things I decided was that trying to do patient care on little or no sleep, with unresolved personal issues still at the fore, would be imprudent. So I called in sick. Besides, they're fat with staff today. I already checked. If they had been short-staffed, I would have gone in anyway and gutted it out. And since you're here, it must be because Tommy called you to check on me."

"Yes, he did. And let me see if I understand this. You called in sick because you're tired and didn't want to do a bad job with patients?"

"Yes. That and my mind is still unfocused, or more correctly, focused far away."

A brief lightning flash gave some illumination to the cave-like darkness of the apartment, and I sat down next to him on the sofa, putting my head on his chest and looking away from his face. The slabs of muscle under my cheek were wonderfully soft and supportive. Through my left ear, I could hear his heart beating solidly, slowly, rhythmically under his shirt. I had never had, nor yet wanted, this degree of closeness with him, but as I experienced it, it was truly wonderful, and I sensed it was the right thing to do under the circumstances. I reached down to take Mike's right hand, thinking of Randi gently taking Tommy's hand in hers. I stopped abruptly when I realized his hand held a pistol. "Mike, why are you holding that pistol?" I said it in a gentle, non-accusatory way.

“Emma, it’s not just a pistol. It’s a Glock 26 nine-millimeter semi-automatic with a ten-shot clip. Holds eleven with one in the chamber. This is a male gun, too, Emma. Guns have genders, like cars. You know how you look at your Gray Lady as being a feminine member of the genus auto? Well, my Glock is a guy. And on a good day I can squeeze off all eleven rounds in just under two and a half seconds and put every one into a two-inch circle thirty feet away.”

“Very impressive,” I said calmly, although my insides were churning. “But why would you ever want to do that?”

“Good point. Not much use for that outside of combat or law enforcement. But anyway, it’s just a frame of reference so you understand that it’s not just any old pistol.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re sitting here in the dark holding it.”

“Are you going to subject me to that Randi-like cross-examination?”

“Not at all. I’m going to sit here, being reasonably quiet for me, content to be next to my boyfriend.”

“Well, Miss Emma, I haven’t had a girlfriend for a long time, much less one who was cuddled next to me in the dark. It feels kind of nice.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re sitting here in the dark holding an eleven-shot Glock.”

“Okay, you are now sitting there. No, you’re lying there with your head on my chest, expecting me to disassemble or to sink into some meaningless hyperbole about my intentions. You’re expecting me to layer on the misdirection, like a pastry chef layering

on frosting, with suave and incomparable perfection. You’re expecting me to spoon out chocolate-like nonsense that will smooth the sharp edges of your concern.”

He paused.

“Wow,” I said, drooling sarcasm. “That was a nice little speech. Did you make that up on the spot?”

He chuckled, a low, rumbling laugh that I could feel through my left cheek against his chest. “Yeah. I just made it up. Pretty good, huh?”

“Actually, very good.”

I remained silent for a long time, and so did he. I was thinking, *No, mister, I’m not going to cave in and speak first. I can outlast you.* I was also thinking, *My oh my, this is really comfortable, lying here, strong chest beneath my cheek, solid heart beating in my ear, and I am still so sleepy. I think I’ll take a short nap.* I was on the verge of dozing when suddenly a huge clash of thunder rattled the windows, and lightning lit up the entire room. Then Mike spoke.

“Do you know this quote, Emma? ‘O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse without all hope of day!’”

“Yes, I know it. John Milton. In ‘Samson Agonistes.’ It refers to Samson’s blindness, if I recall correctly.”

“You’re correct, Miss Emma. Those words might also apply to a state of abject despair, don’t you think, with figuratively unremitting darkness?”

I didn’t answer, and he was quiet again for a long time. I maintained my stillness, my patience, afraid to move, afraid to speak, afraid to breathe. Finally, he began again.

“Sometimes, on the darkest days, in the darkest hours in the deep of night, I’ll sit here, sleepless, holding my Glock, my only true male friend except for Tommy. I talk to the Glock. We communicate in a transcendent way, a kind of therapy for me, forestalling the inevitable, the decision to...to end the pain. I’ve wondered many times how many of the eleven rounds I could put into my head with my rapid-fire technique. Two? Two would be good. Highly effective. Three? Excellent. Probably a world record. But what if I could do four? Four rounds into the brain, self-inflicted. Unbeatable. A record that would stand for all time. Except that I wouldn’t know that I did it. I wouldn’t have the satisfaction of knowing I had the all-time record. My consciousness would be splattered on the wall behind me, the bloody brain matter stuck there and containing all the remnants of memory, some good, some bad. Some very good. Some very bad.”

He was quiet again, and I was absolutely, irrevocably awake and wide-eyed and absolutely unmoving, riveted, afraid to move, afraid to breathe lest he stop talking. Finally, he continued.

“The crux of the matter, Emma, is that I gave up. And that’s what’s killing me.”

He stopped again, hesitating for a long time. Finally, he moved slightly, repositioning himself into a more upright position. He told me to roll over so I was looking directly at him, instead of away. I scrunched around, rolling until I could look directly at him. In a brief flash of lightning, our gaze met, and my heart melted. I looked into those dark brown eyes, made into the deep-

est of pools by the lightning outside, and felt myself sinking into them. At that moment, and from that point forward, I was his forever—completely, intellectually, emotionally, and physically if that’s what he wanted.

Instead, he said, “I suspect you and Tommy and Randi had a long talk last night. Did Tommy tell you about Afghanistan?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

I told Mike everything Tommy had told us, including the great mystery about how Mike survived a grenade blast, about how they had found him tied to a post, about the terrible injuries he had suffered. I explained this with my right cheek still tightly against his chest, his steady heart beating below, with visions of those horrible scars just under the thin shirt.

“Do you want to know what happened, Emma? Do you want to know about the grenade, about the aftermath, about my total and utter collapse, about my irredeemable loss of dignity and manhood? Do you want to know, Emma?”

“Yes, but only if you want to tell me.”

“I do want to tell you. I do want you to know. I do want you know about my abject failure, my failure as a Marine and a man. You can’t continue to want to be my ‘girlfriend’ unless you know. And once you know, you may not want to be my girlfriend. You may not even want to be my friend. In fact, you may never want to see me again.”

Silence followed, but again I outlasted him. Finally, he began speaking, and he told me everything. Everything.

Chapter Forty-four

Mike

Saturday morning, the morning after my full confession to the master interrogator Emma Randelli, I awakened at 0500 hours, or 5:00 a.m. civilian time. I lay in bed in the darkness, sunrise more than a full hour away, thinking about all the differences between military and civilian life. All that thinking consumed a good portion of the pre-sunrise hour, and at the end of it, it occurred to me that now I truly was a civilian. And even more importantly, I was now emphatically relieved of tons of military baggage because of one deeply emotional conversation with that incredible, spirited, green-eyed Italian woman. It also occurred to me that I didn't really know the genetic heritage of the Mouth, my internal name for Emma, she with the tendency to wax profane. She could be Italian, Spanish, German, or Norwegian for all I knew. No, not Norwegian. Too dark. Both physically and emotionally. There had to be some Mediterranean in there somewhere.

It didn't really matter. I knew in my heart that we were somehow meant to be together, on a collision course over a lifetime to this moment. It really didn't

matter who she was or where she had come from, nor did it matter now who I was or where I had come from. This was a coming together of two people analogous to that of the old west, where importance was placed on the here and now, on who you were and where you were going instead of where you came from.

I also knew what she had given me the night before: relief and forgiveness from the torment of that one defining moment when I, after descending into the deepest possible despair, had begged for death. She had understood. In the most fundamental way, she had understood. And she had not given me pity, which would have been absolutely devastating. Instead, she had given me a fiery response, calling me an idiot and a stupid male. Sadly and profoundly, she was correct. But it wasn't until I heard someone else speak those words that I could see their correctness.

And then, dang, for the second time in my life a woman had kissed me and told me she loved me before I could kiss her and tell her I loved her. Bleep. Those thoughts were in my mind as I walked up to Tom's and Randi's apartment at 6:30, with the rising sun hailing a new day. As I approached the door to 3G, I was tossing my basketball from hand to hand, the same basketball I had drowned two nights earlier. I debated knocking gently, knowing that the light-sleeping Tommy would hear it and come to the door.

I decided that was the wrong approach. Instead, I stood five feet from the door, near the balcony railing, and began bouncing the ball against the door. The ball would hit the door, then bounce off the con-

crete and into my hands. Bonk, bounce, catch. Bonk, bounce, catch. Bonk, bounce, catch. Over and over. Bonk, bounce, catch. After the tenth time, Tommy opened the door, dressed in white skivvies and a T-shirt. Sleepy-eyed, he asked, "What the *hell* are you doing?"

"It is I, Qudamah, come for redemption. Pay up."

Puzzled and squinting at the daytime brightness of the balcony, he said, "Koo what? What the hell are you talking about? Are you nuts? Do you know what time it is? I'm not working today. Neither are you. Go back to bed. That's where I'm going."

He turned away from me and began closing the door. Moving quickly across the balcony, I inserted my foot into the space between the doorjamb and the door. Looking through the narrow space, into the apartment, into the bleary eyes of my uncommonly patient and long-time best friend, I said softly, "Hold on, dude. It's a bright sunny day, awash with possibilities and promise. Not a moment to be wasted. So roll it out here, and let's get down to the courts. Today, your ass is mine." I pushed the door open and handed him the ball. He promptly gave it back to me.

He was puzzled. "What did you say?"

I said, "The day is bright with possibilities. If you don't show up on the courts in five minutes I win."

"No. What did you say about the sun?"

"The sun is shining, bro, after an interminably long and thunderous and dismal night, filled with darkness and despair. The eclipse has passed. The dark, dark, dark is no more. *Gone!* It's gone. I was forever doomed

and irrevocably enveloped by darkness, but I have escaped. I have escaped the eclipse. The sun is shining, bro. Just look at it. Glorious.”

“I have no friggin’ idea what the *hell* you’re talking about. Wait a minute. What did you say about kicking my ass?”

“Well, that’s exactly what I intend to do, bro. Except it appears I won’t have to. Because you’re a pussy, and you want to go back to bed. So I win. See you tomorrow. Maybe by then you’ll be man enough to take me on.”

“Wait a minute. Did you say you were going to kick my ass?”

“No, bro, I didn’t. What I did say was that your ass is mine. Just proved it, too, because you pussied out. Go back to bed. I hope the real Tommy shows up tomorrow.”

“Did you just call me a pussy?”

“Truth hurts, doesn’t it, bro? Hasta mañana.”

“Hey, wait a minute. You used the words ass and pussy.”

“Yup.”

“You don’t use profanity.”

“Not profanity, bro. Descriptive terms. First, for what I’ll do to you—your ass is mine. And second for what you are—one giant pussy. See you later, loser.” I turned and walked toward the stairway, bouncing the ball as I walked.

I was two seconds down the walkway when the booming voice arose behind me, stern and authoritative, the Marine Corps Sergeant speaking. “Hey, dickhead.”

I stopped, turned in a slow, measured way, looked at him squarely, and said quietly, “Are you talking to me?”

“I don’t see any other dickhead here. I’ll be down there in ten minutes. And then we’ll see who kicks whose ass.”

I turned again, this time walking without bouncing the ball—out of consideration for all those late-sleeping neighbors. However, I did chuckle uncontrollably all the way down three flights of stairs.

Tommy arrived on the blacktop basketball courts in eight minutes, looking less bleary-eyed but no less puzzled. Facing him, his back to the basket, I decided to add to his puzzlement. Bouncing the ball first with my right hand, then the left, I said, “New rules for today, bro, and just for today. Today, I’m spotting you five points, so you’re ahead five-zip.” I tossed him the ball to check it. He scowled and tossed it back to me.

“Here’s the setup,” I explained. “I told Emma everything last night, bro. Absolutely everything. Everything about what happened on the trail in the Korangal Valley. Everything that happened, every bit of the aftermath, every bit about my callow, irredeemable personal failure, none of which you know. Yet. But you will. Do you know what happened when I told her, bro? She stole my Glock. But before she did that, she kissed me. And before that, she told me she loved me. Imagine that, bro. A loving, kissing bandit. A bandito. No. A bandita. Damn. Just look at that glorious sun.”

As I said that, Tommy looked toward the sun, allowing me to dribble-drive around him for an easy lay-up. “Five-one, pal. Can’t believe you fell for that. Do you need some time to wake up?”

“Screw you,” he replied.

I waited for his scowl to subside, again bouncing the ball back and forth, left to right. “You know, telling Emma everything, and I mean absolutely everything, was cathartic for me. Do you know the word, bro? Cathartic. Comes from the ancient Greek word *catharsis*. Aristotle defined that word as emotional cleansing. Speaking of cleansing, did you take a shower this morning? Your aura is one of eu de locker room.”

His head turned toward his left armpit to sniff. As he did that, I faked right, went left, got just the correct amount of separation, and dropped in a twenty-foot jumper.

“Dude, you really suck today. You seem distracted. Five-two, bro. And yes indeed, I really did read Aristotle’s description of catharsis. In fact, I read it in the original ancient Greek. During our service time, while you were out getting your liver lubricated in some saloon, I was in the barracks reading. Ha! Ha! Loser. Hey, you know that little crossover dribble that you hate? Well, I’m going to do it now. And you know what, there isn’t a damn thing you can do to stop it.”

“What? Did you say damn?”

“Damn right.” I faked left, did a quick crossover dribble to the right, and drove around him for another easy lay-up. “Five-three. Not looking good for you.”

His look of puzzlement deepened. “What is *up* with you today? The sun is shining? You’re almost manic. You keep using profanity that you have sworn off. What the hell is going on?”

“What’s going on is Emma. Anyway, I told her everything. Absolutely everything. Nothing held back. Weird, though. I expected disappointment from her, and probably rejection, if not outright hatred. Got none of those. Got something totally unexpected. She said she loved me.”

He stood there, eyes wide, mouth agape. I went around him to the left for another easy lay-up. “Five-four, bro. You better get moving.”

“I am moving, dipshit. I’m moving trying to figure out what the hell happened to you in one night.”

“What happened was catharsis. Are you as deaf as you are stupid? Speaking of stupid, how far away from the basket do you think I am?”

He snuck a quick peak at the basket, and then turned back to me. “Thirty feet,” he said.

But I had already fired up a jumper, a rainbow arc that just caught the back of the rim before dropping through the basket, a millimeter too long to be nothing but net. I gave him a Cheshire cat grin. “Five-five, bro. I’d start getting worried if I were you.”

“I don’t know what happened to you. What the hell happened? Could you just stop for a minute and talk to me? What happened? What made you like this? The sun is shining? You’re going to kick my ass? I’m a pussy?”

“What made me like this is that a woman kissed me full on the lips and told me she loved me. After she stole my Glock. God, Tommy. Look at this glorious day. The glowing sunshine, the densely sweet, after-the-storm air, the promise of a future filled with wonder and mystery.”

“What the *hell* are you talking about?”

“Not Hell, Tommy. Heaven. I have experienced a little slice of Heaven. By the way, speaking of slice, have I shown you this move, my new slice-move.” Holding the basketball high above my head, I moved it in a circular motion, counterclockwise, using a kind of swimming motion to slice my way around him. I pulled up short and dropped in a bank shot from five feet. “Six-five, bro. That’s six unanswered points. You truly do blow today, you know.”

“Screw you. I don’t blow today or any day. You know that. You’re just distracting me.”

“Payback’s a bitch, ain’t it?” Dribble, dribble, dribble. “One thing, though. I forgot to tell her about Snoot. When I dived on the grenade, my last clear thought was of Snoot.”

“You have really lost it, dude. Snoot has been dead for ten years.”

I paused again. Dribble, dribble, dribble. Thinking about Snoot, my mind wandered to a distant time, a time when I was younger and less jaded. Snoot had remained my good and loyal friend all of his years, always playful and always happy to see me. After Mae and Robert and I had moved to Sacramento, I went back to Auburn and visited Missus and Snoot almost

every week. I took Snoot for long walks, usually along the river, and ended our visits by opening a huge can of Alpo and dumping the whole thing into his food dish. Snoot had the appetite of a much larger dog, and with the Alpo, the manners of a pig. I think that was the best part of the day for him. He died peacefully in his sleep at the age of sixteen, still robust and vigorous.

We had a funeral of sorts for him, attended by Missus, Mae, Robert, Tommy, and me, as we laid him to rest high above the American River. I know Mister was there in spirit. Tommy and I had come up to the spot hours earlier and had dug a fairly deep grave, safe from scavengers. We wrapped Snoot in the quilt that had been Mister’s favorite and gently placed him into his final resting place. I sang “Amazing Grace,” slightly off key, and recited ashes to ashes and dust to dust as we each tossed a handful of dirt onto the quilt. I didn’t perform a canine howl, although I’m sure Snoot would have thought it funny if I had. Tommy and I covered him gently with dirt, packing it firm with our feet. Somewhere, somehow, I hoped, Snoot was frolicking with his beloved Mister in whatever afterlife awaits us all.

Yes, Snoot had been gone a long time, but Tommy and I still went to his gravesite at least once each year, that spot high on a bluff above river, a place with a view overlooking the river’s bend. When Snoot had died, a bit of me and a bit of my childhood had died with him. But I never forgot him or his single act of life-defining, selfless courage. Snoot had been with

me that day in Afghanistan, the day I took on my own figurative Nightmare, just as he had taken on the real Nightmare all those years before. The opportunity that I had wished for, the opportunity to demonstrate that same level of selflessness and courage, came to pass for me in the form a small, highly explosive metal ball rather than a huge, fanged carnivore. Well, Snoot, I performed admirably, just as you did, each of us vanquishing his respective Nightmare.

Tommy slapped at the basketball, quickly drawing me back to the present. I had business to attend to, namely dispatching my best friend in this particular juvenile contest, as Emma would call it. "Nice try, dude. You almost got the ball. Too bad you're such a slow-ass this early in the morning."

He looked stunned, I suppose reflecting on my further use of minor profanity. I used his momentary lapse to dribble left, gain inches of separation, and launch a twenty-foot jump shot that hit the front of the rim, bounced high and forward, hit the backboard, and banked into the net.

"Goddamn it," he said. "I'm sick of you making those lucky-ass shots. And if you think you're going to distract me with more of your recovered profanity, it won't work. I'm onto you. You're using all this to distract me so you can win. Well, it won't work. Now your ass is *mine*."

I used his momentary anger to lure him into my drop-step move, something he usually defended well. I faked right and did a crossover dribble to the left,

faking a drive to the left. He fell for it. As he leaned far to his right, I dragged my right foot, using it as a brake, then planted that right foot firmly. Leaning back to my right, I bounced the ball once to avoid a call of traveling, set both feet squarely, and launched a jump shot that made a pleasing swish sound as it dropped through the net. I won't tell you what Tommy said, but it's not fit for mixed company.

"Eight-five," I said. "Want to concede now, or do you have anything in your tank at all that would make me think you can come back from that?"

"Screw you. Absolutely screw you. You haven't seen the day when you can take me with a handful of tricks."

"Doing pretty well so far. You haven't sucked this bad for years."

"Bite me, dildo brain. Just play. Or I may just take that ball away from you and thump you with it."

"Now who's losing it?"

"Screw you. Just play."

"One more thing. I also forgot to tell Emma about the premonition. When I took the point that day, I knew there was trouble ahead. Yeah, the Irish thing again. I didn't know exactly what was going to happen, just that it was going to be bad. I immediately had this mental flashback to Tigrito when he told me to never ever ignore that feeling. Jeez, I never learn. I'll tell you more after I finish kicking your ass."

We played for another five minutes, the time required for me beat Tommy without any further distracting ploys. Final score ten to five. At the end of

it I said, “Have a nice day, bro. Maybe tomorrow you won’t suck so bad, and it’ll be a little bit harder for me to kick your ass. Come down to my place tonight, say seven. Burgers on the grill. Foursome. You and Randi. Me and Emma. See ya. No, on second thought, I’ll be up to your place in about forty-five minutes. There are some things I have to tell you, *now*, in great detail. And for God’s sake, take a shower, will you?”

I left him there on the sun-warmed blacktop of the basketball court, noting his look of exhaustion and his sweat-soaked T-shirt, beaten. I walked briskly to Emma’s apartment, thinking that I hadn’t felt this good, either physically or emotionally, for years. Before I knocked on Emma’s door, I glanced at my watch. Whoa. 0700. 7:00 a.m. Probably way too early for Miss Night Owl Randelli to be out of bed. I knocked anyway, and then waited. No answer. I was an instant away from leaving when I heard rustling behind the door as Emma looked through the fish-eye port in the door to see who was annoying her at this ungodly hour. The door opened, and Emma stood there, dressed in a tracksuit that I guess served as her pajamas. She had very obviously just awakened, her sleepy eyes squinting into the sunlight.

“Mike. Oh. Hi. I’m sorry. I just got up. No, actually I wasn’t up yet. I...wasn’t expecting anyone. I just woke up when you knocked. I must look terrible.”

In fact, she looked stunning, dark hair tousled, no makeup. “You look terrific, Emma, absolutely terrific. In fact, you couldn’t look bad if you tried.” A twinkle of a smile crossed her lips. She liked compliments. I

said, “And I just kicked Tommy’s butt in basketball. So I came to thank you.”

“What?” she said softly. “What are you talking about? It’s so early. Playing basketball? Thank me? For what?”

“For catharsis, Emma. It’s an ancient Greek word. Look it up. And also for relief. Relief from my nemesis. That’s also an ancient Greek word, too, nemesis. It means undefeatable enemy. In this case, relief from guilt and despair. So thank you. I know you have no idea what I’m talking about, so I’ll explain it all later, over burgers at my place. Come up to my apartment around six tonight so we can have a bit of time alone before Randi and Tommy come up. There are some other things I want to tell you, have to tell you. And I know that right now I’m sweaty and smelly, and I’m sorry for that. But I wanted to give you a measure of my gratitude, and I also want to make my future intentions very clear.”

I pulled her toward me gently and kissed her full on the lips, as she had done to me the day before. I meant that kiss to be a simple repayment for hers, but it quickly became something more for me, something powerfully more, something deep and filled with passion. I pulled away slightly and looked into those stunning eyes, and my heart crumbled. I knew that with that kiss, that look, I was lost, swept by a whirlwind into her soul, belonging to her forever.

I turned and walked away, with contentment and full knowledge that from that point forward, I was the new Mike Michaels, sole property of the spirited and

piercingly green-eyed Emma Randelli. But as I walked away, I was left with the impression that Emma's eyes had seemed not green, but brown. Must have been because of the dim light.

Chapter Forty-five

Emma

I was in Mike's apartment, the storm still a malevolent force around us, and I lay in the darkness, riveted, unmoving, my head still on Mike's chest. He was telling me about his perceived "failure" as a Marine and as a man in a remote and faraway place. I scarcely breathed, afraid it would interrupt him, cause him to stop speaking, cause him to stop in his tortured narrative. My left hand was on his chest, near his neck, and just brushing against his chin. I could feel his warm tears on the back of my hand, cascading down his cheeks as he told me what happened, as told me about his "failure."

Just as he finished, the lights came on. Fitting, I thought. Out of the mysterious darkness comes light, illumination. And then, illuminated both figuratively and literally, I understood, perhaps not everything, but just about everything.

I sat up so I could look at him. "So that's it?" I said. "That's the whole thing? "

He nodded. "Yes. The whole thing." He told me he had begged for death. He had reached a point where he didn't want to go on living, didn't want to go on

suffering, where he couldn't stand any more pain. He had given up. He had begged them to kill him.

I moved away from him a fraction of an inch, gathering my thoughts. "You know what?" I said finally, meeting his gaze with absolute directness. "You are such an idiot. You didn't fail. You didn't fail as either a Marine or a man. You idiot. Jesus H. Jesus H. Christ. You saved the lives of seven people, fellow Marines and one Navy corpsman, each of whom undoubtedly looks on you with God-like respect. You withstood hideous and indescribable torture, to the point where even your captors admired you. You stupid, ignorant male. Do you even know what Qudamah means? It's an Arabic word. Actually, a name I think, like Tom or Mike. I heard it once in one of my classes. In Arabic, I think the name Qudamah means 'courage,' maybe even 'boundless courage.' Did you get that, moron? Even the people torturing you were impressed with you. Even to those enemy soldiers, you had great courage. They called you Qudamah.

"And then you reached a limit that even you couldn't tolerate. So what? So friggin' what? So bleeping what? So dang what? Jesus Christ. I sound just like you, with this absence of profanity. So forget that. I'm going to sound like me. So *fucking* what? Did you get that? So *fucking* what? You gave up? Big deal. Do you think that makes you unique? Just so you know, almost everyone alive on the planet would have caved in long before that, Qudamah. Mr. Qudamah. It's almost a sign of respect, don't you think, that Beard Number 3

shot you? He could have left you to rot. Instead, he was granting you the warrior's death. That's high praise in my book. God, you are so stupid, so man-like, torturing yourself with these childish, masculine thoughts. You are brave beyond all comparison, beyond all measure of any man or any person, and you're a failure in no one's eyes, including and especially mine.

"God, Mike, you're such an idiot. Such a fucking idiot. Now that I know all of this, not only do I want to see you again, not only will I continue to be your friend, but you're going to be seeing *a lot* of me, boyfriend. And it's not going to be strictly platonic anymore either. Got that?"

I paused. He looked at me reflectively for a long time, and then said, "Wow. That was a nice little speech. Did you make that up on the spot?" He was mocking me gently, using my own words, using humor to show me that I had broken through that carapace of depression and reached the heart within, perhaps restoring optimism and positivity to its steady but declining beat.

"Damn right, I did, and every word of it is true and heartfelt. You are one amazing man, Michael J Michaels. One amazing man. Oh, and there's one more thing." I was standing now, and I reached down, gently taking the Glock pistol from his hand. I said, "One more thing. You won't be needing this anymore."

A puzzled frown creased his forehead. "Why won't I need it?"

I leaned forward, kissed him full on the lips—with more passion than I had intended—and then I said, “Because I love you.”

* * *

As usual, I was sitting poolside with Randi on a late Saturday afternoon, with dinner at Mike’s place still pending. We were sipping iced tea, Randi consuming gallons of the sugared raspberry-flavored stuff while I had the standard unflavored, unsweetened variety. In great detail, start to finish, I had explained my stormy-morning encounter with Mike the day before, going as fast as I could, and she hadn’t interrupted me once. I said, “So that’s it. That’s the whole story.”

“Wow,” she said. “Okay. Run through it again, up to that last part where you let him have it about being a stupid macho male. But talk a bit slower this time. Jeez, your mouth was going a hundred miles an hour.”

“God, I know. I’m sorry. Okay, here it is again, with less speed.”

I inhaled deeply and began speaking slowly. “Mike was out ahead of the patrol. He was walking point, whatever the hell that means. His guys were behind him, but not very far behind, and they had carelessly gotten grouped closely together. Then the hand grenade rolled out in front of him. He knew in a heartbeat what he had to do. He had to cover the grenade with his body. If not, they would all die. He was talking about a burst radius of fifteen meters, like I would know what the hell a burst radius is either. Anyway,

it apparently meant that either one dies, or all die. Easy, he said. So he dived forward, intending to cradle the grenade into his abdomen and wait for the explosion, not that he would ever know because he would be killed instantly. But at least the other seven would be spared.

“As he was diving forward, he thought he saw a way out, a way where he might be able to not only save his buddies but survive himself. As he dived forward, he could see over the edge of the cliff. It wasn’t a cliff face after all, at least not at that spot. About ten feet below there was a trail, and he could see that it was the start of a switchback trail that went all the way down into the valley below. But even more importantly, the side of the cliff wasn’t just the side of a cliff. It was a gutter.

“It looked like the village people had carved a drainage ditch, a gutter, into the cliff face, probably to redirect and catch water that ran off the road. The gutter was just below the edge of the road, probably twelve inches wide and twelve inches deep. Even more importantly, the outside edge of the gutter was at least six inches wide, made up of mostly rock. He thought that if he had enough time, he could scoop up the grenade, dive over the edge of the cliff, drop the grenade into the gutter, and fall to the switchback trail below, letting the gutter absorb most or all of the blast and leaving him unhurt except for the ten-foot fall.

“So that’s what he did. He scooped up the grenade, dived over the edge, dropped the grenade into the gutter, and fell ten feet. On his descent, he heard

the grenade explode, felt a sting in his right calf—penetrating shrapnel injury, he called it—and then he hit the trail below. The fall stunned him, knocking his breath away, and he couldn't move for a long time. After all the falling rocky debris and dirt had settled, he could hear small arms fire above on the trail, so he started to get up to go help his squad. As he got to a sitting position, he felt the barrel of rifle press against the back of his neck.”

I paused to sip some iced tea. Randi was wide-eyed, looking at me with patient anticipation. “Okay, I’m stalling, trying to get the time-line straight. For the second time in a few minutes, Mike expected to be blown up, this time just his head. But it didn’t happen. Someone pulled him to his feet and spun him around. There were three bearded guys standing there in a combat posture. Each was holding an AK-47 rifle, whatever the hell that is, and each one looked like he knew how to use it. Mike figured they were Taliban. They made him put his hands behind his head.

“One of the men spoke in passable English. ‘American.’ He spat on the ground next to Mike. ‘Brave American. We will see.’ As he said that, he slammed the rifle butt into Mike’s abdomen. Mike went down on one knee, and one of the other men used his rifle butt to hit Mike in the kidney. That caused Mike to go all the way to the ground, retching.

“‘Strong, brave American.’ They dragged him to his feet and pushed him ahead down the trail. Every minute or two, they would hit him somewhere on the body with a rifle butt. By the time they got to a clear-

ing, Mike says, he was pretty much black and blue from head to toe. He was already weak to the point of incapacitation, but one the bearded men gave Mike another rifle butt blow to the abdomen. Once Mike was down on the ground, the men began ripping his clothes off, leaving him naked. They dragged him to his feet again and tied him to a huge post.”

I paused for another sip of iced tea. Randi was still looking at me patiently. “This next part is pretty bad,” I said. “I had to pry this out of him. He obviously didn’t want to give me the full details. But I had already decided that I needed to know the full details. If ever I was going to understand this man, I needed to know absolutely everything.

“I’ll spare you the most grisly details, but the bottom line is that he was tortured for nearly forty-eight hours straight. God, Randi, the things they did to him. The burns with the end of a red-hot stick. The whip. He didn’t want to tell me about the car battery, but I made him do it anyway. I made him do it in painfully complete detail, every single horrible electric shock. I made him get all the way to the point of his collapse, and then I sensed he was going to clam up. Sorry, buster, not this time. I prodded and encouraged, both gently, and he finally told me what had happened just before Tommy and the squad arrived to rescue him.

“What happened was that he gave up. He couldn’t take anymore. He wanted to die, and he begged them to kill him. Just kill him. And they laughed. It was an arrogant laugh, Mike says. With that laugh they were saying, ‘Yes. We broke the brave American. Ha ha ha.

You are weak just like all your countrymen.’ Funny, though. Just before the bearded guys headed for the hills, the one that Mike called Beard Number Three doffed his cap at Mike and said, ‘Qudamah.’ Then he took out a pistol and shot Mike in the chest.

“Randi, when he told me that, told me that he had given up and begged for death, I swear the tears were rolling down his cheeks like Niagara Falls. But you know what I realized then? Those were not tears of pain. They were tears of shame. That’s when it hit me. That’s when I got it. He had failed as a Marine and a man. He had failed himself and every Marine who has ever worn a uniform. He had let them all down. And that’s what was tearing him up inside.

“So after he was finished, after I was sure he had told me everything, I let him have it with both barrels. No holds barred. Yes, I called him an idiot and other things. Yes, I used profanity. Too bad. God, men are so stupid, so macho.”

Randi interrupted. “Yes, they are. No doubt about that. And no two finer examples than Thomas Lee Miller and Michael J Michaels. Now tell me again what happened this morning when he came to your door almost before the sun was up.”

“Well,” I said, “you know I had left him in his apartment, fully chastised, yesterday morning. I had hoped to see him some time during the day, but I know he had a lot to think about. I didn’t hear from him all day, and I decided I wouldn’t phone him. Anyway, today I was looking forward to sleeping late—Saturday, you know—and maybe going up there later to see how

he was doing. At almost exactly seven there was a soft knock at my door. I’m surprised I even heard it. No, not surprised, since I was kind of half awake already. Weird, I just can’t sleep late like I could when I was younger.

“I looked out the peephole and saw Mike. I opened the door and said hello. He was all sweaty, hair plastered to his head, and holding a basketball. He said he had just beaten Tommy in one of their juvenile contests, and he wanted to thank me. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, and then he started talking about other things like catharsis and nemesis. Damn, Mike, I was thinking, it’s seven in the morning. My brain doesn’t even wake up until nine. Then he invited me to a cook-out at his place tonight, but I was supposed to come up early since there was more he wanted to tell me.”

I paused again, sipping more iced tea.

Randi smiled, “You’re stalling again.”

“Okay, okay. Then he said he wanted to make his future intentions very clear. He pulled me to him gently and kissed me softly and definitely passionately. And I do mean passionately.”

“And did he make his intentions clear?”

“Absolutely. He left absolutely no doubt.”

Chapter Forty-six

Mike

I opened the door to Emma's garage, with the rising sun providing light as I opened the driver's door on her old Camry. I used the spare key she had given me to start the engine, and then I backed the old Gray Lady out into the muted light of dawn. The night before, Emma had asked me if I could get her windshield washer working and fix the wiper blades. "How about tomorrow?" I asked.

"It's Sunday, for crying out loud," she answered with merciful lack of profanity. "Don't you ever take a day off?"

"Never."

"Fine," she said. "Here's the key to the garage, and here's my spare car key. Just bring the keys up to my place when you're done, and not too damn early—got that, buster?"

"Got it."

Emma had come up to my place at six in the evening the night before, exactly on time, and I used that hour to fill her in events in my life forward from the time when Tommy and I had been discharged from the Corps. I felt so ebullient, so free and unrestrained,

that I could tell her anything. Mostly, my narrative left her laughing to the point of tears, and it was an hour well spent. As I finished, she said, “Now I want to know about your life as a child, before high school, before you met Tommy. Everything. Absolutely everything. Tommy said it’s an amazing story. I want to hear it.”

“Deal,” I said. “Tomorrow. Picnic. River. True-confessions time. But you have to reciprocate. Reciprocate. Is that too big a word for you? Does the big, smart English professor have an adequate vocabulary?”

“More than adequate, Marine boy. I’ll reciprocate. And I’ll make sure you don’t adumbrate, adulterate, obfuscate, or bullshit.”

“What was that last thing?”

“It’s a term used in higher learning, something that has obviously eluded you.”

Tom and Randi arrived at just after seven. We grilled burgers, laughed, talked, and drank beer until nearly midnight. Tommy, still befuddled, kept looking at me and shaking his head—in wonder, I guess. Once, when I caught him staring at me, I said, “What?”

“You.”

“What, me?”

“You. You’re so different. You’re so happy. You’re laughing. You’re pithy. You’re affectionate again. You’re so normal. So Mike. What the hell happened to you in forty-eight hours?”

I raised an eyebrow and gave a sidelong glance at the fiery, green-eyed woman talking with Randi. Tommy saw the direction of my gaze, looked at Emma,

and nodded his head approvingly. “Is this relationship with her going anywhere?” he asked softly.

“I certainly hope so.”

“Well, bleep. I hope so, too.”

Now I was befuddled. “Did you just say bleep? Did I hear that correctly?”

“Yes, I said bleep. So what?”

“You don’t use toned-down profanity.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. You’re the master of the foul-mouthed put-down.”

“Bullshit.”

“That’s my boy.”

He grinned. “Bullshit. I’m not the master. You are. There was no one, absolutely no one who was better than you. No one more fluent. No one more creative. Every Marine in history looks up to you for that ability. I’m just a poor second fiddle.”

“Yeah, right. But that still doesn’t explain the bleep. What’s up with that?”

“Maybe I’m taking a page from your book, toning down the foul-mouth approach.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Maybe you can pass some of that along to the Mouth.”

“The Mouth?”

“Yeah, the Mouth. Emma. The potty-mouth poster girl.”

Emma’s voice rose over the soft background music. “I heard that, buster boy. And whether you’ve noticed or not, I’m already trying to tone down the blue language.”

Actually, I had noticed, and I told her that later, after Tom and Randi had left. They had left just before the clock struck twelve, Tommy's last look at me a speculative one, as if to say, "Good luck, partner." But I wasn't quite ready to take that step. I wanted just a bit more time to get to know this woman. I needed more time to understand the connection I felt with her. We sat on the balcony, sipping the Fino sherry she had asked me pick up. I stared at her moonlit profile as she shared small intimacies about her life and teaching.

She paused briefly, and I decided to take a big chance. "Emma," I said, "looking at you now in profile, I see the moonlight giving your face depths and shadows and a luminescence that defines your personality. God help me, I think you might be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Her eyes widened and then narrowed. She leaned across her chair, took my face in her hands, and drew me to her. She kissed me with both softness and longing.

Smiling, I pulled back and said, "Emma, I meant it. I meant those words. Every one. I wasn't trying to hit on you."

"I know, idiot." She smiled back. "And that kiss wasn't a come-on. Well, okay, maybe just a bit of a come-on. But mostly it was a reward for your romantic thoughts, you smooth Casanova, you. And I know why you pulled back so abruptly. I know that we need to go slow. I know that."

She paused for perhaps thirty seconds, looking off into the twinkling night sky. Then she turned to me again, leaned across her chair, and said, "I just want to be crystal clear on one thing." She took my face again, drawing me to her, and kissed me so fully, so deeply that my head spun. Then she sat up straight, smiling. "I just want to be crystal clear. I love you. Now, it's after midnight, I need my beauty sleep. Walk me to the door."

"I'll walk you down to your apartment."

"No, I can find my way home."

"No doubt you can, but it's after midnight. The Y-chromosome goes into a protective mode at times like this."

"Okay, fine, moron. Walk me down. By the way, I don't suppose you know anything about cars, do you?"

"Well, I might, although Ernie would debate that issue."

We were going down the stairway. "Ernie," she said. "Who's Ernie?"

"My employer. Occasional employer."

"Would that be Ernie from Ernie's garage?"

"Yes, it would. Do you ever get that *déjà vu* feeling?"

"A lot. Like now. Seriously, though, my windshield washer quit working, and the wiper blades are shot. Do you think you could take a look at it someday?"

So she had given me her spare car key and a key to her garage, and I backed the car into the brightening day. I stood in the driveway, next to the old Gray Lady,

admiring the last lasting quality of the Japanese automobile. Already fifteen years old, her Camry looked like it might go another hundred thousand miles or so. I made a quick assessment of what was wrong, what I needed to do to fix things, and mentally jotted down what I would need to do the repairs. Easy, I thought. New wiper blades and some rubber tubing to replace the decayed stuff that was currently connecting her windshield washer reservoir to the pump.

Unsure if I would be covered by Emma's insurance if I drove her car, I used mine to drive to Ernie's Garage and let myself in. I went to the parts pantry, smiling because good old Ernie had both the wiper blades and the tubing. I left him a note, telling him what I had taken and that I would stop in Monday to pay the bill. I knew that when I came to pay, he would say, "Get the hell out. You don't owe me anything. Don't even start to reach for that wallet, or I'll come over there and kick your ass." Funny, but I think he could probably do it, titanium knee and all.

Back home, I made short work of the repairs, being careful to prop up the hood on the Camry. I didn't particularly like banging my head on metal, so as I finished, I made a mental note to order new hinges for the car's sinking hood. I went to my garage and got a gallon container of windshield washer fluid, filled her reservoir, put the container back in my garage, and then returned to the Camry. I needed to test things, so I climbed into the driver's seat, noting again that I didn't have to make a rearward adjustment on the seat. *Dang, Emma, you must be taller than I thought.*

I held the washer pump activator until it started providing spray, noting with satisfaction that it seemed to be spraying equally on both sides of the windshield. I turned on the wipers, wanting to make sure that they were clearing the spray smoothly and that they had the correct sweep across the windshield. Lovely Miss Emma had left the visor down on the driver's side, so I couldn't see the entire arc of the wiper blade on that side. As I reached up to raise the visor, I noticed that she kept her car's registration in a plastic holder attached to the visor. I read the information on the registration card, and I was punched senseless. I literally couldn't breathe, couldn't move. *My God, I thought, this car is still registered in Colorado. She has never gotten around to registering it in California.*

But that wasn't what left me senseless and immobile. I read the registration card again. She had registered the car in Colorado in her maiden name and had obviously never gotten around to changing it. Still transfixed, I read the name again: Emma June Sprewell. E. J. Sprewell. Rhymes with jewel. Call me Junie.

Chapter Forty-seven

Emma

The curse of the approaching thirtieth birthday struck again, and I couldn't sleep past 7:30, in spite of being with Mike until after midnight. Chivalrous Mike had walked me to my door to see me safely home. I had paused at my door, hoping he might want to come in. No such luck, and it's either good luck or bad luck, I thought, depending on your perspective. My brain told me we needed to go slowly. My heart told me otherwise. Stupid brain. Instead of coming into my apartment, Mike had taken the keys to my garage and my car. *He's probably down there now, I thought, slaving away under the hood of the ancient Camry.*

Still in my pajama-like tracksuit, I had just put coffee on when there was a soft knocking at the door. I looked through the peephole and was pleased to see Mike standing there. He was dressed in faded jeans and a long-sleeve blue-checked shirt. I opened the door.

"Hello, Emma."

"Hello, Mike. Want to come in?" This was a huge step for me. In my prudish old age, I'd never had a

man inside this apartment before. “You’re making a habit of these early morning visits. Coffee?”

“Perfect.”

“Toast?”

“Love some.”

I dropped bread into the toaster, set cups, saucers, butter, and jam on the table. Sitting at the kitchen table, we engaged in light conversation, with me being as perky as I could manage so early in the morning. Mike, to his credit, did most of the talking, regaling me with more funny stories about him and Tommy. When we had finished eating, I got up, took the dishes to the sink, and began washing them. Mike joined me, rinsing the clean dishes, and drying them with a small hand towel. My, my, we were certainly the domestic pair. I asked, “So what brings you here so early on a Sunday morning?”

“This.” He handed me the two keys, garage and car.

“Thank you. Is it all fixed?”

“Yup. New wiper blades, and both sides of windshield washers work perfectly.”

“Thank you. What do I owe you?”

He pulled me to him gently, kissing me lightly. “You owe me that, plus listening.”

“Wow. If there’s more of that to come, I am definitely all ears. Go ahead.”

“I know things about you.”

“Oh yeah. Like what? Like you’ve been rifling through the glove compartment in my car, learning things about me?”

“No, not exactly.”

“So you know things about me. Big deal. Like what, exactly?”

“Like lots of things.”

“For example?”

“I know that when you were a young girl you loved running.”

“Nice guess, guy. Duh. Like I don’t love running now.”

“When you were a young girl, you lived in a small two-story house in Auburn, on a tree-shaded street. The house was painted light blue with white shutters.”

I was shocked, almost apocalyptically, into full attention. “What? What did you say?”

“Your bedroom was on the second floor, overlooking the front yard.”

I choked on saliva, my breath coming in shallow, ragged gasps. “What? How—”

“Your front yard had two tall California oaks. One of them provided perfect shade for your bedroom window. You used to hope that the other one would topple over and fall into your stepfather’s bedroom on the first floor.”

Memories, mostly wretched, flooded my brain, and suddenly tears flooded my eyes. “What? What? My God, how do you know that?”

“You hated going home in the evening.”

I was suddenly blinded by tears. Mike, ignoring my sobbing, continued. “You used to talk about someday getting your nose fixed, to get a bumpy thing removed.”

“You can’t know...there is no way you could...”

“As a young girl, you loved literature. You loved reading things and trying to find the intent of the writer.”

Overwhelmed by memories long suppressed, I was sobbing now. “What? God, how are you doing this? How do you know these things? How are you doing this?”

He took me by the shoulders, steadied me, and looked directly into my eyes. “Oh, I know all of this and more. Much more...Junie.”

I spoke through gasping sobs. “What? What did you call me? No one knows that name. No one knows...no one knows except...oh my God, you’re Finn. You’re Finn.” And then I was sobbing deeply and uncontrollably, gasping, clinging to him. I said again, with full understanding and resignation, “You’re Finn. You’re Finn.”

And then I recaptured myself and my spirit. I recovered a modicum of dignity and with it self-righteous anger. My past took over, and I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling his face close to mine. “You son of a bitch. How long have you known?”

“Today. Just today. After seeing your Colorado vehicle registration tucked in that little holder on your visor. Emma June Sprewell. E. J. Sprewell, rhymes with jewel...”

“Just when the hell were you going to tell me?”

“Not when. How? I decided the *when* should be immediately, so I came straight here from your car. I was trying to figure out the *how*, but you made it easy

for me. I can’t believe I didn’t figure this out before. There were so many clues, not the least of which was that I felt a connection with you from the first time we met. I mean the first time we met as adults. And along the way, it was like I knew we belonged together. Strange.” He paused, holding me at arm’s length. “But you know, you’re different now. Very different physically. Taller, less willowy. And you have definitely filled out nicely in all the right places.”

He was looking at me in a clearly male way. I felt myself blushing. Then he continued. “You have those streaky blonde highlights in your hair, and the green eyes fooled me. This morning, like the other morning, your eyes are brown. Then I remembered seeing the contact lens case when you spilled your purse. Colored contacts, right? You don’t wear your contact lenses to bed, so your eyes are brown in the morning, like now. And when you had your reconstructive surgery, they fixed the bumpy thing in your nose, right?”

“Yes.”

“And elevated the cheek bones a bit, too, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they did a great job. On the nose and on everything else. Even in the early morning with no makeup, you’re stunning.” I blushed again. “You are stunning in all the ways of physical beauty, Miss Sprewell, but even more stunning in who you’ve become. Very well done. Very well done. But now I see that even with all of those changes, you still faintly resemble the Junie of my memory, but only faintly.” He paused again, looking deep into my eyes.

I reached down, took his hands in mine, and looked back, looked into those dark brown eyes, deep as bottomless pools. “You got really taller, too, and you’re not exactly willowy anymore either. You and Tommy obviously spent lots of time at the gym. And you fooled me with the name change. Where did the Mike Michaels deal come from?”

“Ah, the big college professor, ending a sentence with a preposition again.”

“You idiot. Shut up. How did you get your new name?”

He explained the move from Auburn, Mae’s marriage, the agreement among them all for him to take the Michaels name as his own. “At the time I simply didn’t want to go through life as Huckleberry Finn.”

“That explains why I couldn’t find you when I came back here. New name. New location. It was like you vanished, both you and Mae.”

“I looked for you, too. Struck out time after time.”

We sat at the kitchen table for most of the morning, drinking coffee and discussing childhood memories, the horrors and delights of sixth and seventh grades, Bluto, Mike’s rescuing me twice.

“Three times,” he said.

“Twice.”

“Three.”

“Fine. Someday tell me about the third time.”

“Maybe today.”

“No. Not today. Not now. I’m thinking.” With great regret, I knew what I would have to do, knew what it

would cost me, knew that once done, my life might as well end. No matter. I had to tell him. I stood up, went to the kitchen counter, and turned, leaning against it. Mike stood, too. “Okay,” I said. “You know stuff about me. You probably know more about me than anyone else alive. But you don’t know everything. There’s more you need to know.”

“What? There’s more about Marco? I thought you told me the whole story during that walk a week or so ago. Everything, including the reconstructive surgery.”

“I did, and I was surprised that you seemed so comfortable with my tale of woe about Marco Randelli.”

“Comfortable. Understanding. Explanation accepted. But I still don’t know why you kept his name.”

“I’ve explained that to you, why I have to keep reminding myself that I’m worthless.”

He stepped to me, pulled me in, and held me gently. “No, you’re not worthless. You have great value, especially to me.” He kissed me softly again.

I turned away. “Stop,” I said. “That doesn’t have anything to do with what I need to tell you. Please, before we go any further, I have to tell you something. Please don’t make it harder than it already is.” I sat down at the kitchen table again.

“Okay.”

“There’s more you need to know about me. Something else. Something completely different. I have to tell you now, while I still have the courage.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“Do you remember what you said to me just before you told me everything that happened to you in Afghanistan?”

“What did I say?”

“You said, ‘I do want you to know. But after I tell you, you may not want to be my girlfriend. You may not even want to be my friend. In fact you may never want to see me again.’ Do you remember saying that?”

“Yes.”

I got up again and walked to the sink, my back toward him. Turning to face him, I said, “Well, I’m saying the same thing to you now. In spades. I’m going to tell you something, and when I’ve finished, I won’t blame you if you walk out the door and never come back.”

He moved to a spot directly in front of me. “Proceed.”

I covered my face with my hands briefly and then put them at my sides, standing as straight and tall as I could. I looked directly at him, into those deep brown eyes, realizing with sadness that this might be the last time I would ever see him. I took a deep breath and blurted out, “I killed my stepfather.”

My head slumped forward, and I waited for him to turn and walk out the door. Instead, he reached forward, lifting my chin so I was looking at him again. He leaned forward and gently kissed me. “I love you,” he said.

My head slumped again, and my heart sank since I knew that meant good-bye. He was telling me he loved me for the last time, and then he would leave. But

instead of walking out the door, he reached forward again, tilted my chin up, and said, “Now I have something to tell you.”

“What?”

“I know,” he said.

“What?”

“I know.”

“Goddamn it. Know what?”

“I know you killed your stepfather.”

“What? How do you know I killed Daniel?”

“I saw you do it.”

“What? What do you mean you saw me do it?”

“Well, do you remember the unidentified palm print on the window sill?”

“Yes.”

“The unidentified fingerprint on the knife?”

“Yes.”

“The unidentified hair shafts found near the body?”

“Yes.”

“All those were mine.”

Chapter Forty-eight

Mike

My mind raced back to a chilly springtime night all those years ago, the night of May 12, the night Daniel Merijo died, the night I saved E. J. Sprewell for the third time. I had finished all my homework, stuffing everything into my sturdy book bag. Mae was still talking on the phone to future husband Robert when I went to my room, closing the door behind me.

I changed into jeans and a dark-colored shirt, and from the bedroom window I removed the screen and set it on the ground outside. Moving to the bed, I pulled back the bedspread and got a spare blanket from the bedside chest. I folded and rolled the blanket into a reasonably human-looking shape, put the pillow on top of the “head,” and pulled the bedspread back up. Then I opened the bedroom door six inches so that if Mae looked in, she would see my surrogate, the lumpy blanket, sleeping contentedly.

I turned off the light and climbed out of the window, pulling the curtains shut behind me. I padded across to the tool shed in the backyard. The door on the shed opened without a sound because I had come out earlier and squirted lubricant on the hinges. From

a hook on one of the shed's inside walls, I took the old navy-blue pea coat that had belonged to Mae's first husband. Since I had no experience in breaking and entering, I wasn't certain what I would need at Junie's house. From a workbench I took a Swiss army knife that I carried when I was working in the yard, a small hammer, and two screwdrivers, one Phillips and one flat-bladed. Tucking everything into pockets of the pea coat, I hoped those particular tools would be sufficient. As it turned out, my selection was more than adequate. I closed the door to the shed and set off for Junie's house, putting on the coat as I walked.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for, nor what I would do if confronted with a situation that required action on my part. In one of the pockets of the pea coat I found some old oily work gloves. I slipped them on while I was walking, arriving at Junie's house barely ten minutes after I had climbed out of my bedroom window. In the cover of a large California oak tree, barely fifteen feet from the house, I could see the light was on in Daniel's bedroom. As I was reflecting on what to do, I heard shouting from that bedroom.

"Get down here, you little tease. Don't make me come and get you."

There was a pause, and I used it to sprint, in full stealth mode, to the side of the house near Daniel's bedroom window. I heard movement inside the house.

"What are you doing still dressed, you little bitch? Get those clothes off."

I heard Junie's voice, steely and resolute. "No. I'm not doing that anymore."

"Get them off or—"

"Or what? You'll beat me again? No. You're not doing that again either. Touch me again, and I'll go to the police."

"I told you if you did that it would be the last thing you ever did. Even if I can't take care of you right away, I'll take care of it someday. You won't have a moment's peace. I'll find you if I have to go to the ends of the earth. And when I do, I'll make you sorry you were born."

"I'm already sorry I was born, you worthless piece of—"

There was an abrupt slap. I moved to the window so I could look into the room. I saw Junie facing the window, holding her left cheek, tears in her eyes. Daniel grabbed her blouse and spun her around so her back was facing me. Feisty even then, she recovered, launching a slap of her own. It struck Daniel's left cheek with a crack that sounded like a gunshot. "How do you like it? How does that feel, you—"

Another slap from Daniel silenced her and spun her head almost all the way around. I could see her eyes then, see the fire and flinty steel that would carry her through life. She turned to face him, cocking her right arm to slap back. Daniel grabbed her hand as she struck.

"Bitch. You'll pay dearly for that bad attitude. You won't believe what I'm going to make you do tonight."

That's when I saw it. Something was tucked into Junie's jeans in the small of her back on the right side. It looked like a handle, but I wasn't sure exactly what

it was. Daniel was holding her right wrist and screaming at her, describing what he was going to do to her in pornographic detail, a barrage of filth that made me want to break the glass out of the window, crawl through, and do some of those nasty things to him. In the middle of his tirade and before I could move, Junie reached behind her, grasped the handle with her left hand, and pulled out a long filleting knife. She brought it around in front of her and sunk it into his bare chest.

She was not a natural lefty. The blade, instead of sinking into Daniel's chest, streaked across its surface, leaving a deep laceration. Daniel backed up, looked down, and saw his blood. "You little bitch. Now you're going to d—"

Meanwhile, Junie had transferred the knife to her right hand, and Daniel never got to complete his sentence. Junie thrust forward with a perfect fencer's *coup droit*, the blade slipping between his ribs and stilling that cold hard heart. Daniel gasped, looking down at the knife handle and trying to say something before he fell onto his back next to the bed, face up, eyes wide and unseeing. Junie ran from the room.

Inside the house, I heard footsteps running, and then the front door slammed open and slammed shut. Crouching in the shadows under the window, I watched Junie run down the porch steps and out to the main sidewalk. She turned right, running away from her living hell. I had no idea where she was going or how much time I had. I only knew what I had to do.

The window to Daniel's bedroom wasn't locked, but I couldn't get it open. I used the hammer and the flat-bladed screwdriver to jimmy open the bottom of the window, levering it up an inch or so. Then I was able to get my gloved fingers under the window and raise it the rest of the way. I hoisted myself up onto the sill, slipping first one leg into the room and then the other. On the windowsill I could see oily residue from the gloves, and on the carpet there was mud from my shoes.

Moving to Daniel's body, I stared down at his wide-open, sightless eyes. Pointless, I thought, to check his pulse. The guy was stone-cold dead. And good riddance. I tried to remember everything I had ever learned from crime scene shows on television. I removed the gloves and took out the Swiss army knife. I opened the tiny scissors, reached up, grasped a few hairs from the front of my head, and cut them off. I overdid it, ending up with way more than I would need for this particular purpose. I picked three very short ones, being careful that none of the hairs contained any root material. The rest I stuffed into one of the fingers in the left glove, and then I slipped my left hand back into that glove. I took the three lucky hair-shaft winners and dropped them on the floor next to Daniel, one at his head and two near his left hand.

Daniel was wearing an inexpensive analog wrist-watch on his left wrist, and the dial read exactly 9:30. I took the clean handkerchief I had in my back pocket and used it to pull out the stem on the watch. I set the

time to 10:30, but when I pushed the stem back in, the minute hand slipped back one minute. No matter. I stepped on the watch, feeling the glass cover break under my foot. I knelt down so I could see the damage and noted with satisfaction that the second hand was now immobile with the hour and minute hands stuck at 10:29. Still kneeling, I took my ungloved right hand and made a smeary fingerprint on the handle of the knife near the blade. I hoped it was enough to cloud the evidence but not enough to make a positive identification. *Oh well*, I thought, *the die is cast, and I have crossed the Rubicon.*

Retracing my steps, I climbed out the window and had another thought. I took my still ungloved right palm and made a smeary mark on the windowsill. Then I tracked briefly through the flowerbed under the window, walking in the direction away from Mae's house. I left the house at sprint and, after half a block, crossed the street and headed home.

* * *

I sat at the table in Emma's kitchen recounting the events of that night, and to say she sat in rapt attention would be understating things. She appeared statue-like, riveted to the chair, unmoving, unblinking. As I finished, she stood up, shaking her head in disbelief as tears welled up in her eyes. I rose, too, moving to her quickly and taking her into my arms. She wept silently for several minutes while I held her gently in helpless silence. This was her catharsis, I

thought. Finally, she settled, gathered herself, and said, "Come with me." We went to the living room, and she motioned for me to sit on the sofa. She went into the bathroom, and I could hear water running. She returned in less than a minute and sat next to me on the sofa.

"Huckleberry Finn Carter. Mercury Man. My white knight. I'll be damned if you didn't save me three times. Those things you did that night, those pieces of evidence...those really did save me. I mean, it explains everything. It was all so confusing in the few days after I...after Daniel died. I thought for sure I would be going to prison, but I didn't care. Nothing could have been worse than that living hell, the things he did and made me do. You have no idea how the legal part of it worked out, do you?"

"No, Junie, I don't."

"No, I'm Emma now, Mike. Just like you're no longer Finn."

"Yes, ma'am."

"After I left the house that night, I ran all the way to Florita's house. You remember Florita Suarez? She didn't know everything, but she knew enough. When I couldn't take anymore, I would go to her house and tap on her bedroom window. She usually woke up right away and opened the window so I could climb in. I would sleep on the area rug next to her bed, wrapped in a comforter and using one of her stuffed animals for a pillow. At dawn, I would leave the same way I came, run home, and wait outside until Daniel left for work.

“That night, I looked pretty badly beaten up, with my face and eyes swollen, but it was dark enough that Florita couldn’t really see how bad it was. But in the morning, when we woke up, she took one look at me and said, ‘My God, Junie, my God. This can’t go on.’ I begged her not to tell her father, but she didn’t listen to me. To make a long story short, her father, Miguel, was an attorney, and he said that anything I told him was confidential. It was privileged information between an attorney and a client. Many times I had seen Miguel interact with his family, his daughters, in such a loving way that it made my heart ache. Anyway, I trusted him right away, so I told him everything, and I mean everything.

“At 7:30 in the morning, we went back to my house and ‘discovered’ the body. Under Miguel’s guidance, I gave the police only limited information. Daniel had beaten me regularly, I said, including the day before and the day of the murder. I left the house at 9:30 p.m., running for safety to my friend’s house. All that was true, just incomplete. I told police that the morning after Daniel’s murder, Miguel had seen my face and asked what happened. Then we went to my house to confront my stepfather. We found the body, called the police, and everything happened so fast after that.

“I got arrested, stuck to my limited story, and waited. I knew enough to realize that I was in big trouble because my fingerprints would be on the knife, and that single piece of evidence would probably sink me. But I didn’t care. I was free from sexual slavery. And then the strangest thing happened. I was called

to an interrogation room, and after a few minutes, Miguel and the district attorney came into the room. We all sat down at a grimy table.

“Miguel turned to the district attorney and said, ‘Look, Bob, you’ve got exculpatory evidence all over the place.’

“The district attorney looked directly at me. He said, ‘Miguel, I’m still not sure young Miss Sprewell has been completely forthcoming. I don’t want to release her until I’m sure I have all the information.’

Miguel had this really tough look on his face, and he said, ‘No, Bob. I think you’ll release her today. Otherwise I go to the press with everything, including her being both physically and sexually abused, her escaping to a friend’s house, all the evidence that points to a third-party perpetrator, and the district attorney’s intransigent desire to continue tormenting a teen-aged girl who has been unbelievably victimized and brutalized. Do you think, Bob, that your office needs that kind of publicity?’

“I went home that day, met my grandparents at the house, packed a few things, and left for Grand Junction, all in the space of a few hours. I guess movers came and got the rest of the stuff. In Colorado, under my grandparents’ guidance, I was forced to cut all ties with my old life. I didn’t like it, but I did it. But I never forgot you, and there was rarely a day when you weren’t in my thoughts in some way. I even told Randi about you. She calls you my childhood fantasy, one that I have always clung to. And don’t say anything about ending a sentence with a preposition.”

Since it appeared that Emma was done talking, I leaned across the sofa, took her face in my hands, and kissed her gently. “I never forgot you either. You’ve always been the benchmark for me. I guess I never stopped loving you.”

She kissed me back. “Michael J Michaels, that’s the second-sweetest thing I’ve ever had said to me.”

“What’s the first?”

“When you told me that I might be the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen.”

“Let me correct that statement. You *are* the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She pulled me to her and kissed me with a hunger that was unmistakable. I felt the same hunger, too, but gently pushed her away.

“Damn,” she said. “Stupid brain.”

Chapter Forty-nine

Mike

After Emma’s catharsis, and after talking for hours, we paid a visit to Tom and Randi. I was on the veranda with Tommy, sipping iced tea and preparing to give him a full account of the past two days. Suddenly, from inside, there was wailing and crying as two young females broke down uncontrollably. Tommy said, “Jesus,” and started to get up to check on the girls. I grabbed his arm.

“It’s okay,” I said. “They’re just happy. Sit down. I’ll explain.” And I did, leaving him grinning in delight.

Emma eventually retook her maiden name, and on a bright summer day in late June the following year, we were married, Michael J Michaels and Emma June Sprewell joined in holy matrimony. She was uncomfortable with a formal ceremony in a church, feeling unworthy of divine consideration, and especially unfit to wear the stunningly white wedding gown that she and Randi had picked out.

“Mike,” she said, “I can’t. I can’t wear something like that. Not after everything I’ve done. Not after a life so impure.”

“Emma, get real. Yes you can. Now get this straight. No one is pure. Everyone is soiled. Perfection and human are incongruous words. You lived your life as well as anyone could have possibly lived it given all the roadblocks thrown in front of you. Besides, it’s all in the past now. We’re here, you and I, where we belong, where we’ve always belonged. It just took us a while to get here. And that dress - yes, I’ve seen it -is symbolic for us. It’s a new beginning. We had an old beginning a long time ago on your front porch. Remember?”

She smiled a squinty smile like a contented cat. “Yes, I remember. You kissed me and told me you loved me.”

“Yeah, but not until after you had kissed me and told me you loved me. Funny, but I just realized now that your kiss that day saved my life later.”

“What?”

“Because you came back to me one stormy night and stole my Glock.”

“Oh, that. Well, big boy, I guess your kiss saved me too, so we’re even.”

We had also discussed how to handle the fact that we were probably both felons. She was especially worried that I would harbor misgivings about her because of what she had done.

“Emma,” I said, “come on. That’s the furthest thing from correct that you could possibly imagine. Now who’s being stupid? Listen to me. This is what I see. I see someone who has never come to grips with the concept of self-defense, so let me reconstruct things for you. You were beaten not once but

uncountable times, and you were...abused in other unconscionable ways. On the night of Daniel’s death, the night you defended yourself, he had beaten you again. He had a vise-like grip on your right arm at the same time he was telling you what he was going to do to you. I was there, Emma. I heard every graphic detail.

“When you raked that knife blade across his chest, he let go of your arm and stepped back. He looked down at that wound in his chest and said, ‘You bitch. Now you’re going to d—’ He never got to finish, but he was telling you that you were going to die. He was going to kill you. There is no doubt in my mind that he meant it, and I know there is no doubt in yours. He would have taken that knife and killed you. Do you remember a book I had you read? *Flint?*”

She nodded. “A western. By Louis L’Amour.”

“Yup. In that book, Flint, riding on open prairie, was confronted by four bad guys. One of the bad guys said to Flint, ‘We’re going to kill you.’ So Flint drew his pistol and shot the guy, and that was accepted practice then. Given the threat to his life, he had the right to defend himself preemptively. As soon as Daniel said you were going to die, you had no choice. Defend yourself. Otherwise you were dead.”

“I know that, Mike. I get that. Just don’t forget that I went into that room with a knife tucked into the back of my jeans.”

“And what was your intent in doing that?”

“I’m not sure. Courage, I guess. I don’t think I had any intention of doing anything with it.”

“No. Not until he unloaded a barrage of pornographic filth onto you. Then - and you have to see this clearly - then it became self-defense. And then it became life or death. You did the right thing. I think we need to lay this to rest, not forgetting who we are or where we came from, but lay it to rest. We can build on all those things, become stronger because of them, and very much stronger because we can do it together.”

And that’s what we did.

The wedding was simple and pure. Randi was the maid of honor, and Tommy the best man. Emma’s grandfather had passed away barely six months earlier, but not before he saw his granddaughter’s personal resurrection. In his place, giving the bride away, stood a huge furry man, Czeslaw Czerwinski. Attendees included Mae, Robert, Emma’s grandmother, Missus, and in spirit, Mister. Somewhere, too, I knew Snoot was howling joyfully.

As we walked out of the church, husband and wife, I could hear my Irish ancestors telling me that Emma and I would have a long and happy life together. The whispers also said that for Emma and me there would someday be a son and a daughter who would both grow up with childhoods far less troubled than those of their mother and father. Smiling contentedly to myself, I knew that Emma and I would raise those children in accordance with all the basic rules of life as laid out by Tigrito.

To those rules I would add one more from their mother: life is about looking forward with anticipation, not backward with regret.