

**DEAD
MAN'S
RUN**

Robert E. Gelinas

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By
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DEDICATION

To my dad, Robert E. Gelinás, Sr.—1935-1998, a man unafraid to do with his life what he wanted to do, regardless of what others thought. I'll always love him because he's my father; yet for his courage and good humor in the face of life's greatest adversities, I will always admire him.

THE OVERTURE

Everett Manning died tragically.

He was just about to say something to the busy ticket agent at the gate, when out of the corner of his eye, not fifty yards from where he stood, he witnessed the Boeing 737 out on the tarmac magically morph into a supernova—a massive fireball, eclipsing and hungrily consuming the outline of the aircraft, crumpling its wings, bowing its nose, and tucking its tail. The wide plate glass window before him was instantly filled with a vicious, blinding white welder's light, chased by fluid plumes of red, yellow, orange, blue and black. The low-pile carpet beneath his feet shifted from side to side. The air pressure of the ferocious concussion squeezed Ev's face in a harsh startling slap.

Everything in Ev's field of vision bleached white in that first instant, as over a hundred bodies were simultaneously

dismembered, crushed, torn, or vaporized—all a mere fraction of a second before the amber tinted floor-to-ceiling concourse windows exploded inward, sending a wall of searing heat roaring over him, propelling cruel blades of glass and razor sharp projectiles of twisted and burning metal, ripping and shredding, claiming yet more victims on the crowded terminal concourse.

The final NTSB report, issued months later, officially listed the death toll at 159. Everett Manning's name was on that list. The cause of the explosion was attributed to mechanical failure. Of course, that was a lie, an official lie. But then, the FBI had good reason to conceal one of the worst terrorist acts on US soil.

Nevertheless, on that fateful day, the same day Everett Manning was pronounced dead—naturally, after the initial shock and horror of it passed—Ev began to wonder if, at long last, this cataclysmic event might be his very own pre-paid, non-stop, first-class ticket to paradise. He wanted it to be. At least it certainly looked that way to him at first, as he sat in an orange vinyl booth at Denny's, staring with quiet envy at Bill the Painter.

Confused?

Yes, he was. Confused, bewildered, and afraid. But if he was right about what began so horrifically at the airport, then very soon, and very easily, he might actually escape and be free—free, at long last, to spend the rest of his existence on a warm, white, tropical beach, lounging beneath a cloudless blue sky; sipping sweet umbrella drinks among beautiful, bronzed, coconut-oiled bodies; feeling the hot

kiss of the sun against his skin; savoring the salty scents of the sea, an intoxicating aroma; and all the while, watching the translucent white-capped apple-green waves roll in, crashing softly against the shore; laughing and singing to the carefree refrains of Jimmy Buffett songs.

If he was right...it would be *so* easy to finally get to Margaritaville.

He was wrong, of course.

Dead wrong.

Prior to that horrible day at the airport, Everett Manning had led a fairly routine and uneventful life. He had never committed a felony. He had never had assassins, federal agents, crazed killers, airborne gunships, or war ships chasing him. He had never witnessed a murder. He had never been shot. He had never been covered with blood. He had never put himself in harm's way to save those he loved. He had never had to kill.

No, on the day Everett Manning died things got really complicated.

MOVEMENT I

The Dilemma

Duty then is the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should never wish to do less.

Gen. Robert E. Lee

What is it that every man seeks? To be secure, to be happy, to do what he pleases without restraint and without compulsion.

Epictetus
Discourses, 2nd century

If you are willing to forget that there is an element of duty in love and of love in duty, then it's easy to choose between the two.

Jean Giraudoux
Siegfried, 1928

CHAPTER 1

Dallas / Fort Worth IAP, Texas

As Everett Manning recalled much later, the day of his death was a typical, long, tedious workday of phones and FAXes, spreadsheets and E-mail. It began and progressed like so many others before it, and found him late that afternoon at the airport, waiting for a flight, standing before a bank of stainless steel pay phones with a black plastic receiver glued to his ear.

“Well, is she cute?” Ev asked Jeff, earnestly trying to hear his seventeen year-old son’s reply over the loud, frenzied terminal noise.

Nine-hundred and seventy-five miles away, in Atlanta, Georgia, a scratchy teenage voice replied, “Oh, man, dad, she’s an absolute babe. And *real* smart too. She’s like in the Latin and math club, and plays the flute in the band... and I

mean like, we talk and all... all the time... you know, like in third period Biology, cause, you see, like, she sits at the same table I do and everything... and, like as long as, like, we’re talking about class and stuff, everything’s cool...”

“Uh, huh,” Ev prompted. He was grinning.

His son continued, the young man’s voice an emotional mixture of excitement and frustration, “But, like, I really want to ask her out and everything, but every time I get up the guts to try, it’s like I can’t breathe or anything. Dad, I don’t know what to say. It’s like I get a total case of the brain farts.”

Ev sniffed, doing his best not to laugh. “Hey, tiger, that’s OK. I did that too when I was your age. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“So what did you do about it?” his son asked.

Ev thought back to the bygone years, remembering episodes of his own heart palpitations, risking a fragile ego in pursuit of many a fair maiden’s heart. A few ideas came to mind. “You might consider trying a softer, more indirect approach.”

“What do you mean?” Jeff fumbled with the phone. “Like what?”

“I mean,” Ev advised, “When you just put it all on the line, as in ‘Do you want to go out with me?’ that’s a pretty hard-sell proposition. You force the girl to have to make an all or nothing decision. Sometimes that’s OK. Sometimes it’s too much. Go easy. Try talking about a new movie you want to go see, or a nice restaurant you’d like to take her to. Get a conversation going about the *event*, not the decision.

Then, if she shows some interest, you can suggest going there together sometime. If she seems up for it, then you’re down to scheduling a time. It’s less confrontational than throwing the formal notion of ‘a date’ in someone’s face.”

There was obvious enthusiasm in the boy’s voice, “Wow, dad, that’s great. I’ll try that. Thanks!”

“Well, let me know how it goes,” Ev added, as he heard a sharp click on the line.

“Jeffy?” interrupted the irritated voice of Tanya, Everett’s ex-wife, on another extension, “It’s time you got off the phone. I need to use it.”

“*MOM!*” came Jeff’s mournful protest, “I’m talking to dad. Get off the line. This is private!”

“There’s *nothing* that goes on regarding you that’s private from me, young man,” Tanya spat back, “And besides, I need to speak with your father anyway.”

Ev’s ire rose as he heard Jeff slam down the receiver without even getting a chance to say good-bye. His voice was stern, “You didn’t need to do that.”

“I’ll do whatever I please,” Tanya fired back. “That boy has some things he needs to do for me right now, and besides... *we need to talk.*”

Ev cringed. “Look, I don’t have *time* to talk to you right now. Maybe later.” His knuckles whitened around the heavy black plastic receiver. “I...I gotta go now.”

“*No! You’re going to talk to me right now!*” she blared, just warming up for one of her usual belligerent tirades.

“*Not now,*” he shot back, “*Later!*”

“*When later?*”

“I don’t know *when* later.” That familiar clench in his gut was squeezing tighter.

“Well, I want to know *now*,” she seethed, pouncing on at least one word in each phrase like a cruel schoolmaster with a lash in hand, “And I have a *right* to know. You have an *obligation* to talk to me when *I* want to talk. And we *need* to talk!”

Ev glanced at his watch. It was 4:37. He still had a few minutes before boarding time, but no desire whatsoever to talk to Tanya. “Look, I don’t care. I’m about to miss my flight.”

“*DON’T CARE!—WHY YOU SORRY...*” By reflex the receiver jerked away from Ev’s ear a full ten inches. Tanya’s acid invectives blasted from the starburst of plastic pinholes.

Using the phrase “don’t care” was always more than enough to trigger Tanya’s standard nickel tour tirade of Everett’s more noteworthy personal and social deficiencies, highlighted by his occasionally tardy child support and alimony payments and his alleged “secular” and “materialistic” priorities in life.

Ev held the phone down at his side for a moment, looking down the long, curving airport concourse at the busy ant colony of humanity: scurrying couples, herds of families, hurried business people, uniformed flight crews leading luggage strollers, an elderly woman toddling behind a walker, maintenance people scurrying about with their brooms and mops and trash bins, handicapped carts beeping and chirping, and countless others milling around waiting

for their flights. They came in every size, shape, color, clothing style, nationality, and aroma.

Shifting the phone from one hand to the other, Everett let the twenty pounds of dead-weight, his black nylon laptop case, slip from his aching shoulder to the low pile gray carpet by his feet. He noted his black wingtips could use a shine. His left hand wiped the growing beads of perspiration from his brow, combing his fingers back through his short, black, baby-fine hair. A tense forefinger tugged at his starched button-down collar in a vain attempt to ease the bitter choking sensation.

When Everett put the receiver back to his ear Tanya’s barrage was still in full gear. “And I’ll tell you *what*, mister, I’ve already *spoken* with the IRS this week about your alimony payment—*which is a week late...*”

Ev took a deep breath, squeezed his eyes shut, and without a wasted breath of rebuttal, softly returned the receiver to its stainless steel cradle. There was the briefest moment of joy in that act, loosening the wrench in his gut a half turn, and letting his molars relax a few hundred pounds per square inch.

Oh, blessed silence, thou art my friend.

OK, it had been a mistake to even say one word to her. He knew that. All he had wanted to do was talk to Jeff and see how he was doing. It had been almost a week since they had spoken—too long, as far as Ev was concerned. It was so good to hear his voice again, right up until the moment Tanya butted in, all five-foot-four 190 pounds of her these days—the “bitch-sow” as Ev disaffectionately dubbed her

long ago.

We need to talk.

In the fourteen years they were married, just the mere thought of that phrase, which always precipitated the same old brutal daily routine had made Ev's stomach sour the instant he pulled his car into the garage each evening after work—knowing what lay in wait for him. That was one of the many reasons Everett Manning could no longer live with Tanya, and often questioned his sanity on how it was possible he ever did. Somewhere, buried deep in his memory banks, Everett thought, once upon a time, there had actually been an attractive, intelligent, pleasantly dispositioned, emotionally intact young woman he had once loved and married and made love to with no symptoms of nausea whatsoever. Of course that was long before the bitch-sow showed up one day and ate her.

Tanya and Jeff still lived in the beautiful home Ev had built for them in Atlanta. Shortly after the divorce was final four years ago, Ev had deliberately sought a corporate transfer and moved to Dallas. That at least stopped the daily tongue floggings. Unfortunately, it wasn't far enough away to escape the long-taloned Harpy that had his phone number, pager number, and the ear of his son. Yet, despite the situation with Tanya, Jeff was never very far from Ev's thoughts.

Everett Manning fished the torn boarding stub out of his shirt pocket and looked at it again. He'd already checked his bag out front at the ticket counter, and had turned in his ticket at the gate. Yep, nothing left but the airport waiting

game, almost identical to the elevator version, but with lots more people milling around to annoy you—swarming masses of them, in fact. He huffed, looking at the tiny boarding stub, *as if* the little bimbo behind the ticket counter could vouch for every form of photo ID that existed. He noted his seat assignment: 21E. *Damn*, a center seat. The Corporate Travel Trolls strike again. His eyes rolled up to the harsh wash of the florescent lights of the terminal concourse at the DFW International Airport.

What can you do?

Departure time for his flight to Washington DC was 5:10 PM. He looked down at his watch again. It was now 4:42. Almost a half an hour to spare. No sense hurrying to sit between the lady coughing up a lung bouncing a crying baby with a dirty diaper in her lap, and the overweight guy with the hygiene problem who wanted to gab about his scrap metal business for the next three hours.

Ergo, Miller time.

The edge of a smile crept from the corners of his mouth. Yep, there was still time to squeeze in a beer. Hell, in Ev’s book there was *always* time for a good cold one. With the laptop case freshly slung over his right shoulder and the straps of his soft-side briefcase clutched in his left hand, with a renewed sense of mission, Everett Manning took a deep breath and threaded his way through the teeming throng of transient unwashed humanity, down the crescent concourse to his beloved “Premium Cocktails” sign.

The bar was crowded and buzzing with travelers, but he managed to find an empty seat at a small, round table for

two near the entryway, just as a couple was leaving. The sounds of a thousand voices within earshot melded into a dull roar, interspersed with the beeping and chirping carts, overlaid with the public address announcements calling flights and paging an endless list of awkwardly pronounceable names to meet their parties by the baggage claim. Thankfully, the service in the bar was good. In less than five minutes Ev had an ice cold twenty-two ounce beer and a red and white paper boat of hot popcorn before him.

Life's little pleasures.

Everett let out a long, weary sigh, but felt no sense of relief. Life didn't seem to have an abundant supply of little pleasures for him these days. Sales had been slow. He was sincerely wondering how he was going to close enough business in the remaining months of the year to make his annual sales quota. In fact, if the new prospect he was about to go see in Washington wasn't interested in at least an evaluation test of his company's new software system, it was going to be hell to get over the top this year. Yet, somehow he always managed to find a way to make it. Nevertheless, Mike Henderson, Ev's sales manager, had been yelling more than usual at all the salesmen in the office to bring in the numbers. Sales were slow all over the company. A thin white line of fresh nail growth was showing on the end of Ev's right ring finger. It was quickly chewed off in strict conformity to the other nine.

He chased a mouthful of popcorn down with a sip of his beer.

At thirty-eight years of age, Everett Manning earnestly

believed he was still in his prime, a scrappy and resilient street fighter, with many good selling years left under his belt. Selling was something he liked. He was good at it, a great negotiator, especially in hardball situations, the more stressful the better. Stress seemed to stimulate his creativity and resolve. He presented himself well, and possessed a natural charm and good humor which opened a lot of doors for him. He’d always been bright and resourceful from childhood, and had a decent résumé. Oh yes, you put all that together and it was easy to see why Everett Manning had successfully moved a lot of products for several major companies over the last fifteen years, helping several small companies become major ones. And, yes, he even made a handsome dollar or two in the process.

But lately...it all just...*didn’t feel right*.

It was getting harder and harder to roll out of bed in the morning and get after it. It wasn’t so much a matter of growing older and slower, as it was more the case of getting bored and disenchanted. That little voice in the back of his mind was getting ever more insistent that there was *something* else out there in life he was missing, something *worth* getting out of bed for again. And the longer he kept doing what he was doing, the greater the chance that this particular “something he was missing” would pass him by. Yes, when you put your finger on it, despite making a decent living in a reasonably productive career, Everett Manning still had no earthly idea what he really wanted to be when he grew up.

Who did?

He shook his head in dismay, crunching a fresh handful of popcorn, while he asked himself: *Why am I even doing this? How did this “career,” if you could call it that, happen in the first place? Sure, I’ve done OK, but it certainly wasn’t planned. It all just happened. Why am I knocking myself out day after day, week after week, living in Marriott Courtyards and airports and rental cars, eating all the shitty food and popping antacids like candy, going from meeting to meeting, standing up day after day preaching to a bunch of disinterested semi-catatonic corporate zombies, getting telephone-ear and a peptic ulcer? Why? Just to generate enough cash to pay the child support, the rent and utilities, and all the charge accounts? Just to keep one step ahead of the tax man?*

It all made no sense. The plastic beer cup came to his lips again. More than ever, Ev felt the hamster wheel he was in was getting rusty, and each day a little harder to turn.

But how do you get out of the wheel?

Ev fished his wallet out of his back pocket and checked his cash reserves, revealing a little over three hundred dollars. That was enough for a quick overnight trip.

He mused: *So what can you do? Just keep plugging, right? Salute and do your duty? Do what you gotta do to survive and hope for the best? Save a little cash here and there and one day hope you have enough to retire so you can sit around with the all the rest of the old farts playing Gin Rummy and an occasional round of golf, bitching about reductions in Medicare? Then again, there was always the French Foreign Legion or the Power Ball Lottery.*

Hey, now there's a couple of attractive options.

He laughed out loud at himself.

“What’s so funny?” a nearby voice asked.

Ev looked up at an older gentleman standing next to his table with a saddle-leather briefcase in one hand and a ticket folder in the other. The man was impeccably attired in a finely tailored gray wool, double-breasted suit and an expensive looking burgundy silk tie. Beneath his silver precision-trimmed locks, his face glowed with a perfectly even, deep bronze, rich-man’s tan, obviously from many days on the fairways and lounging by the pool sipping umbrella drinks. His eyes were steel gray, confident and steady, definitely CEO or Board of Directors material. Ev was momentarily confused, not quite sure if it was he who was being addressed by the gentleman standing before him.

“I’m sorry?” he stammered.

The older man smiled, “You were laughing about something just then. I was just curious. Thought you might have a good joke. Sorry. Didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Oh,” Ev waved his hand. “No. It was nothing.”

The man glanced around the crowded pub, “Don’t see any tables left. Mind if I join you?”

“Sure.” Ev tossed a few more kernels of popcorn in his mouth and gestured at the empty chair opposite himself. “Help yourself.”

The stranger placed his briefcase behind the empty chair, then neatly removed his jacket and laid it over the chair’s back and took his seat. The initials WJC were embroidered on his shirt pocket and cuffs in royal blue thread.

He crossed his legs with a smooth scissor motion, placing his green and blue ExecuAir ticket folder on the table in front of him, nodding politely, and offering a distinguished, “Thank you. Appreciate your indulgence.”

“No problem.” Ev checked the time. 4:50. Still plenty of time to finish his beer, and perhaps luck into a new sales prospect. “How’s it going?”

“Can’t complain.” Ev’s new companion extended his hand, “The name’s Clark. Walter Clark.”

Ev took the outstretched hand, professionally pumping the man’s firm grip twice and producing his award-winning salesman’s smile right on cue, “Pleased to meet you, Walter. Everett Manning, but everybody calls me Ev.”

Walter Clark’s porcelain-veneered, perfectly white Hollywood smile emerged, “So where’re you headed, Ev?”

“Up to Washington,” he replied with no real emotion. “The ExecuAir 5:10 flight.”

“Really? Me too,” Walter tapped the half exposed boarding pass from the slit in his ticket folder. “So, are you going up on business or for pleasure?” The waitress strolled by with an empty but wet beer tray folded across her forearm. Walter pointed at Ev’s tall plastic beer cup. “One of those please, as quick as you can, if you’d be so kind, my dear. Bit of a hurry.”

“Coming right up.” The girl smiled and flipped her pony tail out straight as she spun on one heel to go fill the order.

“Business, I hope,” Ev answered. “How about yourself?”

Clark fished a business card out of his shirt pocket. “A bit of business as well, I’m afraid. Just in and out. Wish I had time to stay and take in some of the sights.”

Ev took the man’s card and read it, then slipped it in the side pocket of his suit jacket. Walter Clark was identified on the card as a consultant for a company called Wainright Enterprises out of Phoenix, Arizona. “Wainright. I’m not familiar with Wainright. So what do you do for them?”

The older man hesitated before answering, catching his bottom lip in that dazzling even row of bleached white teeth. The body English said he was choosing his words as carefully as he chose his handkerchief to match his tie. “Oh, I do my best to help solve...business problems. Nothing very glamorous, mind you. So what’s your line?”

“Sales. For Incom Corporation.” Ev emphasized the word *corporation* to make his small Texas-based software firm sound important. It worked a little over half of the time. He offered Walter one of his own business cards from a small imitation leather card case in his trouser pocket, and fell naturally into his pitch, “We make premium productivity enhancement software. It combines PC desktop programs into one common interface. Cuts down on training, administration...*business* problems, like you said...stuff like that.”

“I see. Computers and such. Yes, yes.” Clark frowned at the card, holding it at arm’s length and squinting at it, then slipped it into his shirt pocket and then patted it twice for safekeeping. “Sorry, can’t say I’ve ever heard of your company either. But if you don’t mind, I’ll hang onto your card

in case I ever need any products like that.”

Ev smiled with a trace of weary resignation, “Thanks. Please do.”

The banter was a nice distraction. A minute later the waitress brought Mr. Walter Clark's beer, whereupon he proceeded to down-it in three long swallows, never taking the edge of the cup from his lips.

Ev was noticeably impressed, “Wow! You *are* the king.”

As the bottom of the empty plastic cup hit the table, Walter Clark caught Ev's awestruck eye and winked, pressing the tips of his fingers to the center of his chest as his cheeks did a momentary Dizzy Gillespie. He glanced at his own watch, a polished gold Rolex, “Old habit from college days. The sum total of my education, I'm afraid. Life's too short to sip good beer, as we used to say.” His forefinger tapped the dial of his watch. “But if you'll forgive me, I sincerely hate to drink and dash, but regrettably I must. And I dare say, if you're on my flight, my new young friend, you'll need to get moving soon as well. Flight's leaving any time now.”

Ev glanced at his own watch. 5:04. Six minutes to go. That center seat was just as unappealing now as it was a few minutes ago. “Oh, it's just barely five past the hour. Still got another minute or two. Nothing ever leaves from this place on time anyway. And I still need to make a quick phone call and check my messages. I'll catch you later.”

Clark laughed, his eyes narrowing, “Phone call, you say? Messages? Well, suit yourself. Very pleased to meet

you, Manning. If I don't see you again on the plane, then do have a safe journey.”

“You too.” Ev returned a friendly comrade-in-arms smile as the older man stood from the table and scooped up his ticket, his eyes intent on the information printed on the exposed portion.

The older man's squinting foretold a pair of forgotten reading glasses, which Ev surmised would probably be 18k gold or designer tortoise shell. Still intent on deciphering the cryptic gibberish on the boarding stub, Walter Clark reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a thick wad of bills, neatly folded in a gold money clip. He peeled off a crisp twenty and tossed it down on the table.

Clark's eyes stole back to Ev's for a bright second, “This one's on me.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that, Mr. Clark.” Ev nodded and sipped his beer, shaking Walter Clark's hand firmly once again.

“Walter,” the older man corrected as he hurried away.

Ev fired a forefinger at him, “Right. *Walter*. Been a pleasure.”

Wow that was nice of him.

Ev reached down and plucked his cell phone off his belt, and hit the voice mail speed-dial number. After a brief ring, the automated voice greeted him and advised him he had twelve unheard messages. His hands moved by rote to extract his daily planner from his soft-side briefcase, open it up to the current date, and prepare to transcribe notes. As it came out of the case, a sprinkling of bells jingled.

“...for you, Daddy...”

Ev looked down. There lying on the floor next to his foot was his good luck charm. It was two large decorative Christmas jingle-bells, each about an inch in diameter, one red, the other green. They were connected by about two feet of thick white yarn. It was meant to hang on the back of a doorknob and jingle when someone came or went. His son Jeff had made it as an art class project in the second grade—ten years ago, in another decade, another time. Ev carried it with him in his briefcase always. The familiar sight of it made him smile, notwithstanding that familiar little pang he felt in his heart. He gathered it up and stuffed it back down inside his briefcase as the voice messages began to play, promising himself to call Jeff again as soon as he got to Washington.

The first call was from Mike Henderson, his boss. It was bad. One of Ev’s customers had called in complaining that he had been promised a trade-in and free upgrade for some older version of their software. That was a lie. Ev knew he’d promised the bastard no such thing. But would Mike believe that? Not likely. Mike demanded to be called immediately.

The rest of the messages went downhill from there. The next one was from one of Ev’s software support engineers announcing that an on-site test of their products had crashed a prospect’s computer system—they were pissed, and after blood. Two of the calls were from the bitch-sow. Thank God for the voice mail DELETE command. A few others were bullshit administrative stuff that could wait.

One was a cryptically disturbing message from the IRS, not stating exactly what they wanted to talk to him about, per se, but just giving him an 800 number and advising that he had twenty-four hours to respond before any action was going to be taken. The next one was an automated voice telling him to please remain on the line for an “important call,” which was followed by bad elevator music— DELETE. The last message was the *coup de grace*. It was the new prospect in Washington DC.

The polite and apologetic voice said, “Ev, hey, this is Charlie DeBerg. Look, man, I’m really sorry, but I’m not going to be able to make our appointment tomorrow morning. We’re going to have to reschedule or cancel for now or something. Maybe in the next month or two would be better for us to take a look at your stuff. We’re just about to start an evaluation test on *ProDesk* tomorrow and I have to be down there in the data center to oversee that. I know you said your stuff was supposed to be a lot better than *ProDesk*, but they *are* the leader in the industry. But hey, man, I promise you, if their stuff doesn’t do what we want, then we’d still like to take a look at yours. You can send me some more brochures and white papers if you want, and I’ll have my technical people look at them. Anyway, I’ll call you later and let you know if we’re still interested. Thanks anyway. Have a nice day.”

Shit! Oh, that’s just wonderful. Just wonderful.

Ev angrily stabbed the red END button and returned the small digital phone to his belt. He took a long Walter Clark sized chug of his own beer, belched out loud, half in dis-

gust, not really giving a shit who heard it, and let the warm effervescence resonate in his sinuses and ooze out his nose. No one around him appeared to acknowledge his lapse of etiquette. Ev just stared at his half empty beer cup for the next several minutes, nibbling on the frayed edge of a finger nail.

“Well, that’s a fine how do you do, now isn’t it,” he whispered to himself, glancing down at his watch again, not that it mattered anymore. It read 5:11. Bye-bye plane. A cloud of stunned, disengaged shock settled over him. He suddenly felt very tired. His eyes mutely glanced left and right at the flood of bodies flowing by until something across the table suddenly caught his eye. Walter Clark’s gray suit coat was still draped over the back of the chair. His briefcase was still standing behind it.

“Aw, shit!” Ev jumped up and grabbed the jacket and the light brown Hartman case, along with his own burdens. He zigzagged through the obstacle course of bodies down the terminal concourse toward his former gate. When he got there, as he feared, it now stood vacant, except for the uniformed gate agent typing the last few tickets into the computer. He could see out the plate glass window to the end of the umbilical jetway. It too was empty. With the late afternoon Texas sun glinting off the light blue and green skin of the Boeing 737, ExecuAir’s Flight 1125 had just been pushed down the yellow line and was being unhitched from the tug.

What to do? What to do?

There wasn’t anything he *could* do, he realized. Lost-

and-Found would have to handle it. He looked at the gate agent. She was still busy in head-down keyboard mode, oblivious to his presence. He waved. Nothing. Cleared his throat twice. Zip. He could have been on fire. She was oblivious. Nope, this one was “in the zone.” Yes, we all have our priorities, and as far as Miss Clickity-click was concerned, administration always comes before customer service. Ev was just about to point this fact out to her when— *FLASH!*

It happened.

The tortured instant of fiery death.

Out of the corner of his eye, Everett Manning witnessed the thunderous concussion of the exploding Boeing 737... the supernova... the massive expanding fireball..... the blinding white welder's light filling the concourse window... the raging plumes of red, yellow, orange, blue and black... the floor sliding from side to side... the amber tinted floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows shattering... the screaming glass exploding inward... the wall of searing heat roaring over...

And then the painful silence.

CHAPTER 2

Steele, Alabama

The distinct deep-throated growl of the muffler on the '82 Thunderbird caused Dexter, the Davis' 120 pound, black-and-tan German Shepherd, to jump up on the weather-worn, plank-board porch of the two-bedroom shotgun house and start barking in excitement, bounding down the front steps in one jump. He ran to the length of his chain, standing on his hind legs, pawing the air with his forelegs. Dexter was excited, as he was every day about this time: mouth open wide, long pink tongue hanging out, panting hard. This also was the time every day when Jenny Davis' stomach began to twist into a knot.

He was home.

Jenny's knuckles went white around the dishrag in her hand. The familiar sound of tires grinding to a halt over the

pea-gravel drive was followed by a motor coughing and farting for several seconds after the ignition was shut off. That was followed by a heavy mechanical shudder and a final sputtering sigh, then hissing quiet, interspersed with a few ping-pong ticks and whispers of cooling metal.

Jenny's eyes glanced nervously around the kitchen. Everything looked neat, clean, and in order. The chicken was frying nicely on the stove, bubbling along in an inch of Crisco. The snap beans were simmering with a strip of bacon. The potatoes were tender and just needed to be mashed. The small cast-iron skillet of corn bread was in the oven staying warm. Slices of fresh onion and tomato were on the cutting board. A fresh stick of butter sat on the counter, already soft.

Everything was ready—she hoped.

The car door slammed shut, followed by the sound of uneven footfalls, heavy work boots crunching on the pea gravel, clumping up the creaking back steps, stumbling only once this time. Dexter was still barking.

Jenny took a deep breath and swallowed the knot of apprehension in her throat.

Randy Davis, as was his custom as the Lord of Davis Manor, pulled the warped screen door wide with a whine of rusty metal. He lumbered through the kitchen doorway, listing against the frame for support, barely able to stand. Out came his usual belch of salutation, long, deep and resonant. The screen door slapped shut behind him with a bang, announcing the King had entered the building.

Jenny took one look at him and cringed.

Randy’s eyes were as blood red as she’d ever seen them, watery and shiny, lids at half-staff, rimmed in blotchy rings of pink and purple. The hair sticking out from under his green Alabama Power ball-cap was matted to his forehead with sweat and grime. Dislodged by a jerking hick-up, the empty long-neck beer bottle slipped from his hand to the floor and broke next to the muddy steel toe of his right boot, scattering cruel shards of brown glass across the floor. He never even paid it a moment’s notice, just laughed, wiping a thin tendril of saliva from the corner of his mouth with the back of a grease-stained hand.

“Huuuney...” he chuckled, his shoulders hitching up beneath his dusty denim jacket. “I’m home. Give us a kiss.”

She swallowed hard, “Hey there, baby. Your dinner is almost ready. Why don’t you go get washed up and I’ll...”

“*Ah-most ready!*” Instantly, a black switch was thrown inside the creature standing before her. The watery smile vanished. His eyes bulged forward, the thick tendons on his neck stretched taut with quaking fury.

Jenny didn’t even realize her mistake until it was too late. She shrank against the sink, praying it would be quick this time.

Sometimes she got lucky and he just passed out before it got too bad. Of course, the apologies and “never-again” promises always sounded sincere on the mornings-after; but once Randy got started she never knew how far he’d go. Each time it got a little worse. She still had a cracked rib from the last time, not quite mended, to prove it. That was the frightening part, the “not knowing how bad it was going

to be this time.”

But maybe she’d get lucky *this* time.

A voice inside her head, an all-too-familiar one that sounded an awful lot like her mother, the shrill scolding voice that made her left eye hurt like eating ice-cream too fast, chastised her that if she had just been able to give Randy babies, like the litter of brats her two older sisters pumped out for their husbands over the last ten years, it wouldn’t be this way. Consciously, she knew that was fool’s talk, but the chastising voice in her head didn’t care a whit about her feelings on the subject. From birth she had been taught that it was not her place to question the tenets of right and wrong or a woman’s place, but just to shut her mouth and do what she was supposed to do.

The *voice* relentlessly quoted chapter and verse of the laws of their land, the sacred tribal code of the immutable ways of what’s fittn’ and proper for a woman, just as those ways had been known and passed down from mother to daughter, generation after generation before her. Day after day the voice righteously insisted that every time he slapped her, pushed her, kicked her, spit on her, bruised her, broke a bone, blackened an eye, loosened a tooth, tore her clothes off and painfully violated her—it was somehow all her own fault, that she brought it all on her own head, yea verily, as due punishment for her failure as a wife and as a woman.

You do what’s right, girl, the old matriarchal voice of her elders commanded.

Of course, that was all just fool’s talk, *damn* fool talk,

Jenny often reminded herself. She knew that. But knowing didn't make it any easier. It didn't silence the voice—though one day she prayed the voice would be silenced, burned to ashes, if she could help it.

Jenny didn't care two cents that both her sisters, Ellen and Beth, were champion brood mares. Was that *all* a woman was for? Jenny didn't think so. But according to her mother, and Ellen, and Beth, and Randy, and *the voice*—birthing babies certainly was the top priority of life. And it wasn't as though she and Randy never tried. Lord knows they'd tried for years to get pregnant, but with no luck, not even a false start.

Nothing.

Barren, the voice condemned.

Nevertheless, a part of her—a secret part, a quiet part—was relieved that it never happened, and yes, even *hopeful* that it would never happen. *Ever*.

Naturally, that notion was contrary to all her upbringing, and she'd never dare say so out loud, especially in front of her mother, who would surely backhand her in the next second for blasphemy. But the thought of being a mother with four or five drooling knee-biters in orbit around her, keeping house, cooking, scrubbing toilets, growing tomatoes and squash in the garden, doing laundry, and watching *The Price is Right*, *General Hospital*, and *Oprah* every day, day after day, for the rest of her life wasn't Jenny's own idea of what life was supposed to be all about. Her gut told her there *had* to be *more* out there in the world. She didn't know exactly what it was she really wanted out of life, but

she sure as hell knew one thing in particular she *didn't* want. It was staring at her—ten feet away, with no signs of passing out.

No...this wasn't going to be one of the lucky times.

Randy crunched through the broken brown glass of the dropped long-neck beer bottle and stormed over to her. The sick sour smell arrived before he did. He grabbed her by the neck with his powerful right hand, roughly lifting her chin up, his face looming down to meet hers, nose to nose. The sensation of her tremors only fueled his temper.

“You *know* that's not how I *like* it, Punkin',” he growled. A white fleck of cigarette paper clung to his cracked lower lip.

Jenny held her breath, repulsed by the stench of his sweat combined with the dirt and grease, mingled with too much beer and garlic and tobacco, and whatever else he last puked up on the side of the road on his way home.

Her eyes were stretched wide as she barely got the words out, “I'm...I'm sorry, sweetheart. It'll just be a minute to get it on the table. I just kept it hot for you.”

“*No*,” he bellowed, the inebriation slurring his Southern drawl even more, “You *know* it's goddamn well supposed to be on the fuckin' table hot and ready when I walk through that door each and *every* night! Them is my rules! And you *know* wahappens when you break my rules!”

Jenny's vision was starting to blur with tears of fear. The vice-clamp on her throat squeezed tighter and tighter as her tiny voice rose in pitch, cracking, “But I never know exactly when you're coming...”

He snarled.

Jenny Davis never got to finish her sentence before the stunning open-handed blow of his strong left hand blasted into the entire right side of her face. It was like serving a volleyball, her entire jaw and right ear instantly went numb. The vicious slap was hard enough to send her blond hair whipping around in a wide arc to her right as her body went sprawling wildly to her left, her arms and upper body clearing the counter top behind her. Plates, saucers, cups, and glasses from the overloaded dish drainer tumbled down to the floor in a loud clatter, exploding in a sharp shower of glass, scattering shards across her clean and shiny Mop-n-Glow, linoleum tiles. For half a second Jenny fought desperately for her balance, her fingernails scratching across the Formica, gravity waging war against her equilibrium.

Gravity won.

She tumbled down hard on top of the jagged shards below. The sharp pricks and incisions in her forearms and right shoulder burned deep. Searing pain drove her jaw open to its widest extremity in a tortured silent scream, her eyelids squeezing down so hard she thought they would cut into her cheeks.

“Don’t you *ever* backtalk me, you stupid fuckin’ little *whore!*” Randy Davis screamed down at her, crouching over her, his hands gnarled into white-knuckled fists, quaking arms bowed out at his sides. Bile laden spittle from his mouth showered her bare legs. “You juss better mind me, shape-up and fly right, or you’ll see what else happens to you. You hear me, you *stupid* bitch?” He jabbed a finger

back toward the kitchen door, more bubbles of spit flying, “I could bury you so deep out there in them piney woods, they’d never find your carcass fore the varmints’n bugs done et you to the bone.”

She was crawling away from the venom of his voice through the splinters of glass and droplets of her own blood when she heard him start to chuckle and the sound of his belt buckle opening and his fly going down.

No. Dear God, not again.

“Now just where’n tarnation you think you’s a’goin’, Punkin’, with that purdy little ass a’yours?” he taunted. “You know daddy needs some lovin’ when he gets home, and with the way you been misbehaving, daddy thinks maybe you need to learn a little lesson on how take care your man.”

The nicks and gouges of glass in her palms and knees were insignificant to her now. Jenny was up on all fours, crawling away, thinking she actually had a glimmer of a chance to get away when the strong hand seized her right ankle and jerked her back.

She screamed.

It made him laugh.

The powerful manacle around her ankle yanked hard, twisting her over, sending the room into a spinning blur of vertigo. A bolt of pain shot through her hip as her back slammed hard into the field of broken glass, knocking the wind out of her. He towered over her once more, covering her with his shadow. She watched him push his jeans down over his hips, the belt buckle jingling back against the metal

tab on the leather buck-knife case at his side.

Her eyes going wide in terror, she gasped in a strained breath.

He was already rock hard, grotesquely swollen to a ghastly shade of purple, which was an amazing feat in and of itself considering how much alcohol Jenny knew had to be saturating his system. And mind you, Randy Ethan Davis, called “RED” by everyone except Jenny, was a big man in every respect, a full foot taller than Jenny, and outweighed her by almost a hundred pounds.

When he plopped down to his knees and tried to spread her legs Jenny reacted purely by reflex and instinct. If she’d had time to think about it, she would have been too terrified to do what she did. But there was no time to think, just act. The only thought flooding her mind was the utter refusal to feel the invasive burning down there again. The revolting thought of that repulsive thing tearing its way inside her ever again, taking her, consuming her, defiling her—it was too much.

With her eyes squeezed tight, her bare left heel thrust out as hard as she could kick, toes pulled back, thrusting with all her might like a battering ram, connecting hard with warm flesh and what felt like bone.

Instantly the grip on her right ankle vanished.

Her legs sprung up to her chest in a defensive cannonball, anticipating a retaliatory volley of vicious bone-breaking blows. More glass shards burned into her back.

Only a choking sound preceded an abrupt silence.

Jenny opened her eyes wide and saw Randy still

perched on his knees, where his jeans had fallen down, bunched in a filthy blue pool. His bare, pasty-white upper thigh muscles stood out, straining taut to the point of snapping. Both of his callused dirty hands were now in his crotch. His face was so red she thought it was about to explode. Drops of blood leaked from the end of his rapidly deflating organ. Several of the bright red droplets were already soaking into the bottom hem of his grime-grayed tee-shirt. He gagged once more and toppled over on his right side, retching and coughing, his bloodshot eyes protruding half out of their sockets.

It wasn't the pain—rather, it was more a combination of fear, revulsion, and a sense of pure undiluted self-preservation which propelled Jenny rolling to her left, out of the teeth and talons of the broken glass and wide dark spreading smears of her own blood. She clawed her way up the kitchen wall as though the linoleum was covered with water moccasins and copperheads. All the while she never took her eyes off her tormentor writhing and gagging on his tongue, lying in a tight fetal ball on the green and white checkerboard linoleum tiles, paralyzed with agony.

Look what you've done to your man! the shrill voice that sounded like her mother screamed in her head. *Just look what you've done!*

Go! Just go! another voice firmly commanded, a new voice rang out. *Now!*

Only one thought permeated her mind: *No turning back. The line had finally been crossed. As soon as he could move an inch she was a dead women.*

Go! While you still can, the new voice implored.

Dressed in nothing but a pair of dingy white running shorts and a faded red “Roll Tide” University of Alabama tank-top, Jenny Davis jumped over the broken brown pieces of the fallen beer bottle by the door, lucky not to have any of the jagged glass slivers stuck in the bottom of her feet. She hit the screen door and back steps running as fast as her bare feet would carry her, leaving behind only a bloody palm print on the door frame and one on the door handle, plus a dappled trail of crimson drops on the ground every few paces. Dexter exploded off the front porch once more in a fit of hellish barking, chasing her full speed till he hit the end of his chain and stood up straight again, forelegs pawing frantically.

She ran. With everything left in her, she ran.

Hot tears flew off Jenny’s cheeks and deep sobs wracked her sides as she fled the only home other than her parents’ she had ever known, bruised and bleeding, but alive. Humiliated one last time, but alive. Terrified and terrorized once more, but alive. Fleeing with nothing but her life, but alive.

Alive!

Jenny ran as fast as she’d ever run in her entire life, through the hungry clouds of mosquitoes and noseems, running down the dusty pea-gravel driveway, her naked feet spitting pebbles into the air behind her as she flew. She ran faster still down the hard, hot, cracked blacktop two-lane road, between the walls of tall pine trees on either side of her—Alabama pine trees, as tall as the tales she’d been told

all her life on how to live, trees as narrow as the minds of far too many people in her life. She ran toward the hot orange sunset beginning to bleed down behind the trees and purpling the base of the clouds above; leaving nothing behind her save a long, thin black shadow.

Running. Not once looking back.

Not *ever* looking back.

CHAPTER 3

Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, Texas

If Everett Manning hadn’t been in the process of falling down in front of the ticket counter, actually body slammed by the force of the blast, the long shards of flying glass and shrapnel from the disintegrated airliner and jetway would have torn him to pieces, as it did scores of others bustling down the crowded concourse.

Shrill silence.

There should have been a sound, Ev’s confused mind kept telling him. There was an explosion. He saw it. But there was no BOOM. No thundering KA-THOOM like you hear in the movies with lots of sub-woofer. Only the immense bright light, as bright as looking directly into the sun, which had left a contagion of large yellow neon-trailed

spots before his eyes.

My God, what just happened?

His mind raced to grasp the unfathomable, the unbelievable, the utterly unacceptable—sorting a sequence of instantaneous events contained in a single moment of time that the rational mind completely rejected, yet painfully strained to comprehend. Yes, there had been the scorching light, but no sound. Then the earthquake beneath him, then the first shriek of bursting glass, and then the painful pound of his body crashing down against the floor, hard enough to knock the wind out of him. But no BOOM.

How come?

All Everett Manning could hear at that moment was the grinding whine of a giant wasp or mosquito in his ear, doing its best to bore a hole into his brain. It made his teeth hurt. Even the hubbub of the endless flow of humanity was now gone, obscured by that high-pitched shrill tone oscillating in his ears. He rolled onto his left side and saw people running and waving their arms in panic. Some were bleeding. Others lay prone as he did on the floor. Their mouths were moving, some stretched wide, as if to scream, but there was no sound. Only the piercing squeal of that one tortured note remained.

It screamed for them all.

With great difficulty, on the third attempt, Ev climbed back to his feet, his heart thundering in his chest, feeling slightly drunk and disoriented, and very afraid. He reached out with his left hand and grasped the ticket counter for support. His pinkie landed in something wet.

Just beyond his splayed fingers lay the visage of the too-busy ticket agent hugging her precious computer terminal, only now with the seven foot high and ten foot wide backboard tilted over on top of her. A thick splatter of red stained the ticket counter in a V-shaped spray from her mouth and nose, trickling over the edge of the counter. One of the woman's eyes had burst, laying deflated on her cheek like a squashed grape. Ev spun violently away, feeling the need to vomit well up thick in the back of his throat.

Get away from this!

Ev managed to grab his clutter of baggage and the kind stranger Walter Clark's jacket. Staggering a few feet away, stumbling toward a carpeted wall, he stopped and cowered there for a moment, shaking violently from head to toe, desperate to feel something solid and real and familiar. The ringing in his ears was now diminishing into a dissonant mixture of confused tones and noises. There came intermitted bursts of garbled echoes, frightened voices, sirens, angry voices, terrified screams, urgent voices, running footsteps, shouts, klaxons, bells, and anything and everything that falls under the banners of utter bedlam and confusion.

The black laptop computer bag still hung from his shoulder, digging deep into his collar bone. In his sweating and trembling left hand were the straps to his own soft-side briefcase and the supple handle of the tan Hartman. The gray suit jacket of his brief bar companion was still slung over his right forearm. It wasn't even wrinkled. As he stared at it, through a cloud of intensifying disbelief and

disorientation, the pain of realization thundered a heavy-weight body-blow into his stomach, then reached up and seized his lungs:...this coat's owner was dead, along with over a hundred other people.

Good God, no...it couldn't have...

Suddenly unable to breathe and more nauseous than ever, Everett Manning slowly struggled back to his feet and trudged down the concourse, taking little baby-steps like a ninety year old man, lucky not to be trampled between the opposing crowds of those fleeing the scene of carnage and those racing in to gawk. He found a seat a few gates down the concourse and sat down before he fell down. The seat was away from the vortex of the bedlam, over by the windows, which were now filled with a spider web of cracks, but still intact.

Everett's lungs were burning. But no matter how hard he tried to suck in air, they just didn't seem to be able to get enough. A fresh volley of flashing lights outside the window caught his eye, as a battalion of yellow fire trucks with blazing emergency lights swarmed across the frenzied tarmac to the incinerating wreckage of what used to be a Boeing 737. Cannons blasted thick beige foam even before the vehicles reached their destination. A colorful parade of shrieking ambulances weren't far behind.

What a nightmare.

Ev turned away as another cruel fist of realization sucker punched him in the gut once more: *he just missed that flight*. The prospect in DC who had canceled, while infuriating him to no end, had inadvertently just saved his

life.

He gulped hard fighting back a stinging flood of hot tears. Hand fumbling, he tore open his shirt collar, yanking down his tie, desperate to breathe though the adrenaline rush violently quaking him and racing his heart to a hummingbird’s pace. His gaze returned outside to the mechanized and human carnage. If he hadn’t just checked his voice mail, he would have been sitting on that plane, now a raging inferno, torn and shredded, with pieces of it and its human contents scattered for hundreds of yards in every direction.

Yep, that would have been it.

It was unbelievable. One second he would have been sitting there, squeezed uncomfortably into Row 21, center seat E, with his seatbelt securely fastened, tray table stowed, not using an electronic device such as laptops, CD players, Gameboys, or cellular phones, learning once again where all the emergency exits were located. He would have had his nose buried in the *Sharper Image* catalogue looking at infra-red back-massagers, pocket fold-out lawn chairs, 18k gold nose hair clippers, electric water fountains for dogs, pocket DVD players, *Learn to Speak Japanese/German/French/Russian* in Two Minutes Tapes, and environmentally friendly golf ball polishers. And in the next second—oblivion. The Debt of Debts paid in full.

Dead.

What a concept.

Everett lurched over the arm of his chair and threw up the remnants of beer and popcorn, and a little bit of the

chicken-Caesar salad from lunch.

Get away from here! Now!

But something within him stopped him cold. He couldn’t just go, no matter how grotesque the scene was. There were people hurt just up the concourse. Perhaps there was something he could do to help, render first aid, CPR, something. He looked back up the hallway toward the gate of flight 1125. It was sheer unadulterated pandemonium. Uniformed individuals were yelling and screaming, but no one was paying much attention to them.

At that very moment, one of the uniformed personnel, wearing a red airline jacket, standing at a gate station, spoke into a microphone, his voice coming out over the Public Address system above the clamor, “Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! Please try to remain calm! Do *not* panic! For safety sake, *please*, do not panic! Please exit the terminal building in an orderly manner. Please exit in a safe and orderly manner!”

Just go. You have to. You’re only in the way here.

Everett obeyed, both the voice in his head and the official on the public address system, struggling again to his feet, gathering his load, and wading into the flood of frenzied bodies once more. He lumbered along in a state of numbed shock, flowing with the crowd pressing in tight around him. He wasn’t thinking very clearly; but he was at least coherent enough to realize that just walking “safely and in an orderly manner” out to his car in the parking lot wasn’t likely to be physically possible at the moment. His only hope to get away from the frightened press of bodies

was to go downstairs and take the kiddie train over to one of the terminals on the other side of the airport and try to catch a cab from there. He’d come back for his car some other time.

It worked. Five minutes later, as Ev climbed into the first available taxi, the driver asked, “Where to, sir?”

“Just drive,” Ev commanded as he slammed the door.



Shortly before midnight that evening, Everett Manning sat alone in an orange vinyl padded booth in the back of a near-empty Denny’s 24-hour diner, somewhere in Irving, Texas, not too far from Texas Stadium. He wasn’t quite sure why he was there, or *anywhere* for that matter. The only thing he was sure of is where he *wasn’t*.

Texas Stadium was where Ev had instructed the cab driver to stop and let him out almost six hours ago. No reason to go there. It was just something familiar he saw from the backseat of the cab. For the first two hours he had just walked aimlessly along the side of the highway, his mind floating in that same numb, gray fog of disbelief and shock, still unable to fully accept the reality of what had happened that day. He staggered like a drunk, clinging tight to his bags and Walter Clark’s jacket like Linus’ blue blanket, until he didn’t think he could continue to walk any further, or stand for that matter. The small diner, just off the Loop 12 and Highway 183 interchange was a welcome sight.

He had ordered a bowl of tomato soup around nine

o'clock, but the bowl still lay untouched and cold on the table before him. He stared down at the brown ring of residue at the bottom of an empty coffee cup surrounded by his fingers. His hands were shaking badly, but not from the caffeine. The near scalding brew had done little to ward off the bone-chattering chill which wracked through him.

“Nuther cup?” asked the smiling waitress, identified as Sissy on her blue plastic name badge. She stood there with a full pot in one hand. Sissy had come on shift at around ten o'clock and been sharp enough to realize that the man sitting in the back booth was someone with troubling things on his mind, and she was prudent enough to leave him be, checking back every half hour or so for coffee refills. She had a pleasant face, round and plump like the rest of her, with eyes that crinkled at the corners when she smiled. Her black hair was knotted up into a bun on the back of her head.

“Sure,” Ev whispered and leaned back, allowing her to refill his cup to the brim once more. He figured that was at least cup number eight. “Thanks.”

The horror of that very afternoon was almost too much to cope with—what Ev had seen, what he'd heard, what he'd felt. Nothing of that magnitude had ever happened to him before. Airplane crashes or terrorist bombings were just bad news stories and background noise on TV about other people in other places. They weren't “real.” This was *too* real. From out of nowhere a morbid laugh bubbled out of his throat before he had time to catch it, promulgated by the return of the unfathomable notion of his own fragile

mortality, and how close it had come to being realized that afternoon. It was an utterly new and foreign concept.

What would it be like if his life had been literally snuffed out in an instant?

Well let's see, he considered: to start, for sure, Tanya would be popping the champagne corks, until she realized no more (albeit sometimes late) child support and alimony checks would be coming in and she'd actually have to get a real job. Jeff would be sad.

Jeff.

Ev's heart pinched uncomfortably for a moment as he thought about the green and red Christmas bells tied to a length of white yarn in his briefcase. His throat was tightening again, so much so, he didn't know if he could get another sip of coffee down.

Leaving Jeff behind with Tanya was what hurt most. But there was really no choice in the matter, not in the sense of keeping his sanity. He couldn't stay with Tanya, and she was quite vocal about wanting him gone. And Tanya wasn't about to give up custody of Jeff as long as she was still breathing—and collecting monthly payments. Ev forcibly choked down another harsh bitter sip of his coffee, then sat back in the booth and raised his eyes.

A man walked in the entrance of the diner. He was a disheveled-looking fellow with long gray hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and a full gray beard, dressed in faded blue jeans and a black Harley-Davidson tee shirt. He lumbered into the diner with a large flat object under his arm, smiling broadly and waving at Sissy like an old acquaint-

ance. Ev glanced out the front window of the diner, but didn’t see the chrome stallion he imagined the biker-dude rode in on.

“Hey there, Bill!” Sissy the waitress called to the man who just came in, going over to give him a big bear hug and showing him a seat at the far end of the breakfast bar, then made her way around behind it to serve him.

Ev’s eyes returned to the steaming swirls rising from his own coffee cup, as his thoughts returned to his son. He was reluctant to admit it, but as awkward as the situation was for him with Jeff, he would be wrong to try and change it. As much as the bitch-sow could be contrary and vindictive toward himself, she loved their son as much as a mother could love a child. He knew that. Yes, despite her faults as a wife, Tanya had certainly been a devoted mother. And though he would never give Tanya the satisfaction of admitting it to her, he also knew she was right about his lack of talent as a husband and father. He wasn’t Ward Cleaver or Mike Brady or Howard Cunningham or Bill Cosby like she wanted him to be. Hell, if he was to be compared to a TV dad, he figured his aptitude for the job would probably rate somewhere between Al Bundy and Homer Simpson. So who knows, Ev wondered, perhaps if he really *was* dead, Jeff wouldn’t have to endure the emotional tug-of-war that raged between himself and Tanya.

“So what’cha got for me today?” Everett heard Sissy ask the gray-haired biker, as she poured him a cup of coffee. She called back over her shoulder to the fry-cook, “Hey, Tommy, Bill’s out here. Get him up a Grand Slam,

eggs over-easy.”

A voice came from the pass-through, “Coming right up!”

The burly man seated at the far end of the counter pulled what appeared to be a 24x18 picture wrapped in newsprint from under his arm and presented it with a flourish, “I got you a new masterpiece! Just like you wanted.”

Sissy took the package, peeled away the paper, and revealed an unframed canvass. From Ev's vantage point in the back booth, all he could see was that something very colorful was painted on it.

“Oh!” Sissy exclaimed, “Bill, I think it's your best one yet. I absolutely *love* it!”

“Do you really?” the grizzled road warrior asked eagerly, his grin beaming from between his bristle-brush mustache and Brillo-pad beard.

“Well, tell me what do *you* think, Sara?” Sissy called down the length of the diner's counter, turning the painting around to show it to a slender black woman dressed in hospital-whites, sitting at the opposite end of the counter, near Ev's booth. The painting was now in Ev's direct line of sight. He could see it was a breathtaking seascape, looking over a white sand beach to gently rolling waves, which were silhouetted against a crimson sunset.

“Very nice,” the woman responded with approval, popping a hunk of her cinnamon roll in her mouth, then wiping her hands on a napkin as Sissy approached to give her a better look. As the waitress drew closer Ev could see the painting was very vivid and detailed. If the biker *had*

painted it, as opposed to stealing it, which Ev considered more likely of the two possibilities, it was amazing. He figured it had to be worth hundreds of dollars if not over a thousand.

The biker called after Sissy, “If you really like it, it’s going to cost you twenty-five this time.”

Sissy spun back in mock appall, “Twenty-five dollars!” then huffed, “Well, if that’s what you want for it, then that’s what you’ll get. You know it’s what I like.”

Twenty-five bucks? Ev was floored. Yep, had to be stolen. The old guy was probably some heroin hound in need of a little cash to chase the dragon. Wonderful, he mused, you stop in for a cup of coffee after you were almost blown to bits and you discover you’ve wandered into a stolen art ring. But all that seemed trivial at the moment, and Ev pushed it from his mind, returning to his introspective commiseration over his recent potential demise.

So who else in his life would give a damn if he really had been incinerated in flight 1125 with all those other passengers? Both his parents were gone. What few relatives he had didn’t really bother to stay in touch. Although he knew dozens of people across the country, now that he thought about it, from the day he graduated college sixteen years ago, he’d never taken the time to develop any real lasting and/or meaningful friendships. Not a one. He was still divorced and available. Not even a steady girlfriend at the moment.

Who *had time* these days for such things?

Conclusion: No one would care, Ev. You’re pretty

damn irrelevant.

Despite a single tear carving a rivulet through the fine sheen of sweat down his left cheek, Ev's half-laugh chugged quietly again at the absurdity of the entire notion. But it was true. No one would care. Well, a few of his creditors might be pissed. Then again, maybe not. Now that he thought about it, with the \$250,000 life insurance policy his company provided, all his debts would be completely retired; and, as his beneficiary, Jeff would get the rest for his college.

And that would be that.

With his elbows perched on the harvest-gold Formica table top, Ev leaned over and wrung his head in his hands like Job. A pounding throb was marching from the distance into his temples, field drums thundering a battle cadence. The tips of his fingers pressed against the pain, rotating in little backward circles. This had to stop. Wallowing in this death-spiral of tar baby fatalism was only making him all the more depressed.

He looked up again.

His eyes returned to the painting in the waitress' hands. It was such a serene scene. Whoever did paint that picture was someone who understood peace and tranquility. The laid-back, no-worries, Jimmy Buffett music almost seemed to come drifting out of the painter's rich tints and hues. He was half tempted to outbid the waitress and offer the biker thirty dollars for picture.

The slender black woman, Sara, took the painting in her hands and examined it carefully, asking the question Ev

was wondering himself, “Sissy, this is really good. Did *he* really do it?”

Sissy moved her body to the side, turning her back to the biker, and now directly facing toward Ev, discretely lowering her voice, but still within Ev’s earshot. Her eyes crinkled, “Oh, yeah. He comes in here two or three times a month to bring me a new one. I’ve got a whole box of them at the house. Don’t know what I’m going to do with ‘em all. I’ll probably give ‘em away this Christmas.”

Sara was shaking her head back and forth slowly in amazement, “Well, he’s a fine painter. He should try to sell them for more than twenty-five dollars. Girl, you’re *stealing* from him.”

“I most certainly am *not*. I’m paying him exactly what he wants for them. And I know it makes him very happy. Besides, he eats here for free. I take care of his tab out of my tips. And that makes *me* happy.” Sissy’s voice dropped to a level of the best gossip, “Don’t you even know who that is?”

Sara peered down the bar. So did Ev.

“No. Who is he?” Sara lifted her own coffee cup to her lips.

Sissy lifted the painting to shield her words, “That’s William Clay.”

Ev’s eyes shot down to the Hell’s Angel nursing his cup of Java. That name was very familiar. But the only William Clay he knew of was supposed to be either dead or in some insane asylum somewhere.

Sara shrugged, “Am I supposed to know who William

Clay is?”

“Do you put Texas Oil Company gas in your car?” Sissy prompted.

Ev was already shaking his head back and forth, his lips parting in flabbergasted awe. It *couldn't* be.

“Sometimes,” Sara replied.

“Well, that man sitting down there used to own most of it.” Sissy set the painting down on the counter.

“What happened?” asked Sara. “Did he get fired?”

“No,” Sissy shrugged, “He was a multimillionaire. It seems about seven or eight years ago he just got sick of it all. So one day he just up and walked away. He told me he hated the oil business. He hated big business in general. Don’t get him started on that one unless you have time to sit a while and hear about his daddy making him go to this fancy school and that one, and pushing him along every step of the way, whether he wanted to go or not. Poor thing. He’d always wanted to be an artist. So one day he just up and decides to do what *he* wants to do for a change. So he quit his job.”

“No,” Sara pursed her lips.

Sissy’s eyebrows went up, “And then his snooty-bitch wife up and leaves him and takes all the money. And you know what? He didn’t even care. His family had a court officially declare him mentally incompetent and took all the rest. They said he had some kind of a breakdown, and then they turned around and left him with nothing, literally living off the streets.”

“I *can't* believe that,” Sara protested.

“It’s true, swear to God on a stack of bibles,” Sissy went on. “So he went and got himself a little apartment down on lower Greenville, near SMU. He drives around town in an ugly little red Toyota pickup truck with a couple of hundred-thousand miles on it. He just paints all day long and sells his paintings for just enough to cover his rent and food and art supplies. He told me he doesn’t want any more than that. Hell, he probably doesn’t have two nickels in his pocket to rub together half the time.”

“That’s terrible,” Sara whispered, “Bless his heart.”

Sissy grinned, “No, it’s not terrible. It’s a miracle. I’m telling you, I have never known a happier human being. He lives like he wants. He comes and goes as he pleases. He’s doing what he always wanted to do. And you’ll never find that man without a smile on his face, a hug for your neck, or the funniest stories. I’m telling you, he’s got more friends now than Carter has pills. Believe me, girl, that man will outlive us all.”

The voice from the pass-through bellowed, “Order’s up!”

Sara laughed, “Well, then tell him to paint one for me.”

“I’ll do that,” Sissy returned the laugh, moving down the counter to fetch the hot plate sliding up on the stainless steel deck.

Ev wasn’t laughing. He was staring at the old man at the end of the counter. Was that *really* William Clay, the ex-chairman and CEO of the Texas Oil Company? That man had *everything*. Ev could still remember seeing his picture on the covers of *Forbes* and *Time* magazine, leaning

up against his Rolls Royce in front of his Highland Park mansion, right down the street from Ross Perot's. And look at him now, practically a street bum. He certainly didn't have all that long hair or bushy beard back then either. Oh, no. He was groomed almost identical to the man named Walter Clark he'd shared a beer with earlier that very afternoon.

Walter Clark.

Ev grimaced. His eyes glanced at the Hartman briefcase and gray suit coat piled in the bench seat across from him. Walter Clark was dead. So were a lot of other people. The queasy feeling in his stomach was coming back. He looked back at the elderly hippie biker. The man who once had everything. The man who walked away from it all. The man disowned by his family and publicly ridiculed and scorned. The man who lost both his fortune and his good name. And yet the more he stared at him, the more Ev started to see something entirely different.

The waitress' words echoed back: *"I have never in all my years known a happier human being. He lives like he wants. He comes and goes as he pleases. He's doing what he always wanted to do...that man will outlive us all."*

William Clay, millionaire, was dead. Bill the happy painter, sat at the end of an all-night diner counter scarfing up eggs and bacon without a care in the world. My God, Ev realized, *now* he has it all, with the hamster wheel nowhere in sight.

How wonderful that might be, Ev mused, to just chuck it all like Bill did and start all over. To be free of the ham-

ster wheel. That must have taken a great deal of courage for that man sitting down there. Ev watched the biker-artist laugh and begin telling an amusing story to Sissy, gesturing quite a bit with his hands to illustrate his tale. That man was going to go home to his apartment, sleep like a saint with a clear conscience, wake up in the morning, pick up his palette and brushes and create more beauty, then go hang out with his friends, sell a painting here and there, tell a joke, have a simple meal, and then happily do it over and over again for the rest of his days.

Conversely, for Ev, when he got his head together, he would go back to his own apartment, chug a few stiff drinks to counteract all the caffeine and try to sleep (as if that were even a possibility that night), only to get up tomorrow, to start smilin'-and-dialin' for dollars all over again. Then there awaited the unending routine of running down the old prospect lists, vetting the lead sheets, and setting up appointments and presentations. Then there was always the internal wrestling matches with the engineers and the marketing pukes to actually make anything happen on the odd chance a customer demonstrated the slightest inclination to buy something. Oh, *happy* day. And many more days just like it awaited their turn, leading all the way over the horizon as far as the mind's eye could see.

The voice of self pity promptly spoke up, "*Hey, stupid. Remember back in High School English class? Remember Arthur Miller's play 'Death of a Salesman'? Remember that loser burn-out Willy Loman who killed himself after he got fired? You two guys have an awful lot in common.*

Don't you? Are you just going to run faster and faster in your hamster wheel for years and years until your skills grow dull and they fire you too, or until you can't take it anymore and you put yourself out of your misery like Willy did? Say...you could have saved everyone a shit-load of trouble by not missing your flight today."

For the hundredth time Ev instantly recalled the searing image branded into his brain of the tangled inferno on the DFW tarmac, as towering tongues of red, white, yellow, blue, and orange had climbed up the plumes of black and gray, racing each other up over a hundred feet to be the first to lick the sky. With no nails left to chew, he went to work on his cuticles, remembering the mechanized cavalry of fire fighters attacking the conflagration on three flanks. It had been a valiant effort, but as useless as three guys trying to piss out a forest fire. They'd be lucky to match dental records and DNA to anything left of those poor people, assuming they could find anything viable enough to test. Nausea was welling up in his throat again.

So many dead.

Everett Manning's head popped up as a sharp new chill of realization suddenly ran up and down his spine and slapped him cold in the face. He lifted his head and blinked hard, twice in rapid succession. A blinding searchlight of revelation poured in. His heart was pounding again.

It was crazy. It was utterly insane.

But it was true: Officially, he *didn't* miss that flight. He'd checked in. He'd watched the girl type his ticket into the system. That meant his name was officially on the pas-

senger manifest, which meant he would be counted among the dead. Yes, as far as anyone else in the world knew, Everett Manning was as dead as Walter Clark.

Everett Manning was still staring at Bill the happy painter when he made a very important decision.