

The Note  
by Kevin Lavey

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## Chapter One

At the end of the school day, principal Dennis Conklin called an emergency meeting. Everyone gathered in Borke's math classroom on the second floor.

Davidson leaned against a wall, arms folded, and listened to Conklin, who wore his trademark necklace of Indian beads and silver pendants, break the news that one of their students, Latoya Singleton, had committed suicide. Teachers, sitting in students' chairs, turned to each other, hands to mouths. Some cried. Two counselors hugged. Borke sat behind his teacher desk with a complex expression of delight at being Conklin's chosen prince, disbelief at the news, and self-conscious concern that he'd overplayed his hand in convincing Conklin to have staff gather in his room rather than the teachers' lounge.

Conklin said in response to a question, "Some of you know she lived in a group home."

Conklin had begun to grow his graying hair, and it now hung below his collar. He told

Davidson that he intended to get closer to his roots. I'm a child of the Iroquois confederacy, he said. Mohawk by tribe.

Julie Wang, a 10th grade English teacher, sitting atop a student desk, caught Davidson's eye as he glanced about the room. She slyly tapped the top of her wrist as if on a watch face and mouthed, Let's talk.

Conklin boomed at them using his best tribal chief voice.

"Things like this happen. Who knows why the Spirits act the way they do. We try to heal one another. We can't..."

"What about extra counselors for the students?" interrupted the ever strained English Department chair.

"Extra counselors will be handled by the system," he said with raised voice. "I will get Borke to send out a group email when I find out what our next steps will be. I need to get down to my office and man the phone. Direct followup comments to Mr. Borke here. He'll write them down, and I'll get to them as soon as I can."

One of the assistant principals, arms crossed, back to the wall, shook his head.

As Conklin left by way of the front door, he wiped his forehead with a blue kerchief. Teachers buzzed. They ignored Borke who Conklin-like tried to command their attention.

Davidson waited a few beats then followed Julie to her room around the corner and down the hallway.

She'd brought up her Surly Cross-Check bicycle from the storeroom already.

"Something's not right," she said. She sat in a student chair, as did he.

"Meaning?"

“Conklin seemed nervous. That man’s a lot of things, but nervous? And he runs away from a moment when he could play tribal chief? Why would he throw away an opportunity to be at the center of attention?”

“Latoya came to my room yesterday after school.”

“Really?”

“She seemed sad and distracted.” He shook his head. “I wish I’d picked up on...I don’t know.”

“You’re not blaming yourself.”

“No. I just feel like I missed something. It’s a long term virus I’ve been suffering. Years, really.”

“Okay Mr. Happy. I’m wrapped and ready to roll.” She fit the bicycle helmet on and clicked the straplock under her chin. “Locate that bottle of anti-depressants you stashed away somewhere and start thinking about our World War One project that we keep talking about.”

He followed her out of her classroom. She rolled the bike holding onto the seat, and he listened to the sensuous clicking noise of the freewheel while they walked together down the hall.

## Chapter Two

Newsprint sheets mounted on tripods in the lobby announced extra counselors would be available in listed rooms: “Sign up in your assigned counselor’s room. Each student’s needs and concerns will be addressed.”

Sign up? It sounded ominous to John Davidson rather than comforting. He hoped Mr. Conklin would be standing in the hallway greeting students as they walked in from busses, cars, or parents dropping them off.

A former principal told him he made it his business to watch students as they entered the school building.

“These kids deal with a lot. Drugs, crime in their neighborhood, parents in jail, working late, child care duties, murdered siblings. Each one of their faces is a short story.”

After they gathered yesterday, Borke emailed all teachers, under Conlin’s signature, that they should allow students time to talk and vent in their classroom. The admin assistant told them as they filtered in that morning that Conklin would be out of the building at meetings, which raised eyebrows and generated talk. *A meeting?*

Davidson stopped class early in first period to see what his students had to say about the suicide. No one seemed to know her very well.

“One of those quiet types,” James said.

“She was dirty,” another said. “And always talking to herself. I don’t have time for that.”

“Somebody told me she was a ho,” Raynard said.

“Latoya?” Valeena said. “That girl never got none. I’m telling you. Died and never got none.”

“And them counselors playing like they care about Latoya,” Stuart said. “Wanting you to write down your name, like you’re a suspect. They don’t care about none of us. I hate that phony shit.”

Mr. Davidson reminded Stuart to keep cursing out of the classroom. He tried to assure them that teachers and counselors in the school cared for them very much. Students were teachers’ main concern. Two students put their heads down.

“Anybody who can tell me why she might have done this, come and see me, would you?”

But he didn’t want to hear anything about it. Did they pick up on that?

He went back inside after the last yellow school bus pulled away from the circle drive pickup area. He both wanted to talk with one of his comrades and didn’t. Everybody was busy. He stuck his head into Julie’s room.

She waved hi from her spot across from a student whom she tutored. He waved then left.

He returned to his room. He didn’t want to go home, didn’t want to search for new resources for future lessons, didn’t want to grade papers. He dug into the file drawer filled with

old lesson plans which he'd been meaning to mine to recapture good ideas long forgotten.

For the better part of an hour he read through papers and decided to save three articles. The rest--lesson plans, graphic organizers, miscellaneous information--he tossed.

In a file marked Rhonda Davidson, misfiled under "R", he found a letter from Rhonda, his first wife, written to him thirteen years ago. He sat down at his work table.

Shantay, a 10th grader, walked in. She wore braided extensions with wooden balls at the ends that clattered when she turned her head, tight pants, and a top with a revealing neckline. Her perfume filled the room.

She pulled up a chair catty corner from him at his work table. "Mr. Davidson, you and I need to have a discussion."

Not for the first time he thought, why haven't black women taken over the world? They are a force of nature.

She made feathery taps with acrylic nails on the table top, leaned back, and crossed her ankles.

"Latoya wasn't done right by anyone. She didn't need to commit suicide."

"I certainly agree with you there," he said.

Chucky Jefferson pushed sawdust with a mop almost half as wide as the hallway. Mr. Davidson touched forefinger to lips. They waited until they could no longer hear Chucky in the vicinity.

"That old white man's a pervert. For real."

Mr. Jefferson vacuumed up tidbits of information and handed them around to other teachers like candy. Chucky didn't like him, for good reason. Last year, he caught Chucky

putting old computers into the trunk of his car and told him to put them back in the store room or he'd call the cops.

“We need to find out why she done herself in, Mr. Davidson. She can't be just another black girl gone. That just can't happen. We were sisters. She left me a note pushed up in my locker.”

She handed him a sheet of paper folded in half. On the outside in curlicue writing it said, *Mr. Davidson would understand.*

“Did you read it?” he said.

“No.”

He stared at her.

“Course I read it. It was in my locker, wasn't it?”

He unfolded it. She wrote in bubble loops: *Mr. Davidson. Somebody's got to talk to that lady at the group home you know her. there's some bad stuff going on over there I wish I could*

It stopped mid-sentence. Had she been interrupted? Felt it wasn't worth explaining?

“What was going on with her?”

“I got a notebook of hers. None of it is good. They were messing with her at home.”

“What home? Her group home?”

“Where she lived with her mother and her no-count boyfriend. Her mother done sent her to the group home.”

“Why would she say in her note that somebody's got to talk to the lady at the group home?”

“I don't know. But did it ever occur to anyone that maybe somebody killed her? *I think*



somebody killed her, made it look like a suicide.”

“Shantay, let’s slow down. This is a whole big world we’re talking about here. If you suspect somebody tried to harm her, you need to tell the police.”

The wooden beads clattered when she cocked her head. “Let’s be for real, Mr. Davidson. You think they’re going to listen to the likes of me?”

“Tell your parents or an adult. Make some noise.”

“You’re the one I’m telling, on account of that note.” She pointed to it. “For the first time the other day, she told me lots of bad stuff was going on. I told her just what you’re telling me. Go to the cops, Latoya. She said she did that, they go after her sister. I know that nasty boyfriend of her mother was messing with her. Latoya told me he loved her. And she believed him. Ain’t that some shit?”

“You said there’s a notebook.”

“I got it.” She sniffed her nose and looked to the side.

What, he thought. Why the hesitancy? He asked her to bring it to him.

“All right. Okay,” she said, then left.

### Chapter Three

He glanced at the posters in his room, history's famous warriors: Sun Tzu, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Stonewall Jackson, Ho Chi Minh, Genghis Khan, Apaches, Mamluks, Samurai, Shaka Zulu.

As a teacher, he'd let them down. He'd gotten soft. How long had that been going on? Two years? Three? Four?

He was still competent and thorough and challenging and organized and understanding, but he used to be *good*. He used to create classes of mini U.S. Governments with lobbyists and congressmen and the president fighting to promote their interests. He took students to Civil War battlefields in Virginia and had locals CW buffs come and talk to them. He would hold annual workshops for parents on how to help their children interpret original documents. He used to get students to believe that they were anthropologists who came back in time to study 21st century society. What would they see, he challenged them. What artifacts are we leaving behind? He used to blend history with philosophy.

He used to do everything.

Why had he stopped? Change of administrations? Change of curriculums? Change of staff? Change of heart?

The past two years he'd begun handing out worksheets. His book on teaching practices had stalled. He'd encouraged his financial advisor to create charts that would show various retirement landscapes.

He placed the letter from Rhonda on his desk. Embarrassment reverberated through him.

The empty seats in front of computers and desks made the room seem like an abandoned village. He should go home, not torture himself by reading a long ago message from his first wife.

"My Dearest Man, You are the best teacher your school has," she wrote. He cringed. She listed all the things he did for students. "I am leaving for academia and am doing so with the understanding I know what teaching is because I am married to a passionate man who sacrifices himself to those who might never understand all that he does for them."

He used to pull it out two or three times a year when he needed a boost. He'd forgotten about it, maybe deliberately. His students were right. His classes had become boring. He'd become boring. He hadn't felt inspired to take a class or try anything new in an age.

He and Rhonda had divorced and become friends and had even wrinkled the sheets a few times when neither was in a relationship. He'd suggested they live together again, not get married, but she spiked the idea. "I'm with the langurs. We like multiple partners." She'd got a PhD in adolescent brain development, wrote peer review articles, and taught at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

In the school parking lot, he punched in her number but hung up before the first ring. He

felt pretzeled. Should he leave the Latoya suicide business alone? Should he start digging?

He read through several randomly chosen hexagrams in the *I Ching*, that wondrous book introduced to him by a professor of Chinese studies many years ago, by the porch light until 1:00 a.m. He hadn't picked it up in years. Julie confided in him that she consulted it, thus his renewed interest. He would get her to show him how to throw coins.

He went to the end of his yard so he wouldn't disturb the neighbors, leaned against his car parked in the street, and called Rhonda.

"I knew you'd be up working," he said. The hours between midnight and 6:00 a.m. belonged to her she told him after they were married. "I need some advice," he said.

"I'm researching an article for the Reading Journal. Remarkable the things we're learning about the brain."

"A girl at our school committed suicide."

"Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry to hear."

"I want to stay out of it, but I can't. Moth to a fire."

"Why would you stay out of it?"

"It's a sewer. Something perverted was--is--going on. I'm picking up bad voodoo vibrations."

"Why can't you stay out of it, then?"

"I'm too scared to. I've turned into a mediocrity."

"The only thing you should be scared about is not writing your book. Write your book."

"I'm going to write my book."

“How many teachers have you mentored?”

“A lot.”

“You put those best practices into book form, you’ll be doing teachers a great service.”

“The book is going to get written.”

“It’s the way you can contribute, John.”

“I can tell the system wants to get past this girl, fast. Conklin wasn’t even in school today.”

“Write the book. This was the year you were going to put all of your outside of school time into writing. Remember?”

“You’re right. You are right. Not to mention that I’m going to tie all of my tried and true practices into brain based research, which you are going to help me with.”

“John, it’s been wonderful being interrupted by you.”

“The girl who committed suicide wrote me a note.”

Silence.

“I’m getting off now. Find an ally,” she said.

“You’re my ally.”

“I’m an *éminence grise*.”

“I’m going to call you.”

“I have no doubt.”

## Chapter Four

He brought his laptop into her room. They had talked about planning a unit together, but by nuts and bolts time of launching it, they realized that the school year had galloped by and they hadn't had enough time to lay the foundation. Their students, a mix of the disturbed, the disenchanted, and the incapable, needed well designed structure and scaffolding to be successful and focused. Students were assigned to The Alternative School, a high school right outside of Baltimore City, for at most two quarters with always a host of problematic behaviors. Engaging them in a long term project would tax the patience of the Dalai Lama.

They lowered their sights and started to bang together a single project that had World War One at its center. They called it their pilot plan before running a for a full-on unit in the fall.

"I read through the *I Ching* last night."

"Yeah?"

"Latoya's suicide. Bad ju-ju. Deeply wrong. I read the section on 'Hindrance.' Here's one line: 'The great is departing;/the little is arriving.' I'm on it Julie. I'm not going to let it go."

They worked at a triangle-topped table. Both could see passers-by through the window

framing the door.

“Even the students,” he said. “Collective amnesia. It’s like she’s been gone a year.”

“I heard some of them say they posted pictures on Instagram. They tweeted back and forth. But their brains spin through information at a thousand rpms,” Julie said.

“I’m going to pass around an envelope.”

“Remember our sachem Conklin says it has to stay with Ms. Clark. She keeps it in the office and collects the money. Conklin doesn’t like people twisting arms.”

“Latoya wrote me a note, and her friend Shantay tells me she kept a journal which I’m getting from her. I’m putting in two hundred dollars.”

“Be careful. I can tell Conklin’s not aboard on this one.”

“How?”

While she talked she drew on a sketchpad, tracked their conversation by drawing whoever came into her free associating mind: Conklin, Latoya, him, herself, World War One soldier with gas mask.

“The way he broke it to us then rushed out of the room. Then the follow up email authored by Conklin’s reservation Indian which was crafted with zero passion.”

She reached to her nearby can of drawing instruments and plucked out a thin, flat tipped marker. She drew a caricature of Billy Borke with a headband supporting a single drooping feather. “I think it was deliberate. And here it is, Day Three, right?, and we haven’t heard anything from Borke, Conklin’s message tool. The news is that there’s no news.”

He listened, scratched his arm.

“Borke would sacrifice his favorite plaid vest to keep Conklin happy,” she said.

“Whoa there. That level of commitment.”

“Listen, I can’t match your two hundred,” she said. “But I’ll throw in fifty.”

He told her he planned to go to the group home. From an electronic file folder he clicked open Latoya’s note. It appeared on his monitor. “I scanned it just in case the hard copy happens to disappear.”

She read it. “I suspected she was a group home kid. She was hard to figure. Which lady do you think she’s talking about?”

“I’ll go up there and find out, won’t I? I don’t even know which group home.”

“One of the counselors will know.”

She quickly sketched likenesses of the three counselors riding backward on a donkey. She had them thumb pointing at each other. One said about two, “Idiot.” Two said about three, “Moron.” Three said about One, “Buffoon.”

The following morning, he talked with the Ms. Clark, the admin assistant about the collection he was taking up on Latoya’s behalf. Her eyes widened two degrees then her expression sharpened to disapproval.

“What?” he asked.

She had dyed her straw-like hair an odd color. Orangish-copper? She glanced toward the hallway that led to Conklin’s office.

“Remember, Mr. Conklin’s one day rule on collecting charity money,” she said. “And he’ll keep it to one day. Trust me.” She pulled her office sweater tight around her shoulders and shot him a quick, button-mouthed glance before shaking her mouse to wake up her screen.

He told her that he’d already got \$250.00. She put up her hand like a stop sign.



*The Note/Lavey*

## Chapter Five

Davidson finished teaching his 11th graders, completed his post-dismissal duties, straightened his room for tomorrow, then drove to the Center for Wayward Children.

Earlier in the day, after he thanked the school counselor Mr. Washington for the information about Latoya's group home, he asked why the place was called Center for Wayward Children.

"Did they get Charles Dickens to name it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Mr. Washington said, solemn as a priest. "Been around for seventy-five years that place. You got all you need?"

Washington, a retired army captain, kept a fastidiously neat office space. The other two counselors with desks in the same long room were less tidy. He'd heard Washington refer to them as tree sloths.

Washington had mounted a framed quote above his desk: "Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment."

"Did Latoya ever come in here with, I don't know, problems? Wanting to talk?"

“No, but of course I’m not the guy they come in to talk to. That’s Smith’s department. She’s talk. Rodriguez is laughs. I’m work. You got all you need?”

John suppressed a smile. He remembered Julie’s drawing.

On the way over to Center for Wayward Children, thinking of his conversation with Mr. Washington, he said to himself, No, I do not have all I need.

Was he required to call social services about the note? What about the police, should they know? Teachers received stern information packets about procedures connected with children in distress during teacher orientation week every year, but who could remember them?

He’d never been to Center for Wayward Children group home. He turned onto the grounds and drove through the stone entranceway. The central administration building had shingles missing on its roof. Unmowed grass surrounded it. A rusted bicycle without a chain rested against a basement window. He saw two cottages for children, another lay hidden behind the administration building and sheltered by an overgrown stand of shrubs and bent trees. An unpaved service road ran to a gate in the ten foot high fence out of sightlines from the front entrance.

He didn’t have an appointment because he wanted to catch the place unawares. He parked and stepped inside. It had a moldy smell overlaid with bleach. His stomach clenched. He used to visit a foster brother in a group home.

The waiting room held Salvation Army mismatched chairs. The receptionist, absent from her post, occupied a metal desk piled with files and errant papers. He noticed the open door to the Director of Operations.

He knocked on the doorframe and the woman at the desk turned, and he was face to face

with Taryn Morton.

He would be wary of police involvement now, though Taryn had been a long time ago. She'd told him she was eighteen, and that night, drunk, feeling the call of the wild, he chose to believe her. The next day he found out she was not. He lived in a state of abject terror for a year, well after she'd left the school.

Taryn was still beautiful, but her mouth had hardened and her eyes were sharp.

She smiled, no doubt enjoying his stunned expression.

"Mr. Davidson, have you come over to buy me a drink?" She pointed to a chair. "Why don't you have a seat before you fall over."

I'm a grown woman, Mr. Davidson, she'd said to him way back when, and you're a grown man. We can do what we want. They did. It happened during a spell when his wife kicked him out of the house before they eventually divorced.

Abject terror or not, he continued. He thought he'd gone to heaven. She told him she would never leave him when he cried in her arms one night. A day later, she'd pivoted and informed him it was over. It had gotten too serious.

"Well, now that I can exhale, it's nice to see you."

"You're still looking good, John."

"I've kept my gym membership. One of the constants in my life. Unlike my marriages."

"How many has it been?"

"Two. I think I might still have one in me."

"How old are you? Late thirties?"

"Let's keep it there."

“I bet you have two more in you. Fifteen, twenty years each. Maybe you catch a break and make the last one a keeper.”

He couldn't help laughing.

“One of my students lived here. Latoya Singleton.”

Her face tightened. She shook her head and left the room.

He looked to his right out of her window. He saw a groundskeeper unlock the chain to the fence at the end of the unpaved road leading from the housing unit, swing open the gate, and let out a yellow cab with a single passenger in the back.

Taryn returned with freshened face and sat down. “I'm sorry,” she said. “Latoya was one of my special girls.” She blinked back tears.

“She left me a note. Said I knew the woman who ran the group home. I didn't know who she was talking about. What was going on with her?”

“I should have you talk with the House Monitor.”

“No, she meant you. She said there was some bad stuff going on up here.”

“The police came by and walked through right after it happened.”

“You look scared, Taryn.”

“And you look guilty, John.”

He saw a flash of anger he remembered from way back when. Back off, he told himself. He needed her on his side.

She leaned back in her chair. “Why are you up here, John? This is police business. We're doing an internal investigation. It's one of those unfortunate things.”

He put hands in a cage and watched her.

“She put my name on a note, said I would understand.”

“You want to show me this note. Maybe I can make some sense of it.”

He took it from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

“There’s nothing here, John.” Her jaw relaxed.

He wouldn’t tell her about the notebook.

“You know,” she said. She leaned forward, placed elbows on desktop, put chin atop interlocking fingers. “I kept my diary from the time you forced yourself on me. I was just a child.” She gave him a cold smile.

“I’ll tell you one thing Taryn Morton. Nobody forced anything on you that you didn’t want. You better watch your ass. You’re in something, I can tell.”

“And you better stay in your pew, John Davidson. It’s a rough world out here.”

“It’s nice catching up,” he said. He took a card from her desk cardholder and put it in his shirt pocket. “I’ll come around again. Count on it.”

He strode out of her office, opened and pushed shut the front door then danced up two stairs and straightened against the wall so he’d be out of sight if she stuck her head out to look for him. He heard her get on the phone as she closed her office door. He tiptoed back and leaned close, but he couldn’t make out her words.

John drove down the gravel road to the gate. He figured Taryn watched him. He got out of the car and made a show of looking at the lock on the gate and surveying the area.

## Chapter Six

Next day during his break, he walked with the SRO on his rounds at school.

“Theoretical situation,” he said. “There’s a prostitution ring operating out of a group home. Maybe underage girls. What can the police do about it?”

“Problem is,” Officer Ewing said standing outside the first floor boys bathroom, flipping his keys, “unless you got an eyewitness or some sort of formal complain or hard evidence you can’t do much about it. Whoever it is running this theoretical group home you’re talking about no doubt has enough wherewithal to keep his assets tucked away. You might have cops who know about it but can’t do anything because every time they go over there, they don’t have squat.”

“You think some of your cop buddies are dipping into the delights?”

“If they are, they’re scumbags, and they’re not my *buddies*. You busting my balls?”

A student in a red and blue striped polo shirt leaving the bathroom smirked.

Ewing said to him, “What are you laughing at? You’re ugly and I have a gun.”

Davidson had had Ewing come to his social studies classes and talk to students about

police procedures. He wore a crisp uniform, swaggered enough to appeal to the adolescent mind, and pumped iron. He arm wrestled the strongest boys and never lost. He was everybody's favorite uncle.

“I can't say it could never happen. But a lot of that stuff is TV. Ninety-nine percent of police corruption crap you hear is bullshit.”

“The body of a fifteen year old girl doesn't qualify as bullshit. Somebody's not watching.”

Everything pissed him off today. Why was the school system and his school in particular trying to bury this thing?

The bell sounded and a few stragglers quick stepped into their classrooms.

Ewing pointed a green eye at him and smoothed down his goatee. He'd shown John the tattoo on his left shoulder of a warlike eagle clutching a snake in its talons.

“Davidson, you get us some evidence we can go on, we'll be there. We don't have time for a circle jerk. You got that?” He unwrapped a piece of gum and folded it in his mouth. “And let me tell you something else. The first hit is always preferred over the second, third, and so on. You keep returning to a place and your evidence has a way of getting moldy, not to mention people start forgetting things. You hearing what I'm saying?” He walked off, arms like a gunslinger.



## Chapter Seven

As happened when he felt mentally bankrupt or squirrely-restless, he went for a drive. He checked his watch as he locked up his house. 8:30 p.m. He once drove around Baltimore's 51.46 miles of beltway (he Googled it) three times after midnight when he was so agitated about his impending divorce from his second marriage he couldn't sleep or function or even direct his rage in a coherent fit of destruction, such as smashing the windshield of her beloved Toyota Prius. Less dramatic were weekly and monthly meandering drives through neighborhoods or straight up I-83 to the Pennsylvania border.

He drove along Baltimore-National Pike and watched the box stores and strip malls and shiny cars illuminated under auto dealership lights slip away the farther west he went. The visual noise of so many stores stopped abruptly as he glided through Patapsco State Park and breathed in cool, wet air rising off the ground.

Near Turf Valley he took westbound I-70 and drove as far as Frederick. He went into town for gas. Confederate and Federal armies walked and rode horseback through some of those old streets. Stonewall Jackson came through with his men, and late in the war, Jubal Early rolled

through when he attempted a final, desperate assault on Washington DC.

John pulled into a gas station and stared at the fairgrounds and the park across the street and considered going to a hidden spot beneath one of the mighty oaks, pulling his coat over his head, and holing up for the night.

But he got back into his car and within three hours of leaving Baltimore, he landed back home. He slept for short stretches and found himself sitting up against his pillow and staring out the streetlight brightened window.

At 3:00 a.m. on the nose his telephone rang. He picked it up quickly, as if he'd been waiting for her call, which he had not.

"We need to talk, John," she said. Taryn's voice had reached inside him the first time she spoke in his class so many years ago.

"You need to leave Latoya to rest in peace."

"You're running girls out of there, aren't you?"

"I'm a cog in the machine, John. I look out for their health and well-being as best I can," she said. Then as if to herself, "If only I'd moved down south to Atlanta last year."

"Who's running the show? Let's stop it."

"The man you want is named Rocco. Rocco Dragusha. He's some sort of Russian Albania. I'm finally scared. He's a bad guy. He's a mean son of a bitch."

"Is that who you called after I left?"

"Hold on." She put down the phone on dresser or table. He heard her call out to someone, from the sound of her voice probably a child. Maybe an elderly parent.

Footsteps came toward the phone.

“And you know what else? He’s connected. People higher up on the food chain know what’s going on.”

“What are you scared of?”

He would find out that she had a year left on her undergraduate work. People who had her job usually had a master’s.

“Putting girls out on the street is a tax free income stream,” he said.

“Don’t judge. I’m making my life work. I don’t want that taken away.”

“But you’re scared.”

“He’s the most egocentric human being I’ve ever met. Go to the porn site redscorch and search east European god. That hairy guy who’s got young girls giving him tag team blow jobs? That’s Rocco.”

“Show the cops.”

“You never see his face. But it’s him. He made me watch it. Besides, what’s illegal?”

“But you’re scared.”

“He knows my family situation. He told me I need to put this Latoya business to bed. You coming up to see me didn’t help anything out. John, I’m asking you to stop. Let it rest. Please.”

“I can’t.”

The guy across the street started up a motorcycle. John had been meaning to get to know him. He picked up his nightstand clock and pressed the button to make the dial face glow. 3:10. Who drove away on a motorcycle in the middle of the night?

“He told me I need to make this go away. It was one of my girls. *You lost control of the*

*situation*, he said. He plays hardball, John. He wouldn't think twice about drowning my boy like an alley cat."

"Why'd you call at three in the morning?"

"None of this operates on a normal schedule. None of it. You're in it now. You need to remove yourself very carefully."

"Go to the cops. Get clean of it."

"People will get hurt. I'll guarantee one thing, John Davidson, it won't be my child or my sick father...or me. I'm hanging up now."

He dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He made himself a pot of coffee, put on a coat, and went outside to sit in the cool March air.

How in the hell am I supposed to know what to do, he thought. He needed to figure out how Taryn's world worked.

He sipped his coffee, and watched until the sky lightened and early morning people walked down their front walkways, got in their cars, and headed onward to work.

He wasn't going to let this one go. He'd had enough of half-measures in his life. He'd been putting it on cruise control for years now. He'd wrapped himself in a cocoon. A girl committing suicide meant something.

Rocco Dragusha. Hell, the guy's name scared him.

## Chapter Eight

He smelled food odors and heard unleashed voices of adolescents and clattering of utensils and trays. Teachers rotated through lunch monitoring duty, and his turn had come up. Today, he pushed a large gray trash can on rollers up and down the long tables so students could easily throw in trash before carrying their trays to the stacking area. Some days he stayed on the sidelines and watched, like most teachers. Most of the time, though, he liked to mix it up with the kids.

“Mr. Davidson,” Desiree, one of his tenth grade girls, called to him. “How much money you make?”

“My sex life and salary are off limits.”

“That’s cause you don’t get much of either,” said Oscar.

Their group laughed.

“Oscar,” he said, “I can assure you, I have enjoyed the company of many, many more females than you have. Who hasn’t? Everybody knows you’re still a virgin.”

A collective “Oh!” from them.

“And size does matter. How big is your mutual fund portfolio?”

“He whored you, yo,” said Desiree. “I mean for real.”

“Desiree, why don’t you become a teacher. You can help straighten up some of the misguided youth you see around you.”

“I ain’t being no teacher,” she said. “Nothing but disrespectful niggas in these schools. I’d smack the ugly off them and get fired in a week.”

He kidded back and forth with them a little more before rolling the trashcan along.

He saw Julie Wang leaning against a pillar talking with a fellow English teacher. They nodded to each other. Shantay came up behind him.

“Mr. Davidson, I’m going to stop by with that notebook after school. You going to be there?”

“Yes, I will.”

She didn’t meet his eyes.

As she walked away, she was joined by a tall, lanky boy with short dreads and a bright smile. John heard him say, “It’s all good then?”

He had a class right after lunch period ended. He waved to a couple of his fellow teachers then left his post ten minutes early. He had prepared his lesson and handouts and felt like walking the halls. Rhonda’s brother told him he’d make a good principal, and maybe he would have. He liked milling among students, moving around to get a temperature read of the building, listening without snooping to students’ conversations. Young people had so few mentors, so few ways to find righteous.

He went by the library and looked through the glass doors. He saw Ms. Wentles sitting with a Mexican girl he knew from his 9th grade government class. Ms. Wentles taught reading at

a back table of the cafeteria or the library with one or two or three students at a time.

She showed around pictures of her grandchildren on her smartphone, handed out vegetables from her garden, and baked cookies for students and staff. Other specialists like her existed in the system--ESOL teachers, psychological counselors, various types of physical therapists, people who went from school to school to ply their trade. Road warriors.

She drove a Mercedes and dressed in stylish, expensive clothes. Julie told him that Wentles's hats and scarves cost Julie's clothes budget for a year. "Those purses and shoes aren't knock-offs, either."

He rocked back and idly watched the pantomime of her leaning, with old style octagonal eyeglasses, close to the girl and speaking harshly. The Mexican girl put palms to her eyes and cried. The school librarian looked up from her laptop.

He craned his neck. At all times she projected grandmotherly kindness. Weird.

He checked his watch then hustled back to his room. The school was on an A/B day schedule. Every other day he taught a remedial class of students who'd failed 9th grade social studies--American Government. The principal allowed him latitude with the curriculum, anything that would help them pass the High School Assessment exam they needed to graduate. He focused on reading strategies, study skills, and sussing out main ideas. He'd found himself reverting to old handouts which asked them to answer straightforward comprehension questions.

Julie Wang taught a 9th grade English class. Just last week, as they discussed working together with their 10th graders, she asked him what he did with his 9th grade social studies students. He told her.

She'd said, "Your lame-itude is pathetic. Let's get those kids working on a

cross-disciplinary project along with your 10th graders.”

The minutes ticked by with mind-stretching slowness.

School ended at 2:20. He did his bus duty then waited until 2:45 for Shantay. To hell with it. Maybe it was a sign.

He slipped his computer in his backpack and did a visual check on his room making sure he'd logged out on his desktop computer and locked up his closet door.

Shantay and the lanky boy came in when he had his hand on the lightswitch.

The boy smiled. “Man, you out of here.”

“Some of the other teachers stay late,” Shantay said.

“Let's see what you have.”

She and the lanky boy with dreds sat down atop nearby desks. Davidson dropped his backpack on his teacher desk and eased into his swivel chair, hoping to project Captain Teacher.

“Sonny, he's a recording artist, Mr. Davidson.”

“Congratulations,” he said.

“Music is my thing,” Sonny declared.

Davidson spread hands. “Great.” He glanced from him to her, her to him.

“He needs some recording equipment, Mr. Davidson. You need Latoya's notebook.”

Sonny sat with a hip swag to his body language, one foot on the floor. “The stuff don't cost too much,” he said. “But I'm looking for an investor. I'm about a hundred short. One hundred puts me over the hump.”

“I give you a hundred dollars, and I get Latoya's notebooks. All of them.”



“She only had the one. Not like she was a writer.”

“She could write some rap lyrics now,” Sonny said. “She had a nice ear.”

“Latoya Singleton? Well, well,” he said. He glanced at Shantay who paid close attention to her fingernails.

He rubbed his jaw.

“So you and Latoya were friends, too?” he asked Sonny.

“We were. That we were. She helped me with some raps I needed for my album. It got done, then that was it.” He popped a quick glance at girlfriend Shantay.

Finally, he thought. He’d wondered why he got yes-no signals from Shantay about Latoya.

From his wallet he took out five twenties. Shantay gave him the marble black composition notebook. The two entrepreneurs left.

If the exchange had been video recorded, he thought, tucking the notebook into his backpack, he’d get fired and brought up on charges. He paid an underage girl for a piece of evidence that should be in the police’s hands.

## Chapter Ten

He took a table near a window in Ben's Restaurant in Hampden, his home away from home. Ben, wearing a white apron and a flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up on his forearms, waved from behind the bar.

"How's my favorite social studies teacher?" he said.

The restaurant was empty except for a few late afternooners staring into computer screens.

"Overpaid and underworked," John said.

Ben banged the flat of his hand on the bartop. "Twenty years ago I told Bonita I should become a teacher. You guys work two or three hours a day, get your summers off, and be adored by teenagers. Unions got it so you can't get fired. What's not to like?"

Bonita, ferociously good natured, walked from the back. They had been married for thirty years.

"But my darling wanted to go into the restaurant business, and here I am, fifty-six years old, a broken man. She put the spurs in me and I haven't stopped running since the 1990s."

Bonita stood with hand on hip and looked at John Davidson. She turned her head to the side appraising him.

“He needs a woman,” she said.

“He’s been married six or seven times already,” Ben said.

John laughed. Patrons looked up from their computers.

“No, he needs a woman who’s younger. He’s worn out,” Bonita said.

“I think it’s the women who done wore him out.”

“You men, you need a woman to keep your life juices flowing, *si*? You get worn down so easily. Life is big. It’s wonderful. A woman will help you stay excited, man.”

“He and I can switch places a while,” Ben said. “You help get him back to his old self, while I enjoy some bachelor solitude a while.”

She turned to Ben. “I got a suggestion for you, big guy.”

“Here it comes,” he said.

“Your soup was not so good yesterday. You need to spice it up a little. Just like our love life.”

The customers, overhearing, laughed, as did John.

Ben shook his head. “Sisyphus thought he had trials and tribulations.”

A waitress wrote down John’s order. John took out the composition book and flipped pages, letting his eyes skip over the loopy handwriting, entries made in purples and greens and oranges, some dated, some not. One endless unpunctuated sentence after another filled most pages. A couple pages contained entries written back and forth between Latoya and another person, as if she and a classmate got bored and needed diversion. He stopped at pages that

somehow seemed more organized and focused. She had copied directly from a celebrity magazine an article about a rapper. In the margin were lots of exclamation points.

The notebook was a messy drawer.

He went back to page one. She complained about her mother. She wrote that her mother's boyfriend wanted her and that her mother was jealous. She wrote about school, lack of friends, feeling that no boy her age would really ever love her. She knew that Shantay was jealous of her because she and Sonny *kept it real*.

The color of her pen changed to purple. She wrote about the parties. They were never told in advance. *Ms. Taryn would come and tell three or four of us to get ready*. They were driven by cab to a hotel. Sometimes other girls were there. They weren't allowed to talk to them, but she could tell they were from group homes. *They had that look and Mr X was always there*. Rocco Dragusha? The girls sat in adjoining suites and the men came in and pointed to them. Mr. X. crooked his finger. She watched money change hands, and the girls went with the men to rooms, six or seven times a night. *I'm a ho now*, she wrote at one point. *I do what Mr X tells me to do with the men if I don't he will get my sister Ms. Taryn says go along it dont matter*.

John had eaten his sandwich and hardly remembered doing so. Bonita came by with a slice of apple pie on a plate and put it in front of him.

She looked into his eyes. "You are seeming so sad right now."

He felt tears well up.

"Oh, my gosh, what is it?"

"A girl at school committed suicide. No more than fifteen, sixteen years old." He shook his head. "I'll be damned but the world can be an ugly place sometimes."

“That is so sad, John. I’m so sorry to hear. Why did she do such a thing?” She put the flat of her hand to the middle of his back and rubbed it.

“I don’t think anybody knows why exactly,” he said. “She was a group home kid, had a mother that was into drugs. Who know where the father was.”

How often had little Latoya heard a door close and knew she had no way out?

Bonita put her loving hand to the side of his face and leaned toward him. “Don’t take on the world’s burdens, John. You do a good job as a teacher and you’re a good man.”

“I have done a good job, Bonita. I have. But not lately, and I’m eating myself up about it.”

She stood up straight. “Sometimes a *vaquero* needs to get off the horse and walk a while to take a look at his surroundings. When it’s time, he gets back in the saddle. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

“You’re just what the doctor ordered,” he said. He kissed her hand. “Would you marry me?”

Ben wiped down tables.

“Look here,” she said to Ben. “He wants to marry me.”

Ben stopped and glared at John. “Come and steal another man’s wife.” He paused. “Dibs on being your best man.”

After eating the pie and thanking the waitress for the coffee refill, he turned back to the composition book. He was looking for one thing. He read about more parties and visiting the clinic and having the flu and still Ms. Taryn telling her not to be selfish. *That’s a cold bitch right there.* The girls heard news of a girl their age on the east side of the county who had been

*The Note/Lavey*

murdered. *Ms. Taryn told us it was Mr X who done it he don't fuck around she said that girl told Mr X she was goin to the police.*

Her last entry was a single line. *what am i supposed to do about maurice i was doin this for him.*

He would have to find out who Maurice was. And he had to make sure that Mr. X. was Rocco. Taryn's name was in the journal so he had her dead to rights.

He called Taryn when he got home. She didn't pick up. He left a message. An hour later, he called again. He called twice more before he turned out his light.

Yesterday, he asked his American government students what they would do if they knew about a crime, knew one of the bad guys involved in a crime, but they didn't have enough evidence to go to the police.

"I'd pop his bitch ass," Semaj said, a light skinned, flabby boy who spent full time trying to impress his peers.

"I'm handing out lunch detentions for cussing. I'm making calls home. I'm taking off daily participation points. And I'll shut down discussion and give you handouts if you can't use classroom vocabulary. Now, one at a time."

"What kind of crime?" Jerome asked.

"Let's say somebody got your sister involved in prostitution. Forced her to be raped, in other words."

Several boys laughed and started talking. Davidson froze them with a kill-look. They sniffed and quieted.

"Me and my boys would cut the man's testicles off, Mr. Davidson. I'm trying to be

proper here. You don't do that to somebody's family."

"So, you'd kill or maim the man and possibly spend decades in prison?"

"I ain't getting caught, I'll tell you that right now."

"Anyone else? How about one of the young women in the class?"

"I'm keeping it one-hundred, all right? What's she doing opening her legs for these niggas in the first place." Tracey looked around. "They making money off her? She ain't saying no? That don't compute. You feel me?"

"Let's avoid the n-word," he said. "So you're telling me that she's at fault."

"Half-yes, half-no."

"You don't believe that she could be coerced into selling her body?"

"Ain't nobody selling nothing here, you feel me, that I don't want to sell. That's all I'm saying."

"What if she felt powerless?"

The talk degenerated into students throwing out opinions without listening to one another.

"Does anyone in here realize that there's a sex trade industry in our country that forces young girls and women into prostituting themselves?"

"Where'd you hear that?" Dante said. "That sh...that stuff happens in Thailand, all right. This a free country. You sell your ass, you want to sell your ass. But let me ask you, Mr. Davidson. What would you do, find out some pimp's got your sister turning tricks?"

"Try to save her."

"What if it don't work? You going to get yourself a tone and take care of business?"

“No, I don’t believe in being a vigilante. I suppose if nothing else worked, I’d go to the police.”

Howls and waves from the class.

“Police ain’t doing shit.”

“They probably running the game out the police station basement.”

“*Po*-lice. Shee-it.”

Too many of them cursed for him to issue lunch detentions. Once he quieted them, he admitted that preventing illegal gambling and prostitution was difficult.

“But no matter how I feel,” he said. “I’m not hunting someone down and killing him. We got to stop that blood feud business.”

He passed out copies of a single page from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. Chapter 5 Force. From the commentary: “Like the general, you can start with common ways to try to end your conflict. If that doesn’t work, try uncommon ways. Fortunately, there are so many potential uncommon approaches to your problem that you are limited only by your imagination.”

“Let’s think about this guy who’s selling young girls,” Davidson said. “The common way is try to get the police involved. Get him arrested. Get him thrown in jail. But as all of you so eloquently indicated, that probably won’t happen. Outside of your impulses for street justice, what is some other way we could get this guy to stop?”

He paired them up. He would give bonus points for creative answers. More importantly, he would give them school dollars to “buy” chips and sodas that were “sold” Tuesdays and Thursdays.

He heard suggestions such as threaten his family, torch his car, put a girl undercover.



Two quiet students raised their hands.

Moline said, "These kind of people hate exposure."

"She always talks all proper, yo," one of the boys said.

"That's cause she went to Catholic school."

"Moline is speaking," Davidson said.

"They're vampires. What we came up with is having a bunch of young people following him around and taking his picture and posting them on Instagram and tweeting about him. Make him look nasty."

"Did Terrence help you with that?" he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Yo," Semaj said. "Terrence is smart, yo, he just don't ever say nothing."

He gave those two five school dollars. "I like it," he said. "I like that very much."

During his lunch break he called Taryn again. He said that if she didn't call back he would go up there and start making noise. He would give her till 3:00 p.m.

At 2:45, she called.

Her voice was strained and hollow and aggressive. He had Latoya's notebook.

"So what?"

"She talks about a Mr. X. who collects money on the scene when the girls were being sold. Is that Rocco?"

"Yes." Weary and resigned.

"Who's Maurice?"

"Latoya's mother's boyfriend. Grade A asshole."

“Where can I find this Rocco?”

“Where can you find Rocco. You just asked me that? You don’t want to find Rocco. He is bad news.”

“I’m going to have a heart-to-heart with him.”

“John,” she said. “You need to hear what I’m telling you. Stay away from Rocco and his kind.”

“I’m not going to stay away from anyone. Tell me where I can find him or I will hand that notebook over to the cops and tell them you admitted to running a prostitution ring up there.”

He heard her tapping a pencil on her desk top.

“You think it’s just him?”

“What does that mean?”

“You know what. You need to find out yourself. Rocco goes to a bar in the city named Nines on Washington Boulevard. Right near DeSoto.”

He asked for a description. “Late thirties. Five-ten. Brown hair slicked straight back. Penetrating brown eyes. Wears black turtlenecks with suit jackets. Always has on expensive shoes. Broad in the shoulders. Crooked nose from being broken. Wears too much musk cologne. Often carries a firearm. In any group, he’s the center of attention.”

“You liked this guy, didn’t you.”

“Moving forward.”

“Let’s get this guy, Taryn.”

“I don’t want to hear *let’s* anything.”

“What’s an Albanian-Russian doing in Baltimore?”

“Albanians are the kings of sex trade industry in Europe. Kidnap girls and ship them around. That country is right out of the stone age. He came over when he was a kid, but he’s old school. You ever hear of the Kanun?”

“No.”

“Do a little research. It’s their tribal code. Governs things like blood feuds and women being the property of men. Rocco’s people realized the U.S. is the wild west for sex slavery. The Russians have New York and New Jersey locked up. His uncle works DC. Rocco set up shop here in Baltimore, the surrounding counties, and he’s branching into Annapolis. He will throw your teacher ass into a tree shredder.”

“That train has left the station. Are you protecting your flank? Who looks after your kid and father during the day?”

“My aunt lives around the corner from me in Carroll County. But that’s none of your concern, John. You better realize what you’re in for. There’s more to it than Rocco.”

“Why don’t you--”

She hung up.

## Chapter Eleven

Mr. Kraft, a retired psychologist from Maryland State's prison system, subbed for the teacher in the next room. He had a high forehead and wore large, black framed glasses that rested close to his face, which gave him the appearance of an oddball character in a comic strip. He relished telling stories from the belly of the beast, and John chatted him up whenever he was in the building.

He and John shared planning periods. John caught him before he drove to the nearest Royal Farms for coffee or went to the first floor to flirt with the art teacher, both of which he made no secret of doing when he was substituting.

Mr. Kraft forever operated in therapist mode, so when someone showed up on his doorstep, he projected his professional counselor's smile and said, "Good to see you. How are things?"

John pulled up a student chair and sat opposite side of the desk and said. "What happens to a girl who's sexually abused?"

He tucked his chin, picked up a pencil, held the ends, and rolled it horizontally.

“I can tell you one thing that happens to a large percentage of them.” He raised his high-on-the-forehead eyebrows. “They end up using drugs which means they end up in the criminal justice system. Hundreds and hundreds of them were my clients.”

“A student here committed suicide. I need to tell you something in confidence.”

He held up a finger. “Before you do so, pay me a dollar.”

John leaned, got his wallet, pulled out a dollar and handed it to him.

“This way,” Kraft said, “I can claim you were a paying client and our discussion is protected by laws and conventions of the therapist-client relationship. We’re not just pals talking.” He smiled. The idea of pals humored him.

“Okay,” John said.

“Let’s unpack for just a moment. Give me some specifics.”

John imagined that he kept a fastidious house. He bet that he fashioned himself a chef.

He told him what he knew. Latoya, a sixteen year old girl who always seemed hidden and wary, had committed suicide. John smelled a rat and began investigating. Come to find out she’d been part of a situation in which he suspected underaged girls were being sold as prostitutes.

“The police were called, correct?” He looked at his pencil as he rolled it.

“Yes. The woman at the group home told me they had investigated. No charges were filed.”

“These things,” he said to the pencil, “are very difficult to unearth.”

“I’m on a mission,” John said. “I want to get the guy at the top.”

“And do what precisely?”

“Expose him. Get him sent to jail.”

“Why?”

“Why? He’s a shit stain. He needs to be removed from the general population so young women are safe from him.” Kraft was starting to irritate him.

Mr Kraft put his pencil down. “I meant why are *you* taking this on?”

“It needs to get done. I feel I should have noticed. I was asleep at the switch.”

He rolled the pencil back and forth on the desk. “I thought I would ask. You will put yourself in jeopardy, but you know that.” He cleared his throat and placed the pencil to the side and sat forward with hands together. “Sexual exploitation, so it seems to me, is rooted in the human psyche. The more I study human beings the more complex and bizarre they seem. How can we on the one hand be so generous, altruistic even, and on the other, so self aggrandizing, so *consciously* willing to feed and shelter ourselves, to survive, at the expense of others? It is utterly fascinating how mysterious we are to one another.”

John scratched the back of his head.

“But to the matter at hand. What happens to a sexually exploited female?”

“Who has been sold into prostitution and therefore feeling completely powerless over her body and her life, really, who didn’t feel like she had anyone to help her and, by god...” he put his hands to his eyes.

Mr. Kraft moved a box of tissue toward him. For two full minutes he was unable to talk.

Then he managed, “Until the only option for her was to commit suicide.”

“There are statistics,” Kraft began, “that--”

“Mr. Kraft, your body of knowledge is vast. I want to hear what happens psychologically to a child who is a victim. Society seems able and willing to speak about people who are are

mauled in car crashes, but we can't get our hands around a sexually abused person.”

Kraft paused and blinked a few times while attempting to locate internal files. “The victim feels helpless and isolated. She blames herself for the abuse that has been perpetrated on her. You see, the person, usually a family member, who is doing the exploiting has some sort of relationship with her which he has betrayed by violating norms that the child feels were the foundation of her world. She is confused and stressed to a degree that those of us who have not been abused cannot fathom. If the abuse is continuous and lasting, she begins to resemble those victims of concentration camps in which the norm is a claustrophobic mix of physical pain, abuse, isolation, and lack of any sort of steady routine. Bizarrely, she becomes dependant on her abusers to help her determine normal.”

An announcement blared. *Pedro Diaz, please come to the office with your belongings.*

*Pedro Diaz, come to the office with your belongings.*

“So she comes to a place like school,” he said. “And it feels like the moon.”

“That’s quite an astute observation, Mr. Davidson. They aren’t in a school building long enough to find stable. They look around and see what other kids their age are doing and try to imitate it, but for someone like this young lady you’re talking about, the disconnect is too great. She was too isolated.”

“There was no way out.”

Mr. Kraft picked up the pencil again and gave it special attention, as if trying to find a flaw in the paint application. “And it is a profoundly disturbing fact that when a child tries to bring to light her situation, the normal world, quote-unquote, pushes back. As if it can’t tolerate hearing or seeing a common act of violence and predatory behavior it perpetuates. The child is

treated to secondary trauma because she is greeted with blame, rejection, and further isolation. No one wants to believe what she's saying, much less act on it in a way that would initiate healing."

Davidson glanced up at the clock. He should never have started this conversation. The more he heard the less he wanted to know. But like Macbeth he was wading in blood and couldn't go back.

"What happens to the ones who survive it? Age out of the abuse, so to speak."

"It's not pretty. I have a firm belief in the power of humans to heal, but abuse victims are dealt a bad hand. They are plagued by alcoholism, substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, various personality disorders, interpersonal relationship problems. It goes on. We go back to the tortured nature of the human psyche. Often the abused become abusers. After all, what else do they know when they attempt agency?"

"I'm surprised that more of them don't commit suicide."

"You're not the first to make that point. Remember, they have been betrayed. I'm beginning to think that betrayal might be at the heart of most trauma. I haven't quite worked out that thesis, but it has great resonance with me."

John looked up. The blond-haired art teacher, who wore black leather wrist bands and dark eye makeup, appeared at the door.

"Dr. Kraft, I thought you were going to come to my third period class."

"Well," he said, straightening. "I intended to. This young man came in and we have been having a discussion."

"The invitation is still open." She turned and left.



He raised his way-up-high eyebrows. “One lives the archetype. The beauty and the beast.” He hoisted his briefcase onto the top of the desk and stood.

“I feel helpless,” John said.

“Most of us do. We are a cruel species. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a date with my favorite dominatrix.”

## Chapter Twelve

He'd avoided Ms. Clark, the admin assistant, because he hoped she'd keep open the money collection longer than one day. But she caught him after he signed in.

"This has been waiting for you," she said. She took the the brown manilla envelope from a file drawer.

He went over to the conference table and counted out the money. Teachers came into the office, went to their boxes, shared news, laughed, commented on how glad they were it was Thursday. One more day, they said.

Two hundred and eighty-four dollars. He and Julie put in \$250.00 themselves. There were, what, thirty-five, forty teachers in the school building?

"That's it?" he said to Ms. Clark.

She kept her eyes on her computer screen. "That's it."

Mike Parker, the social worker who had an office off the main office, looked at John who stared into space, hands placed atop the brown envelope on the glass table top.

"When's your free period, man?" Parker said to him.

John was too distracted to notice the snarl in his voice.

He told him. “But come by at lunch time. Ms. Wang and I are sharing our planning period together.”

“All right, man,” he said. He shook his head and walked into his office.

John checked his watch. He still had fifteen minutes before homeroom.

He remembered he promised Julie he would stop in before school started. He couldn't remember why. “Knock, knock,” he said, leaning into her room.

She was Special Operations all the way. One time she said to him, “Teachers have to go guerrilla. Those people writing the curriculum for us don't know anything anymore. They sold their souls to the devil. We need to stay under the radar and make learning happen for our students. Our beloved alternative crazies count on us.”

He'd seen her challenge students to a pull up contest in the gym space at the bar on the weight lifting machine. One rangy, tightly muscled boy did thirty-one. She did fifty-four.

After knocking on her doorjamb, he remembered that he'd promised to compile a folder of articles, photographs, book titles and suggestions for their academically challenged alternative students. He would hand them off to her, she would skim them before they met during their common planning period, and they would brainstorm about which ones might be useful. They agreed that their project would have a social studies center of gravity. She could start developing a project only after seeing his materials. She would also show him what reading strategies he could employ that would bolster what she taught. Finally, she would look for short fiction written by veterans or better yet poetry that came out of war. They might even throw in a few excerpts from the Iliad.

He had nothing.

“You’re pathetic,” she said.

She straightened different colors handouts and instructions for a multi-tiered class assignment.

“Sorry,” he said. “This Latoya thing has me off my game.”

“That’s an excuse.” He saw that she hadn’t taken off her fingerless bike gloves while she went through papers. After straightening and giving her room a quick look-over, she leaned fist to tabletop. “Are you in this with me? I’m ready to jump. I can’t have you figuring out how to pack your parachute. You get my meaning?”

“I’m all in,” he said.

“Well then act like it. I need you ready to go.”

She wore a man’s military style watch underneath her wrist. She glanced at it. “The natives will be coming down the hallway in a few minutes. Your room has nicer light. We’ll meet there at 11:30. Let’s do this, John.”

He put hands in gassho and bowed. “I’m sorry. I am. I’m effing sorry. I’m all in.” He went to the floor in full prostration.

He could crack her up.

“Get off the floor or I’m going to kick your ass.”

He hustled back to his room. On the staircase going up he ran into Borke, Conklin’s math teacher pet, who sported an Amish style scraggly beard.

“Hey, Borke,” he said.

Borke jutted his chin. “Morning.”

Why were some people clammy and moist? Borke kept microfiber towels stacked in his closet. “I sweat alot. I’m a sweater,” he felt obliged to inform you before wiping his face, neck, and arms. He liked to get up close and personal with students. John heard them talking about it. *Yo dripped his shit on me.*

Maybe he would visit Borke later and find out what he knew. Borke kept his radar on for any news in the building and might have noticed something funny outside of John’s bandwidth. But he had to be careful. He couldn’t let Borke know he was fishing. Borke waddled into Conklin’s office throughout the day and would get extra special poodle pets for tattling on John. Julie let him know that Conklin wanted the Latoya “problem” to go away.

But he’d try to catch him after school for a few minutes anyway.

Davidson’s classes hummed along until after lunch. In 11th grade they studied U.S. history, which intersected with world history (10th grade) at various times, such as the stock market crash of 1929 and the world wars.

He had them studying the Harlem Renaissance. Initially enthusiastic, they had gotten bogged down. He’d let them choose topics, but that didn’t seem to be enough. They seemed not to know what to do, although he’d taken them through the requirements of their final paper. He stopped the class twenty minutes before the bell and paired them up. They had to tell a partner what it was they worked on and two interesting things they found out about their topic. Their partner then had to tell the whole group. He gave pairs seven minutes to exchange information. He listened. How could so many of them be so stuck? He’d have to conduct a lot of one-on-ones the next time they met.

He made a pot of coffee in his room and waited for Julie. He looked on the school

system's website for interdisciplinary projects connected with World War I, but nothing jumped out at him. He Googled the same, and got 2,790,000 results.

Make the project simple, he thought: what started World War I. what happened during WWI, what was the result of WWI.

Julie arrived. They both drank their coffee black. She wore dark slacks, a long sleeved cotton shirt, and a light, body hugging polar fleece jacket.

He told her his Before, During, and After concept. Give students a choice. Make groups of kids of various academic abilities. She processed it for at most two seconds.

"Lame. Lame, lame. Lame, lame, lame," she said. She reached over and unbuttoned the top button of his long-sleeved polo shirt. "Don't advertise your dorkiness, as appealing to some of us as it is."

"Thank you," he said. "I knew there was one tiny detail off about my March look, I just couldn't put my finger on it."

"We need to get radical," she said. "I'm tired of keeping close to these lesson plans they give us. They're basically a way to control students...and teachers. They're awful. Right now is zero hour: we're officially embracing project based learning. We're an alternative school. We need to act like it."

"How do we do it?"

"We're going to follow the Tao of Constructivism."

He laughed. They had discovered that each read the *Tao Te Ching*.

"You and I, John, are going to go on our adventure of teaching a curriculum entirely generated by our students. Start right at the beginning of the process, let them guide it. Starting

with, why study World War One. Starting with that.”

“I’m listening,” he said.

“We start off by doing a silent chalk talk. We write the words World War One on sheets of newsprint. We give them magic markers. They go up to the board and write down what those words mean to them. Then we follow clues that they put up there.”

“We’re invisible,” he said.

“Invisible but present. They generate everything, even if they don’t know it.”

“I like it.”

“Everything starts with questions. Questions lead to other questions,” she said.

“It’s going to be messy,” he said.

“It better be,” she said.

“We go into total support role. Doing by non-doing.”

“‘Only do not contend/And you will not go wrong.’ We stop being the traditional authority figures in the classroom and all of a sudden they don’t have anyone to contend with. I’ve been moving in that direction for years.”

“What translation?”

“Addiss and Lombardo. Very spare. Anyway, let’s go to the edge. My ideal is that they come into class and not notice whether or not I’m present.”

“Deep. You wouldn’t get much support from the union.”

She laughed. “Let’s see what they come up with. Worst that can happen is that we roll it back and shift to standard operating procedures. Assign the usual.”

They hunkered down and talked about various scenarios. How it might work, the

structure of the classroom while questions were flying around, how to record the questions, how much small group and individual work they wanted to see, how and where the process could crumble. What categories would the questions likely fall into? What if one handful of students finished up, while another was only a third of the way through? What if some students were stuck at the beginning? Should the class create a list of assessments that they could choose from? How much should they as teachers intervene when they saw a question begging to be asked?

The bell rang ending their planning period. He looked over his shoulder at the clock.

“Damn,” he said.

They punched fists.

“You still got it, Davidson,” she said. “I was getting worried.”

His brain percolated during 9th grade American government class. He’d been on the bottom of an information pile with its focus on increasing test scores from the department for so long that creative embers had been snuffed. Not to mention that small detail of his turning into a sloth.

At 12:40 he stood at his classroom door and exchanged comments with his departing students. A group of super-smarties who’d been kicked out of their home schools because they skipped so often stayed back and huddled.

They asked him if he would chair their fundraising committee so they could buy some “awesome badminton uniforms.” They needed an adult to supervise.

“Badminton uniforms?”

“Awesome badminton uniforms,” Morgan said.

She showed him her design. A cartoon ninja figure with racket raised ready to deliver a



kill stroke, foot in horizontal kick position, crazy eyes above mask covering nose, mouth, and chin.

“Follow the proposal procedure. The form is in the office. I’m giving you only a tentative yes because part of me believes you’re putting me on. If I find out you’re making me the butt of a practical joke, I will keep every single one of you in high school until you’re twenty-five. I know people.”

They left. Most of the students were good kids. Knuckleheads, misfits, and off-taskers, but good kids. Honest to god thugs appeared, but those types usually authored their own destruction.

Mike Parker, the social worker, strode down the hallway. He was also the j.v. soccer coach and assistant varsity football coach and liked to wear the school jacket, even in the building. During faculty meetings, he spoke about the community. *“What are we doing about community relations? You all need to come out there in the community with me. I got insights because I go to meetings in the community.”*

“Hi Mr. Parker.”

He wanted to eat lunch. He’d forgotten that Parker asked to talk to him. He stood by his door hoping he and Parker could have a quick chat about whatever was on the man’s mind. Davidson like to close his door, hunker down, and eat lunch alone.

“You’re not going to invite me in?” Parker said, cocking back his head. “Come on, man.”

They grabbed student chairs.

“I’m going to tell you, man,” he said. “That money fund you got going for Latoya, man.”

He shook his head, eyes on the ground. “That didn’t work for me, bro. You hear what I’m

saying?”

“Not really, Mike.”

“Why didn’t you draw me in? I’m up there in the community talking with people. I met with her mother right after Latoya passed. Man, it was hard.” He pounded the thumb side of fist to chest. “Man, I was suffering with her. The next thing I know, somebody’s starting some sort of fund. Why didn’t you come to me, man? I should have been part of it. I’m the school social worker. I need to be out front with this sort of thing.”

“Didn’t mean to step on toes.”

“We’re not talking about toes here, man. It’s the way things get done. I went to Mr. Conklin about it. You do know I’m the community liaison for the school, right?”

“Is that an official title?”

“I mean, yeah, it’s official. It’s part of the job formulation of school social worker, if that’s not too abstract. But you get my drift.” He had his hands folded and nodded a lot during the conversation.

“You talked to Conklin.”

“I did. Conklin, man, this Latoya thing. I mean he and I...” Mike Parker touched his heart. “We shared some things. He wants me to stay in touch with the family and the community.”

A flash of inspiration came to him. “Mike, would you be the one to present the collected money to Latoya’s mother.”

“Aw, man, you trust me with that? Man, that is righteous.” He stuck out his hand. They shook. “Man, that touches me, bro. How much money you collect.”

“Two hundred and eighty four dollars.”

“Really, man? Wow, we got a generous staff here.”

Davidson choked back the information that he and Julie had put in \$250.00.

“That’s cool, man. I’ll put in another dollar, make it \$285.00 even.” He nodded his head and stared at the floor.

Davidson stood. Parker took the hint.

At the door, Parker said to him, “You all right, man.” He shot him a power fist.

### Chapter Thirteen

The principal called him into his office the day after Mr. Parker and he had their meeting of the minds.

“What’s this I hear about a healing fund you started up about one of the students.” A statement, not a question.

The principal grew up around Baltimore, but advertised his Indian roots. He often wore a necklace with replica arrowheads, animal claws, or various beads. He claimed a tribal chief gave him a turquoise ring, which he wore on the middle finger of his left hand. But he also wore western designed suits and a below the knee frock coat along with a hand crafted cowboy hat.

About his office were prints of the Grand Canyon, Montana landscapes, and photos of men in the 1800s laying railroad track.

“Not exactly one of the students, Mr. Conklin. She’s the little girl who committed suicide.”

“A tragic event, Davidson. We all know that. But more than one teacher thinks you’re stuck on it. Passing around the envelope is better left to the Sunshine Committee, don’t you

think?”

“They weren’t getting to it.”

“Everybody’s plenty busy this time of year. It was on their agenda. You got Tina Carlisle’s panties in a twist. You better go over there and smoke the sacred pipe with her.”

“Tina Carlisle was born with her panties in a twist. It’s a done deal. I gave the envelope to Parker. He’s going to run it over to the mother.”

He non-smiled while making a display of his top teeth. He picked up a piece of pink memo paper and waved it in the air.

“I got a message here from the Center for Wayward Children Group home. Says you met with one of the Directors, somebody named Taryn Morton?”

“I did at that.”

“Cease and desist, Davidson. She complained to one of the higher ups who gave me a call.”

“What’s the complaint?”

“You aren’t an authorized social worker, are you? Some sort of official mentor?”

He leaned forward. “You know as well as I do that I’m not. Are you going to tell me about the complaint, Mr. Conklin, or are we playing footsie.” He had never before spoken to a principal in the way he did with Conklin, but he long ago figured out that you either muscled up to Conklin or become prey.

“The complaint is that you’re up there nosing around in business that you have no business nosing around in. She said you were asking a lot of questions you don’t need to be asking. I agree. Let the police do their jobs. We should abide by the roles in our teacher family

here. That's what makes us work."

"You going to tell me how the police are doing their job? Latoya Singleton is in our rear view mirror receding from view. We need to make sure something like that never happens again."

Conklin leaned back in his chair, put left leg over right knee, folded hands on his paunch. His pants flared up over his expensive, hand tooled boots. "It's an ugly world out there, Davidson. The great spirits are at war with the forces of darkness. Take a breath. Piece of advice." Conklin pierced him with his most aggressive stare. "Don't cross me." He pointed to the clock above his doorway. "Meeting adjourned."

John walked by the assistant principal's office down the hall from Conklin. He thought she was talking to herself.

"Althena Tremont knows things that she keeps inside, Mr. Davidson."

He stopped when he heard his name and stuck his head in the door.

"Of course you should have come right here in this office and parked your behind in that chair, shut the door, so we could begin quite a nice conversation. Now, I've been hearing things and you've been intemperate. It's time you talked turkey with Althena."

He eased inside and kept his voice low. "How have I been intemperate?"

She lowered her voice, too. Her office was one of three off a corridor leading to the principal's grand, end office.

"These rooms have ears."

"Why don't we meet in my room during lunch. Make it seem like you just popped in," he suggested.

“I think that’s a fine idea, Mr. Davidson. I’m going to bring down a cup of tea and we’ll have a chat.”

Althena walked into his room blowing across the top of her tea cup. She was dark skinned, always dressed with a bright blouse or accenting scarf, hair-done, perfumed, and of a demeanor where her smile could calm down the most indignant parent or freeze a foul-mouthed, six-foot-five, arrogant athlete.

She bobbed her tea bag then leaned to drop it into the trash can. They both sat in student chairs. He had pulled up a desk to the side so they could lean elbows.

“You know you kicked something up,” she said. “It’s a hard world you’re walking into.”

“I seem to be hearing versions of that.”

“Pay heed,” she said. “There are a lot of trails and pathways lead to that back office.”

“Something’s not right, Ms. Tremont.” He never used her first name.

“I’ve been smelling it myself for quite some time now. ‘Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.’”

“You know your Bible.”

“I do.” She sipped her tea and eyed him. “You a believer?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not. But I believe in the inspiration the Good Book provides.”

“Don’t get too clever about things you might not understand.”

“I will try my best. What do you think I should do about the Latoya business?”

“Be watchful. Walk carefully. ‘The devil prowls around like a roaring lion.’ You best believe in the power of evil, Mr. Davidson.”

“I do.”

She stood, straightened her aching back, pulled at her scarf, held the cup with both hands.

“My door is open. Take advantage of it.” She left.

He worked for a half hour after school before going up to Borke’s room on the 3rd floor. He saw Borke down the well-buffed hallway leaning long armed at his door talking with two new teachers in the math department.

Borke swaggered among the newbies, who deferred to him because they knew he was close to the throne.

Borke straightened seeing Davidson approaching his math patch. Borke liked to loudmouth about math being a hard discipline. Social studies? He once said to Davidson: “Social Studies, English, arts and crafts, what’s the difference?”

Borke had put on weight, John noticed. Rumor had it that his Filipina wife had left him which perhaps explained Borke’s recent aggressive toadying up to Conklin.

“Davidson,” he said too loudly, hoping to impress the twenty-something wizards sunbathing in his glow. “Give me the Pythagoras Theorem, real quick.” He winked at the smirking math guys.

Davidson stopped, put finger to chin, looked skyward. “A-squared plus B-squared equals your mother in a foursome. That’s why you don’t know who your daddy is.”

The math mice laughed.

Borke twitched his nose and crossed his arms.

“Listen,” he said to the new guys, “I’ve got to talk with Prince



Borke for a few minutes.”

One started to step away. The other, wanting more Borke glow, said, “Yeah, right. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers.

John grabbed him by his nose and squeezed it hard.

“Listen, you little twerp. I got this job after I left Sheppard Pratt for stabbing a math teacher. You math guys make me very nervous so I tend to act out. Go to your room or I’ll light your hair on fire.” It flashed that he was channeling Julie Wang. She was the no bullshit commando, not him.

He and the other thin-tied new teacher left. Wide eyed, Borke managed, “I’ve been trying to tell them. Show them the right way of doing things.” He cleared his throat. “Come on in, John.” He slathered on his polished, insincere good cheer.

He and Borke sat atop student desks as if they were long time pals ready to fix the weary old world.

“Ms. Wang and I are putting together a mini-unit or project of some sort on World War I. I’m thinking about bringing in a math component, get some cross-disciplinary stuff in there. Is there any way our students could use math when trying to figure out, I don’t know, the logistics of given x-number of troops in the field you’d need x-amount of food. Really, anything would be good.” He lied with such sincerity he fooled himself. It started to sound good to him. He came up here wondering if he could find out any information about Latoya, Conklin’s reaction to the suicide, or related scuttlebutt.

Borke zeroed in on him. “Davidson, I’m impressed.”

He walked to his closet and got out a clipboard with graph paper. “Sit down here.” They

sat elbow to elbow at a couple of desks. “Now look here.”

Borke was a math nerd’s math nerd and as irritating a human being as he was, John couldn’t help but appreciate the man’s enthusiasm.

“We’ll talk about calories per man in the field.” He spoke to himself. “Let’s say, 3500 calories. You’re outside, carrying weapons, under stress. You need caloric intake.” Quieter still. “We’ve got to calculate...”

John watched as the merlin-like figures appeared on the page.

“Don’t go too hifalutin, Borke.”

“You’re right,” he said. Then quieter. “You’re right, you’re right.” But he’d fallen down a rabbit hole into deep math realms.

John watched for a while. “Borke, you have got to make it something these kids can do.”

Borke carried a reputation of being an enthusiastic teacher, but one unable to differentiate lessons for students who struggled. He was department chair which allowed him to cherry pick honors classes for himself leaving other teachers to carry the water of standard students. In retribution, some of the veteran math teachers in his department would conveniently get sick during high pressure, school-wide test days or scheduled times when higher ups did walk-throughs, perpetuating eternal guerrilla warfare against him.

John watched Borke become untethered to the known universe while scratching out calculations on the paper.

He decided to come out with it. “Why’s this Latoya Singleton business put a bug up Conklin’s ass?”

Face to paper. “It needs to go away, Borke,” said Borke. “Who knows who could get

hurt.”

John stayed still. Borke remained in the ether. John wondered if Borke knew he channeled Conklin.

Before reflection wormed its way into Borke’s cerebral cortex, John took the stage.

“Borke, I’m enjoying watching you further your Nobel Prize winning work, but I need a graphic organizer and a three-step process.”

Borke looked up. Sweat glistened his face. “What?”

“And a specific way I can get them to apply algebraic equations or some geometry. You’re out there in the wild blue yonder.”

Borke turned back to the graph paper filled with mathematical notations. “Three-step process,” he whispered. “Graphic organizer.”

“I’ll check in with you tomorrow, Borke.” He stood.

Borke scrunched his face at him, a lost little boy next to a fairy tale toadstool.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m... You sure you can’t stay?”

John touched his watch. “Appointment. You going to put that in my box?”

“In your box by start of school tomorrow.”

He reached out and shook Borke’s soft, moist hand.

He walked down the stairs to the second floor wiping his palm on his pant leg, packed his bag in his room, locked up and left. In the parking lot, he pulled out his phone and called Julie.

She answered with, “Hi Davidson.”

“I’m at school. Just met with Borke.” He told her what Borke said: ““It needs to go away, Borke. Who knows who could get hurt.””

“Strange.”

“I’m heading home for a while then I’m going to see what I can find out about Rocco at his favorite hangout.”

“Be careful.”

“I’ve been being careful for too many years. It’s time for me to be un-careful for a while.”

“Okay,” she said.

“You know what?” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I watched Borke go deep into his weird Borkean subterranean world. It made me jealous. That passion.”

“I happen to be recording our conversation, which I’ll play for everyone at the next faculty meeting.”

“I’m off, Iago.” He wanted to invite her, but he sensed she checked the clock.

“Davidson, you going to tell me who Rocco is?”

“I’ll fill you in tomorrow.”

## Chapter Fourteen

He parked in a grocery store's lot across the street from Nines, a bar with a brick facade and windows filled with beer brands scripted in neon. A parking lot for twenty cars sat at the side of the building.

Several guys in leather coats leaned shoulders against the front of the bar smoking. Women with teased hair entered or left in twos and threes and ignored the looks from the men.

He wouldn't go in. He knew he would stick out like a farmboy at a Jazz Club. He wanted a look-see at this guy Rocco, get a sense of who he was, that's it.

John had been a teacher for sixteen years. What could anyone in the system do about his extracurricular activities connected with a student suicide? Maybe a lot, maybe a whole lot.

Several men wearing leather coats, dark pants, and dark shoes entered and exited the building, smoked, stood about in front looking up and down the street.

Those are the acolytes, he said aloud. But where is the high priest?

Other sorts from the blue collar neighborhood sought out the bar--beefy faced guys in blue jean jackets, young women with tattoos walking on pointy high heels, college kids

slumming it.

Did Rocco use the place to hide? Did he think he was invisible here in one of these American bars that could be transplanted to Cleveland or Pittsburgh or Toledo without loss of identity?

He called Rhonda.

They still belonged to each other in a loose-limbed way. He helped raise her daughter, Yvette, now attending UMBC, where Rhonda taught.

Yvette might be it for me in the child department, he thought, which made him unhappy.

“Calling to catch up,” he said.

“Did you try to call Marietta before me. She not around?”

Rhonda knew he rarely spoke to Marietta, his second wife. She blamed Marietta for distracting him from his passions for teaching and writing. Rhonda considered Marietta a hair-do.

Rhonda’s blue collar parents named her Rhonda, which she loved. She told him one time that her colleagues all seemed to have names like Carson or Brynn or Hadley. If I’d never been given the name Rhonda, she told him, I wouldn’t have bought a Harley. I’m serious.

“Just so that my scorecard is right, Marietta’s with a younger man now, correct?” she said.

“Yeah, but he’s not nearly as fun as me.”

“He’s in a coma then? What happened to the poor dear?”

“Hah.”

“Why are you calling again? I told you the other night that I’m right in the middle of

something.”

“I just wanted to check in.”

“This is a booty call, isn’t it?”

“Could be if you play your cards right.”

“Pencil me in for, let me see, three weeks from Thursday. Oh, geez, sorry, that would be Jim’s night. Let’s say you give me a call in a month or two. See if we can work something out.”

He laughed low in his throat. “I was hoping for the kinder, gentler Rhonda tonight.”

“Okay, there’s not really a Jim, but there is a Phillip. The kinder, gentler Rhonda is for him.”

“Phillip?” It really did bite into him that she could live so self-sufficiently, get a man to love her to death for a while when she felt like it, then have that guy, whoever he was, love her as friends when she decided they were no longer a couple. “Do I know Phillip?”

“Maybe. He was a Teach for America guy over in one of those horrible schools on the east side of Baltimore years and years ago. He got his doctorate in social science. He’s written a couple of books on economic policy and its effect on low income people. Great guy, big heart. Divorced. He’s a colleague and we’ve been in a mating dance for a couple of months. Just made it official a few weeks ago.”

“I don’t like him,” said John, trying for jokey. “He sounds like he’s got a dark side that doesn’t quit. Guy like that, nothing but him, him, him. You need needy like that?”

“Thanks for thinking of me, you lovely man. Now, really, I’ve got a head of steam. If my article gets published, I’ll be invited to conferences here and abroad. You’ll have to schedule an appointment to see me years in advance.”

He decided not to get off the phone. He told her more about Latoya, how he suspected she came to him to talk, but somehow couldn't, concocted an excuse about needing makeup work, then committed suicide the next day. She'd written a note saying he would understand.

Rhonda was entranced, as he knew she would be. She came from tough, and let her hear about someone who was taken advantage of.

"Start over, tell me everything that has happened right up to this minute." He told the story.

"Now what," she said when he'd finished.

"I'm sitting here across the street from the bar which Taryn says is Rocco's watering hole."

"Don't confront him. The Albanians are tough hombres."

"I'm a tough hombre."

"Two men step into a boxing ring. One is a Russian-Albanian gangster, the other is a thirty-eight year old social studies teacher. Gangster, social studies teacher. Guess which one I'm putting money on."

"I didn't know there were Russians or Albanians in Baltimore," he said.

"Maybe they're just arriving. The new ethnic chic. Be careful, John. Stick to your reconnaissance mission tonight."

"One last thing. I'm working with a twenty-eight year old teacher these days on an interdisciplinary project. She throws the *I Ching*. Reads the *Tao Te Ching* like I do."

"Is she Chinese?"

"Her father was. Grandfather fled Communist China in the thirties, I guess. Father grew



up in Taiwan. Mother a regular American gal. Julie was born here.”

“I like her authentic roots.”

“She reached over and unbuttoned the top button of my shirt. Said my dorkiness appealed to her. How do I interpret that?”

“Anyway you want to. Keep in mind that sometimes women just like to practice.”

“So I’ll see you later?”

“That was a wonderful come on. Save it for your twenty-eight year old.”

He got off the phone. Three guys with unshaven faces walked out the door and sparked up cigarettes. They formed a circle and talked. Lots of hand gestures. Mid-thirties. One guy wore a severe, black beret. On a cue that John didn’t see, the three of them looked over at him and stared for a deliberate few moments before turning away.

He wished he could get himself to believe that he wasn’t scared. He stayed until after midnight then drove home. No Rocco tonight.

## Chapter Fifteen

He pulled into the nearby Starbucks before work feeling loggy and thick-headed. When he got out of his car, he noticed a guy in a granite colored Cadillac Escalade, driver's side window rolled down, reading a newspaper and sipping on a coffee. He wore one of those leather coats the Russian-Albanians had on. John made a point of looking at the guy for a few beats to see if he could draw his attention. If the guy looked up, John would drive to the nearest police station.

When he came out holding his coffee, he saw that the Escalade had driven off. But going to school, on I-95 south, he thought he saw it four or five cars behind him. He slowed down. Cars eased into the next lane, sped up, and passed. Two drivers gave him fuck-you looks. He maintained 55 m.p.h. and waited for the Escalade to come up. Same darkened windows, same paint color. He looked over.

This time the passenger's window was open. A bleached blond woman drove, tattoo on her upper arm. He made a point of speeding up and driving parallel to her for a mile. She leaned to turn up the radio and didn't look his way. Was she deliberately ignoring him? Was her open

window for show, saying, see, there's no Russian-Albanian thug here?

He peeled off at his exit, went to school, and forgot about it until lunch time. He looked up from his computer. Had he seen the same Escalade in the parking lot of the Giant grocery store where he stopped for milk and cereal at 12:30 a.m. after his reconnaissance mission last night?

Amplifying paranoia? Probably.

He stayed late after school. He would go to the gym at 5:30 because he noticed a good looking woman arrived there around that time. He and she had made eyes at each other. He hadn't approached her yet because, if he were honest with himself, he wanted to meet a woman who was a version of Rhonda, a self-sufficient somebody who wanted him around with enough regularity to keep him happy, yet was allergic to being a couple.

But he didn't want to cut off options, either. A fit woman in spandex is hard to resist, no matter her independence level.

He used Tuesdays and Thursdays to catch up and often stayed till 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. All papers graded and recorded then handed back Fridays and Mondays. The school ran on an A & B day schedule. Over the years, he'd tried different routines: put all papers in a satchel and leave right after the closing bell; arrive when the building supervisor unlocked the front doors and get in as much work done as possible before students arrived; combine working at school and home. He'd settled on the leave-work-at-work option. If he couldn't get it done that day, he'd get to it tomorrow.

He packed his teacher bag. In the parking lot he saw somebody pissing on the side of his car, back to him. Probably some knucklehead kid looking for bragging rights. No frigging

respect.

John barked, "Hey! What the hell are you doing."

Too late he saw the leather coat folded on the hood of the car parked next to his. He heard a footstep twist on the gravel.

He turned as the blond woman with the tattoo on her right arm swung down on him with a bat. The man kicked him in his side. The woman joined in. He looked up at the cutout heads blocking most of the sky. Light blurred.

Hours later he came to in St Agnes Hospital.

"Who called the ambulance?" he asked the nurse.

"Honey, you're finally awake. You feel okay?"

"A dull headache."

"When those painkillers run out, it's going to be more than dull."

Colored coded I.V. needles were stuck in his left wrist. A machine beeped somewhere over his left shoulder.

"How'd I get here?"

"Hon, you were here when my shift started, so I have no idea. Looks like you got the stink beat out of you. Better choose a different crowd. Next time you might be CTD."

"Okay," he managed. It hurt to talk. "I give up."

She leaned over him to take a look at his head. He smelled the tang of her body odor.

"Circling the drain."

"When do I get released?"

"Oh, you're here tonight, hon."

The following morning the physician making rounds told him that it didn't look like he suffered a concussion, but he got hit flush on his head. He might have cracked a rib, hard to tell, he said. He suggested three days off of school.

"I'll take it," John said.

He took a cab home, called school to give them his news, asked that someone make sure his car was okay, then went to bed.

He slept till 2:30 in the afternoon. He called Carl Scholz, a once upon a time colleague and friend who dropped the profession ten years ago and became a lawyer.

## Chapter Sixteen

“That’s everything?” Scholz said.

“That’s it,” John said. He switched phone from right ear to left and stretched out his legs on the coffee table. His body hurt from head to jaw to neck to shoulders to arms to back to lower back to thighs to knees to calves to feet to toes.

“What are you after in all of this? What’s in it for you?” Scholz said.

“I want to do the right thing by a student, a person, who’s being forgotten.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll nominated you for sainthood. What else? Why are you doing this?”

“You sound like my ex-wife.”

“Maybe you should have listened to her instead of opting for divorce.”

“We taking the gloves off or are you being funny in your usual non-funny, heavy handed way?”

“I’m German, John. The only thing funny to me is the way French people act.”

“Okay, what’s in it for me. Carl, I have become a mediocrity. I don’t stand for anything. I’m an early middle aged guy who has put it on cruise control. I didn’t want this, Carl. It sought

me out. It's my karma."

"Karma," he growled. "Der ist Unsinn."

"You say what you want. I'm on to something that's rotten to its core. I'm not letting it go."

"Why did you call me?"

John imagined Carl in his well-ordered, cherry wood office, pointing his finger, his thinning, tousled blond hair over his forehead.

"What do I need to be careful about? What's on my flank that I don't see?"

"You better not step on the police's toes." He heard Carl breathing. "And you better not enlist any children in your escapade. School systems love to make teachers sacrificial lambs. It gives them a belief that they're on the side of angels."

"Other than that?"

"Nobody can stop an American citizen from driving around playing secret agent, all right? But whoever has this thing rigged isn't stupid...or a nice person. You have stepped onto someone's hunting ground. I suggest that you write down everything you do and entrust your notes to a confidante, in case you get into serious trouble and need someone to know precisely what has happened. In addition, notes will help if there should be a post-mortem on your activities."

"That's good advice. Gloomy, but good."

"You still haven't answered the question about why you're doing this."

"I believe I did."

"I know."

He promised Carl that he would call him soon.

He would take his suggestion to write down everything. Should he share his notes with Julie by way of a shared Google docs? That would be easy. He wanted to it to be out of eyesight of anyone in administration, so Ms. Tremont was out.

Carl hit a nerve. He didn't want to admit to Carl what lay behind this Latoya business, but he knew. Like so often in his life he saw a pulsing red light that marked a spring night, senior year, at cabin outside of Elkton in Cecil County. He drove up there with three friends from school. Word got out that somebody was throwing a party at her parents' vacation spot out in the woods an hour's drive outside of Baltimore City.

Cars clogged both sides of the dirt road leading to the house. The closest they could park was a quarter mile away. When the cars doors thudded shut, they stepped into humid air and smells of night woods. One of them made a crack about an axe murderer coming up at them from their blind side. John looked up at stars peeking through the canopy of leaves swaying in the breeze.

A hundred or more people filled the lighted house or stood in groups out in front. Three kegs of beer sat in ice tubs near the porch steps.

How he wished later he had listened to Stephen when he said, "This is out of control. Let's turn around and get the hell out of here."

He looked up and saw people sitting on the roof and pointed them out to his friends. They laughed. Every light in the house was on.

Bauman, the dorm's hot dog eating champ, said, "I'm getting drunk tonight. I don't know about you boys. And if God loves me, I'll get laid."



They found a stack of cups on the porch, and poured themselves beer, then walked out back. Two guys played guitars. A girl sang. They stood and watched for a few minutes. Bauman and Joe said it was too mellow for them and went inside through the back door to the circus of moving bodies and laughing silhouettes in the window.

He and Stephen sat on the grass. Drunk voices and sounds of people splashing in the water came from their left. A boy pushing a girl in a wheelbarrow ran by. Stephen pointed his chin at three drunk kids splayed near the barn across the yard.

“This is out of control,” said Stephen. “I had no idea.” His round glasses reflected lights shining from the interior of the house. “Who’s got the car keys?”

“Bauman does,” John said. “I’ll get them from him when I see him.”

“Man, I’m staying back here. But later on, if you can’t find me, I’ll be up sitting on the car.”

“Let’s have a few beers and score some fun. I feel like I’ve been in a pressure cooker. You ever think about dropping out of school?” he asked.

“No.”

Stephen nodded toward six or seven people who sat in lawn chairs on the patio lighted up by a security light above the back door. John saw them, drinking, flipping birds at each other. The boys wore bib overalls without shirts. The girls had teased up hair and dark eye makeup. One of them said, “You’re an asshole, Jeff. Let me spell that for you. Capital A-s-s--“ They laughed. Somebody joined them with a handful of beers in cups.

He and Stephen turned to the splatting sound of Harleys coming from their right. Two bearded guys wearing black bandanas and sleeveless leather coats rolled into the back yard and

revved the engines and the locals on the patio raised their cups and yelled. The motorcycle guys got people to jump out of the way. The guitar players stopped. The girl crossed her arms and stood with hip high.

One rider cut his engine and kicked down the kickstand and somebody on the patio handed him a beer. The other guy revved his engine and drove around the perimeter of the backyard, really a field, scattering people, getting them to run toward the center or dash into the house.

When Stephen heard one of the patio locals boom out, "Fuck y'all you motherfuckers!" referring to God knew what, he said to John, "Get the keys. We need to leave. If Bauman and Joe don't come, tell them to call and we'll pick them up later."

"It took us an hour to get out here."

"We can go hang out at that truckstop diner."

"Let's just chill out here for--"

"John, are you stupid? Something bad is going to happen."

He clutched John's arm. John looked into the black disks of his pupils and saw raw, isolating fear. In the past three months, Stephen had broken up with his girlfriend, buried his mother, and found out his brother had AIDS.

"Okay, Stephen, you're probably right. But you owe me one."

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Jesus H. Christ."

John glanced over at the locals as he climbed the back porch stairs. He looked into the yard where dozens of people clustered holding beers. He idly looked over at the barn with a dim light burning inside. Couples walked toward it.

Joe had managed to score a spot on the couch in a house filled with people. Music blared. Laughter. Whoops. People sat on the staircase. The noise excluded talk other than yelling.

Joe didn't know where Bauman was. "We're leaving," shouted Stephen, miming a man driving a car. Joe shrugged. John told them both to stay there in the front room. Stephen stood behind the couch with an empty beer cup in his hand, a prop to ward off evil spirits.

John managed to squeeze past people populating the stairs. As he got to the second floor, the bathroom door opened. A guy bent at the waist vomited into the bathtub. The floor was wet with water or urine.

John looked into the four bedrooms. No Bauman. He wasn't in the dining room or the kitchen or the basement. John walked through the front and side yards. He checked back with Stephen and Joe who remained in the front room.

"You see him?" he shouted at them. They held up hands.

"Shit!" he said. "I'll be back."

John walked into the backfield and drifted among the dozens of people. He walked down to the water's edge beneath overhanging trees.

He went toward the barn.

Around the front, hidden from view of the house, was a large opening. Doors had been slid back. Lights high in the rafters created a dim bleakness. An ancient tractor sat in the middle of the cement floor. Two empty stalls were to the left. A ladder led up high to a loft. Girls and boys sat at various spaces on a wood bench circumnavigating the barn. Couples had climbed atop deep shelves built into the sides. He saw Bauman sitting with legs splayed and chin resting on chest about halfway down the long bench.

One of the locals with a large Adam's apple and dark hair in his eyes said, "Don't hold his liquor well at all, does he?"

"I guess not," said John.

"You want a taste of this here," he said. He shook an unlabelled bottle of clear liquid and gave John a smile.

"No thanks," he said. "I'm the champion of can't hold his liquor."

"Shit, I thought you college kids come up here to party."

"We did. I'm realizing I don't have much talent for it."

John managed to get Bauman to stand up and start walking. He put Bauman's arm around his neck and walked his fellow warrior around to the back of the barn and pointed him to the house.

"Whew," Bauman said. "Let me sit down a minute." He plopped down in the grass like a little kid. John looked through a small, mud filmed window of barn to the dim forms milling about. He took a step back, startled. Right beneath the window two locals in the bib overalls knelt next to a girl without pants. One boy held her arms above her head with one hand, the other hand covered her mouth. John saw the leering grin of the young man with the Adam's apple approach and kneel down with the others. The girl kicked as one boy slipped from between her legs while the next in line unzipped his trousers.

John looked at Bauman who had tipped over and lay in the grass on his side. Fear rattled through him. He wished to God he hadn't seen what he did.

His hands shook. He went around to the front of the barn. His breath shallowed. He didn't know if he could speak. He stepped inside. The barn seemed more crowded. He walked

toward the back. Two boys in bib overalls blocked his way.

“Where you going, little fella?” one of them said.

“I got to get that girl back there,” John said. His throat had constricted.

The other boy stepped into his space. He chewed tobacco. His mouth was a wet black hole. He touched John gently on his chest with his right hand to block him. With his left he smacked him so hard John left his feet.

“None of this up in here is your business, boy. Now get the fuck out of here before we take you back in there.”

They laughed. John found his feet then went around to haul Bauman up from the grass.

When he corralled Stephen and Joe, he stopped in the front yard and told them what he'd seen. To his undying shame, he allowed Stephen to convince him that it was none of their business. He didn't call the cops. He didn't go back to the barn with Stephen and Joe and raise hell. He didn't storm back there by himself. He didn't say a thing the following week when news spread around campus that a girl got raped at the party. He had done nothing to help her while she was scared out of her wits, probably wondering if she were going to be killed. He'd been too afraid.

This time, Carl Scholz, he thought, he wouldn't be scared off.

## Chapter Seventeen

He'd taken the recommended three days off. When he walked, still limping, across the school's parking lot an hour before the bell, he saw Conklin sitting by himself on a front bench at the half-circle driveway where students got dropped off by yellow buses.

His body ached.

Conklin read the Baltimore Sun. He sat right leg over left knee and peered down at the folded paper through the bottoms of his glasses. He'd perched his cowboy hat, with a small, red and white feather in the hat band, back on the crown of his head.

Conklin looked up and his face hardened. He cocked his head back in a theatrical gesture and said, "Well Dick Tracy done got his ass kicked." He laughed. "Next time don't interrupt a man when he's pissing."

Conklin's booted foot tapped the air. He shook head.

"You ready to get back to teaching again," said Conklin. "One of the reasons we pay taxes is to provide the police with a salary. Why don't you give them a call next time?"

He defended Conklin when his fellow teachers complained about him. The school was in

disarray when he came seven years ago. The guy before him used to take off for days at a time while riding out his last five years before retiring. When on site, he stayed in his office and let the assistant principals and department chairs run the school. Fiefdoms developed. Teachers called in sick. Students fought in the hallways. Conklin arrived on the scene and played New Sheriff, no, New Sachem in Town. He made it unpleasant enough that eight malcontent teachers transferred out after his first year.

He stopped. Conklin's head had the rounded planes of a small boulder.

"You walk around back to get your car and see somebody taking a piss on it. You stop and call the police?" John said.

"I don't get my ass kicked."

"We all get our ass kicked once in a while, Mr. Conklin."

"If that's what you got to tell yourself," he said. "Mr. Davidson, I don't feel like getting into a pissing contest, no pun intended. You and I have worked well together, and there's no reason we're at odds. I think you're taking this suicide business too personally. We're going to differ there, I can tell. But you need to keep the school system out of it."

John sat down. He liked the man, though as he was beginning to believe, these guys charged with carrying out orders from headquarters served a master only satisfied by data driven solutions. That way of doing business didn't seem to belong in human, unmeasurable world of creativity and learning, but that was another battle altogether.

"Davidson, the Chamber of Commerce here in Catonsville is going to give me and three other principals a good citizen award. I want to invite you to be at my table. I should have contacted you earlier, but you were out nursing your wounds and the whole business slipped my

mind.”

“What time?”

“There’s meet-and-greet at 4:30, but you don’t have to be there till 5:00. It’ll go till about 6:30. They know they’re dealing with school people and we get up early. I’ve invited Borke, too. You’re my go-tos. I want you to know that.”

“I’m honored,” he said.

“We do good work,” Conklin said. “Don’t you forget it.”

“We do,” John said.

Ms. Wentles, the Reading Specialist, pulled into the lot in her late model Mercedes Benz. They both watched as she parked, got out, retrieved bag from the back and made her way down the walkway to the front door.

Conklin said to him, “I need a minute with her. Rumor has it she’s been yelling at students. Can’t have that.”

“Hi Dennis,” she said to Conklin.

Both of them waited for John to leave so that they could talk, which he did.

He stopped by Julie Wang’s room. She arrived at school an hour or more before the bell every day. “Take care of things while they are not yet at hand./Manage the flow of things while they are not yet in disarray,” she’d quoted from the *Tao Te Ching*. Live like the Sage, she told him.

She said, “John!” and stepped from her triangle work desk to give him a hug. He smelled her hair and felt the strength of her arms. Bike hard.



“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” he said.

“Are you all right?” They had spoken the second day he was out.

“I’m sore. But I’m back in the ring.”

“Good.”

“Conklin invited me to his Chamber of Commerce dinner tonight.”

“Well, well,” she said.

“We’ll chat later on,” he said. “I’ve got to see what shape the sub left my room in.”

Althena Tremont made it a point to stop by his room before students arrived and watched as he went from computer to computer jiggling the mice to make sure the machines were powered up.

“You’re walking crooked,” she said. “You kicked up something that decided to kick back.” She stood at the doorway and sipped her tea. “‘Woe for the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time.’ You made the devil all upset John Davidson. What are you going to do about it?”

“I think you sometimes make up those Bible quotes.”

“Hah,” she said.

He stopped near a window.

“You know what I’m deciding as I see you?” he said. “Let’s go up to the group home together. Talk with Taryn. See what we can come up with.”

“We’ll be like driving Ms. Daisy except there will be a white man who’s the chauffeur.”

“I’d like to run up there today after school. Then I’ll go to Conklin’s Chamber of

Commerce dinner.”

“Well, well, well. You, Borke, a couple of the department chairs and me. One big happy family.”

While driving, he glanced over. In her right hand she held a string of dark wood prayer beads, fingering them one by one.

He drove through the gates of the Center for Wayward Children. Blown plastic bags and fast food wrappers stuck to the fencing. A bus stop trash can lay tipped over near the roadway.

He tried to dodge the potholes leading up to the administration building.

“I don’t have a good feeling about any of this, Mr. Davidson. There’s an unclean spirit afoot.”

He pointed. “That’s the back gate I was telling you about.”

The receptionist sat inside a horseshoe shaped counter as if a troll shoulder deep in a well. She ignored them with gum chewing casualness.

“I’d like to see Ms. Morton,” said John.

“You have an appointment?” she said without looking at them.

Ms. Tremont rapped her knuckles on the wood and said, “Ms. Perez.”

The woman looked up. Ms. Tremont had seen her name on the nameplate.

“We didn’t come in here to be ignored,” said Ms. Tremont.

Ms. Perez set her jaw. A dark brown birthmark covered her lower cheek near her left ear.

“I don’t believe I can help you,” she said and went back to her papers.

“I’m a friend of--” he began.

“May I help you?”

A middle aged woman not quite five-feet tall came down the stairs from the second floor.

At the landing, she said, “We’re under quite a bit of stress at the moment. Two of our boys have decided to run off, and we’ve had to notify the police. The guardians of the boys aren’t happy with us nor are my bosses. Let’s go up upstairs to my office.” She projected a halo of calm.

John heard Ms. Perez snort a mocking little laugh while Ms. Tremont grabbed the railing and looked up the flight of stairs as if initiating an assault on Mt. Everest.

In her office, the woman sat behind her desk and they took chairs.

“It looks like you got off on the wrong foot downstairs. I’m Ms. Kaufer, the Executive Director of the Association of Mid-Atlantic Group Homes. My main office is here, but I travel to various sites around Maryland, to our two homes in Pennsylvania, and now three brand new sites in Delaware and Virginia.”

Davidson and Ms. Tremont introduced themselves.

It occurred to him that executive directors were born not made. How could there be such excruciating coordination among beiges and browns if not for DNA signalling ?

“Now, you have come over to visit us. How may I help you?”

He said he wanted to see Taryn.

“May I ask what this is in reference to?”

“Latoya Singleton committed suicide last week and I’m following up on a conversation I had with her.”

She leaned forward. "One of the worst days of my professional life, Mr. Davidson." She looked to the windows to her right, from which one could see the gravel road and the locked back gate. "You know, we've had the police out here."

"Yes, so Taryn told me," he said. "I tell you, though, Ms. Kaufer, I can't just let it go at that. You know, a student commits suicide, everyone feels awful, then slowly we all get back to business."

"Mr. Davidson, you are a wonderfully kind and compassionate man. If I can assist you in any way, do not hesitate to call. Let me give you both one of my cards." She opened her desk drawer and had to get up and walk around to hand them, being too short to reach across the desktop. He had never registered the group home's logo, a flat back hieroglyph image of a boy and a girl hand in hand against a bright disk of yellow.

As he tipped to the side to pull out his wallet, he heard, "Ms. Morton must have come in in the middle of the night. Well, maybe sometime late yesterday afternoon, now that I think of it. I was at another property. She left this." Ms. Kaufer took a sheet of paper from her in box and pushed it toward him.

He and Ms. Tremont read it together. It was standard issue: Thanks for the opportunity. It has been a great pleasure to work with some of society's neglected and feel like I made a contribution. Etc. A single paragraph then sign off.

"Did she leave a forwarding address?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"She did not," she said.

"She didn't mention where she was going? Nothing?"

"Just that," Ms. Kaufer said nodding at the letter.

He handed it back to her.

“Her departure is one of the reasons we’re scrambling a little bit here. She did good work. She spoke of a son. Wildly protective of him. She had a private high school in mind, once he came of age. Of course, that’s years down the road.”

“I didn’t know,” he said.

“Well,” Ms. Kaufer said, placing flats of hands atop desk, raising eyebrows and giving them a grand smile, “I must finish up a number of things before calling it a day.”

She came around to walk them toward her office door.

At the top of the stairs, he turned and said to her, “Did you know Latoya?”

“I made it a point to sit with all of my children twice a month.”

“But did you know her? Did she ever say anything to you? Did she come to you?” He knew he sounded desperate.

She allowed herself an exhale and her small, middle aged body seemed to sag. “No, she did not come to me. How I wish she had.”

“Thank you, Ms. Kaufer, I hope I can call on you again if anything comes up.”

“Please, please do,” she said.

The young woman at the front desk ignored them.

He opened the car door for Ms. Tremont, got in himself, then drove them around back so she could see the bungalows out of sight from the front entranceway. He pointed out that the gate blocked what at first seemed like an infrequently used service road. But it was not choked with weeds and one could see where tire tracks dusted the asphalt on the other side once the cars left the grounds.

She took it all in. “Did you notice that woman’s eyes. She watched us like a cat bunched up ready to pounce. Let’s get out of this unholy place.”

He drove. She’d placed her large, hard sided purse on her lap, the loop handles like arches.

“She’s sure a friendly sort,” said John, wanting to get Ms. Tremont going.

“‘For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.’ John Davidson, you’re in something up to your kneecaps.”

“I found her charming.”

“Nothing but a sin of omission. A sin of omission. You know what’s being omitted?”

“What’s that?”

“Your good sense.”

He took backstreets the few miles to their school instead of jumping on the freeway. He wanted to listen to Althena and her bible quotes.

She could tell he dawdled. “Get me back to my car. I’ve got to get home and cook for the mister before sitting at a table listening to them go on about our principal.”

“I think we need to try and find out where Taryn and her son moved to. Which I suspect is Atlanta, Georgia.”

Althena turned her body toward him as he swung into the parking lot. She bunched her mouth up until he parked. “Now, where did you get that tidbit of information, Mr. Davidson?”

“She and I have talked.”

“And?”

“She was scared. She talked about family in Georgia.”

“Were you going to disclose that information to me?”

“I was.”

“When?”

“When I was ready to make a full confession.”

“Let’s hear it.”

He looked through the windshield a moment.

“Taryn and I have some history.”

“Her last name again?”

“Morton. She went to our school for about a half year before being placed back in her home school.”

She whispered to herself, “Taryn Morton. That’s an unusual name. Taryn Morton. I can’t say I remember her.” She touched her finger to her lips. “When was that?”

“Ten, eleven years ago.”

“When I came aboard.”

He opened the door to let fresh air in the car. Althena didn’t move. She’d picked up a wavering in his voice.

“I’m waiting,” she said.

“She was one of my senior students, far beyond her years.”

“Yes,” she said.

“I was between wives. She and I had a fling.” He cleared his throat and tapped on the steering wheel. “Not my finest hour.”

“You had a fling. ‘I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the

flesh, which wage war against your soul.’ That’s from the book of Peter, in case you’re interested. Well, now, Mr. Davidson, it all gets sort of unruly for us, doesn’t it. Any more secrets you’d like to share before I lend you my support?”

“I think that’s it. I’ll keep you posted in case something else comes up.”

“This youngster Latoya wasn’t bearing your child by any chance.”

“I deserved that. It’s my mission to find Taryn. I need to figure out where this Russian-Albanian guy is vulnerable. I stumbled onto a barrell of rot, and I’m going to find out how to clean it out. I can tell you one thing. We won’t get much by going at Ms. Kaufer head on.”

“I’ve heard enough for the time being. You do realize I don’t know anything about a Russian-Albanian. Come around and open this door for me. I got a husband to cook for and an awards ceremony to go to.”

He leaned against his car while she walked stiff-back with purse handle hooked in the crook of her left arm. She drove off, eyes forward, working her mouth.

Sitting at the awards ceremony drinking coffee and forking into his yellow cake, he listened to the Chamber of Commerce officers speak about Conklin. Pillar of the community. Principal of a school for troubled students. Leader in innovative educational programs. He thought he might get a wink from Conklin as the encomiums were slathered on. Instead, Conklin listened with chin raised like an old time Indian Chief waiting to be photographed.

John texted Julie. *you know yr principal is ze man*

She texted back. *ever doubted it?*

The district superintendent was at Conklin’s table, which meant that Conklin had worked



mighty mojo to get him there.

At the end of the dinner, John helped Ms. Tremont to her car.

“Now why was the district supe there?” she asked. “That surprised me a little bit.”

“Conklin’s determined to get out from under the suicide cloud and having the D.S. there meant Conklin’s name gets burnished up in headquarters.”

Her dark eyes clear and still and unblinking behind thick glasses swam up at him. “I believe you're right,” she said.

## Chapter Eighteen

He'd drunk too much coffee at the awards ceremony. He tried falling asleep on the front room couch, a tactic he often used to outflank insomnia, but it didn't work.

He brought his laptop down from upstairs and searched *Taryn Morton*. He got a slew of hits. One Taryn Morton lived in South Africa and practiced a form of social connecting she learned from animals in Central America.

He texted Julie. *show me how to throw the i ching.*

*u up?*

*Yes*

She called.

"Come in tomorrow early," she said, "and we'll do it."

"Like to told you, I learned about it a long time ago. Once in a while I pick it up. I'm ready to be a devotee."

"I've got a copy of Minford's translation, so we'll use that. Go buy it for yourself. It's deep, my brother. Formulate your question in a way that you would for a wise counselor. The

idea is you're asking for some understanding. The *I Ching* brings to consciousness unseen layers."

"How about something like, *What should I do about Latoya's suicide?*"

"Maybe. Until you discover your own special coins, pick out three of similar size. Quarters or nickels or whatever. I use three wheat-back pennies. I saw them on my father's dresser and I asked him for them."

"I can tell you're drawing. What is it?"

"Conklin riding a horse bareback with spear in hand."

"Come to find out Taryn Morton has flown the coup."

"Taryn Morton?"

"She's was the Director of Operations for the Center for Wayward Children. I knew her way back when. Latoya wrote me a note telling me to talk to her which another student Shantay gave to me the day after the suicide."

"Are you obsessing over this?"

"Yes. I might even be willing to sacrifice my job if it comes down to it."

"What? Why?"

"You'll find out. A lawyer friend told me to keep a journal. I want you to read everything. I'll share a Google doc file with you in case something happens to me."

"John, what the hell."

He could tell she stopped drawing.

"I think I got beat up because Taryn Morton tipped off someone."

"You do realize I don't know what you're talking about."

“I’ll write it all down by morning. You read it and we’ll check in then you see if you want to throw the *I Ching* coins with me. I’m trying to hunt down Taryn Morton in the meantime.”

He got her home email address, wrote down everything that happened up to the present, then shared his Google document.

He searched for Morton in the Atlanta, Georgia area and came up with numerous hits. Maybe he could shake out a few more morsels of information from the Executive Director.

He collapsed in bed with his clothes on and dreamt of Latoya Singleton. He knocked on hotel room doors convinced she occupied one of the rooms. He wanted to shout her name, but felt inhibited. He didn’t want to disturb anyone. He heard the sound of a door opening behind him. She stuck her head out. He turned and ran toward her. A man followed her in before he could get there. He knocked on the closed door, but wondered if it was the right one. He heard male grunts but silence from Latoya.

## Chapter Nineteen

She stretched out her legs and drew on her ever-present sketchpad. She turned to look when he came in.

She'd been drawing a picture of him, question mark showing in a thought bubble, *I Ching* in front of him.

He took a seat next to hers.

"Write down your question here." She tapped a sheet of notebook paper clipped in a clipboard.

"Before I do that, did you read what I wrote?"

"I did. I'm still trying to get a handle on it. In the meantime, your question."

*What should I do about Latoya's suicide?*

"It's almost right," she said.

He looked about the room. She had dragged the computer cart in from the locked closet already this morning. Lots of student work hung on bulletin boards. She kept neat work stations.

*What are the forces operating behind Latoya's suicide?* he wrote.

“Okay,” she said.

He threw 8, 7, 8, 8, 7, 8. The Abyss.

“Oh, boy,” she said. She lay the book flat, put her hand to her forehead to brush back her hair, and began to read. “Before I start,” she interrupted herself, “you should know that the Chinese were inland people. Water represented danger to them. The hexagram is made up of water over water, so that’s double danger.”

She began reading. Beneath the headings Judgment and On the Image of the Hexagram were paragraphs of information. He listened.

“Read that last line again,” he said.

“”This Hexagram, formed by doubling the Trigram of the same name, deals with Danger, how Danger is to be encountered, its effect on the Heart-and-Mind...’ The danger is real, John. Two thugs beat the hell out of you.”

She read to herself for a minute. He took the book from her hands.

““The message is simple: Persevere. Practice Good Faith...Good Faith is the Heart-and-Mind of the Tao.””

“I always check the information on each line,” she said. “You didn’t throw any sixes or nines which change lines from yin to yang or yang to yin, but I check the lines anyway. Read this one.” She pointed.

““The Pit of the Abyss is entered. Calamity.””

He read more aloud then said, “Listen to the commentary: ‘This thicket of thorns, these cords, writes Magister Liu, are the bad habits of Heart-and-Mind...A Leader who has misjudged his direction, writes Professor Mun, now has to pay the price. He has fallen into a deep Pit.’

That's me," he said. "I fell into a deep pit, for sure, with my teaching."

"Don't joke about any of this," she said.

"I'm not. Getting beat up scared me."

"What's the next step?"

"A lot of pieces are missing. I need some ammunition before I talk to Rocco."

"Which means?"

"I need to hunt down Taryn. I think she's the key to this thing.

Otherwise, I'm left with trying to pry something out of Kaufer over at the group home, which is fruitless. I think she knows too many people. I'm trying to see what happened, and it's like looking through a downpour. There's no shape there."

"The perilous, uninterrupted torrent of Water can be navigated through the Abyss."

"I need somebody to bounce ideas off of. Ms. Tremont is a good sounding board, too, but she has to be careful."

Julie put her hand to his forearm. "I will," she said. "But you and me. One step, then one step, then one step."

"Got it," he said.

At his lunch break he called over to the group home. He asked for Taryn's home address.

"You call earlier, officer?"

"I did, Ms. Perez," he lied.

She gave it to him. "Write me an email next time," she said. "Phone calls hassle me out

to no end.” She hung up.

He again called Taryn’s cell phone, but as had happened numerous times, she didn’t pick up. He left yet another message.

Right after school, he admonished himself that he needed to spend more time planning. His students should not have to suffer because he’d become obsessed.

Address in hand, he drove to Carroll County. He wanted to visit her former neighborhood, stand in front of her house, see if could scare up something.

He drove down Knighthood Lane. Variations on units with two stories, two car garages, patch of front yard, lamps at the base of the driveway, mailboxes next to the curb. The face of “Feel Right at Home” in Carroll County, as the sign on the two lane highway proclaimed.

He parked. Lawnmower noise pulsed in and out through the air. High-pitched whine of weed wackers. He walked across the stiff grass and glanced in first floor rooms. She’d left in a rush. Inside large pieces of furniture remained--a couch, two stuffed chairs, a dining room table, even some pictures and tchotchkes. He went back to the front sidewalk.

A neighbor wearing sneakers and a kimono as cover to a square body charged down the sidewalk. A small, hairy dog with a white coat and a face of black fur jumped and barked at her side.

“You know her?” she asked pointing to the house.

“Yes, I came out here wondering about her. I’ve been leaving messages. You wouldn’t happen to have a forwarding address, would you?”

“She and her son, I thought of them as the ideal clients. But look at the mess they left me. What am I supposed to do with all that furniture and crap. You tell me that.” She pulled out a



pack of cigarettes, stuck one in her mouth unlit, inhaled, then play-acted blowing out smoke. She held it up. "I'm trying to quit. I pay a therapist to tell me to stay close to my addictions."

"Forwarding address?"

"You the police?"

"No. A friend."

"If you're the police, I'm suing your ass for distributing false information by saying you're not the police."

She cocked her head, took another drag on the unlit cigarette, then popped it back into the wrinkled pack.

She pulled out an iPhone from other, nether regions of her kimono. "Here."

He tapped it into his phone.

"You got to know them?"

"I'm her landlady. I was looking to sell, but right when the market tanked, she came along. We worked out a deal. She burned me. Just up and left."

"Sorry about the furniture. Maybe you should just go ahead and sell it."

"Really, that's going to solve my problems, mister?"

"One of them. The others are up to you."

She lit the cigarette with a man's brushed-silver Zippo lighter, snapped the lid shut with a thumb flick.

"You look like a nice man," she said. "Can the sarcasm. The other one, the one who came out here just yesterday, had more manners, but a little secret, okay? He scared me. His tag-along was a mean little prick, too, I could tell."

“You give him her forwarding address?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“What’d they look like?”

She described what sounded like Rocco and the guy who bonked him on his head in the school parking lot.

“They both wore black leather coats,” she added. “Like they were thugs off a movie set.”

John decided he definitely needed to take a trip to Atlanta, Georgia.

## Chapter Twenty

Sitting in his car, after talking with the landlady, he called Ms. Tremont.

“Atlanta, Georgia,” she repeated.

“I’ve got to get up close and personal with Taryn. She’s blowing me off. I’ll take tomorrow off then be back Sunday if I’m lucky, Monday if I’m not. Tomorrow’s Friday, so that kind of works for me.”

“So you’re going inter-state with this thing here.”

“I’m thinking about driving.”

“Ten hours down, ten hours back. That make sense to you? Take a durn plane.”

“It’ll be expensive.”

“Take the plane. Let me tell you something from inside the front office. I thought Conklin’d be all fluffed up on himself seeing how he got that award for being outstanding in everything he does, but he was snorting and kicking up dirt. I think they wanted him to do something different after that child committed suicide.”

“Meaning?” He watched three freshly scrubbed suburban kids ride bicycles past his car.

He wondered what it would be like teaching children like that. They projected a sense that they came from stable homes and did their homework. No doubt they would listen to him if he asked them to stop talking in class. Of course those types grew up and did insider trading deals.

“He should have hit the counseling heavier. It made the system look bad that that poor girl commits suicide then the school gets back to business. And I’ll tell you another thing,” she said.

“I know you will.”

“You jumped out ahead of him with that collection thing. The Area Supe asked him about it on the phone this morning. The Supe wanted more fanfare. You know, make the family feel like the school had their interests in their heart.”

“Okay.”

“So, talking about galavanting all over the place looking for Taryn who’s picked up and gone, somebody connected to the suicide of a girl, the whole business making Conklin look like he didn’t take care of business? None of it favors you.”

“I’ll call in sick tomorrow, get down there and get back to school fresh as a...”

She waited a moment. “As a what?”

“I’ve got to go down there and discover a Southernism before I can finish that sentence.”

“You do that. But right now, you sound like you don’t have sense enough to pound sand in a rathole. Like that you mean?”

He called in sick, booked a Southwest flight for early afternoon from BWI to Hartsfield-Jackson, Atlanta’s airport, then rented a car and a hotel for two nights. The whole

package came to about \$900.00, which irritated him.

He knew he wouldn't have time to bask in the delights of the Empire of the South, The Big Peach, Hotlanta. But stepping outside with his bag after landing, he did experience one thing: the humidity. The weight of early spring weather sat on him like an elephant. He followed the voice of GPS for fifteen or twenty miles to Decatur.

No one answered when he knocked on the front door.

He'd considered flying down Saturday then returning Sunday, but he wanted to build in a day in case she managed to dodge him. Should he call and leave a message he was down here?

He drove around and stopped off in a corner restaurant that served food for college kids. He got a burrito to go and a bottled water then went back to her leafy neighborhood and sat in his car and ate.

After a while, he leaned back and fell asleep. He woke when a barking dog jumped up and two-pawed the widow. A fit looking seventy year old smiled with grayed teeth behind a British officer mustache.

John got out after the man pulled off the dog with a bright yellow leash.

"Can I help you with something, son?" he said, smiling, with mean, depthless, milky-blue eyes.

"No, you can't. How about keeping your dog off my car."

"Not your car, son. That's a rental. Up and down this block here, we don't like people lingering about." He played out the yellow leash and the dog stepped forward, seeming to grin, holding John in his sad, baleful, brown-eyed gaze.

For a moment John measured the smiling, nosy neighbor, and without understanding his

rage he thought about how the world presented a never ending march of people and events that meant to disrupt, intrude, and assault. How one must forever fight to maintain one's circle, about how that young, mentorless Latoya had predators moving her from home to group home to market place, her very body the goods and services for sale, without regard for her physical or emotional well being, how instead of a some lioness protecting her, she, in the jungle of supposed civilized life, became the commodity bought and sold and bought and sold again. The first time, did she mistakenly reach out her hand to be guided, an act of instinctive trust, to the man who took her behind closed doors, who demanded she strip off her clothing, her panties, who then made her lie down and lift her soft knees so he could mount, push his cock into her, the child who now understood what her world could do to her.

John opened his door and reached into the side of his backpack and got out the Leatherman tool and opened up the knife and clicked the tool locked.

“You let that dog come up on me, Mister, and I will slice its throat open. You just keep walking him along with that sissy yellow dog leash and mind your own goddamn business.”

“I'm retired military,” he said. “And you're not from around here, son.”

“You were some desk jockey douche-bag, and I'm starting to appreciate my good fortune about not being your son.”

He sniffed and said, “Come on, General.”

What he right this minute did appreciate was working with those crazy kids he'd been teaching sixteen years. Had he taught in some suburban, middle class wonderland, he would never have learned how to go ghetto on the likes of some nosy, self-appointed neighborhood mayor.

Fifteen minutes later, an elderly couple rolled into the driveway of the house he'd been watching.

He stayed back until they climbed out of the car. He joined them on their walkway. The elderly man wearing a worn, dark suit had the house key in his hand.

He sensed the reserve from which they eyed the unfamiliar white man now so casually stepping onto their property.

"Sir, ma'am," he said. His wished he had a hat so he could tip it in a show of respect. "I'm here to see Taryn Morton. I was given this address from her landlord in Carroll County, Maryland."

"Randolph, none of this is my business," the woman said. She took the key from him and unlocked the door and went inside.

"Sir, I'm not here to cause any disruption. I would like to speak with her."

The man had the dry, leathery skin of an old football. He scanned John's face without disclosing a trace of what conclusions he formed.

He asked John who he was and where he came from. They conversed a while.

"She's living in a motel off of 278." He gave John the name. "I don't want any trouble for her. I'm her uncle and I'll help her along." He shook his head. "But she can't stay here, no sir."

"Thank you," he said.

"I don't want any trouble. I want shut of this business, whatever it is that's got her."

John knocked on the door of room 217. He saw harsh, flickering TV lights against the back wall, and a few beats after his knock the TV sounds stopped.

“I know you’re in there,” he said. “I’ll call the manager.”

She opened the door. Before stepping out, she turned to her child and said, “Mommy’s going to be right outside a minute. Turn the TV back on.”

She pulled the door shut behind her. She squinted her dark eyes.

“You didn’t answer my calls.”

“I’m done with you. I’m finished with Baltimore, with that whole mess.”

“That girl Latoya isn’t going to die in vain. It’s one thing I can do.”

“You fucked me, John, then told me I was the sweetest thing you ever saw. I should have turned you in.”

“You told me it was over, remember?”

“I needed to survive. Having a teacher take me to hotel rooms and fucking me wasn’t working.” She grabbed her hair and closed her eyes. “Ooh, I need this shit to stop. I am raising a son.”

“I need to stand up.”

“He’s too big, John. You don’t understand. He knows things.”

“Who allowed it to happen with the girls at the group home? There’s got to be a guy somewhere up the totem pole who I can squeeze. I need to get to Rocco.”

“I’m scared, John. I have a child. I’m down here trying to find a job and they ask for references. I need to get myself settled here.”

“Give me a name.”



He slipped a pen from his pocket and clicked it. She stepped inside to retrieve a pad of motel note paper. She wrote down two names. He looked at them. One of them was the reading specialist, Ms. Wentles. The other was Ms. Kaufer, the Executive Director of the group homes.

“Jesus, how does the reading specialist fit in?”

“She scouted for us. She had access to kids from five schools.”

“My God.”

“You hurt me, John, and now you have to look after me. You have to think of me and my son and my diabetic father. You have got to promise me I won’t be hurt.”

“I’m going to try.”

“That’s not good enough. You have to do it.”

“You allowed underage girls... You pimped for those girls, Taryn. You’re in it.”

“Protect me, John. You didn’t before. You have to now.”

“How do I get to Rocco?”

She closed her eyes. “I told you, go to that bar.”

“I went down there to look around. He didn’t appear.”

“Go down there and get word to him that you want to talk. He thinks he’s someone who can talk to presidents and peasants. He considers himself Mr. Cool, Mr. Take Care of Any Situation. But you should stay away from him. And stay away from me,” she said, rousing her anger.

“Answer your phone when I call.”

“No more,” she said.

“I have had enough from you and everybody else who wants this to go away.” He closed

the space between them and put his finger in her face. “I will cause you no end of trouble if you ignore me. I will cause your uncle trouble. I will cause your father trouble. I will get social services on your ass and do my best to get them questioning your competency as a mother.”

“Stop it,” she said. “You owe me.” She clenched her fists and closed her eyes. Again, she grabbed her hair. “Goddamn you to fucking hell.”

“We owe Latoya and all those other girls.”

She put her face in the plate of her hands and cried. “Stop it. Just stop it.”

He walked toward the metal stairs leading to the parking lot. “Answer my phone calls, Taryn. Don’t ignore me any more.”

## Chapter Twenty-one

He managed to find a flight out late Saturday night instead of waiting till Sunday. The flight was delayed for four hours so he had to idle his time away in the airport. Sunday morning he collapsed in bed and managed little more than naps the rest of the day.

He didn't have much of a lesson plan on Monday. But he was a veteran teacher and knew how to wing it. He and Julie still worked out how to launch the World War I project.

When he returned to his classroom at the start of the second period from a bathroom run, he saw Conklin and the Coordinator of Secondary Social Studies sitting in the back. Both had system assigned combination laptop/tablet devices on student desks in front of them.

He knew Conklin chose the second class on Monday morning purposely: it was populated by Davidson's lowest performers. Of the eighteen of twenty-two present in the 10th grade world history class, six were special ed who read at the fifth grade level, four had failed the class in their home schools at least once, one spoke little English. Seven of the fifteen went to drug counseling, four of whom openly bragged about spending time in the "lock-up."

No one could remember what they read about last Thursday, the last day he'd seen them

because the school was on an A/B day schedule.

He had created an outline that provided an overview of the chapter in the book they were reading about the origins of World War I, which included four mini-research topics at the bottom.

He saw the outline on his desk. He'd forgotten to make copies to pass around to students.

He'd also forgotten to bring in a DVD of a PBS special which provided a clear introduction to nationalism, that knotty topic, twenty minutes of which he'd intended to show them instead of reading today, knowing it was Monday and his students often had difficulty getting motivated. Finally, he'd also forgotten to sign up for the computer lab, which he intended to use so that students could explore a database with original documents.

His written objective projected on the screen wasn't relevant, given his lack of preparation. His students, coming off a weekend of poor to no parental supervision, staying up late, partying, or working too much, resisted reading aloud, drawing conclusions from the text, and generating questions for further study.

He ground through the lesson, reading aloud to them, writing notes projected through the Elmo document projector, notes that they copied, a passive, brainless activity.

Often he would get a student to write the notes on the Elmo while he created a give and take between the note writer and the rest of the class. Most days the students not writing on the overhead projector would want to jump in and show how smart they were even though they hadn't been chosen to write.

But the two students who usually did the writing had difficulty keeping their eyes open and heads up.

So he read, wrote down notes for them to copy, cajoled a few students to read, all of whom seemed to read with especial difficulty, one of whom went from word to word as if crossing a creek rock to rock.

The principal and coordinator tapped on their laptop keyboard without letup for the entire ninety minutes.

Afterward, the principal emailed him asking that he meet him in his office during his free period. Thankfully, the social studies coordinator had left.

“Davidson that was below subpar,” Conklin fumed. “Veteran teacher like yourself for God’s sake.”

Conklin looked down at his informal observation sheet on which he’d scribbled notes. “You’re one of my go-to veterans. What happened in there? Do I need to get one of the PCTs to work with you?”

PCTs--Professional Consulting Teachers--worked with first and second year teachers or veterans who were slobes or incompetents.

“I was--” he almost slipped up and said he was in Atlanta. He’d called in sick on Friday--”out of it all weekend. Ms. Wang and I are trying to work a cross disciplinary project and we’re still in process. It won’t happen again. Let me ask you something, why did you and Coordinator happen to come in today?”

“I don’t answer to you, Davidson.” He knocked a knuckle on his desktop. “That was out and out incompetency.”

“An anomaly,” he said.

“Don’t no-big-deal me.” He snorted then leaned back in his leather chair. “This

interdisciplinary plan you and Ms. Wang are working up, when you're finished, send me a copy. I want to look it over."

Davidson decided on the spot to duck and lay low. Conklin stung him with two deadly insults for a veteran teacher: threatening to recommend him to a PCT and now this, telling him that he would inspect his lesson plan.

"Okay," he said.

"I'll put a copy of my notes in your box and stick the original in your file. Anything else?"

He walked out, felt his neck burning. Borke came into the main office as Davidson passed through.

Borke put his hands up. "Whoa, what's wrong with you?"

John ignored him. He went to Julie's room knowing she was free. He hoped she wasn't running one of her impromptu tutoring lessons for one of her students.

She worked on her laptop at the three cornered table.

"You have a minute?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "We've got to lock up this project thing we're working on."

"I just got bushwhacked."

He told her what happened. He admitted to being unprepared. "I could put a nail through my forehead for letting that happen. But let me run something by you. I just rattled Taryn's cage then on Monday I get the head of social studies in my room. Is that a coincidence?"

"I'm signed up for the Word of the Day from some website. You know what a recent one was? Apophenia."

“What is it?”

“I memorized the definition: ‘The perception of connectedness among unrelated phenomena.’”

“This from somebody who seeks understanding of deep patterns by consulting the *I Ching*.”

She went to her closet and pulled out her backpack and brought it over to the table.

“Speaking of which.” She got out her copy of the *I Ching* and opened it to the explanation of The Abyss, the hexagram he got when he threw the coins. “You need to be reminded about where you are. Remember, the idea of darkness comes from the two trigrams, water atop water. You have entered an Abyss, John Davidson. Don’t think you haven’t.” She clapped the book shut.

“I’m going to push this Latoya business,” he said.

“Do it, but stuff like the Coordinator showing up is going to happen.”

“So it’s not apophenia.”

“I’m forcing you to look hard, John Davidson. You’re in a fight and you need to know what you’re doing. Now, we got only about ten minutes before the period ends. Stay after school with me so we can get our interdisciplinary World War One project off the ground. I plan to get radical on this thing, so strap in.”

“Conklin wants to see our plan for how we’re going to teach the project.”

She cocked her head at him. “You’re turning into a one man Bhopal disaster.”

## Chapter Twenty-two

He waited until the guys in black leather coats went inside then jogged from the parking lot across the street. He sat at the bar near the entrance.

His vantage point allowed him to see past the small, empty stage, all the way to the back booths and tables occupied by Rocco, his band of brothers, and a few women. Booths ran along the side of the exposed brick wall. TV monitors were mounted high on walls throughout. The place was crowded with young men wearing billed caps and young women with dark eye makeup. Pitchers of beer stood on tables like instruments of ritual.

Hung throughout were posters of James Dean shooting pool, Marilyn Monroe holding down her billowing dress while blowing a kiss to the camera, an airbrushed picture of youthful Elvis holding a microphone, head to the side, eyes closed.

He texted Julie. *why would Rocco choose this neighborhood joint full of americana as his hangout?*

Right back *you a restaurant critic? hes trying to fit in. its good cover.*



*The Note/Lavey*

*jesus 2 girls from r school just walked in.*

*who r they*

*i don't know. recognize them tho.*

They wore tight jeans, plunging necklines, and high heels. They waggled fingers at the bartender, and joined friends at a table.

*they got the attention of rocco.*

Rocco waved them over. They turned away and leaned in to one another. Five minutes passed. One of the lesser mortals from Rocco's tribe, young, curly hair, gangly body, stood after Rocco snapped at him and pointed him in their direction. He puffed up and meandered over to their table and passed along the message. In unison, they looked at Rocco who smiled a sweet, soulful, little boy smile at them. They turned away, discussed, sipped their drinks, talked and laughed, sipped drinks again, then decamped and joined Rocco's table.

John watched the action in the bar. How can men like Rocco tap their magic wand and trigger the call of the wild in women? What did the Roccos know that he didn't? Was it a numbers game? Beckon x-number of females, some would respond? Salmon leaping upstream.

The bar continued to fill. People from the neighborhood slapped five, called out to each other. A guy came in carrying his guitar. He wore a fedora and women smiled and he winked and flashed the peace sign to people who halloed.

The bartender said to him, "You're late Renny."

He shrugged, "Out of my hands. You ever have a girlfriend, bro? They make you go to bad places."

The bartender shook his head in mock sympathy. "Must be hard being you. Give me

three full sets or I'm knocking you."

The troubadour raised and lowered his hat. The bartender reached to a shelf beneath and put out a comically large brandy snifter with a little paper sign on a wooden post that announced TIPS.

The musician pulled out a crumpled five from his pocket, flattened it by rubbing it back and forth on the edge of the counter, and dropped it into the jar.

He hooked himself up to the mike, sat on the stage chair, and plucked individual guitar strings.

"Renny, how's your darling?" someone said.

People laughed. His girlfriend troubles were a matter of communal knowledge.

"Sweet as a vinegar," he said. More laughter.

"Okay," he said. "I'm going back to the 1960s tonight. 1970s. I'm planning on edumacating you dummies on what real music was, once upon a time."

Catcalls and middle fingers.

He imitated Bob Dylan's voice, while he told a story of smoking pot with the Beatles.

John laughed. His Bob Dylan imitation was flawless. He began to sing. *Corina, Corina, girl where you been so long?*

People continued to talk—it was a neighborhood bar after all, not a concert hall—but the volume lowered.

John had a Viet Nam era uncle who loved Bob Dylan and played his albums enough when John was around that John knew lyrics of many of his songs.

Finished with Dylan, the performer turned into Joni Mitchell and in a high, female voice

began, *Help me, I think I'm falling in love too fast.* People clapped and laughed. He sang in the voices of John Lennon and Mick Jagger. Every song was about a woman breaking his heart. Finally, he spoke in the voice of Carlos Santana. He spun a tale about how a woman put a spell on him then sang,

I got a black magic woman  
Got me so blind I can't see  
That she's a black magic woman  
She's tryin' to make a devil out of me.

At the end of the song, while people clapped, someone shouted, "There she is!"

A woman in black leggings with a leopard print short jacket and dark eye makeup waved as she pranced in. She sat down the bar from to John, crossed left leg over right knee with high heel hooked on the top of her foot, and like a celebrity basked in everyone's attention.

"Hey darling," the singer said from his stool up on the stage. He made an exaggerated show of loosening his collar and fanning his face with his hand. "I was just talking about you."

She blew him a kiss, waited for everyone to quiet down from whooping and laughing. She said, "Why baby of course you were. What else is there to talk about?"

John had allowed himself to get absorbed in the guy's act. One of the students in his class had turned in her chair to watch the performer. As so many women did with men who'd picked them up, she clicked her eyes around the room looking for possible escape routes from the stone load of male attention.

Though she was a long room away, and waitresses crisscrossed the floor of the restaurant, and patrons stood and walked around, and the lights were low, he sensed that her eyes lingered on him a moment. Had she spotted him?

She leaned to her friend, whispered. They both squinted, pointed, then covered their mouths laughing.

Hell with it, he thought. He touched the bill of his baseball cap in a gesture of recognition. They waved. Rocco looked at them then like an alerted falcon pinned his eyes on him, whom he dismissed after a long few seconds.

John lay a five dollar tip on the counter and sipped the last of his beer.

He got a look at Rocco and his oddball presence in a neighborhood bar, so mission accomplished. But something bugged him, and only when he got up to leave did it come to him.

Everybody had fun in here engaged in the great mating game American style, but it made him think about himself, about how predatory he had been throughout his life, how unthinkingly he took advantage of Taryn, and other women. He hadn't considered them. He had never attempted to look at the world through their eyes.

He stood up and stared across the bar until he caught one of the student's eyes. He pointed to Rocco. She turned and patted the man's hand and pointed at him. Rocco deigned to turn his head a few degrees to look at John. John put two fingers to his own eyes and mouthed, "I see you, motherfucker."

Rocco couldn't have possibly understood what he said, but no doubt read his body language.

After John left, Rocco asked the girl who he was.

"He's a teacher at our school."

He nodded, "I see. And is he your favorite?" He smiled, nodded his head like a tired old actor. "Did he come here to check on you? What?"

The two girls looked at each other. “He’s all right,” the blond said. “He’s always trying to work you to death.”

“Why is he here?”

The dark-haired friend said, “How should we know? Listen, Marlee, we need to go. I forgot my inhaler at home.” She waved her hand in front of her nose. “Somebody’s got on too much cologne and I’m reacting.”

Their girl signal.

Marlee said to Rocco, “Thank you, baby. We might see you later.”

Marlee and her dark-hair friend got into the old Toyota pickup her brother lent her. “That Rocco guy is a serious creep.”

“Not to mention the 1980s gangster hair-do.”

Rocco knew who John was. He texted Taryn. *call me immediately*

Rocco walked through the restaurant, winked at the guitar player, and stopped at the bar. He asked that another round of drinks be sent to his friends in the back then tipped the bartender with a twenty dollar bill.

Outside, Rocco eyeballed people leaving and entering. He stood with his five-foot ten frame erect and made sure that any male that caught his eye looked away first.

He felt good. He’d worked out, then went to the mall and bought himself a brand new pair of Salvatore Ferragamo shoes and a Tag Heuer watch. He thought he might get some snow game here, but that wasn’t going to happen. That was all right. He needed to take a trip to see his uncle. There would be some bitch down there for him.

His phone rang.

“Rocco, why are you texting me. I am done with Baltimore.”

“Relax, I’m just talking. Your friend came into the bar.”

“Let me ask you a question. Why do you hang out in a redneck bar in Morrell Park? That makes no sense.”

“I hide in plain sight there. When the cops get wind of me, I watch them start to hang around. Then all of a sudden, I’m gone. I had a place all the way on the east side for a while. People get nosy, I leave. The boys and I need a place to relax.”

He looked at his reflection in the window of a parked car and tilted his face to display his strong jaw.

“I thought you said your friend would be easily persuaded. He sits in his car and watches from across the street then today he comes into my bar? None of this is good, sweetheart.” He winked at one of the neighborhood guys wearing an Orioles hat. Rocco knew these boys liked to get up close to the flame. They thought he was mafia.

“Rocco, what do you want from me? I’m tired.”

“I want this to go away.”

“Make it go away. I’m in Atlanta now.”

“I know where you are, Taryn.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a 3x5 notecard. He read aloud her uncle’s address. “So we are all on the same page, right? How’s your boy?”

“Rocco,” she managed then stayed silent.

“Taryn, we’re still in the game together. We play it out, everyone is happy, and you get your life in Atlanta or wherever you run off to. I gave you an opportunity up here and you took

it. We're doing some clean-up here, so don't get wobbly in the knees."

"I gave you Davidson's name after one of your go-fers saw him watching you."

"We're talking in circles. You indicated to me I could scare him off. That didn't happen. He walks into my bar tonight."

"He's on a mission." She glanced at her three-year old boy who sat in the fabric, stained motel chair watching TV. He sucked on a red popsicle. They had eaten McDonald's hamburgers together. "I told him to talk to you. I said you're a reasonable guy."

"You're in touch with him. When did you get in touch with him?"

"One of the girls commits suicide. My name is in it."

"I know that. I know all of that."

"He won't let go. I cut him off. He comes to see me. Do I have to make it simpler? Get him off my ass."

"Taryn." He quieted his voice. "We have a situation. Let's work together." He flicked his wrist to look at his watch. "Keep in touch. That is the most important thing to me right now."

### Chapter Twenty-three

The following day he left early to go to a meeting, filling in for his department chair who was out on maternity leave.

While sitting in the back, he listened to a litany of procedures on implementing the meticulously organized curriculum that Ms. Peabody, in charge of curriculum development, had created.

Wary department chairs had been taking various units of the new curriculum back to their teachers throughout the year, most of whom, upon receiving it, scoffed, or so the department chairs were insisting to Ms. Peabody.

Ms. Peabody countered with, “Demand that your teachers teach the curriculum with fidelity. If teachers teach the curriculum with fidelity, they will recognize its intrinsic logic. But it must be taught with fidelity.”

Teachers had an ingrained geiger counter detecting new initiatives that had a shelf life of only a year or two before being replaced by another new set of initiatives. Their operative mode became resist, resist some more, resist again. The upper realms leaned on the department chairs,



the department chairs leaned on the teachers, but since firing anyone once having tenure was an intractable issue, the process engendered a stasis. Teachers yearned for more creativity in lessons. The system's insistence on fidelity was tethered to test scores. John dodged many curriculum demands because he worked in one of the alternative schools, stepchildren in the system's unruly school family.

Ms. Peabody's allowed her favorite henchman, Ms. Drapers, a thick shouldered woman who played field hockey in college, to conduct the meeting. Drapers, to loosen up the surly department chairs, talked about her family's interest in things Star Trek.

"I know it's dorky, but we have a lot of fun!"

She claimed her son was a fluent speakers of Klingon. She and her husband considered financing a summer vacation so her son could visit a Klingon community that thrived in the U.K.

"You know, she said, "like when Jews go to a kibbutz."

The department chairs knew she and her kids called her husband Spock. She was Kirk. The son and daughter seemed to take on commander, doctor, engineer roles as she, Kirk, saw fit.

One stepped beneath the umbrella of her good graces by flashing the Vulcan salute. It was all jokey, but not. She'd even given Ms. Peabody, her superior, a cutting stare one time when Ms. Peabody herself suggested that, really, they didn't crew the Starship Enterprise.

One sensed that Drapers secretly taped the meetings and pored over them later to see who might be smirking or talking behind their hand while she entertained them with one of her Star Trek moments. Laughing, okay. Mocking, not.

His comrade from one of the other alternative schools across the county, a woman in her thirties named Janet Mose, had not bothered to come, so although he sat at a table of department

chairs from other schools, they ignored him and he was left alone. Thankfully, Drapers felt like talking at them for an hour rather than asking them to work in groups of four or five in some sort of brain dump activity. He could sit within his own cone of silence.

He thought about Rocco. He held out his hand and saw it shaking.

To keep himself occupied, he wrote in his journal he shared with Julie.

*I've got to approach Wentles, the reading specialist. Maybe I can leverage some information from her. She's a ferocious old bird, so what will be the blowback? I can't let her keep trolling for girls.*

*What have I got myself into? I feel like I'm winging it. Taryn hopes I drive off a bridge. I better watch my ass as a teacher. Conklin's not happy with me at all, not a good thing. I feel like I need some sort of plan, but I don't know enough yet to know what to do.*

*I know one thing. I'm confronting Rocco asap.*

Again, he hid in the shadows of the parking lot across the street next to the local grocery store that closed at 9:00 p.m. John saw him and his boys huddle for a while then go into the bar. Five minutes later, a thin young guy with a curl hanging over his forehead and a knock-kneed run, the same kid Rocco snapped at to retrieve his students from the nearby table last night, dashed across the street. He came up to John's window and tapped on it with his middle knuckle.

He didn't look John in the eye but stared downrange as if contemplating the skylight of the city.

"Rocco wants to talk to you."

The kid propped his elbow on the roof of the car. He smoked, held the cigarette between

the fingers of his left hand.

“That’s his name, is it? He the guy has all of you shitting your pants every time he comes around?”

“Listen, bitch,” the kid lisped.

Rocco must be having a ball with this kid, spinning him like a yo-yo. His curriculum vitae was stamped on his face: I’m tired of being your gopher. Pwease let me be important.

“Rocco sent me over here to ask you to have a drink with him. You don’t want to do that, it won’t make him happy.”

He flicked his cigarette away and in a dazzlingly swift move rotated his hunched body and reached in and grabbed John’s throat. John pressed his thumb into the underside of the young man’s thin wrist until the kid yanked away.

“Goddamn it,” he said.

John got out of the car. The kid backed off. John squared up on him. Lanky, taller than John by a couple of inches, with a nasty sneer on his face, and a neck tattoo, he said to John, “I ought to beat the shit out of you.”

John looked into his unfocused, pale brown eyes smoking with rage. He was a cornered animal and John didn’t want to press. He’d seen emotionally disturbed students, contrary to all good sense, attack teachers for no other reason than believing it was the only avenue open to them.

John flattened his voice so that the crazy boy in front of him would register it: “Tell Rocco to meet me at Jim’s Gym over in Canton at 6:00 p.m. tomorrow.”

“I’m not telling him shit,” he said.

“Jim’s Gym in Canton,” John said as if whispering in the boy’s ear, through the fog of the young man’s rage.

“Fuck you,” he said.

He quieted his voice one notch lower. “Now, I’m going to get in my car and be about my business. Tell Rocco Jim’s Gym in Canton. 6:00 p.m. tomorrow.”

Unbeknownst to the young man, John had got him to de-escalate and enter a decision making zone, like climbing down a ladder from dark attic. No longer in the ether of his emotional pyramid, he hesitated. In that moment, John swung into his car. He drove through the parking lot to the exit, down Washington Boulevard, found his way to Pratt Street, then went north on I-83 to Hampden.

## Chapter Twenty-four

John sat in the restaurant and sipped water from an eight ounce bottle. He was hungry but wanted to be light on his feet. He was too old to get into a physical scrape with anyone, but he hadn't practiced tai chi chuan for years to be afraid to use it. *Yield and overcome. Bend and be straight.*

Who was he kidding? Rocco and his factotum would stomp him so hard he'd blow snot bubbles.

Rocco swaggered in with his number two behind him. He shook off his coat and tossed it to his man who carried it over his arm.

Rocco tugged at his cuffs and inventoried the lighted space. Several tables were occupied with couples wearing gym clothes and athletic shoes. A few single men, showered and dressed after their workouts, without a hot meal at home, ate sandwiches and stared at lighted cell phone screens.

Once Rocco finished announcing his presence by standing in the center of the room, checking his watch, and waiting for surreptitious glances, he locked eyes on John and waited for John to flinch or signal him some way, which John refused to do.

“You ready for this,” Rocco called over to him, provoking longer looks from people sitting in their muted domains beneath overbright lights. The ladies behind the glass cases of prepared foods and soups stopped conversing and glanced at him.

He smiled like the most popular guy in school and shot a wink at John.

“What, I come in, you sit there?”

This was the man that ushered Latoya to the place where she felt her single option was suicide. John didn’t know if he could go on with his powwow. What had he been thinking? He threw the coins yesterday for the *I Ching*. Hexagram 36. Darkness. “In human affairs, there is a Dark Lord above, and a Bright Minister below. One must bear with adversity and remain firm.”

Rocco walked over to his table, took a seat, and put hands in his lap. He projected jungle power when John watched him from across the street in the grocery store parking lot, but here at the gym restaurant, John saw a man his age, fatigue in the eyes, deep vertical crease in his forehead. No doubt he had to fend off young marauders wanting to take the game from him.

They were the same build, same height. If John put on a leather coat and both were walking down the street, they could be mistaken for one another.

“So you like to play FBI?”

John expected crudeness, a thug. An aggressive alpha. But Taryn said he was different. “He’s been Americanized,” she said.

“It’s time for us to have a discussion,” he said.

“You’re a pimp,” John said.

“I make a living,” he said. “I fill a need.” He shrugged. “Life. Not so mysterious after all. You know what, let’s take a ride.”

“School night for me, Rocco.”

Rocco laughed. “I’m the teacher tonight. You’ll get back to your life. Come with me.”

The long-legged number two sat in the back seat, amusing himself with a toothpick and fussy tugs to the collar of his leather coat. No one talked. Rocco took the Baltimore-Washington Parkway to New York Avenue then drove into Washington DC.

John listened for an erupting, lunging movement from number two or quick shifting motions from Rocco. But instead, they drifted through the streets in heavy silence like boatmen navigating a river into a forest.

Rocco glided up New Hampshire from Dupont Circle to 18th Street then down Florida and turned on Massachusetts then went into the elegant neighborhood of embassies with their wide circle driveways and grand front entrances. Republic of Macedonia. Turkey. Nepal.

He said, “Look around you. Everywhere I’m taking you, my uncle controls.”

He found his way back to Massachusetts then to Q Street and went into Georgetown past the bronze buffaloes standing guard.

John hadn’t been down this way in a long time. The car tires rumbled over cobblestones. He looked up at the old, three-story brick houses abutting the sidewalks. Mercedes Benz’s, BMW’s, high end SUV’s lined parking lanes. Even the dogs prancing along looked well groomed.

“My uncle got to claim DC. Otherwise, it would be mine.” He pressed the button and his window slipped down. He made an exaggerated sniffing sound. “I can smell the fucking money. It’s in the air.”

“You want it bad.” John loathed talking to Rocco, as if the man were a reasonable human

being. He told himself he was gathering information. That long ago professor of Chinese history spent days on Sun Tzu: “If you want to attack an army, besiege a walled city, assassinate individuals, you must know the identities of the defending generals, assistants, associates, gate guards, and officers.”

“Things need to be taken care of,” Rocco said, as if answering to a long ago contract he’d made with himself. He nodded his head. “A lot of traffic back and forth between Washington DC and Baltimore. A lot of money sloshing around. My uncle and I are trying to work out a business arrangement. You wouldn’t believe the complications. One’s family.” He tried a nonchalant shrug, but John noted the straight-ahead stare before he grinned a predator grin. “My father,” he paused. “I am still tying up loose ends.”

They drove down M Street to Key Bridge then U-turned and backtracked. He turned left at Wisconsin Avenue then after a few blocks turned right which took them back into Georgetown.

“I could take you to other neighborhoods north of here and across the bridge into Virginia, but you get the point.”

“You’re showing this to me because....”

“Because you need to look at the trade with new eyes. Everything becomes messy. Everything. I could be selling cotton swabs to mothers with newborns, and still, the business of it, the people involved, the infrastructure, the logistics, all of it would be messy in some way or another.”

“Let me see. Women, girls, selling their bodies and cotton swabs.”

He turned right on 23rd Street, eased his car to the curb, and parked. “The female has



something the male wants. The seller has something a buyer is willing to pay for. I don't understand the difficulty." He opened his door.

They crossed 23rd Street. John looked back at the car and beyond to the woodsy urban park then turned and followed Rocco. He'd almost forgotten about Rocco's number two who now loped along behind them.

They entered a stucco building through what looked like a service entrance into a high-ceilinged, windowless, strip club. Flashing, various colored lights and loud music filled the sealed mini-universe of the bar. Though only 7:30 p.m., at least fifty patrons, men, sat at tables or lounged on swivel chairs in the raised area in back.

"Make a point to come down here at about midnight. Three times as many people."

A waitress wearing tiny shorts and a skin tight top with bare midriff took their order. Three surly middle-aged men standing at the far side of the bar looked over at Rocco. Rocco nodded.

The music was too loud. He saw waitresses carrying out plastic woven baskets of fried food nested inside wax paper. Men at tables ate with bare hands. Grease stained their mouths. They drank beer and liquor from glasses filmed with fingerprints.

"These guys who come in at this time," he raised his chin. "They have family obligations, work duties, all sorts of burdens. They're looking for a good time. They want to feel a little classy, a little special. They want to feel like they conquered, like when they were young in high school. So you have some girls around. Back there," he nodded, "we have a little area for lap dancing. Make them feel special. Everybody wants to feel special."

John looked over at the entranceway of the lap dance room curtained off by long strings

of beads. A reddish light illuminated within.

“Eight or nine tables. Boys they like to go in together and get the girls on their laps and they talk back and forth and they feel special. You know what is one thing you count on always? Everybody is lonely. Everybody wants to join in, to belong. Everybody wants to be a part of something very big. So you buy the next thing and for a while, you feel special. Then it goes away, you wander around a little bit.” He walked his fingers in the air. “Until you see how you can feel special again. Look.”

A man in a business suit ducked his head and came through the beads shortly after a black woman wearing a blond wig had exited. He had a suppressed smile on his face.

“See,” said Rocco. “He is in love. He will be back.”

John wondered how he would write it up for Julie. *I stepped aboard Rocco’s boat and get a tour of the underbelly of Washington DC. All in the name of opposition research.*

One of the men Rocco had nodded to, in his late fifties with three days growth of black-gray beard, walked over to their table. He settled in a chair and sized up John and Scott behind old school, black framed, rectangle eyeglasses.

Rocco and the man grunted hellos.

“My uncle,” Rocco said.

The uncle turned his stiff body a few degrees to his left, raised his hand, and flicked his fingers. The bartender appeared instantly. He said something to him in a foreign language and moments later shots of vodka and glasses of frothy beer were placed in front of them.

The uncle lifted his shot glass, as did Rocco and Scott. John, feeling panic wobble through him knowing his poor tolerance of alcohol, drank the vodka in one gulp along with the

others.

His stomach burned and lurched. The uncle raised his hand again. The bartender held the bottle near the bottom, and John watched the clear liquid bubble and stream through the silver pour spout. Again they drank. John sipped his beer, hoping to settle the fire in his stomach.

The uncle and Rocco spoke to each other in monosyllables. John couldn't tell if it were English or some unidentifiable Slavic language.

The uncle looked at John and said with a heavy accent, "One more?" He arched his thick black-gray eyebrows and pinned John with tiny beads of light at the center of his eyes.

John waved him off. "No thanks, that will do it for me." He felt loose-mouthed and giddy. His shoulders relaxed.

The uncle nodded.

From over his shoulder came the whisper of "Baby, I need you over here for a minute."

Heavy-headed, he took her in.

"She needs to talk to you a minute. She knew your little friend," Rocco said.

"Latoya?" he said.

"Yes, Latoya. Come on, baby," she said.

He got up. She reached behind herself and grabbed his hand. They went through a doorway off the front entrance then down a dim hallway.

She closed the door behind her after they entered an office with a couch and desk with a computer.

Standing by the desk, he said, "You knew Latoya?"

"She was my cousin."

It was a way those young girls talked, he knew. Everybody was a cousin.

“What happened to her?” he said. He could feel himself choking up.

“Baby, I don’t know. It was awful.”

She came up to him and put her hand to his chest then reached behind his naked neck and brought his face to hers.

“Come on over here, my special baby,” she said. “My special man who cares so much.”

She brought him over to the couch by the hand, and he lay down. “Put this on,” she said. He did, then so fast she was up on him and he was inside her.

She sucked her breath while on top of him. When he opened his eyes right before he came, he saw the young woman watching him, as if all women from all time regarding him and his foibles. He grunted and, weirdly, felt as if he had turned into a fish, a trout. Somewhere in his murky field of fish-vision he caught a glimpse, a flash of light. He had been snared by a hook, and his fish instincts told him to avoid the silver flash, and he managed.

He shook his head and sat up. He slipped the condom off of him, tied it off, and put it in his pocket as he hiked up his pants. He would not allow them to plant his DNA somewhere.

He looked at the young woman, no more than eighteen, and he said, “You didn’t know Latoya, did you?”

“Baby, I’m all the way here in Washington D.C. How would I know Latoya? Rocco told me you fell in love with her. He wanted me to make you feel right.”

She looked at herself in the mirror on the wall and applied lipstick, touched her hair, then left the room.

He looked into the same mirror. “You’re a fucking dupe and an asshole.” He opened the

door and walked down the hallway lit by a bare bulb. He returned to Rocco's table. The uncle had departed. Scott sneered.

Rocco appraised him. "You see what I've been trying to tell you? This is not a small thing. We are human beings here. That is all."

John swam at the bottom of his trout pool, slow, quiet, watching.

"You are a respectable man, John. And look, you had a need. And so?" He shrugged like a merchant at a vegetable stand.

"You're wrong," John said. "I'm not respectable. But I have seen the light."

He put hands together and bowed to Rocco. He felt as if warmth of sunshine bathed him. He had humiliated himself. He would tell Julie. Why not? What could happen to him now? What did he have to lose?

Rocco tapped his chin as if in philosophic dilemma.

John felt clear-headed and buoyantly alive. "Scott, you're awfully quiet. How's it going man?"

"Fuck you," he said.

John laughed. "Rocco, what's your uncle say about you crowding him out? He know you're planning on raiding his turf?"

Rocco slammed the side of his fist on John's hand which lay flat on the table top. Pain whitened his eyes.

"Careful," Rocco whispered.

John cradled his hand, squeezed and opened it.

Rocco asked John, "What do you want? I don't want to hear about justice and world

peace. What do *you* want.”

Why not, he thought. He and Rocco were pals. They had crossed a bridge together. He flexed his hand.

“I want to write my book. I’ve been teaching a long time and I’ve got words of wisdom for up and comers.”

Rocco nodded. “What do you need to make this happen?”

“Time. I need to have my life cleared away so I can get it done. It’s really my life’s work.” Yes, play along.

“Maybe we can help each other out. You have a nice way with people, John. A nice touch. You came to see me, which shows me that you have a set of *cojones*.” Again the philosophical nod. “I need a partner now that Taryn has flown the coop so that I can focus on the business. I have a long term project in mind.”

John laughed and worked his jaw. He could still feel the effects of the alcohol. He imitated a friend who used to imitate his Jewish grandmother: “You want I join the underworld.”

“I need you to look after things, a certain area of my business. You would be like...like an a air traffic controller. You move girls through your field of operation and pass them on to the next set of handlers.”

“How do I get paid?”

“Under the table.”

“All of a sudden I’ve got money from a source that I can’t account for.”

He dismissed it with a sweep of his hand. “You don’t think that’s a problem I’ve been handling? I’ve got a stockbroker. He’ll invest it for you. Write your book.”

“What do you want?”

“Washington DC.” He wagged his finger. “That’s worth paying attention to. That uncle of mine, what can you do about those guys from the old country? They think we’re living in the 1950s. Ah, the way they treat the women. I’ve seen them with bruises on their backs, their legs, even their faces. Puncture wounds from needles in their ankles. It’s unnecessary.”

John looked around. The uncle watched them from his seat at the bar. The music, which seemed to have retreated, now encroached. A stripper ground her pelvis then hooked her leg around a stage pole. Two bartenders worked like laborers on a factory line.

Fear filled his mouth, as if he’d touched his tongue to whetstone. Rocco and the uncle, they could kill him and make it seem like an accident. He needed to go, return to Baltimore, sleep, be a teacher tomorrow.

“What do you want me to do?” he said to deflect attention.

“Long term,” Rocco said. “Get a position in the school system where you’re not teaching all the time. Teachers are buried in a cave in a classroom. Become an assistant principal, that way you have access to people coming and going.”

“You mean girls.”

“Of course. But others. People who can help you build an organization. The girls are like employees in a fast food restaurant. They come and go. You would be the director of a department within a corporation.”

“Why don’t you and your uncle combine resources? You’re going outside the usual practices.”

*They’re tribal, Taryn said. Rocco’s father tried to make a power play on his brother, so*

*his brother killed him or had him killed. According to their code, the brother had to raise Rocco, the father's child. Rocco's after blood.*

"I am." Eyes to the bar. The uncle had gone to the kitchen or his office. Rocco's number two wandered off, perhaps to do a line of coke in the bathroom.

"You see, John, I'm at a delicate point with my uncle. He needs to step away and go to Florida and sit with his fellow bulls in the sun."

"So you want to depose the uncle and claim the throne."

"Or if he wants to stay around, live in a fancy apartment in downtown Washington DC where he can take a cab to the baseball stadium. He likes baseball. That old Russian toad likes baseball of all things. It is an inane sport in my opinion. My God the tediousness."

"A fifteen year old girl in my class committed suicide."

He shook his head, "We're back to that." He paused. "The Latoyas of the world have a low ceiling. We love stories of heroes overcoming odds. The quiet little warrior who fights her way to the top. But that's Hollywood. Never happens."

John wish he'd drunk his beer less quickly. He looked around. He was caught in Rocco's undertow.

"Let's go back to slavery days," John said.

"You make fun."

How was he going to get this guy arrested?

"You pay them well, do you?"

He tsked. "No, no, of course not. But I explain to them while they are crying and blubbing how the nature of life works. You have men with a need. You have young girls with a



way to satisfy that need.”

“Prostituting yourself? You ever try it?”

He looked to the ceiling, sighed. “But I am not a woman,” he said with weariness, as if he’d had the same discussion many times. “It’s a sacrifice that if they’re willing to make can afford them dividends. They cash in on their beauty which lasts for only a short time.” He rocked his head back and forth as if making internal calculations. “Fifteen to twenty three. We’re talking on the order of eight years. I am building franchises. When they are ready, and *if* they keep themselves clean of drugs and disease, I begin to introduce them to the business. Women are infinitely better than men at business. It’s not even close. Infinitely better.”

“I’ll bite,” John said. “Why?”

“Because they have the capacity to read situations and people better than men. As a species, they’re more attuned to the makeup of patterns that govern situations in life. Men dominate business only because of their capacity for violence, which can’t be ignored. We know that without our ability to command respect and attention by killing, we would be trussed up as soon as we hair over, milked for our sperm which would be filed and inventoried for later consideration.”

“You believe that, don’t you?”

“I exaggerate to make a point, John. But I believe what I know to be true. If truth were something different from what I’ve described, I would believe that. A woman is the superior creature except for that one single thing. Her inability or unwillingness to employ violence to organize herself, her community, her government. Her emotions dominate because she has given birth.”

John should have got up and left. “What’s the skill set you’re kind enough to help them develop.”

“I show them how the business works. Most of them, like most people, are idiots. Live like idiots. Die like idiots. I could be the manager of a McDonald’s and it would be the same thing.” He held up his glass. A waitress came by. “And another beer for my friend.” He winked at her. “I show them the model of how to run the sex business. I mentor them.”

“If they say no.”

“I demand nothing from them.”

“When they want to get out of it?”

“Goodbye.” He brushed edge of right hand over left palm. “See you later.”

“And if they take you up on your offer?”

“I set them up, take a percentage, and offer my services of protection. Nothing is simple. I suffer the problems of any CEO. But, no risk, no reward.” He tilted his head while sizing up John. “You would be good at it,” he said. “Trusted position in society, access to girls, an understanding person.” He shifted himself, pulled out his wallet, took a card and offered it to John held between two fingers.

“Take it, my friend. Here, take it.”

“Why did she kill herself? What did you do to her?” He felt the fine grain paper of the card.

“There is no profit in that line of thinking, John.” He looked at his watch. “I had always hoped to retire by age fifty. I don’t know...”

John recognized that Rocco wanted him to empathize with the trials of being a pimp.

“I’m not going to let you get away with it,” John said. “You’re a predator. You take advantage of the weak.”

“I’m starting to feel insulted, John.”

“Fifteen year old girls?”

“You want to see depravity? Go to India, Malaysia, China...any number of countries that supply the labor to make American products. Children nine, ten years old constructing athletic shoes, cell phones, t-shirts. Who am I to judge the system? I am a businessman. Quite simple.”

“Taking advantage of under-age girls.”

“You’re a romantic.” He stretched out his legs and put hands behind his head, winged out his elbows.

Rocco understood who he was. Could he, John Davidson, teacher of youth, say the same thing? What was he doing with himself? What Rocco did was contemptuous and predatory and evil, but it would be something his students understood. The people in the lives of the students he taught made choices that put them in jail or made them addicts. They settled for service jobs and partying. They became pregnant then stopped going to high school. They lived in a world where college was nearly an impossible dream. Of the tiny percentage who started, how many finished? A fraction of tiny.

How many of his students over the years had been killed in inane neighborhood scuffles over who said what to whom, or feeling disrespected, or being on the wrong street wearing the wrong colored shirt? He once taught a student who got shot in the face and lost an eye because he pointed an unloaded gun at someone and claimed later, “I was just messing with him.” That *him* returned with a .22 deciding that he didn’t like being messed with. Just last year a girl who

ran with thugs was accidentally killed when a stray bullet hit her in the back of the head while she sat on a swing in a neighborhood park while drinking cheap wine with friends.

The students he taught lived in mayhem and predation and poverty and noise and pleasure-seeking without looking downrange. They talked about getting rich. They said, “I ain’t like you other food stamp niggas. I’m coming back here and throwing Franklins around just to watch y’all jump.”

Or they believed ghetto lore. How many times had he heard about somebody’s uncle who told them about some company that would hire them with no skills necessary and provide good benefits?

They said things like, “How am I ever going to use social studies or whatever this class is. No Nazi ever did nothing to me. Why should I worry about all that?”

“You’re wrong,” John said to Rocco. “Whatever you believe with that kind of thinking, you’re wrong. A girl killed herself for some reason I can’t quite figure out, and I’m going to get to the bottom of it. I’m going to shut you down.”

Rocco laughed. John saw a gold tooth in the back of his mouth. He eyes, though, didn’t laugh. He shook his finger at John, as if he were a scolding elementary school teacher. “This is my livelihood, John. It is my domain. Do you have the means necessary? The will? Because I’m starting to believe, John, when it gets down to it, to the place and time when blood gets spilled, that you would rather be a woman than a man.”

That sat for a few beats.

“Now get the fuck out of here,” Rocco said.

John looked around and caught the attention of Rocco’s number two, now leaning against

the bar counter, who looked at him like a hound who had caught a scent.

“Get the fuck out of here or I break this bottle and stick it in your fucking neck.”

John walked through the restaurant, eyes forward, pulled the door open and once outside walked to the left. He wondered if he might die. He imagined Rocco releasing him like prey, hunting him down for sport and killing him, then leaving him in the curb to be pissed on by dogs.

He went to a tree away from the road, leaned against it with his shoulder for balance, and puked.

Rocco would kill him if he decided to. He had no doubt about that.

He walked to P Street and headed east to Dupont Circle where there were people who could eyewitness his streetside execution. On a parkbench near Dupont Circle’s empty water fountain basin, he scanned the area. He froze when an unseen skateboard ranger zoomed by from behind with a loud wave of wheels on cement. But no Rocco or Number Two in sight.

He hailed a cab to Union Station to catch the next Amtrak train, which he found out would be at 3:15 a.m. He nestled in the corner of a church-like pew, crossed his arms, and dreamed about falling into a pit.

## Chapter Twenty-five

“What happened to you?” Julie said.

“Didn’t have my coffee yet.”

She stepped back. “Love that yesterday’s clothes choice you decided on this morning.”

He sat down in a student desk. She looked at her watch. “You’ve got three and a half minutes.”

“Rocco took me into DC last night to meet his uncle. He wanted to school me. Julie, I’m in over my head.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll write it up. But the twenty-five words or less version is that Rocco is gunning for his uncle’s position down in DC, and he wants me to take over Taryn’s duties of funnelling girls to him.” He rattled on for a while about how he got from DC to Baltimore, how he had to take the light rail to Patapsco then take the 77 bus to school.

She touched a finger to her computer to get the screen to come up.

“Forty seconds left.”

“I was hoping for a sympathetic ear. And a cup of coffee.”

She walked over to him with a sweet smile. He returned it. She leaned forward and smacked him hard across the face. “Wake up, John Davidson.”

He put his hand to his face. “What was that for?”

She straightened and laughed. “I don’t really know. Whenever men start with that look-at-me, I’m-a-hero bullshit, it pisses me off. Get out of here. Write up last night’s events so I can get up to pitch. In the meantime, I have classes to teach.”

At lunch, he went into Althena Tremont’s office and shut the door.

She looked at him over the tops of her glasses.

“Son, you looked a little peaked.”

He told her he’d gone to DC with Rocco.

“Well, they got a saying in the south. If brains were leather, you wouldn’t have enough to saddle a June bug. You’re climbing right in it, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“You find out anything worth a nickel?”

“He’s arrogant. And there’s bad blood between his uncle and him.”

“Child, if that’s your treasure, you didn’t dig deep enough.”

“He wants to be liked. He wants some sort of social acceptance for what he does.”

“For pimping and getting underage girls to sell their bodies?”

“For offering a service that society demands and has demanded since the dawn of time.”

“Now that’s quite something. ‘And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.’ What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to find a way to give him some sort of social unacceptance.”

“I see.” She adjusted her glasses. “Keep me informed, as your assistant principal. But there’s information and too much information. Make sure you know the difference. Now get on. I’ve got some reports to write up.”

After he got home he napped on the couch. When he woke up, he wanted to talk to Rhonda. He wanted Rhonda to ask him over and cook dinner for him. He wanted Rhonda to listen then ask him to stay the night.

He texted her. *you around?*

She answered within thirty seconds. *no.*

He wrote up in fine detail yesterday’s events starting the moment he saw Rocco walk through the door of Jim’s Gym.

6:00 p.m. He weighed his phone in his hand. He called Carl Scholz, his lawyer and long ago colleague, at the office. Carl picked up.

“I’m at a crossroads, Carl. I’m not quite sure what I have.”

He told him about meeting with Rocco. Rocco admitted to him that he was a pimp. “And he wants to recruit me to help funnel girls to him. I think he’s planning on knocking off his uncle.”

“Send the recording of the entire meeting to my office by FedEx tomorrow.”

“I don’t have any recording of our meeting, Carl.”

“Precisely, John. You have nothing more than a he said, she said situation. Do you want my advice?”

“Yes.”



“Stop playing secret agent. Wash your hands of this Rocco character and return to your classroom. You have no business doing what you’re doing. You don’t know the first thing about being a one man vigilante committee. You’re not some...I don’t know...street fighter bringing this man to justice.”

“Carl, I--”

“You have decided to to another agency’s job for them, and without a doubt you are ignoring your duties as a teacher. In addition, when and if this Rocco guy is ever arrested, he will do his utmost to get you in as much trouble as he’s in.”

“What can he do?”

Carl mumbled something in German, then said, “I’ll tell you what he can do. He can survive. Vermin survive. Higher species get sacrificed. He can claim you trampled on his rights by stalking him. He can have one of his factotums ‘accidentally’ run over you when you’re walking through a store parking lot. He can have one of his girls claim that you made inappropriate advances on her. He can resuscitate this Taryn woman and have her go to the press and tell about your affair with her. There are a lot of things he can do.”

John knew Carl’s face turned red by this point. His eyes bulged.

“He knows how to survive. You are the goddamned boy in the bubble, John. You count on people’s good will. If you are someone he decides is in the way, he will squash you.”

“I’ve got to find out why that girl killed herself,” he said quietly. “I just do. I’ve got to shut down that group home. What Rocco’s doing is evil.”

“Get the authorities involved for Christ’s sake!”

“They were involved. They didn’t do anything.”

“Then you have nothing. You alert the authorities of your suspicions. You keep your ear out for what the girls in your school are saying. Then you bide your time. Meanwhile, get back to your classroom.”

“That’s it?”

“That is it. Keep me up to date. You’re maintaining a daily journal, yes?”

“Yes, on your advice. Another teacher knows what I’m doing.”

Carl cooled off and they talked a while longer about his twin boys, now thirteen years old. When this Latoya business was over, he promised himself while listening to Carl, he would spend more time with his step-daughter.

## Chapter Twenty-six

He walked through the doors of the group home, went down the hallway, and opened the door to her office. The light shone through spotless windows to the left. Again, he noticed the ordered binders in her dark wood bookcase, the immaculately clean conference table, the dusted figurines.

“You’re back again,” she said.

“I am,” he said with faked cheer.

She took his measure, then after a moment nodded at the artwork on the walls of her office.

“All of these lovely paintings,” she said, “were done by young people at various group homes over the years. I believe in the healing power of art. How it uplifts our spirits. I look at them during stressful moments of the day.” She pondered the paintings for a quiet moment.

“Please sit. Tea? I maintain an electric water kettle.” She reached behind and plugged it in.

“No thanks,” he said.

He listened while she small-talked. The increase in the number of broken families. The

school system not meeting the needs of the have nots. The lack of funding for the most desperate people.

“I can’t let it go that Latoya killed herself and no one seems to care,” he said. “If she had been memorialized properly, if I sensed that people felt badly about it, I wouldn’t have started any of this.”

“Have you come here to confess?” she said. “You’re being tragic.” She perched on her chair, hands atop the desk.

“Did you know that in our country teenage boys are five times more likely to commit suicide than girls? Just looked it up. I didn’t know that. I’m telling you,” he said, theatrically shaking his head, “something about this suicide business caught my attention.”

“You must press the police,” she said. “You must!” She blinked with bright bird’s eyes. Her mannish, tailored suit coat, and pale fingernail polish, and brushed back haircut allowed for perfect camouflage of efficiency.

“Well, I went to Taryn.”

“Ah,” she said, “Our idealist.” She narrowed her eyes. She flexed nostrils. “She and I talked after you visited right after Latoya’s death. She told me that you have burned out as a teacher. You’re in the business of punching your ticket, she said. She claimed that you were good in your day. I’ve no doubt.” Her eyes tracked him from a place of vibrating stillness.

“She told me you were running a prostitution ring through your group homes.”

She turned in her chair and poured hot water into a cup with tea bag. She brought the cup to her desk and set it on a warming disk. “You sure you wouldn’t like tea?”

He cocked his head and stared at her. These people, he thought. How can these people

function?

“No tea.”

Again she perched on the edge of her chair and watched him with now hooded eyes and a ferocious little tuck to her mouth.

“Taryn is less discreet than is good for her. What I do here, what my job entails is none of your business, Mr. Davidson. You have, what, fifteen years in as a teacher. I would mind my career.”

“A young girl commits suicide in your care and you see it as...”

“An unfortunate decision by a mentally disturbed child. Did you know that she’d been up to Sheppard Pratt twice in the past six months for five day in-patient treatments?”

“She must have been feeling under the weather prostituting herself and all.”

She sipped her tea. John noticed the fur of hair about her upper lip and along her jawline. “You and I will get nowhere jousting together. She was a liability to herself. The herd gets culled. She fell by the wayside. Life moves on.”

“God Almighty, what are you?”

“I’m a functionary,” she said. “I perform a task. Tasks. In the past five years I have raised one million dollars in scholarship money for my girls who want to go on to college. That’s ten times the amount raised by anyone else in the state of Maryland who occupies my position. And I teach the misfortunates who arrive at my doorstep how to shop, how to keep a checkbook, how to invest in mutual funds.”

“How to traumatize them for life by using their fifteen and sixteen year old bodies as merchandise.”

“You wouldn’t understand. For women, it’s different. They can turn it on and off. Women are tough. Men...*pff*” Again, the predatory, unblinking stare. “I want to be clear with you with your meddling do-gooderism. Your arrogance and sentimentality. Keep out of this. It’s bigger than you and me. You’re going to get yourself and your step-daughter hurt. Take some time this summer to work on your teaching skills.” She placed the cup back on the warmer, then tipped her head back and looked down her large nose at him. “I’ve noticed that many high school teachers stay arrested. You take on the characteristics of the age group you teach. My guess is that you’re not a joiner. You prefer stand back and watch and feel superior. But you have become a mediocrity.”

“I will have a cup of tea now,” he said.

“A wise ass remark,” she said, naming it, as if naming a kind of weed on the roadside.

“Do you see what I mean about needing to graduate from high school?”

He stood. Using her same controlled tone of objectivity, he said, “All of us arrested high school teachers, we can be rather zealous, just like teenagers.”

He left her office and walked down the buffed wood-floor hallway. He flipped his car keys around his first finger, opened the front door, and stepped into the bright, over-warm sunny day.

How in hell was he supposed to solve any of this?

## Chapter Twenty-seven

After leaving the group home, he drove to a shopping center parking lot off of Maiden Choice and Wilkens Avenue and found a spot shaded by the Giant grocery store. He stared at the landscaped embankment of grass with saplings planted in aprons of mulch and strapped with guy wires. He pulled his backpack from the well of the passenger's seat and unzipped the front pocket and reassured himself that he'd brought along his copy of the *I Ching*. He'd put his three special coins in an internal flapped pocket which he fingered to make sure they were there.

He looked at his watch. 3:15 p.m. He had a friend who lived in Adams Morgan in Washington DC who introduced him to an El Salvadoran restaurant with eight tables and a carryout window. He put the car in drive. He'd buy some pupusas and sit on the plaza on the corner of 18th and Columbia, not too far as the crow flies from Rocco's uncle's strip club, and people watch.

He had jumped rush hour traffic by thirty minutes or so, although traffic around Washington DC was little less than a controlled siege most times of the day. He should consult Chucky Jefferson, the custodian at school: traffic jams might be an Illuminati sponsored activity

to wear down the relentless good cheer of Americans going about their New World business.

He snaked his way up New York Avenue, as he had with Rocco, crowded with gas stations, liquor stores, row homes, schools, and intersected by crazy angled streets. In the distance to his left he could see the Capitol building, as if imposed by an invading nation as a set piece of colonial architecture. He took K Street, drove a while, then turned north on Connecticut and that quick entered the upper third of the economic pyramid. He drove along the visually spacious boulevard that is Connecticut Avenue, and went around Dupont Circle with its mass of youth occupying benches and green spaces. He parked in the outer reaches of Adams Morgan and walked six blocks along Columbia to 18th Street.

He found his El Salvadoran restaurant which had expanded into the adjacent building and now catered to the casually elegant. DCers reminded him of a tankful of tropical fish, the predatory rankings of which eluded him, but how bountiful they were, how colorful, how aggressively they displayed. To be in one's thirties and have found a station as a reward for years of striving and be on the brink of a promotion... What a heady life-era that must be.

He stood by the hostess lectern and looked into a restaurant occupied by the beautiful and felt his mood downtilt as he considered the one thousand bad decisions he'd made in life. These expensively clothed, cutting-eyed people in front of him walked the jungle of who's in and who's out, of rising and falling, all the while knifing each other in the back to find favor. It's what humans did, have always done, will always do, and had he held himself back from the real game by becoming a public school teacher?

A stunning El Salvadoran beauty cradling menus in the crook of her arm approached after entering the dining room from the kitchen. Heads turned, men and women both. She smiled at



him and for the life span of a shooting star, he was chosen. Had he become a lawyer and wore a \$2,500 hand finished wool suit with necktie loosened for post-work prowling, the shooting star moment might have become a starry nighttime embracing them on their long, life-journey together.

She said, “Just one?”

He decided to stay rather than order out.

“Yes,” he said. He looked over her shoulder. The Rottweiler face of a cook, doubtless her father, peered out at him through the food pickup window. In the armor of a \$2,500 suit, he might grab her hand during a moment of father’s distraction and their illicit first night together would be more delicious still knowing papa would be out hunting for them.

She walked him to the table closest to the emergency exit. “This is the best place for one. From here, you can watch all the peoples come and go.”

Did she take a quick glance at his worn Reeboks? What did she think of the backpack he had hiked on his shoulder?

“Thank you.” A waitress came to take his order, then he was left alone. He retrieved his *I Ching* and coins and waited until any attention anyone might be giving him ebbed. Before throwing the coins, he wrote his question. *I need clarity on my situation. What should I be considering as I move forward with the Latoya suicide? Who cared about divination.* The *I Ching* helped with strategic assessments.

His salad arrived. Yes, he would like another beer.

Julie Wang came from nowhere and sat down across from him.

“Mind if I join you?” she asked. “I see you’re consulting the *I Ching* again.” She waved

the waitress back. "I'm starving."

"Julie," he said. He forked a bite of salad. "When did you begin stalking me?"

"You didn't see that guy leave in a huff about five minutes ago?"

"No."

"It's a shame. He was cute. He wanted me to get a tattoo with him. It was supposed to seal our undying commitment to one another. God, we're a primitive people."

She had a boyfriend? A sharp spasm squeezed his chest.

"You been together very long?" he managed.

"Depends on what long means to you. The important thing is that we've just started being untogether."

He laughed.

"I told him tattoos are a desecration." She glanced toward the front door.

"Not piercings?"

"It's different."

"How many earrings?" He pointed with his fork.

"Seven." She touched them, up the curl of her right ear. "And three on this one."

The waitress arrived. "What are you having?" Julie said to him, but didn't wait for an answer. "I'll have what he's having. No salad."

He put down his fork. "I'll wait."

"Don't. Tell me again how do you know about the *I Ching*," she said.

"I took an elective in graduate school on Chinese history. The professor showed a few of us interested students how it worked. I feel rude eating in front of you."

“My father throws the coins almost every day. Ma ma? Not so much. She’s from Nebraska. Go ahead and eat. I had my appetizer before Bozo departed.”

“I don’t recognize you without your bike helmet.”

“Hah,” she said. “I might go for a midnight ride tonight. Get that guy out of my system. Let me see your question.” She chuckled her fingers. “Hand it over.”

“No,” he kidded. “Private. Very deep.”

“Get over it,” she said. She pushed her hand through her short, raven black hair. It flopped back into place like the fur on a pelt.

Their food came.

“This is my first time here,” she said. “What are these?”

“Pupusas.”

She cut into one with her fork and ate. “Good. Good-good.” She nodded.

“We’ll get to the *I Ching* consultation, but I’ve got to ask. Why are you down here?”

“That guy,” she hitchhike gestured while she ate. “We met through mutual friends. His father’s somebody important in defense procurement. They moved to DC from the west coast a few years ago. We were oil and water, but it was a lot of fun. I loved fighting with him.”

“What’d you two argue about?”

“No.” She raised a bunched fist. “Fight-fight. We beat the stink off each other. He wasn’t afraid to throw a punch at a girl. Good man. Most guys would puss out on me. Last week we tumbled down the front steps of his home then went at it like hillbillies in a mud wrestle right in the front yard. Somebody called the cops.”

He rubbed his chin.

“I don’t like punks.”

They ate and talked shop. Finished, they ordered coffee and split a semita, a coffee cake made with guava.

“So you blew that guy off. What, you drive down?”

“No, I was going to hold my tongue until we got back to Baltimore, then tell him he’s been ejected from the mother ship, but I saw you over here with your copy of the *I Ching* and no woman on the horizon. I figured I could get you to take me home.”

“How do you know no woman?”

“You weren’t looking around. And besides, even you with your typical disastrous fashion choices wouldn’t choose to look like such a spud if a woman were in the picture. You’re still dressed in your school clothes.”

“I’m in disguise.”

He sipped his coffee and cleared his throat. She watched him, hands on the edge of the table.

The waitress came by to fill their cups.

“*I Ching* time. Let’s get to it,” she said.

She reached across and grabbed the book. She looked at the front and back covers, stopped to read about the author, then flipped through pages back to front.

“My father met Minford in Australia one time. He said he’d gotten too used to the Wilhelm version for him to change, but he loved Minford’s translation of *The Art of War*.”

“He doesn’t read it in Chinese?”

“He can but he came to America when he was nine or ten, and his parents pushed English

on him.” She read his question which he’d written down on a half sheet of notebook paper.

“What do you mean, what should you be considering about the Latoya suicide?”

“I forgot if I wrote in my shared journal that Taryn gave me two names. The executive director of the group homes, Ms. Kaufer, and the reading specialist, Ms. Wentles. I confronted Kaufer today right before I came down here.”

She fingered the gold dragon pendant at her neck.

“But there’s something...,” he said. I know it’s there, something behind the scenes that’s gripping these people. Kaufer told me me to keep away from it. That it was bigger than us. That my step-daughter and I would get hurt. How the hell does she know about Yvette?”

He sat back and looked around the restaurant. Paranoia rattled through him. Were there any nearby people who seemed to be faking jolly time as diners and, instead, listened to Julie and him?

She watched him look around. She switched places and joined him on his side of the table so that she could scan the restaurant.

“Oh, shit,” she said.

She pointed at the the glass paneled front door. A young man entered. He spotted her sitting with John and side-stepped around tables in the crowded dining room.

He pulled up a chair. “I was an asshole. I’m sorry.”

John figured him as southern California. Maybe an Ultimate Frisbee champion way back in his more lean-bodied youth. Here he was, late twenties and going bald.

Her eyes glistened. He’d seen that look when she zeroed in on a student who decided be disrespectful to her, the small framed, good looking Asian-American woman who might have

struck the misguided youth as passive. The student always came out of their exchange looking as if he'd been kicked in the stomach.

“Yes, you were,” she said, “an asshole. And I am quite sure that you’re sorry. I would be, too, if I were you. You got a taste of something with me that Cindy or Brittany couldn’t give you. Jeffrey, doll, you are now the past tense.”

“Look,” he said. “I’m trying to be a better person.”

“You are,” she said. “It’s too bad that with all that effort you’re still a dick. We are no longer a we.”

He put his face in his hands and started crying.

“No,” she commanded. “Get up right now and leave. You *do not* have permission to embarrass yourself in front of me.”

He cleared his throat and looked toward the front door. Faces of patrons blossomed around them. He hesitated.

From an unidentified restaurant patron came, “Jeffrey, honey, get up and leave.”

People laughed. Jeffrey shuffled away with eyes to the floor, shoulders slumped, hands hanging straight down. A few beats after the front door closed, another voice said, “Jeffrey, come back! We miss you!”

More laughter.

“You know,” she said. “If he had pushed me over in the chair and started wrestling, I would have respected that. Guys crying? That’s a no-no with me.”

“I’m mentally bookmarking that.”

“There is no disaster greater than not knowing what is enough.”

“Okay, sensei.”

“You need to refine your question. Remember, you did this once. You want to think about the next stage.”

“How about, *How should I proceed going forward while investigating Latoya’s suicide?*”

“Better. Cleaner. Now throw the coins. Let’s see what you come up with this time.

Hexagram 23. Pulling Apart.

She looked over the the Judgment. ““This is a largely negative Hexagram dealing with a situation of critical danger,”” she read. She skimmed. Continued: ““Yin Energy creeps its way steadily up to the Top...The Mountain, which should tower high above, is here “resting” on the Earth. Plainly it has been in some way stripped or overturned.””

“What’s it telling me?” he said.

“Everything’s out of whack.” She kept her eyes on the book. “Things are collapsing, being pulled apart. Right here. ‘This is a difficult time, a time of crisis.’” She shook her head. “You threw a six for the fourth place, so we’ll read the commentary on the line then see what this Hexagram morphed into with the yin line turning into a yang. ‘Disaster is imminent. Yang is annihilated. The Tao of Steadfastness is destroyed.’”

“That tells the tale, doesn’t it?”

“Sure does.”

“The group home which supposed to act like a shelter, a place of refuge, and it betrayed its trust. Negative influences rose up and destroyed it.”

“And it’s telling you that you better be aware of how dangerous the situation is.”

“I think I finally am.” He shifted and pointed to the words beneath the heading On the Image. “Disaster looms.”

“Okay, the yin line becomes yang, so we get--” She flipped to the back of the book to look for the upper and lower trigrams. “We get Hexagram 35. Advance. Fire above, earth below. Let me see.”

She mumble read while he looked around. Then she read aloud the commentary beneath the Judgement and the Image. The name of the Hexagram, she read, might have had to do with “a high noble charged with pacification after the Zhou conquest.” She continued with the long passage.

“Now here we go. ‘That which is False is dispersed: Truth is preserved...Sincerity enhances illumination.’”

“If I do it the right way everything will work out?” he said.

“No. The *I Ching* asks us to empty ourselves of our designs and listen to the deep depths where the Tao offers up the right path. My reading is, don’t get ahead of yourself. Follow the light of what is right and good. Stay away from any notions of revenge or trying to be a hero.” She looked to the book. “Flow generates Illumination. Illumination generates Flow.”

“I want everyone of those guys put in a dungeon.”

“I know you do, but maybe that’s not your role. Don’t overstep.”

He caught the waitress’s eye and indicated with a pouring motion that they needed more coffee. Then he attempted to turn his attention to the middle distance, but he glanced at her hands and bare arms. She was only ten years younger than he.

“I thought Rocco was the main guy,” he said. “But he’s not. I know he’s not. Could



Kaufer be the real muscle? Then who's above her?"

"Some sort of Board of Directors?" Julia said. "Maybe your one guy is really a group."

"What about the police?" he said. "Wouldn't they have to be in on it?"

"I don't think so," she said. Her cell phone rang. "Look who's calling." She held it up so John could see the picture of the departed Jeffrey.

"Kudos for persistence," John said.

"Give me a minute here." She went into her settings, thumbed her screen numerous times. "There. I've blocked his number. Damn, we're friends on Facebook." Screen tapping and sliding. "Okay, now he's banished from my Facebook world." She worked her keyboard with her thumbs. "I'm right now sending out a message to everyone on my team to excommunicate him from their lists. He's got stalker potential, but I'll deal with that as it comes up."

"I'll reread everything tonight." He held up the book. "It's time to go into my bat cave and ponder." He picked up the coins and notebook paper and packed them away. "I'm tired. I need to get going. You coming with me?"

"I'm a damsel in distress. Of course I'm coming with you."

On the Baltimore-Washington Parkway he again brought up possible police involvement. She said she didn't think it possible. Cops get a bad rap, she said. They're pretty standup people.

They talked about school, but in a back mind-room he kept thoughts whirring about who might be the person pulling the levers. John didn't know enough about CEO Kaufer's world. He might try to call Taryn again, though she was ready to put a hit out on him.

Julie lived in Catonsville, a few miles from The Alternative World.

*The Note/Lavey*

In front of her townhouse, she said, “That was a lot of fun.”

“It was,” he agreed.

She shut the car door. Abruptly, he thought.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

“Chucky straightened up the mop closet. Yes he did. He straightened up the mop closet.”

He looked at himself in the mirror above the utility sink.

“Chucky likes to wear a Ravens hat. Chucky likes his Ravens hat.”

Chucky Jefferson sat in the swivel chair whose battered and split faux leather covers had been repaired by generations of duct tape. He pulled the clipboard from the hook bored into painted cinderblock walls and read through his duties from 6:30 till 7:30 a.m. He would return to unhook the same clipboard to check on duties from 7:30 to 8:30, then 8:30 to 9:30, then do the same throughout the day.

The radio, on a shelf above the clipboard, dialed to a talk station, had not been turned off in the decade he had begun working at The Alternative School. Every morning he tried to make sense of what they said, but their words knotted up in his brain.

The chief engineer said, “Damned Democrats make a sport of ruining this country. These guys on the radio are the only ones who know what’s what.”

Chucky said to him, “Illuminati.”

At 2:15 he rolled his yellow cart to a stop outside of Mr. Davidson's room.

He entered with his dry mop and snaked the head beneath desks and computer tables while Mr. Davidson sat staring into his monitor.

He stopped and stared at Mr. Davidson, who looked up from his computer.

"Hi Chucky," he said.

"Mr. Davidson," he said. He coughed in his hand. Took his hat off. Scratched his scalp with his thumb. "You ever wonder what the government is up to. The government is up to?"

"What's it up to?" Davidson rubbed his eyes.

Chucky took a step toward him. "Illuminati."

Once in a while, Davidson entertained Chucky's Illuminati theories. Chucky seemed revved up today.

"Chucky, I've never been able to figure out what exactly Illuminati is."

Chuck grinned and nodded his head. "They do that. Confuse people. Confuse people!"

"You know what I think? I think the government gets people to believe in Illuminati so that the government can do whatever it wants. I think Illuminati is a front." He winked to let Chucky in on his joke.

"That's what Illuminati wants. That's what they want!" He nodded numerous times.

"Illuminati." He put his mop handle to shoulder to free his hands. "It's big. Big."

Davidson leaned back in his chair. He appreciated Chucky and often told him so. The man never missed a day of work. Took pride in mopping floors and scrubbing desks free of graffiti. Davidson had never heard him complain.

"Chucky, have you ever met a member of Illuminati? Or knew someone who did?"

“You don’t meet those people, Mr. Davidson.” He widened eyes. “They’re in the shadows. Shadows.” He laughed and shook his head. “Chucky doesn’t meet Illuminati.” He inwardly scolded himself. His mother told him not to call himself Chucky in front of other people.

“Is Mr. Conklin Illuminati?” Again Davidson shot him a wink to let him know he was kidding.

“Rich man, Mr. Conklin. Rich man.”

“Well,” Davidson said. He touched his mouse to bring up his screen. “Like all of us working stiffs, Mr. Conklin isn’t rich in the larger scheme of things. He might seem rich.”

Davidson said to himself, turn off the teacher noise. Let the man talk. No doubt, one hundred fifty or sixty thousand a year qualified as rich to Chucky.

He smiled his round-faced, gap-toothed smile and said, “You got to think big, Mr. Davidson. Big.” He got on all fours and pushed his shaggy headed dry mop back into a corner beneath a computer table. “Big.” John heard him say.

Chucky came up for air, red-faced, large-eyed. “Illuminati big, Mr. Davidson. Illuminati big. He’s got properties all over the place. Money coming in all ways. All ways. All ways.”

“What kind of businesses?”

“Property. That’s his business. He’s on the phone talking to people all the time. All the time.”

A pause lingered. Chucky rose up and down on the balls of his feet holding onto the dry mop handle.

“Plenty of money. Plenty of money. Illuminati.”

“I should get him to tell me how he does it, right?”

John glanced at his computer. He wished to square up his lesson plan, grade papers, send out emails alerting parents to failing students or celebrating successes, then straighten up his room and be off.

“New car. New home in Ocean City.”

“Mr. Jefferson, how do you know he has a home in Ocean City?”

He opened his mouth and his cloudy gray eyes widened. He rose on the balls of his feet.

“Chucky went up there with Mr. Conklin to clean up the moldy basement. Moldy basement.” He heard himself use Chucky. “I was team leader. Got paid under the table. Got paid under the table.”

“Really. When did you go up there.”

“In February. February.”

“I bet it was cold.”

“He’s got a pickup truck, too. A pickup truck so he can haul supplies. He owns a hat shop on the boardwalk. A hat shop on the boardwalk.”

“Chucky, are you sure about all that?”

“Chucky’s sure!” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Removed his hat, scratched the top of his head with the bill, replaced it. “Mr. Conklin gave me this Raven’s hat. This Raven’s hat. No team like the Ravens. Brand new hat.”

“It’s a nice hat, Chucky. It sure is.” John looked at his computer screen hoping that Chucky would take the hint.

Chucky bounced up and down on the balls of his feet as if determined to set a record for

bobs-in-an-hour.

“Okay, Chucky. I’ve got some things to do before I head home.”

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, Mr. Davidson. Okay, Mr. Davidson.” He looked around the room. “Okay, Mr. Davidson.”

John turned his attention to a the graded papers to his left. He recorded the grades on web-based software. He didn’t sense that Chucky had registered the hint to vamoose.

But after a while he stopped his bouncing and finished cleaning the room with special diligence. He went to hands and knees with a scraper for stepped on gum. He wiped down the computer keyboards with a micro-fiber cloth. He dry-mopped the room twice.

As he left the room, he touched the bill of his cap like a gentleman custodian. He couldn’t suppress a grin. “Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Davidson. Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Davidson.”

He would try to remember to ask Ms. Tremont about Conklin’s side businesses, if there were such things.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

He lifted the analog clock from his nightstand and pressed the LED button. Two o'clock in the morning. Popped out of sleep again.

Right now, right this moment, somebody might be shaking the shoulder of one of those girls, getting her up out of her school night's sleep, and putting her into a cab.

Kaufer, the Executive Director, told him she managed how many group homes? Nine, ten?

He went down to his kitchen and poured skim milk over a bowl of cornflakes then went to the dark front room. He had to get this thing working for him. Choose between the Executive Director or Rocco then make life crazy uncomfortable for whichever one. Don't let up.

Either that or back off like Carl suggested and live to fight another day.

His phone rang as he finished his cereal. She came out of the gate shooting.

"You started this shit, John. Now it's time for clean up."

"Rocco start this shit," he shot back. "You did. Your CEO did."



“This shit with me. You took advantage of me when I was seventeen years old. I was a teenager, you motherfucker. I don’t care how I appeared to you. I wasn’t the thing you saw. I was an abused little girl, from a family of crazies. Now you need to do something right by me. Get them out of my life.”

“Them? Who’s them?”

“All of those creeps who call me in the middle of the night or text message me or send me emails.”

“Is Rocco the father of your child?”

Stillness, the stillness of a park at night after you hear your car door shut and you look up hoping to see stars through the haze of city lights.

“No,” she said. “I sometimes wish he were. I can handle Rocco.”

“Who’s the father?”

“John, I am so afraid.” It was the voice of a young child, a little girl, a change so dramatic that he wondered if she had a niece with her whom she put on the line.

“Taryn?” he asked.

“I can’t breathe,” the little girl said. “John, I can’t breathe.”

“I’m calling 911 in Atlanta for you.”

“No,” she said. “I’ll get in trouble. Just stay with me. Just hold my hand.”

“I’m here,” he said. “I won’t go anywhere. I’m here.” In a soft, grownup’s voice, he told her that she was safe now. No one could hurt her, but he knew it wasn’t true. He knew that he had put her in jeopardy, that he had put himself in jeopardy by not paying attention. He remembered hearing a psychologist who spoke at meeting of educators about how modern times

forced the adult world of responsibilities and simply the adult View of Things (as he projected on his PowerPoint) onto children which had no business being part of their business. “We want them to be mini adults yet children. We don’t know how to let them be children. Yet, ironically, we extend their childhood into their twenties. We traumatize them, we do, and we’re left with alien beings who don’t know how to be people. Watch out for them,” he implored. He stood atop a table to grab everyone’s attention and said, “*Watch out for them*. If you take anything away from today’s workshops and lectures it should be those four words.”

“I’m here,” he said to her. “Are you there?”

“I’m shaking. I’m scared. Take care of me.”

He squeezed the phone and whispered to her that she was okay. That no one would hurt her.

“Oh, shit,” she said.

“Taryn!” he said. “What is it?”

He heard the phone drop onto a table, the phone line still open. An exchange of voices.

Who was the adult?

She picked up. “Hello?” she said.

“Taryn.”

“Who is this?”

“John. We were talking. You said you were scared. Are you all right? Who’s that with you?”

“My son just came into my room.”

“Everything all right?”

“Yes. Yes it is,” she said, now the in control adult.

“I’m glad you called.”

“Are you? Just...just help me out, would you? Now, I’ve got to go.” She hung up.

### Chapter Thirty

Next day after the caravan of yellow buses left the lot, he spotted Julie in the hallway and followed her up to her room. He sat in a student's chair next to her at her work station. He told her he planned to drive down to DC and tell the uncle that Rocco intended to dispense with him and take over his patch.

"The uncle is a bad man, John."

"He is. He's a primitive. Some guy who walked right off a cave painting."

"A person like that, he'll hurt you, kill you maybe, if you cross him."

"I don't have a choice. I've got to do something about these guys trolling for girls. I've got to act."

"Why? Why not leave it alone?"

He told her his shameful story of abandoning the woman who was raped.

"That thing has sat in me like a tumor for years, but you know what, doing the right thing by Latoya stands on its own. I'm about sick of my smallness. My mediocrity."

"John."

“I’ve decided I need to take care of my backyard. I can do that.”

They sat at her cramped, triangle-topped work station. She’d flipped open the sketchpad, rested her head against left hand, propped elbow on table top, and drew a picture of John riding a steed, a pennon on his lance, charging forward into medieval glory with a large bull’s-eye on his back punctured by a group of arrows.

She held out her drawing, examined it, smiled.

“Why are you telling me this?” she said.

“I want to give you a copy of my house key. I wrote down numbers of people I need you to call if things go wrong. I left them on the kitchen counter. My lawyer friend’s number is one of them. I’ve kept him up to speed. Call the cops, too.”

“When do I call the cops?”

“Tomorrow. Noon? I don’t know. Something like that.”

“You sure there’s no other way?”

“No. I’m ready. As the kids would say, *Been ready*. I’m heading down to DC.”

He drove by the uncle’s bar where he and Rocco had gone a couple of nights ago. The sun sparkled. The bright blue late afternoon sky. A mild wind blew humidity away. He wished he could wander around the city, go up to the restaurant where he ran into Julie and read the Washington Post.

He parked his car five blocks away from the bar in case he needed to sprint away in a fury, hide, and sneak up on his car later on.

He checked his watch before he walked in. 4:45. Inside, he saw the uncle sitting with two others in a booth in a nearly empty restaurant.

The lights of the stage were off. The place had the soggy feel of off-hours bars. The yeasty odor of spilled beer hung in the air.

John marched across the room and slipped into the booth with the uncle and his two heavy-faced comrades.

The uncle almost smiled at Davidson's audacity.

"I've got to tell you something," Davidson said. "I think it should be in private."

None of the three moved. They seemed to John to become more still, more stone-like in their silence.

He waited, then plunged ahead.

"Rocco is trying to recruit me to help him find girls for the business up in Baltimore." He felt like a tattling gradeschooler. "His intention is to push you out and take over down here. He talked a lot about you. Said you like baseball. He'll buy you season tickets and put you in a condominium down here somewhere so you can go to the games with your buddies while he runs the show."

The other night, he thought of the man as a past-his-prime middle aged guy. Propped up on his throne only because of the thick-necks around him. Sitting across from him, Davidson saw his strong chest and built-up arms. The man vibrated with a boxer's power. Davidson realized he had made a mistake. It didn't matter if he was "right." He had violated a code of the tribe. An outsider never speaks badly of an insider.

His ears rang. He needed to flee.

“Why the fuck should I believe you?”

The uncle had a habit of leaving his mouth open and ajar. He touched his tongue, which had the coloration of an oyster, to his front lower teeth.

“The fuck you come down here and make trouble.” The pupils of his watery eyes were empty, like drilled holes. He breathed through his mouth and stared at John as if at a moronic teenager who tried to rob him.

The uncle nodded to one of his bristly faced thugs. The guy stood.

“The fuck out of my life.”

John lowered his eyes like a humbled novice ready to accept punishment from a Superior. He slid out of the booth, eyes cast down, and as he stood he stomped down hard on top of the thug’s foot. He spun and dashed the length of the restaurant, through the kitchen door, skidded around the prep area and shouldered through the screen door held closed by a hook and eye.

Outside, he slipped and fell on the cobblestones of the alley. Two dishwashers smoked weed near a dumpster and looked at him like raccoons caught rummaging.

Instead of running alongside the building, which would put him a few feet away from the front door, he looked down-alley.

“Can I get to the street that way?”

The weed smokers paid him no mind. One pontificated with foot on turned over milk crate.

He stumbled, ran to the narrow opening between the back of a building and the side of another. He had to turn, so narrow was the passage, but he could see a vertical bar of light thirty

feet away: his escape. He scooted sideways, his clothes rubbing. He knocked his cheek on a brick jutting out from the building. He scraped his chin. If he could get to the light, he would be safe. Thank God, he parked his car many blocks away, outside the radius of the thug and his buddies who might patrol for him. He heard breathing and grunting behind him.

He arched his back to free his head so he could turn and look. The thug whose foot he'd stomped on was an arm's distance away, sideways, reaching for him, clanking at him with what looked like an extended police baton which he had to reach over his head with his right hand.

The opening between the buildings narrowed. The man hit at him with the baton. John felt pain zing through his shoulder. The buildings were canyon walls. He scraped himself through. The man grabbed at him. John's shoe got stuck.

"You little prick," he growled. He launched himself sideways in a desperate grab and caught the neckline of John's light jacket with three fingers. John wriggled like a fish on a line.

He tried to pull away, but the jacket choked his neck. The man's hands grabbed at his head.

John managed to unbutton the top button. He crouched as best he could, raised his arms, and the jacket slipped away and off of him.

The man's thickness wedged him tight. He flicked the baton. It clanged off the brick wall above John's head and clattered to the ground. John edged forward toward the bar of light, tearing his pants at the knees, scraping the skin of his elbows and arms.

The buildings levered inward. He couldn't go one more inch. He managed to turn his head and saw the thug retreating. He pointed at John.

"You piece of shit. I'll get your ass."



The street was five feet away. He had come this far and got stuck. He twisted and tried to drop down, but he couldn't bend his knees in the space. He looked up. A line of bricks, some architectural anomaly, jutted two inches out of the wall, just beyond his reach. He put his foot to the opposite wall and in a creaking, desperate push hiked himself up. He finger-grabbed them like a rock climber, and hung, stretched, thinned, and hand marched himself a centimeter at a time toward the lighted street. Close to the edge of the building, he freed his leg, then hip, then pushed his body out. He dropped, rolled, found his legs.

A few pedestrians eyed him with heads straight away as if he were some unpleasantness,—a crook, a homeless nutter—meant for someone else to take care of.

He looked around wondering if the uncle's crew would come thundering toward him from the periphery. Nothing. He bolted down 23rd Street to N then over to 25th and finally down near M street. He crouched beside a car and waited to see if they had followed him. Still nothing. He unlocked the car and while driving away checked and rechecked his mirrors.

### Chapter Thirty-one

He had stirred up the crazies and what, now go home and plan lessons?

“Hi,” he said. “I told you I’d call. No need to contact the federal authorities.”

“What happened?”

“Rocco and his uncle need counseling. That’s a dysfunctional family,” he said.

Julie laughed. “I guess so.”

“The uncle wasn’t happy.” He swung toward the Baltimore-Washington Parkway from New York Avenue and glanced at the sign that implored drivers to use hands-free devices. He switched phone from left ear to right. “I told him Rocco was after his turf.”

“He believe you? What’d he say?”

“These boys are old world. You don’t betray the family, and that’s what Rocco did by talking to me, an outsider. Rocco’s such an arrogant son of a bitch that he gave me stuff I could throw in the uncle’s face, thinking I wouldn’t violate our bonding moments.”

John continued to check all mirrors while he talked on the phone.

“Rocco wants to get me into the business. Help him Americanize it. He should be a CEO

of his own company, I'm telling you. He's got the vision thing down."

"I know this isn't politically correct," Julie said, "but why do these depraved creeps have a constant stream of girls joining up?"

"I wish I knew."

"I mean it, John. I know some of them are young, but are there that many dumbass females in the world that they go looking for love from guys like Rocco? Seriously?"

"I'm shrugging."

"If an older man put his hands on me when I was sixteen, my father would have shot him. I'm not kidding."

"I guess the question is, where are the fathers?"

"Maybe that is the real question. What are you doing now?"

"I'm on the B-W Parkway. I want to go by the Niner, Rocco's hangout. My gut tells me that Rocco's going to make a move of some sort, and I want to be on the scene. Even if it's just to witness."

"You don't think you should alert the police?"

"What am I going to tell them? 'I know about some bad guys who are might want to do something bad?'" He wanted to ask her to come with him. But what if the tables were turned. Would he go with her?

## Chapter Thirty-two

By the time he got to Niner on Washington Boulevard in Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore, it was 10:00 p.m. He was usually in bed.

As he turned into the broken asphalt of the parking adjacent to the bar, he saw Rocco driving away in his BMW. Under a flash of streetlight illumination, John saw the hooked nose sidekick.

He thought he'd sidle up next to them and shout that he wanted to talk, *now!*, but Rocco sped away southwest on Washington Boulevard. John followed as best he could. Rocco gunned it along the too-fast roadway, past McDonald's and Burger King, past storage facilities, and strip malls advertising the flea market. Past Caton Avenue toward Arbutus. Past Lansdowne Road and the Super Wal-Mart anchoring the mall of box stores and acreage of parking spaces. In the nighttime nakedness of the commercial signs and houses bordering the road in disrepair or unoccupied, all of it seemed primitive and haphazard, like the encampment or settlement around a dry oil well.

He followed along until the four lane road left strip malls and fast food restaurants and

became crowded by trees and gravel shoulders. The regular hum of driving settled in, interrupted by blasts of trucks and cars whipping by in the opposite direction.

Rocco turned his BMW into a driveway and John shot past and surveyed the area the best he could. He made a U-turn a half-mile up and drove past again though a car crowded him from behind, and he went faster than he wanted. On this second pass, he could make out a straight ahead driveway that ended in a circle in front of a two story house surrounded by trees and a path that led around to the back. Again he went down Washington Boulevard a way then found a parking lot to a closed Mom and Pop grocery store and sat and wondered what to do.

He pulled out his phone and looked to it as if it were some homing device for all things lost, such as men in their late thirties with two divorces and a flatlined career. How did it happen that once upon a time a person was young and had friends then over the years friends became acquaintances then not even that? He had already called Julie once this evening, and Rhonda made it clear that she wanted to stay removed from his drama. Should he call his lawyer? Ms. Tremont? Borke? He laughed. Of everyone on his contact list, Borke would probably be the single person he could rely on to stay on the line and talk to him.

He swung into the road then drove the quarter mile then turned right into the driveway as Rocco did. He circled and parked his car and aimed it toward Washington Boulevard so that if necessary he could bolt. He grabbed the flashlight from the glovebox.

He walked around back so that he could get a sense of the place. A spotlight on the wall of the house illuminated a large backyard. A stainless steel barbecue grill was parked on the patio, and slate stepping stones made a path to the sliding glass back doors. Along the border of the half acre back lawn lay a trail into a neighboring woods. He'd aroused the suspicions of a

large dog somewhere which barked aggressively until deciding that the threat assessment was minimal.

Davidson peeked into the back door and could see that the front room was lighted as was the kitchen. A back room was dark. He walked across then followed the dirt footpath leading away from the house. He saw two other houses through the opening in the trees.

He waited until darkness folded upon him before clicking on his flashlight. A spring-fed creek widened and formed a small pond. Stone benches and a two person gazebo down the path were placed at the edge of it. He strobed the flashlight around the cathedral space beneath the reaching branches above him.

One could sit and listen to frogs or birds. Perhaps watch deer, with their delicate, hesitant feet and hyper-vigilant muscular stillness, approach and lean down like suspicious, escaped prisoners and drink.

A couple of paths led in different directions. He clicked off his flashlight and walked back toward the house to which Rocco had led him. He went around to the front and thought, get in your car and leave. Whatever you need to do with Rocco do it later. There's no need to jump into anything right now. Go back home and think about the situation. Isn't there a better avenue to take than going up to God knows whose house this is and knocking on the door just to see who would answer it? Then say, "Oh, by the way, I'm here to see Rocco."

In front, he glanced over at a couple of cars parked to the side, one of which was a Cadillac Escalade. He tried to peer in, but the darkened windows prevented. It seemed like the same model and color as the one he saw driven by whoever it was who jacked him up behind the school building.

The front door opened. He ducked behind the SUV, kept low, and watched. Out came Rocco wearing his leather coat followed by his sidekick. He could see their hollowed forms against the light that came from the front door.

He looked at the man in the doorway with forearm on the doorjamb.

Rocco's sidekick walked down the porchsteps then leaned against the BMW while Rocco turned to the man, hands in pockets, and tipped back on his heels.

"I don't like drama," the man said. "Take care of it."

Davidson felt ill in the bottom of his stomach. Of course he recognized the body language and hair at collar length and the voice.

Rocco slammed his car door and stepped hard on the gas, shooting gravel, then made an aggressive left turn at the end of the driveway.

Before the man could shut the house door, John stepped from behind the car.

"I'll be goddamned," Davidson said.

Conklin wore a tailored deerskin shirt with dark piping and a necklace with a turquoise stone and animal claws. He packed a holstered firearm.

"It's you," Davidson said. "You're behind this."

Conklin cocked his head and looked at John from a place of complete calm and control, as if in sympathy. "You show disrespect."

"I'm calling the cops."

A moment of peaceful silence settled between them before Conklin said, "You go right ahead. How about you let me call them. I'll get them here faster than you can."

Take him up on it, he thought. See what happens.

“Join me. Right now, we are brothers sharing the same mother Earth. Let’s not fight. Maybe we can come to some agreement. I’m going inside. Come in. I will to tell you a few things about how the world works.”

Conklin let the screen door slap shut behind him. Davidson stepped up onto the wood planks of the porch and heard the thump of his footfalls, and he wondered if it would be the last time he heard such an everyday sound. Conklin carried a gun. Davidson looked back at the car. It seemed some archetypal image, a car parked to the side on a gravel driveway, as if the owner had slipped the bonds of everyday, civilized life to reassure himself of an essential thing inside him by a walk in the woods.

The opportunity to turn from Conklin and the sorry depredations of what lay behind a young girl’s suicide compelled him to pause. No one would be the wiser if he left right now. Rhonda would understand. She knew his real work right was to write his book. Julie would understand.

And he did have much to give young people, to teach them, he did. So many of the students at The Alternative School had been abandoned by parents, grandparents, relatives, and guardians too busy managing their own sorrows and hardships to be present. Teachers made a difference in those young people’s lives, even teachers who had become war weary and disheartened and mediocre. He knew how to teach. He had just forgotten himself for a while.

He turned his back to Conklin’s house. He would leave. He looked to the night sky obstructed by the web of elm tree branches.

But the girl he had abandoned in the barn so many years ago being raped, when he did nothing. What about her?



He turned and opened the front door and stepped into a hallway which smelled of incense.

“I smudged the house with sage about an hour ago,” Conklin called from another room. He appeared and walked down the hallway pointing to John’s right. “Sit in there, on the couch.”

At the bottom of the staircase, his wrist on the newel post, Conklin called upstairs. “Analyn, get down here.” He whistled a ditty through his teeth. A girl, sixteen or seventeen years old, came down in a silk robe and slippers. “Get us some beers,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Conklin,” she said, eyes downcast.

He strode into the sitting room and sat across from Davidson in the large, stuffed chair.

“She’s a Thai girl,” he said. He took off his holster and placed it with the inserted gun on the end table next to the round base of a lamp. He glanced at Davidson then took out the gun and looked at it, barrel pointed to the ceiling. “This here’s a solid piece of handiwork. HK P2000. Thirteen round mag. Like shooting a BB gun. When you’re at the range, you’ll take out all the black. Yes sir. Great PDW. For you uninitiated, that’s personal defense weapon.” He put it down on the end table. “You’re wondering why she’s here, aren’t you,” he asked.

“Not really,” Davidson managed.

“She’s an export from Thailand. God knows how she got to this country. If she does right, I just might keep her around. Sweet little thing. No trouble at all.”

She came in with the two bottles of beer standing upright on a silver tray. She bowed to Conklin who took his beer then she stepped to Davidson. Knowing she shielded Conklin’s gaze with her turned back, she raised her hooded black eyes and looked into his before leaving the room to disappear into silence.

“You followed Rocco out here and now you’re in it. He tells me you have an interest in things you shouldn’t concern yourself with.” He raised his bottle. “You got the stomach for this?”

“For what, Conklin?”

He heard a creak as if someone stepped on a loose board down the hallway near the kitchen.

“For seeing things how they really are.”

“I’d like to see you in prison.”

Conklin snorted and shook his head. “I was an idealist like you once upon a time, Davidson. Then I turned fifteen years old.”

“What happened to the belief of the Iroquois tribes? Of we stick together?”

“Davidson, my real people are Comanche. We’re hunters and horse riders. We never set down roots like those agricultural people. We’re nomads and warriors. We take advantage of weakness. I long ago realized that people in a school need to belong to one another like a tribe, so I started that Iroquois Indian crap. That Six Nations, Iroquois League love fest. You got politically correct douche-bags thinking the Iroquois influenced the founding fathers. We have become a nation of little girls.”

“You preached it.”

“I’m a warrior, Davidson. I used it because it worked. You teachers are like sparrows with your mouths upturned waiting for momma to stuff a worm down your gullets.”

“You’re a big man, deceiving people.”

“I’m a winner, Davidson. I impose my will to conquer. My people the Comanches ruled

the west until the European swarms killed off the buffalo, our food source. But that's the way of the world. The strongest win."

"A child committed suicide and you wanted it over and done with. You could have honored her, and I wouldn't be the wiser. You brought down hell on yourself."

He laughed as if he were complimented. "John, you own your little corner of the universe at that school. A pension in ten, fifteen years, a schedule that doesn't tax you too much. What's to complain about? You have been a good soldier all along. I need you to stay like that. I got two more years, son. Did you know I got a little place in Costa Rica right on the water? Once I go down there, I live like a king. You should join me. I know the right people in real estate."

"This is a game to you, isn't it?"

Conklin drank and eyed him from the side.

"You need to know what you're dealing with here, Davidson."

"You're a pimp."

"You're going to get heated and righteous on me. It's funny when you do that at our monthly staff meetings. As if you're going to change a goddamned thing with your righteous indignation." He pointed the bottle at him. "You are messing with my business, my livelihood, and I'm not going to give you a pass. I got an income stream from the school system, I got one from a couple of businesses I own in Ocean City, and I got a bigger one servicing men who like to pay for girls."

"Just business to you."

He shook his head. "The world's got dipshits like you walking around in some goddamned oblivious state of mind while the rest of us sharpen our insights about human nature

and take advantage of it.”

“The Latoyas of the world are commodities.”

He leaned back. “You ever think about women? Think about them. I’m not talking about jacking yourself off before you go to sleep. I mean, think about them. The role they play. I started doing that when I was a young man, and the more I thought about them, watched them, watched what men would sacrifice for them, I thought to myself, I got myself a gold mine right here. I remember taking a college literature course when we read Henry David Thoreau. That’s your turf right?”

“Thoreau?”

“Literature. The soft arts.” He laughed and shook his head. “Damn, boy, get your helmet on.”

“Damn, boy, leave the frat house.”

He rat-tatted a tattoo on his leg with both hands. “You channel that, you got a job with me. Double your income. Triple it.” He stretched out his legs, looked down at his leather moccasins. “About the time I was thinking about how to get women working to my advantage--which means how could I make money off of them--we read *Walden* in my literature class. Basically, one of your boring goddamned classics. But I can still remember a line that changed me: ‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.’ You ever come across that?”

“Conklin, that’s on coffee cups.”

He looked to the ceiling as if at a far galaxy. “I thought to myself, I can solve that. I started throwing house parties in college. I’d been renting a house off campus, so I had the venue. I charged the males ten bucks to get in. Females were free. I was like a zoo keeper. I got

the animals together. I started sweet talking the girls in charge of sororities, some of them real players. I cut them in.”

“You’re telling me your early pimp stories, Conklin. Who gives a shit.”

“Thoreau. Henry David Thoreau made me become a student of human behavior. Some of those girls, I found out, they wanted to leverage their goods to make a profit. Three of them cornered me one night and told me to meet them at the student union building. Over fries and hamburgers, they pinned my ears back, those three. They had business cards made up, they were all about investment, marketing, and profits. They told me they needed a safe environment and a locale. They would handle the girls, and by God that’s what they did. I had the house and I collected the money, kept a few second string football players around as bouncers. We agreed percentages then we went into business together. I walked out of college with \$17,000 in my bank account, all my student loans paid off, and my eyes open.”

Again he heard creaking in the house, as if someone were creeping up on them.

“Women are different from us. They feel things differently.”

“I’ve been hearing that a lot. You’re fooling yourself.”

“We’re sentimental morons compared to them. You get a woman who knows how to swing her ass, let me tell you,” he nodded, “that’s one who’s got nuts. Most men, hell, 90% of them, ain’t worth the dicks God blessed them with.”

John tilted his head. He was sure someone lurked somewhere in the house.

This time Conklin turned toward the sound, listening. He pulled his gun from the holster lying flat on the table, raised it to his ear for a moment before resting it in his lap.

“Analyn, that you back there?”

“I’m in the kitchen, Mr. Conklin.”

“Make us a plate of something.”

“Yes, Mr. Conklin.”

Davidson heard a tremor in her voice. He looked to Conklin who was oblivious to it. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. The journey had just gone into an underground passage.

“You know you made a mess for us here,” Conklin said. “You got Taryn all riled up. I groomed that girl. Put her in the director’s chair up there in the group home. She had an eye for those wounded types. She could spot them before the DSS case worker reached over for the clipboard with the blank forms on it.”

They could hear the refrigerator door opening and closing, the faucet turning on and off, then chopping sounds.

He stared at Conklin. Conklin stared back.

“I’ll be damned, Conklin. The tumblers just fell into place. I’ll be goddamned. You’re the father of Taryn’s child. That’s why she’s so afraid of you.”

“She’s afraid because you decided to get holy and throw a goddamned wrench into our works. I told her I need her in her slot at that group home two more years. She bolted on me because you came up there sniffing around. Now I’ve got to spend time and money chasing her down.”

“Good luck. She’s gone.”

No sounds came from the kitchen now, somehow a wrong silence, but Conklin hadn’t been alerted to the thing unseen at the back of the house. He picked up his gun and looked at it, needing a prop now that he and Davidson had crossed into territory Conklin wished to avoid.

“She’s not gone,” Conklin said. “She’s hiding out in Atlanta, which both of us know. That’s what I need you to do for me. Go on and get her. I’ll fly you down there. Rent a truck, throw all her belongings in it. I need her and my boy back here in Maryland. I can insert her into another group home, and we’ll just call all of this a minor disruption. You do that, all your sins will be forgiven.”

“I’ll be goddamned. You don’t lack for arrogance.”

“It’s the way things need to be.” He tapped the gun against his thigh. His nostrils flared and his eyes deadened. “I won’t let some teacher disrupt my kingdom. You don’t beat me, Davidson. I beat you, then let you stay in my tribe because I need you. I’m the Quannah Parker of this outfit. You violate like those Apaches did, and I will make you eat your entrails.”

This time the creak in the floorboard was Analyn.

“Mr. Conklin.”

### Chapter Thirty-three

She stood at the threshold of the room and blinked tears that striped her cheeks. Conklin began to stand. John jumped out of his chair and ran atop the coffee table and kicked Conklin in the face sending him, arms up flung up, toppling over the padded arm of the chair. The gun clattered back against the wall somewhere.

Lying on the floor, he touched his wrist to his bleeding mouth. “You made a grave mistake, Davidson. This is my home. You violated...”

John heard rushing footsteps. He turned, still standing atop the coffee table. The same two thugs who stood beside Rocco’s uncle in his bar in DC stepped into the room. One grabbed Conklin by the deerskin shirt, lifted him off his feet, then threw him into the stuffed chair.

John backed off and stood near the fireplace.

The uncle walked down the hallway in his expensive, rumpled, dark blue suit and a cream colored fedora. He stopped before entering the room and lay a watery-eyed gaze on Conklin. He scratched his eyebrow with his middle finger.

“Bring him in,” he said to the body guards.



He settled into the couch John had been sitting in. John watched from his position with back to the fireplace. He wondered if by a mad sprint he could he make it past everyone. Then he remembered one of the hexagrams of the *I Ching*: *Darkness can be overcome only through natural innocence. Be open, be still, be sincere, be respectful. This is the path of Non-Action.*

The bodyguard dragged someone down the hallway. They lugged him into sight and the uncle said to him, "Stand up."

Rocco, with blood soaked shirt, eyes swollen shut, jaw slack and grotesquely misaligned, tried to heave himself up on his legs while the body guards held him by the upper arms.

His hands, with cockeyed fingers, looked like they had been pounded with a hammer.

The uncle regarded him for a moment. John couldn't read the man's expression other than to think how disinterested he seemed. As if he were in the middle of a bothersome chore. He pointed to a desk chair and one of the thugs put it behind Rocco who sat down, like a boxer in his corner of the ring, the match lost.

"Your father, he was a fuck. You're a fuck," he said with a thick accent. Albanian? John didn't know.

The uncle pointed to Davidson. "You talk to this fucking guy." He shook his head. The uncle shifted his fish gray face to Davidson and tongued a morsel of food from his back teeth then quietly worked his mouth. "He doesn't know us."

Davidson waited for the uncle to tell the two thugs to snap his neck and bury him somewhere.

Those two stood with crossed hands below their beltlines, as if they were Secret Service agents.

He settled his eyes on his nephew. “You find a new way to do business up here? That what you think? You think you got this guy”--he pointed to Conklin--“working for you. This fucking American who doesn’t owe us anything. He cuts a deal with a prosecutor. Who do you think goes to jail, him or us?”

Rocco managed to lift his head. “You killed my father.”

“Your father thought he was smarter than me. You think you’re smarter than me. Without this guy”--he nodded at Davidson--“I might have let you come into my home and shoot me. This guy saved me.” He looked at Davidson. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Let me go.”

He looked up to the ceiling, paused for a few moments.

“Give me your driver’s license.”

“What?”

He flicked his fingers in a give-it-to-me gesture. The two big guys sharpened their attention.

John pulled out his wallet, stepped, handed his license to the uncle, then returned to his place by the mantle. The uncle held up the license between his fingers and one of the thugs took it from him and placed it inside his coat pocket.

“I know where you live. You move, I got a lady works at the DMV, she can give me your new address. You saved my life from my own blood. So now we’re friends. Don’t ever stop being my friend.”

Conklin had remained quiet the entire time. John had flicked glances his way, and he couldn’t help it, he felt embarrassed for the man. He’d pissed himself, and now that the uncle had

dealt with Davidson, Conklin knew it was his turn. He bowed his head and quietly cried.

The uncle stood up and stepped toward Conklin, leaned, and slapped the man. “Shut the fuck up with that crying. This fuck.”

He snapped his fingers and one of the thugs, the one without the license in his pocket, clicked open a telescoping police baton meant for crowd control and handed it to the uncle.

The uncle said to Davidson, “I don’t want to see you no more.”

John quick walked around the sofa and left the room. He turned and watched the uncle lift the black baton and start beating Conlin about the shoulders and head, not like some aged, graceless old man, but with authority and strength.

Conklin whined, “No, no. Please God, no.”

The uncle methodically beat him, and John left, knowing that the situation could turn on him by some weird, tribal logic, and in an instant, he might not be the uncle’s friend anymore.

He got in his car, started it, and turned left at Washington Boulevard. He drove home in a shocked stupor.

He stepped onto his front porch and sat down and stared. He could have been killed tonight. He did not want to die. He had long ago stopped believing in God. Who or what to pray to? He looked at his watch. 2:45 a.m. He wished he could tell Julie that he wanted above all and finally to go out with her and begin. He wished he could tell his students that their cynicism and anger and boredom and drug taking were robbing them of their brief moment in the sun on this fragile planet. He wished he had called his step-daughter Yvette more often. He wished he had known how to live with a wife who proposed that they stay together except allow one another to

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love other people. He wished he had gotten over the hurts inflicted on him by his parents who left him with an aunt and uncle then departed for New Zealand with a mad group of Christian survivalists.

He wished to begin living like a human being who had woken up, and he would.

Resurrection

#### Chapter Thirty-four

Rumors zigzagged around school that Conklin had quit to run for mayor, had decided to join his Indian people up north, had left for another school outside the system.

Borke talked two of his fellow math teachers into covering his classes while he walked

the school hallways with cellphone to ear trying to squeeze information from any source he could.

Davidson saw him pass by his classroom a few times on his grief walk. Once, he was crying. On his free period, Davidson searched him out. He found him in a back hallway near the custodians' storage closets and music instruments room, head resting in arms against a stack of boxed copy paper.

He whistled. Borke turned.

"This way." He waved him onward.

Borke followed, a slump shouldered votary bereft of his leader.

Davidson led him out a side door into the school parking lot.

They went to the flag pole, around which was a small plaza made of stone. They sat on the ledge of the base of the pole where students crowded at the end of the day when waiting for parents to pick them up.

Borke's raw face looked as if someone had rubbed it with a turpentine soaked rag. He sat with hands to his knees breathing through his mouth like an exhausted hound.

"What's wrong big fella?"

"Nobody can find Mr. Conklin."

"I take it you have his home number and tried there?"

"Duh."

"That's the spirit, Borke. Maybe he's just under the weather and wanted to hole up at home."

"That makes no sense."

“What about making a general announcement over the intercom? Ask anyone and everyone, students included, if they know where he is.”

Borke searched Davidson’s face for signals of mockery. “Are you being real right now?”

Low hanging fruit, he thought. Better stop. He remembered the *I Ching*. “Gods and Spirits Injure the full; They bless the humble.” He had been trying to strangle the cynical man who lived like a virus in him since the beginning of time.

“Well, I guess on second thought, it might get everyone riled up.”

“Get everyone riled up,” Borke repeated.

“You check hospitals in the area?”

“Serionte told me not to.”

“And you listened to him? Serionte the Incompetent Assistant Principal of the Year tells the Mighty Borke what to do all of a sudden?”

Borke tugged his Amish beard.

“Sit out here. Nobody can see you from the office. Call around to local hospitals and bring us the word.”

Davidson dreaded the thought that the uncle murdered him. He would have to tell the police if that were true, then go underground to avoid the same fate.

Twenty minutes later, Borke showed up at his room. Davidson glanced at the wall clock above his door.

“I got students coming in here in eight minutes, big guy.”

“The Iroquois chief is wounded,” he whispered.

Borke shut Davidson’s classroom door.

“The Iroquois chief is down!” he said. He closed his eyes and breathed. “One, two, three, four, five...” he counted to ten. Eyes open he said, “You should try it.”

“What happened?” Davidson asked.

“Mysterious accident.”

“Where is he?”

“St. Agnes Hospital.”

“You going over there?”

“The minute school is over.”

“Sign out now,” Davidson said. “Take sick leave. Serionte won’t know you left the building, and if he did, he wouldn’t care.”

“Serionte’s the assistant principal. That needs to be respected.”

“Borke, you’re a soldier, right?”

The pale flat face shone like a full moon. “Yes.”

“Serionte’s in the rear out of harm’s way, a R.E.M.F. Sometimes decisions have to be made in the field.”

Borke turned to his right and said to himself, “Sometimes decisions have to be made in the field.” He cleared his throat and addressed Davidson. “What’s a R.E.M.F.?”

“Rear echelon mother fucker.”

Davidson wrote down his cell number. “Call me as soon as you have some hard intel.”

Chapter Thirty-five

“How did you find out where he was?” Julie asked.

Davidson parked in the hospital parking lot.

“Borke. Man is like a bloodhound.”

“How do we get into see him?”

“We’ll say he’s our spiritual advisor.”

Julie laughed.

The nurse looking after Conklin in the Critical Care Unit didn’t question them. She said they had only a few minutes before she needed to take some vitals, give him some meds, and change bedding.

“He’s not in good shape,” she said.

Davidson and Julie stepped into the room. He was under sedation and hooked up to monitors and had intravenous needles in the top of his hand. His face was bruised and puffy beyond recognition. His right ear had been badly torn. His exposed upper chest looked as if it had been kicked by a horse. A cast covered his left shoulder and arm.



“Man meets heavy karmic debt,” she said.

“When bad things happen to bad people,” he said.

“Why’d you bring me here?” she asked.

“I needed you to see. That could be me right there. Or dead. He had a gun.” He had told her everything that had transpired at Conklin’s house.

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to believe that he violated the Way so badly that it’s being taken care of. Remember, what is it, Hexagram 29? ‘The Pit of the abyss is entered. Calamity.’ And I am going to practice the Taoist way of non-action.”

She gave John a long, hard stare. “I want you to meet my father. The study of the *I Ching* is deep and humbling. Now, let’s go. I’ve seen enough.”

He drove her into the city.

Twenty minutes later, they handed back their menus to the waitress.

“It’s a Tuesday night. Why am I eating out with you at a Thai food restaurant?”

“I wanted to get our first date over with.”

“Is that right, Ranger. You’re saddled up and ready to go, are you?” She paused. “I like eating with chopsticks.”

“So do I. See how much we have in common?”

“Your attentions right now are mildly fun. I’ve enjoyed the way you’ve been hovering. But you have a reputation as somebody who sleeps around.” She slowly shook her head back and forth. “Me no like. At all.”

“I’m awake now,” he said. “I’m done with that. Done. That’s old stuff.”

“Well aren’t you the enlightened being.” The waitress poured more tea. “Thank you,” Julie said. Attention back on him, she continued. “This is how it’s going to work, you and me. I happen to be between boyfriends right now so you’re in luck. You and I will be teachers who plan projects and our much discussed unit together. During that time we will begin to share auras and listen to each other. I’m twenty-eight years old and, frankly, ready to be a big girl and do big girl stuff. But I will not be the object of someone’s betrayal.” She pointed her chopsticks at him. “If that happens, Conklin’s little accident in there will look like falling off a tricycle.”

“I’m ready,” he said.

“I’m ready for you to buy me dessert,” she said. “Then I have to get home and go to bed. All alone. In my luxurious, clean sheets. Under nice warm covers. Did I mention all by myself?”

He smiled. She burst out laughing.

He went home, showered, tried to read while lying on the couch. Too restless, he put his book down and turned on TV and watched an early season Orioles game for a while.

He went to the front porch and breathed the rich night air and sat down to watch people walk their dogs and come and go in their cars.

At his desk, he wrote in the journal he shared with Julie: *I will figure out a way to squeeze Wentles. Get the police on her. She’ll give up Kaufer. Let’s hope they haven’t packed up and left.*

He drove to the Niner and sat across the street in the parking lot of the grocery store for fifteen minutes. None of Rocco’s goons were apparent, nor was Rocco. The Niner had turned into a neighborhood bar again rather than headquarters to a group of dark-haired men wearing

leather coats.

Inside, he ordered a beer and looked around: a hubbub from guys playing pool, groups of people talking, and cross-armed men pointing to the TV while making statements of absolute certainty about whichever athlete they talked about.

No Rocco. He didn't want to ask the bartender about him. He didn't know what blowback it might cause.

A large-headed neighborhood guy came through the front door wearing a Capitals hockey jersey.

Somebody halloed, "Hey Jimmy."

Jimmy waved then stopped at the bar and said to the bartender, "Where are those goombahs usually sit over there?"

The bartender shrugged.

"Good riddance. Scumbags."

He called Taryn. He knew she wouldn't pick up. He left a message: "I have some news about Conklin," and waited for her call back, which came within the half hour.

"Your baby's daddy got jacked up," he said.

He heard her exhale. "You're a piece of shit for saying it like that, but tell me what happened."

He told her everything up to the hospital visit.

"What do you think they did to Rocco?" she said.

"I don't even want to go there. He betrayed the uncle. That was bad mojo. I think the

only reason the uncle let Conklin live is so that Conklin could tell the tale of what happens when you step into the uncle's sacred circle."

"That's funny. Conklin loved talk like that."

"He's Comanche, not Iroquois, he told me."

"He not nothing. That Indian stuff is bullshit. He's a half-Italian white boy who grew up in Glen Burnie."

"The Indian thing is nothing?"

"Nothing. Zero, zilch."

"I'll be goddamned. Tell me. Why did Latoya commit suicide? I have to know."

"I'm changing my number. I don't want you ever contacting me again, Davidson. I don't want Conklin ever contacting me again, either. See him, tell him that."

"Okay. Tell me about Latoya."

"She has a little sister who wanted nothing to do with her mother's boyfriend, that sexual predator Maurice. But Maurice talked Latoya into getting her sister into bed with him. Latoya didn't protect her. She told me that Maurice told her if she got her sister to go to bed with him just once, he would marry Latoya. They'd go to California together. Cali, is how she said it. Maurice gets the sister, who suddenly decides Maurice isn't so bad. Maurice pushes Latoya out of his life, keeps on with the sister. Latoya couldn't deal with it anymore. I found out about this after--"

"After she became one of your girls."

"You are a judgmental son of a bitch."

“Not anymore. I don’t know a thing. I’ve right now decided that I’m dedicating my book to her. Maurice still at it?”

“Probably. I need you to tell Conklin to stay out of my life.”

“Conklin won’t be contacting many people after this. He’s in for some serious rehabilitation. Who knows what brain damage he suffered.”

“I’m glad you saw it through, Davidson, but you did wrong with me. Look after people.”

“I’ve turned a corner.”

“Don’t just say it, do it. Now, never, I mean never contact me again.” She hung up.

He put his phone away. The guy he’d heard the only other time he’d been here tuned his guitar while sitting on a bar stool on stage.

“Renny, what you got for us?” someone said.

He used a British accent. “Love songs, me friends. What else is there?”