

International Bestselling author of **THINK OF A NUMBER** and **SHOT YOUR EYES TIGHT**

LET THE

DEVIL

SLEEP

JOHN VERDON

Also by John Verdon

Think of a Number
Shut Your Eyes Tight

John Verdon

Let the Devil
Sleep

A novel



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Acknowledgments

Part One
The Orphans
of Murder

She had to be stopped.

Hints had not worked. Subtle nudges had been ignored. Firmer action was called for. Something dramatic and unmistakable, accompanied by a clear explanation.

The clarity of the explanation was crucial. It could leave no room for doubt, no room for questions. The police, the media, and the naïve little meddler herself must be made to understand his message, to agree on its significance.

He stared down thoughtfully at the yellow pad in front of him and began to write:

You must abandon your ill-conceived project immediately. What you are proposing to do is intolerable. It glorifies the most destructive people on earth. It ridicules my pursuit of justice by exalting the criminals I have executed. It creates undeserved sympathy for the vilest of the vile. This cannot happen. This I will not permit. I have slept for ten years in the peace of my achievement, in the peace of my message to the world, in the peace of my justice. Force me to take up arms again and the price will be terrible.

He read what he had written. He shook his head slowly. He was not satisfied with the tone. He tore the page from the pad and slipped it into the slot of the document shredder by his chair. He began again on a fresh page:

Stop what you are doing. Stop now and walk away. Or there will be blood again, and more blood. Be warned. Do not disturb my peace.

That was better. But not quite good enough.

He'd have to work on it. Sharpen the point. Leave no doubt. Make it perfect.

And there was so little time.

The French doors were open.

From where Dave Gurney was standing by the breakfast table, he could see that the large patches of winter snow, like reluctant glaciers, had receded from the open pasture and survived now only in the more recessed and shadowed places in the surrounding woods.

The mixed fragrances of the newly exposed earth and the previous summer's unmowed hay drifted into the big farmhouse kitchen. These were smells that once had the power to enthrall him. Now they barely touched him.

"You should step outside," said Madeleine from where she stood at the sink, washing off her cereal bowl. "Step out into the sun. It's quite glorious."

"Yes, I can see that," he said, not moving.

"Sit and have your coffee in one of the Adirondack chairs," she said, setting the bowl down in the drying rack on the countertop. "You could use some sun."

"Hmm." He nodded meaninglessly and took another sip from the mug he was holding. "Is this the same coffee we've been using?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it."

"Yes, it's the same coffee."

He sighed. "I think I'm getting a cold. Last couple of days, things haven't had much taste."

She rested her hands on the edge of the sink island and looked at him. "You need to get out more. You need to *do* something."

"Right."

"I mean it. You can't just sit in the house and stare at the wall all day. It will make you sick. It is making you sick. Have you called Connie Clarke back?"

"I will."

"When?"

"When I feel like it."

He didn't think it was a feeling he was likely to have in the foreseeable future. That's just the way he was these days—the way he'd been for the past six months. It was as though after the injuries he'd suffered at the end of the bizarre Jillian Perry murder case, he had withdrawn from everything connected with normal life—daily tasks, planning, people, phone calls, commitments of any kind. He'd gotten to the point where he liked nothing better than a blank calendar page for the coming month—no appointments, no promises. He'd come to equate withdrawal with freedom.

At the same time, he had the objectivity to know that what was happening to him wasn't good, that there was no peace in his freedom. He felt hostile, not serene.

To some extent he understood the strange entropy that was unwinding the fabric of his life.

and isolating him. Or at least he could list what he believed to be its causes. Near the top of the list he'd place the tinnitus he'd been experiencing since he emerged from his coma. In all likelihood it had actually begun two weeks before that, when three shots were fired at him in a small room at nearly point-blank range.

The persistent sound in his ears (which the ear, nose, and throat specialist had explained wasn't a "sound" at all but rather a neural anomaly that the brain misinterpreted as sound) was hard to describe. The pitch was high, the volume low, the timbre like a softly hissing musical note. The phenomenon was fairly common among rock musicians and combat veterans, was anatomically mysterious, and, apart from occasional cases of spontaneous remission, was generally incurable. "Frankly, Detective Gurney," the doctor had concluded, "considering what you've been through, considering the trauma and the coma, ending up with a mild ringing in your ears is a damn lucky outcome."

It wasn't a conclusion Dave could argue with. But it hadn't made it any easier for him to adjust to the faint whine that enveloped him when all else was silent. It was a particularly problematic problem at night. What in daylight might resemble the harmless whistling of a teakettle in a distant room became in the darkness a sinister presence, a cold, metallic atmosphere that encased him.

Then there were the dreams—claustrophobic dreams that recalled his hospital experiences, memories of the constricting cast that had held his arm immobile, the difficulty he'd had breathing—dreams that left him feeling panicky for long minutes after awakening.

He still had a numb spot on his right forearm close to where the first of his assailant's bullets had shattered the wrist bone. He checked the spot regularly, sometimes hourly, and hoped that its numbness was receding—or, on bleaker days, in fear that it was spreading. There were occasional, unpredictable, stabbing pains in his side where the second bullet had passed through him. There was also an intermittent tingling—like an itch impervious to scratching—at the center of his hairline where the third bullet had fractured his skull.

Perhaps the most distressing effect of being wounded was the constant need he now felt to be armed. He'd carried a gun on the job because regulations had required it. Unlike most cops, he had no fondness for firearms. And when he left the department after twenty-five years, he left behind, along with his gold detective's shield, the need to carry a weapon.

Until he was shot.

And now, each morning as he got dressed, the inevitable final item he put on was a small ankle holster holding a .32 Beretta. He hated the emotional need for it. Hated the change in him that required the damn thing to always be with him. He'd hoped the need would gradually diminish, but so far that wasn't happening.

On top of everything else, it seemed to him that Madeleine had been watching him in recent weeks with a new kind of worry in her eyes—not the fleeting looks of pain and panic he'd seen in the hospital, or the alternating expressions of hopefulness and anxiety that had accompanied his early recovery, but something quieter and deeper—a half-hidden chronic dread, as if she were witnessing something terrible.

Still standing by the breakfast table, he finished his coffee in two large swallows. Then he carried the mug to the sink and let the hot water run into it. He could hear Madeleine down the hall in the mudroom, cleaning out the cat's litter box. The cat had recently been added to the household at Madeleine's initiative. Gurney wondered why. Was it to cheer him up

Engage him in the life of a creature other than himself? If so, it wasn't working. He had more interest in the cat than in anything else.

"I'm going to take a shower," he announced.

He heard Madeleine say something in the mudroom that sounded like "Good." He wasn't sure that's what she said, but he didn't see any point in asking. He went into the bathroom and turned on the hot water.

A long, steamy shower—the energetic spray pelting his back minute after minute from the base of his neck down to the base of his spine, relaxing muscles, opening capillaries, clearing mind and sinuses—produced in him a feeling of well-being that was both wonderful and fleeting.

By the time he'd dressed again and returned to the French doors, a jangled sense of uneasiness was already beginning to reassert itself. Madeleine was outside now on the bluestone patio. Beyond the patio was the small section of the pasture that had, through two years of frequent mowings, come to resemble a lawn. Clad in a rough barn jacket, orange sweatpants, and green rubber boots, she was working her way along the edge of the flagstones, stamping enthusiastically down on a spade every six inches, creating a clear demarcation, digging out the encroaching roots of the wild grasses. She gave him a look that seemed at first to convey an invitation for him to join in the project, then disappointment at his obvious reluctance to do so.

Irritated, he purposely looked away, his gaze drifting down the hillside to his green tractor parked by the barn.

She followed his line of sight. "I was wondering, could you use the tractor to smooth out the ruts?"

"Ruts?"

"Where we park the cars."

"Sure ..." he said hesitantly. "I guess."

"It doesn't have to be done right this minute."

"Hmm." All traces of equanimity from his shower were now gone, as his train of thought shifted to the peculiar tractor problem he'd discovered a month ago and had largely put out of his mind—except for those paranoid moments when it drove him crazy.

Madeleine appeared to be studying him. She smiled, put down her spade, and walked around to the side door, evidently so she could take off her boots in the mudroom before coming into the kitchen.

He took a deep breath and stared at the tractor, wondering for the twentieth time about the mysteriously jammed brake. As if acting in malignant harmony, a dark cloud slowly obliterated the sun. Spring, it seemed, had come and gone.

A Huge Favor for Connie Clarke

The Gurney property was situated on the saddle of a ridge at the end of a rural road outside the Catskill village of Walnut Crossing. The old farmhouse was set on the gentle southern slope of the saddle. An overgrown pasture separated it from a large red barn and a deep pond ringed by cattails and willows, backed by a beech, maple, and black-cherry forest. To the north a second pasture rose along the ridgeline toward a pine forest and a string of small abandoned bluestone quarries that looked out over the next valley.

The weather had gone through the kind of dramatic about-face that was far more common in the Catskill Mountains than in New York City, where Dave and Madeleine had come from. The sky had become a featureless slaty blanket drawn over the hills. The temperature seemed to have dropped at least ten degrees in ten minutes.

A superfine sleet was beginning to fall. Gurney closed the French doors. As he pulled them tight to secure the latches, he felt a piercing pain in the right side of his stomach. A moment later another followed. This was something he was used to, nothing that three ibuprofen couldn't suppress. He headed for the bathroom medicine cabinet, thinking that the worst part of it wasn't the physical discomfort, the worst part was the feeling of vulnerability, the realization that the only reason he was alive was that he'd been lucky.

Luck was not a concept he liked. It seemed to him to be the fool's substitute for competence. Random chance had saved his life, but random chance was not a trustworthy ally. He knew younger men who believed in good luck, relied on good luck, thought it was something they owned. But at the age of forty-eight, Gurney knew damn well that luck was only luck, and the invisible hand that flips the coin is as cold as a corpse.

The pain in his side also reminded him that he'd been meaning to cancel his upcoming appointment with his neurologist in Binghamton. He'd had four appointments with the man in less than four months, and they seemed increasingly pointless, unless the only point was to send Gurney's insurance company another bill.

He kept that phone number with his other medical numbers in his den desk. Instead of continuing into the bathroom for the ibuprofen, he went into the den to make the call. As he was entering the number, he was picturing the doctor: a preoccupied man in his late thirties with wavy black hair already receding, small eyes, girlish mouth, weak chin, silky hands, manicured fingernails, expensive loafers, dismissive manner, and no visible interest in anything that Gurney thought or felt. The three women who inhabited his sleek contemporary reception area seemed perpetually confused and irritated by the doctor, by his patients, and by the data on their computer screens.

The phone was answered on the fourth ring with an impatience verging on contempt. "David Huffbarger's office."

"This is David Gurney, I have an upcoming appointment that I'd—"

The sharp voice cut him off. "Hold on, please."

In the background he could hear a raised male voice that he thought for a moment belonged to an angry patient reeling off a long, urgent complaint—until a second voice asked a question and a third voice joined the fray in a similar tone of loud, fast-talking indignation—and Gurney realized that what he was hearing was the cable news channel that made sitting in Huffbarger's waiting room insufferable.

"Hello?" said Gurney with a definite edge. "Anybody there? *Hello?*"

"Just a minute, please."

The voices that he found so abrasively empty-headed continued in the background. He was about to hang up when the receptionist's voice returned.

"Dr. Huffbarger's office, can I help you?"

"Yes. This is David Gurney. I have an appointment I want to cancel."

"The date?"

"A week from today at eleven-forty A.M."

"Spell your name, please."

He was about to question how many people had appointments on that same day at 11:40 but he spelled his name instead.

"And when do you wish to reschedule it?"

"I don't. I'm just canceling it."

"You'll need to reschedule it."

"What?"

"I can reschedule Dr. Huffbarger's appointments, not cancel them."

"But the fact is—"

She interrupted, sounding exasperated. "An existing appointment can't be removed from the system without inserting a revised date. That's the doctor's policy."

Gurney could feel his lips tightening with anger, way too much anger. "I don't really care much about his system or his policy," he said slowly, stiffly. "Consider my appointment canceled."

"There will be a missed-appointment charge."

"No there won't. And if Huffbarger has a problem with that, tell him to call me." He hung up, tense, feeling a twinge of chagrin at his childish twisting of the neurologist's name.

He stared out the den window at the high pasture without really seeing it.

What the hell's the matter with me?

A jab of pain in his right side offered a partial answer. It also reminded him that he'd been on his way to the medicine cabinet when he'd made his appointment-canceling detour.

He returned to the bathroom. He didn't like the look of the man who looked back at him from the mirror on the cabinet door. His forehead was lined with worry, his skin colorless, his eyes dull and tired.

Christ.

He knew he had to get back to his daily exercise regimen—the sets of push-ups, chin-ups, sit-ups that had once kept him in better shape than most men half his age. But now the man in the mirror was looking every bit of forty-eight, and he wasn't happy about it. He wasn't happy about the daily messages of mortality his body was sending him. He wasn't happy about his descent from mere introversion into isolation. He wasn't happy about ... anything.

He took the ibuprofen bottle from its shelf, tapped three of the little brown pills into his hand, frowned at them, popped them into his mouth. As he was running the water, waiting for it to get cold, he heard the phone ringing in the den. Huffbarger, he thought. Connie Huffbarger's office. He made no move to answer it. *To hell with them.*

Then he heard Madeleine's footsteps coming down from upstairs. A few moments later, she picked up the phone, just as the call was switching over to their ancient answering machine. He could hear her voice but couldn't make out the words. He half-filled a small plastic cup with water and washed down the three pills that were starting to dissolve on his tongue.

He assumed that Madeleine was dealing with the Huffbarger problem. Which was fine with him. But then he heard her footsteps coming across the hall and into the bedroom. She walked through the open bathroom door, extending the phone handset toward him.

"For you," she said, handing it to him and leaving the room.

Anticipating some unpleasantness from Huffbarger or one of his malcontent receptionists, Gurney's tone was defensively curt. "Yes?"

There was a second of silence before the caller spoke.

"David?" The bright female voice was certainly familiar, but his memory failed to attach a name or a face to it.

"Yes," he said, more pleasantly this time. "I'm sorry, but I can't quite place—"

"Oh, how could you forget? Oh, I am so hurt, *Detective Gurney!*" the caller cried with joking exaggeration—and suddenly the laughing timbre and inflection of the words conjured up the person: a wiry, clever, high-energy blonde with a Queens accent and a model's cheekbones.

"Connie. Jesus. Connie Clarke. It's been a while."

"Six years, to be exact."

"Six years. Jesus." The number didn't mean much to him, didn't surprise him, but he didn't know what else to say.

He remembered their connection with mixed feelings. A freelance journalist, Connie Clarke had written a laudatory article about him for *New York* magazine after he'd solved the infamous Jason Strunk serial-murder case—just three years after he'd been promoted to detective first grade for solving the Jorge Kunzman serial-murder case. In fact, her article was a little too laudatory for comfort, dwelling as it did on his record number of homicide arrests and referring to him as the "NYPD Supercop"—a sobriquet that lent itself to scores of amusing variations created by his more imaginative colleagues.

"So how are things up there in peaceful retirement land?"

He could hear the grin in her question and assumed she knew about his unofficial involvement in the Mellery and Perry cases. "Sometimes more peaceful than other times."

"Wow! Yeah! I guess that's one way of putting it. You retire from the NYPD after twenty-five years, you're up in the sleepy Catskills for about ten minutes, and all of a sudden you're in the middle of one murder case after another. Seems to me you're kind of a major-crime magnet. Wow! How does Madeleine feel about that?"

"You just had her on the phone. You should have asked her."

Connie laughed as though he'd said something wonderfully witty.

"So between murder cases what's your typical day like?"

"There's not much to tell. It's pretty uneventful. Madeleine stays busier than I do."

"I'm having such a hard time picturing you in the middle of some kind of Norman Rockwell

America. Dave making maple syrup. Dave making apple cider. Dave getting eggs from the henhouse.”

“I’m afraid not. No syrup, cider, or eggs.” What came to his mind was quite a different scenario describing the past six months. *Dave playing the hero. Dave getting shot. Dave recovering too goddamn slowly. Dave sitting around listening to the ringing in his own ears. Dave getting depressed, hostile, isolated. Dave viewing every proposed activity as an infuriating assault on his right to remain in a paralyzing funk. Dave wanting to have nothing to do with anything.*

“So what *will* you be doing today?”

“To be absolutely truthful with you, Connie, damn little. At most I’ll walk around the edge of the fields, maybe pick up some of the branches that blew down during the winter, maybe rake some fertilizer into the garden beds. Stuff like that.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad to me. I know people who’d give a lot to trade places with you.”

He didn’t answer, just let the silence drag out, thinking it might force her to get to the point of the call. There had to be a point. He remembered Connie as a cordial and talkative woman, but she always had a purpose. Her mind, under that windblown blond mane, was always working.

“You’re wondering why I called you,” she said. “Right?”

“The question did cross my mind.”

“I called you because I want to ask you for a favor. A *huge* favor.”

Gurney thought for a moment, then laughed.

“What’s the joke?” She sounded momentarily off balance.

“You once told me that it’s always better to ask for a big favor than a small one, because small ones are easier to refuse.”

“No! I can’t believe I said that. That sounds so *manipulative*. That’s *awful*. You’re making that up, aren’t you?” She was full of cheerful indignation. Connie never remained off balance for long.

“So what can I do for you?”

“You did make it up! I knew it!”

“As I said, what can I do for you?”

“Well, now I’m embarrassed to say it, but it really is a huge, huge favor.” She paused. “You remember Kim?”

“Your daughter?”

“My daughter who adores you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, David, David, David, all the women love you, and you don’t even notice.”

“I think I was in the same room with your daughter once, when she was ... what, maybe fifteen?” His recollection was of a pretty but very serious-looking girl at lunch with him and Connie at Connie’s house, hovering at the periphery of their conversation, hardly saying a word.

“Actually, she was seventeen. And okay, maybe ‘adore’ is too gushy a word. But she thought you were really, really smart—and to Kim that means a lot. Now she’s twenty-three and I happen to know she still has a very high opinion of Dave Gurney, Supercop.”

“That’s very nice, but ... I’m getting a little lost here.”

“Of course you are, because I’m making such a mess of asking you for the super-huge favor. Maybe you ought to sit down—this could take a few minutes.”

Gurney was still standing by the sink in the bathroom. He walked out through the bedroom and across the hall into the den. He had no desire to sit. Instead he stood by the back window. “Okay, Connie, I’m sitting,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing bad, really. It’s overwhelmingly good. Kim has an incredible opportunity. Did I ever tell you she was interested in journalism?”

“Following in her mother’s footsteps?”

“God, don’t ever say that to her, she’d switch careers overnight! I think her greatest goal is total independence from her mother! And forget about *footsteps*. She’s on the verge of a major *leap*. So let me get down to the nitty-gritty here, before I lose you completely. She’s completing a master’s program in journalism at Syracuse. That’s not far from you, right?”

“It’s not exactly in the neighborhood. Maybe an hour and forty-five minutes away.”

“Okay, not too terribly far. Not much worse than my commute to the city. So anyway, for her final degree project she came up with an idea for a kind of reality miniseries about murder victims—well, actually, not the victims themselves, but the families, the children. She wants to look at the long-term effects of having a parent murdered, without any resolution.”

“Without—”

“Right—they’d all be cases where the killer was never caught. So the wound would never really have healed. No matter how much time passes, it remains the single biggest emotional fact in their lives—a giant force field that changes everything forever. She’s calling the series *The Orphans of Murder*. Is that great or what?”

“Sounds like an interesting idea.”

“Very interesting! But I’m leaving out the dynamite part. It’s not just an *idea*. It’s actually going to *happen*! It started out as an academic project, but her thesis adviser was so impressed that he helped her develop her outline into an actual proposal. He even got her to nail down some of her intended participants with exclusivity agreements so she’d be protected. Then he passed the proposal along to a production contact of his at RAM-TV. And guess what? The RAM guy wants it! Overnight this thing has been transformed from a frigging term paper into the kind of professional exposure that people with twenty years’ experience would kill for. RAM is the hottest thing out there.”

In Gurney’s opinion RAM was the organization most responsible for turning traditional news programming into a noisy, flashy, shallow, poisonously opinionated, alarmist carnival—but he overcame the temptation to say so.

“So now you’re wondering,” Connie went on excitedly, “what all this has to do with my favorite detective, right?”

“I’m waiting.”

“Couple of things. First, I need you to look over her shoulder.”

“Meaning what?”

“Just meet with her? Get a sense of what she’s doing? See if it reflects the world of homicide victims as you know it? She’s got this one big chance. If she doesn’t make too many mistakes, the sky’s the limit.”

“Hmm.”

“Does that little grunt mean you’ll do it? Will you, David, please?”

“Connie, I don’t know a damn thing about journalism.” What he did know mostly disgusted him, but again he kept quiet.

“She’s got the journalism part down pat. And she’s as smart as anyone I know. But she’s still a kid.”

“Then what do I bring to the table? Old age?”

“Reality. Knowledge. Experience. Perspective. The incredible wisdom that comes from ... how many homicide cases?”

He didn’t think that was a real question, so he didn’t try to answer it.

Connie continued with even more intensity. “She’s super capable, but ability isn’t the same as life experience. She’s in the process of interviewing people who’ve lost a parent or some other loved one to a murderer. She needs to be in a realistic frame of mind for that. She needs a broad view of the territory, you know what I mean? I guess what I’m saying is that so much is at stake, she needs to know as much as she possibly can.”

Gurney sighed. “God knows there’s a ton of stuff out there on grief, death, loss of a loved one.”

She cut him off. “Yeah, yeah, I know—the pop-psych stages of grief, five stages of horseshit, whatever. That’s not what she needs. She needs to talk to someone who knows about *murder*, who’s seen the victims, talked to the families, looked in their eyes, the horror—someone who *knows*, not someone who wrote a frigging book.” There was a long silence between them. “So will you do it? Just meet with her once, just look at what she’s got and where she plans to go with it. See if it makes sense to you?”

As he stared out the den window at the back pasture, the idea of meeting with Connie’s daughter to review her entry ticket into the world of trash television was one of the least appealing prospects on earth. “You said there were a *couple* of things, Connie. What’s the second one?”

“Well ...” Her voice weakened. “There may be an ex-boyfriend problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“That’s the question. Kim likes to sound invulnerable, you know? Like she’s not afraid of anything or anybody?”

“But ...?”

“But at the very least, this asshole has been playing nasty little tricks on her.”

“Like what?”

“Like getting into her apartment and moving things around. There was something she started to tell me about a knife disappearing and later reappearing, but when I tried to get her to tell me more about it, she wouldn’t.”

“Then why do you think she brought it up?”

“Maybe she wants help, and at the same time she doesn’t want it, and she can’t make up her mind which it is.”

“Does the asshole have a name?”

“Robert Meese is his real name. He calls himself Robert Montague.”

“Is this somehow connected with her TV project?”

“I don’t know. I just have a feeling that the situation is worse than she’s willing to admit. Or at least admit to me. So ... please, David? Please? I don’t know who else to ask.”

When he didn't respond, she went on. "Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe I'm imagining things. Maybe there's no problem at all. But even if there isn't, it would still be great if you could listen to her talk about her project, about these homicide victims and their families. It means so much to her. It's the opportunity of a lifetime. She's so determined, so confident."

"You sound a little shaky."

"I don't know. I'm just ... concerned."

"About her project or about her ex-boyfriend?"

"Maybe both. I mean, on the one hand, it's fantastic, right? But it just breaks my heart to think that she might be so determined and so confident and so independent that somehow she'd get in over her head without telling me, without my being able to help her. God, David, you have a son, right? Do you know what I'm feeling?"

Ten minutes after they'd ended the call, Gurney was still standing at the large north-facing den window, trying to make sense of Connie's uncharacteristically scattered tone, wondering why he'd finally agreed to talk to Kim and why the whole situation made him so uncomfortable.

He suspected that it had something to do with her last comment about his son. That, always, was a sensitive area—for reasons he had no intention of examining right then.

The phone rang. He was surprised to find that he'd distractedly been holding it in his hand, having forgotten to hang it up. *This time it really will be Huffbarger*, he thought, *calling to defend his idiotic cancellation policy*. He was tempted to let it ring, let it go to the answering machine, let Huffbarger wait. But he also wanted to be done with it, didn't want to be thinking about it. He pressed the TALK button.

"Dave Gurney here."

A young female voice, clear and bright, said, "Dave, I want to thank you so much! Connie just called and told me that you'd be willing to talk to me."

For a second he was confused. He always found it jarring when a parent was called by her or her first name.

"Kim?"

"Of course! Who did you think?" When he didn't answer, she raced on. "Anyway, here's why this situation is so cool. I'm headed up to Syracuse from the city. Right now I'm just where Route 17 meets I-81. Which means I can shoot across I-88 and be in Walnut Crossing in like thirty-five minutes. Is that okay with you? It's super-short notice, I know, but it's such serendipity! And I'm dying to see you again!"

The Impact of Murder

Routes 17, 81, and 88 converge in the neighborhood of Binghamton, which is a good hour from Walnut Crossing. Gurney wondered if Kim's optimistic time estimate had arisen from a lack of information or an abundance of enthusiasm. But that was the least of the questions on his mind as he watched the perky little red Miata making its way up the pasture trail to the house.

He opened the side door and stepped out onto the matted grass and gravel where his Outback was parked. The Miata pulled in next to it, and a young woman emerged, holding a slim briefcase. She was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a stylish blazer with the sleeves turned up.

"Would you recognize me," she asked with a grin, "if I hadn't told you I was coming?"

"Maybe if I had time to study your face," he said, studying it now in its soft frame of shining brown hair, parted loosely in the middle. "It's the same face, but it's brighter and happier than it was that day I had lunch with you and your mother."

She frowned thoughtfully for a moment, then laughed. "It wasn't just that day, it was *those* years. I was definitely not very happy back then. It took me a long time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life."

"You seem to have figured it out quicker than most people."

She shrugged, looking around at the fields and woods. "This is beautiful. You must love it here. The air feels so clean and cool."

"Maybe a little too cool for the first week of spring."

"My God, you're right! I have so much going on I can't remember anything. It's already spring. How could I forget that?"

"It's easy," he said. "Come on in. It's warmer in the house."

• • •

Half an hour later, Kim and Dave were sitting across from each other at the small pine breakfast table in the nook by the French doors. They were finishing the omelets, toast, and coffee that Madeleine had insisted on making when she learned that Kim had been traveling all morning with nothing to eat. Madeleine had finished first and was cleaning off the stove. Kim was telling her story from the beginning, the story behind her visit.

"It's an idea I've had for years—examining the horror of murder by examining its impact on the victim's family—I just never knew what to do with it. Sometimes I wouldn't think about it for a while, but it would always come back, stronger than ever. I became obsessed with it—I *had* to do something with it. At first I thought it could be like a scholarly thing—maybe a sociology or psychology monograph. So I sent query letters out to a lot of the

university presses, but I didn't have the right academic degrees, so they had no interest in me. So I thought maybe a regular nonfiction book. But for a book you need an agent, which meant more query letters. And guess what? Zero interest. Like I'm twenty-one, twenty-two—who the hell am I? What have I written before? What are my credentials? Basically I'm just a kid. All I have is an idea. Then it finally dawns on me. Duh! *This is not a book, this is television*. From that point on, things started to fall into place. I saw it as a series of intimate interviews—'reality television' in the best sense of that term, which I realize has a pretty scuzzy sound these days, but it doesn't have to be that way—*not if it's done with emotional truth!*"

She stopped, as though suddenly affected by her own words, flashed an embarrassed smile, cleared her throat, and went on. "So anyway, I put it all together in the form of a detailed outline for my master's thesis and submitted it to Dr. Wilson, my adviser. He told me it was a great idea, that it had real potential. He helped me put it in a commercial proposal format, made sure my legal bases were covered to give me some protection in the real world, and then he did something he said he never does: He passed it along to a production executive he knows personally at RAM-TV—a guy by the name of Rudy Getz. And Getz got back to us like a week later and said, 'Okay, let's do it.' "

"Just like that?" asked Gurney.

"I was surprised, too. But Getz said that's the way RAM operates. I'm not going to question it. The fact that I can make this idea real, that I can explore this subject ..." She shook her head, as if trying to ward off some volatile emotion.

Madeleine came to the table, sat down, and said what Gurney was thinking. "This is important to you, isn't it? I mean, *really* important, beyond being a career booster."

"Oh, God, yes!"

Madeleine smiled softly. "And the *heart* of the idea ... the part that matters so much to you ...?"

"The families, *the children* ..." Again she stopped for a second or two, evidently overcome by some image that her own speech was evoking. She slid her chair back from the table, stood, and walked around the table to the French doors that looked out over the patio, the garden, the pasture, and the forest beyond.

"It's sort of silly, I can't explain it," she said, speaking with her back to them, "but I find it easier to talk about this standing up." She cleared her throat twice before beginning in a barely audible voice. "I believe that murder changes everything forever. It steals something that can never be replaced. It has consequences that go way beyond what happens to the victim. The victim loses his life, which is a terrible thing, an unfair thing, but for him it's over, the end. He's lost everything that might have been, but he doesn't know it. He doesn't go on *feeling* the loss, *imagining* what might have been." She raised her hands and placed her palms against the glass panes in front of her, a gesture that conveyed both great feeling and great effort at control.

She went on, a little louder. "It's not the victim who wakes up to a half-empty bed, a half-empty house. He isn't the one who dreams that he's still alive, only to wake up to the pain of realizing that he's not. He doesn't feel the sickening rage, the heartache his death causes. He doesn't keep seeing the empty chair at the table, hearing sounds that sound like his voice. He doesn't keep seeing the closet full of his clothes ..." Her voice was growing hoarse. She cleared her throat. "He doesn't feel the agony—*the agony of having the heart of your life torn*"

out.”

She leaned against the glass for several long seconds, then pushed herself slowly away from it. When she turned around toward the table, her face was streaked with tears. “You know about phantom pain? The amputation phenomenon? Feeling pain in the place where your arm or your leg used to be? That’s how murder is for the family left behind. Like the aching in a phantom limb—an unbearable pain in an empty place.”

She stood perfectly still for a little while, staring at some inner landscape. Then she wiped her face roughly with her hands, emerging from behind them with a matter-of-fact determination in her eyes and voice. “To understand what murder really is, you have to talk to the families. That’s my theory, that’s my project, that’s my plan. And that’s what Ruc Getz is excited about.” She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “If it’s not too much trouble, could I have another cup of coffee?”

“I think we can manage that.” Madeleine smiled pleasantly, went to the sink island, and refilled the coffeemaker.

Gurney was leaning back in his chair, his hands steepled reflectively under his chin. No one said anything for a minute or two. The coffeemaker made its initial sputtering sounds.

Kim looked around the big farmhouse kitchen. “This is very nice,” she said. “Very homey, warm. Perfect, really. It looks like everyone’s dream of a house in the country.”

After Madeleine brought Kim’s coffee to the table, Gurney was the first to speak. “It’s clear that you have a lot of passion about this subject, that it means a great deal to you. I wish I were as clear about how I can help you.”

“What did Connie ask you to do?”

“‘Look over your shoulder’—I think that’s one of the phrases she used.”

“No mention of ... any other problems?” It sounded to Gurney like she was making a childishly transparent effort to have the question sound casual.

“Does your ex-boyfriend qualify as a ‘problem’?”

“She brought up Robby?”

“She mentioned a Robert Meese ... or Montague?”

“Meese. The Montague thing is ...” She trailed off, shaking her head. “Connie thinks I need protection. I don’t. Robby is pathetic and extremely annoying, nothing I can’t handle.”

“Is he connected to your TV project?”

“Not anymore. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

Just curious about what? What the hell am I getting involved in? Why am I bothering to sit here listening to some overwrought graduate student with nutty-boyfriend problems expound on his sentimental ideas about murder and her big chance at glory on America’s trashiest cable network? Time to start backing away from the quicksand.

Kim was staring at him as though she had Madeleine’s gift for reading his mind. “It’s not as complicated. And since you’ve been generous enough to offer to help me, I should be more forthright.”

“We keep coming back to that part about my *helping* you, but I don’t see—”

Madeleine, who was squeezing out a sponge at the sink after washing off their omelette plates, interjected gently, “Why don’t we just listen to what Kim has to say?”

Gurney nodded. “Good idea.”

“I met Robby in the drama club a little less than a year ago. He was easily the handsome guy on campus. Like a young Johnny Depp. About six months ago, we moved in together. For a while I felt like the luckiest person in the world. When I got totally into my murder project, he seemed supportive. In fact, when I picked the families I wanted to start interviewing, he came with me, joined in, was totally part of everything. And that ... that’s when ... the monster emerged.” She paused and took a sip of her coffee.

“As Robby got more involved, he started taking over. He wasn’t helping me with *my* project anymore—it became *our* project, and then he started acting like it was *his* project. After we’d meet with one of the families, he’d give them *his* card with *his* contact information, tell them they could get in touch with *him* anytime. In fact, that’s when the ridiculous Montague thing started, when he had those cards printed up: ‘Robert Montague Documentary Productions and Creative Consultancy.’ ”

Gurney looked skeptical. “He was trying to elbow you out, steal the project?”

“It was sicker than that. Robby Meese looks like a god, but he came from a screwed-up home where bad things happened, and he spent most of his childhood in equally messed-up foster homes. Deep down he’s the most pathetically insecure person you’ll ever meet. Some of the families we were talking to, trying to sign up for official interviews—Robby was desperate to impress them. I think he’d have done *anything* for their approval, anything to be accepted by them. To make them *like* him. It was kind of disgusting.”

“What did you do about it?”

“Initially I didn’t know what to do. Then it came to a head when I discovered he’d been having discussions on his own with one of the key family members, a guy I really wanted to get to. When I confronted Robby about it, the whole thing blew up into a screaming match. That’s when I threw him out of our apartment—*my* apartment. And I got Connie’s lawyer to draft a nice threatening letter to keep him away from the project—*my* project.”

“How did he take it?”

“At first he got very nice, slimy-nice. I told him to fuck off. Then he started telling me that messing around with old murder cases could be risky and I should be careful—that maybe I didn’t know what I was getting into. He’d call me late at night, leave messages on my phone about how he could protect me and how a lot of the people I was dealing with—including my thesis adviser—weren’t what they seemed to be.”

Gurney sat up a bit straighter in his chair. “What next?”

“Next? I told him if he didn’t leave me alone, I’d get a restraining order and have him arrested as a stalker.”

“That have any effect?”

“Depends what you mean. The calls stopped. But then the weird stuff started happening.”

Madeleine stopped what she was doing at the sink and came to the table. “Sounds like this is getting intense. Mind if I join you?”

“No problem,” said Kim. Madeleine sat down, and Kim continued. “Kitchen knives started disappearing. One day I got home from a class and I couldn’t find my cat. Eventually I heard this little meow. The cat was in one of the closets with the door closed—a closet I never used. And there was one time I overslept because the time on my alarm clock had been changed.”

“Aggravating, but fairly harmless,” said Gurney. The look on Madeleine’s face suggested

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