



**DOUG
RICHARDSON**

THE SAFETY EXPERT

A NOVEL FROM THE AUTHOR OF *DARK HORSE* AND *TRUE BELIEVERS*

prologue

TICK. TICK. TICK.

“So there it is. I’ve made my confession. It’s off my back. And now it’s on yours.”

Old man Pratt shut his mouth and sucked back some fresh O₂. Tick. Tick. Tick. The oxygen meter continued. It sounded every bit like a death clock, counting down to his very last moment on earth.

“I don’t care what you think about me, who I am or what I done. I said what I said for me ’n’ me alone. You understand?”

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The goddamn oxygen meter—always talking over Pratt while he was thinking. Some days he would stare at it for hours, watching the tiny indicator arm vibrate with every merciless tick. Other days the meter reminded him of the gas gauge attached to the north side of the one and only house he had ever owned. Stockton, California. ’63 to ’69. There was that one time, he recalled, his pet Rottweiler nearly tore the legs off one gas company employee who came to read the meter. *What the hell was that dog’s name?* he thought. *Good dog. Fat prick of an animal.* The name came to Pratt. He had called the dog *Gutter*, on account of where he had found the poor thing, its leg

busted by a passing car. *Best three-legged dog ever*, thought Pratt. *Good damn guard dog, too*. After the incident with the meter reader, the gas company wisely provided a set of field glasses for readers to track Pratt's gas consumption from the street. Nowadays, figured Pratt, he would have been sued by the meter reader and lost or had to settle. The thought made him glad he no longer owned the house. In Pratt's rulebook, owning anything was for losers.

"Where the hell was I?" he grumbled. "Ain't got no regrets, neither. You can't live with that shit... Hell. You can take regret and flush it for all I care."

A ribbon of plastic hoses coiled around him, each neatly affixed to him with tabs of white, sweat-resistant tape. There were two bags of i.v. fluids hanging from what could have passed for a hat stand. What was in those damn fluids, only God and chemists knew. The contraption on Pratt's head was elastically fit, the nipples releasing the precious oxygen into his nostrils. The rest was up to Pratt. As long as he kept breathing and his heart kept pumping, the fluids would flow and the O₂ meter would tick, tick, tick. All charges paid for by the Indiana State Bureau of Prisons.

"So if I got no regrets and don't give a shit what other people think, why'm I tellin' you this? That's a good question and I don't know the answer just yet. Maybe I won't send you the tape. That'll prove I don't give a rat's piss."

Rat's piss or not, Pratt kept talking. With every lung-load of fresh O₂, he watched the microcassette player rise and fall on his goiter-like stomach, a round orb of a gut which was his own work of art.

"Just so you know, I got no proof. Just what the guy said. But lemme say this: I've been in the joint long enough to know bullshit from what's real. And this guy, believe you me, was real as real gets. No shit. I believe him to this goddamn dyin' day —"

"Will you shut the fuck up?" barked the black con. "Jeesuz H. Christ, man. All you do is beat your fuckin' gums."

The black con was two empty beds over to Pratt's right. The infirmary was at a low population. The sixteen beds were separated into two rows of eight, divided by a double-lane causeway and cut up with vinyl curtains hung on roller track. Only four of the sixteen beds were occupied. And the two other cons were so narced on

sleep meds that Pratt would have laid bets that the Second Coming wouldn't have roused them.

That left Pratt and the black con.

"Shut your cotton pickin' ears and go to sleep," said Pratt.

"Shut your mouth... cracker fuck."

Pratt figured correctly that the black con was new to the joint. The con hadn't yet learned the martial art of doing time. Prison was never quiet. And nights were a series of terrible noises. Cries, grunts, pain, dementia. Pratt called the noises *coyote sounds*. Beasts barking at the dark. Or carnivores fighting over the last remains of a dead carcass. He assigned each horrible sound to its place in nature, turning prison into his own Wild Kingdom. Suddenly, those awful noises fell naturally on his ear. And sleep became easier.

"You can either shut your ears or shut my mouth," said Pratt. "Your call, nigger."

Big words. But Pratt knew the black con was strapped in with Velcro and duct tape. Some failed suicide, figured Pratt. Probably buggered-up on his first night in the dorms, and certainly not able-bodied or willing to take on the older con lying just twenty feet away.

"Next time he'll kill himself right," Pratt found himself saying into the tape recorder. "Twist a rope out of a bed sheet and take a dive off the top tier. Save good taxpayers like you some dough, I expect."

Click. The tape player shut itself off. Pratt gripped to himself, "Cuz I'm fuckin' ramblin' on and on..."

Side 1 of the microcassette tape was exhausted. Pratt fumbled with his drug-swollen fingers to extract the tiny cartridge, flip it and reinsert it into the recorder. It felt as difficult as performing ocular surgery with a pair of chopsticks. *Fuckin' cancer drugs*.

Side 2. Pratt thumbed the RECORD button, then calmed himself with a deep breath. If he closed his eyes, he could use his imagination and make the canned oxygen smell like just about anything. Cigars. A woman's sweaty musk. Bacon frying. This time it was spearmint. Wrigley's Doublemint. What Pratt would have paid right then and there for a pack.

"What I was sayin' was just this. You don't know me from Adam. And I sure as hell don't know you. For all I care, you can toss this tape in the incinerator."

Pratt found he was holding his breath, weakening his voice to a whispering rasp. Why? He had burned half a cassette, running on like a broken valve. And still he hadn't told it. He hadn't delivered on the promise he had made at the start of the tape. Pratt pulled another two liters of oxygen.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

"Like I was sayin' before. I was his cellmate. L.A. County. Eleven years ago? Twelve, thirteen? Back around them riots. All them fires, you know? We were poppin' these little blue grinders. Good stuff somebody had scammed off a guard. Anyways, he was inside on this three month pop for beatin' on his girlfriend. Gave him giggles that it was such a short pop considering the shit he had been doing outside. Home invasions, follow-homes, shit like that. Big money house cleaning. Had a partner, he said. In, out, jewels, cash. Said it was easier than robbin' banks."

Pratt paused, finding his own silence unnerving. The black con had returned to the land of tranquilized slumber. The distant babble from the nursing station had faded. If he strained his ears, Pratt wondered if he would hear the old plaster cracking beneath the ward's new paint.

"Guy said all the jobs was slick but for this one time... one time where some soccer mom decides to fight back. Killed her and the two little girlies 'before anybody could say, *Puff the Magic Dragon*.' Them's his words, not mine. And won't never forget 'em. *Puff the Magic Dragon*. You know what I'm sayin'. You know who I'm talkin' about, too. Soccer mom and the little ones was yours, fellah. Your own wife and kiddies, man."

Pratt found himself on pause. And for half an instant, imagined himself as the man for whom the tape was intended.

"Sorry, partner. Kinda harsh words. But I suppose that's the shit you had to live with ever since. Guess that means I feel sorry for ya. Kinda hell a man goes through. Just since then, ever so often, that damn song comes into my head and I think of that s.o.b. and what he did to you and what he said to me. *Puff the Magic Dragon*, man. Fuckin' cold, you know?"

Click. Pratt turned off the recorder. His eyes swirled to the back of his skull. *The fuck am I thinkin'?* reasoned Pratt. *Probably never*

lived with the shit. What kinda man could? Probably swallowed a bullet by now. Nobody's ever gonna hear this. So why even try?

With that sole idea stuck like a knife between his eyes, Pratt gave up by flinging the microcassette player. The recorder shattered against the wall and fell to the floor in broken bits.

“Fuck that guy.”

1

JANUARY 5. Interstate 118. Eastbound at Tampa. *The damned diamond lane*, griped Ben to himself, *where two or more passengers in a vehicle constitute a legal carpool*. That was the law in California. Just two people per car. Any people. A pair of pot-smoking teens. A van carrying two plumbers to their next appointment. A mother with an infant riding in a rear-facing car seat. Each a legal carpool. Hardly what state traffic and safety administrators had planned when carpool lanes were originally introduced back in 1985.

Ben checked the traffic in front of him, then his speed. It was just south of twenty-five mph. The temperature indicator to the right of the speedometer read ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit. It was the beginning of a second, steaming, mid-winter week. Not that irregular for Southern Cal. Still, all the news was abuzz with more nauseating talk about global warming. That alone was enough to make Ben sweat.

In the diamond lane to Ben's left, a blue Camry surged by at something close to eighty mph.

Nineteen-eighty-eight, recalled Ben, shaking his head. Back then it took *three* passengers to make a carpool. Back then it was reasonable to hope drivers would want to spare themselves the hassle of slow, bumper-to-bumper commutes in exchange for ride-sharing and maybe some conversation with neighborhood co-workers. Back then, any person violating the three-passenger rule would be hit with a hefty, two-hundred-dollar traffic ticket.

But as it so often is with government plans, things worked out just a bit differently. For months and months that left-hand lane of unencumbered promise remained practically deserted during the morning and afternoon rush hours, squeezing more traffic into fewer lanes. The average commute increased over one minute per highway mile. Traffic planners had never imagined that drivers would choose the increased expense of greater fuel and time consumption over a shorter commute with two caffeinated friends.

Before scrapping the mega-million dollar highway project and returning the “extra” lane back to the freeway at large, someone in Sacramento suggested “two.” Not three, but two passengers to constitute a legal carpool. And just like that, along with the cost of changing a few freeway signs, daily commuters took to the “two passenger” restriction like ducks to water. Within weeks, traffic eased by four percent as the left-hand lanes filled with willing participants. Commutes decreased. And the powers that be were redeemed and rewarded for their calculation and collective genius.

If they had only asked me, thought Ben. *Or anybody with a teaspoon of common sense. They could have saved California millions in start-up costs and more than a year of nearly empty diamond lanes.* Ben would have told them two was wiser and suggested authorities apply a simple and ancient axiom: three’s a crowd.

Ben employed his turn signal for a safe lane change. It wasn’t yet 9:00 A.M. and eastbound traffic on the 118/Ronald Reagan Freeway was inching through the Los Angeles County community of Chatsworth. The January sun was angled perfectly to create annoying reflections off the Sunday-waxed hood of Ben’s new Volvo S80. The sedan was an upgrade from his last Volvo four-door, and the Volvo four-door before that. Ben would recommend getting a new car every two years to his clientele, just to keep up with the latest advances in vehicle safety technology.

Ben lowered the visor to protect his eyes from the glare. Each squint cut deeper lines into a nearly forty-year-old face that was clean-shaven and blue-eyed under a conservative cut of short brown hair. Still handsome enough—or so teased his wife, Alexandra.

The diamond lane hugging the center meridian was, as usual, breezy and unobstructed. Drivers pushed their cars well over the sixty-five mile per hour speed limit. But not Ben. He knew better. It was his job to know better about lots of things.

Ben's cell phone trilled in a very phone-like manner. Not one of those customized, pop-music ringtones. Just a normal, dental office ring. He pressed SEND on his mobile and let the hands-free Bluetooth do the work. Both hands back on the wheel, Ben could now safely talk and drive.

"Hello," he answered, despite knowing full well who was calling.

"Hey, Ben," answered the familiar voice of Josie Jones, Ben's gal Friday.

"Morning, Josie," said Ben.

A Nissan z screamed down the diamond lane, low to the ground, customized for illegal street racing. Ben mentally clocked the rice rocket at better than 90 mph. Josie never heard the speeding z, but could almost make out the sound of creaking leather as Ben firmly regripped the steering wheel.

"Do you know why diamond lanes are a mistake?" asked Ben.

"Uh, no. But you're gonna tell me, aren't you?"

"Not if you don't want to know."

"I don't want to know," teased Josie.

"Okay. What's on you mind?" asked Ben.

"I was kidding," said Josie. "I wanna know."

"You really want to know?"

"I super seriously really wanna know," said Josie. "If it's your business to know, then I should know."

"Fine," said Ben, pleased. "It's a three-factor error. Factor one is the open highway theorem. Put Lucy behind the wheel on an unobstructed highway and she will often unconsciously drive at an unobstructed pace regardless of the speed limit."

"I didn't know that," Josie said patiently.

"Factor two, Ethel is in the lane closest to the diamond lane. That lane is usually obstructed and the difference in pace during

rush hour between the diamond lane and the obstructed lane can sometimes be fifty or sixty miles per hour.

“And factor three?” cued Josie.

“If Ethel has a passenger, qualifying her to drive in the diamond lane, and if Ethel gets fed up with her slow commute, sees the speed at which Lucy is getting to her destination, Ethel is likely to want to switch lanes.”

“That’s what I’d wanna do... Correction, that’s exactly what I do. So what’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong is that you’d glance into your side view mirror, see if it’s safe and pull into the diamond lane. Right?”

“Right.”

“By looking into your side view mirror, can you gauge the difference between a car driving at fifty-five miles per and eighty-five miles per?”

“I dunno. I suppose—”

“Stop supposing. You can’t. CHP can’t. They’ve tested it. In a side view mirror, those speeds look the same at a glance. And a glance is all most drivers in heavy traffic can afford to give without smashing into the car in front of them.”

Ben was rolling now, picturing the situation in his mind, reeling with evidence and spewing without regard for time or usage minutes. “What kind of car you drive?”

“I drive a Jetta,” answered Josie.

“Average car, average acceleration. Zero to sixty in seven or eight seconds. It’s roughly the same differential if you’re driving at fifteen to twenty miles per hour. To accelerate to the speed of the oncoming car takes about eight seconds.”

“Okay. This is higher math territory. I still can’t determine all those seventh grade problems where the train is going so many miles per hour and the car going the other direction is driving a different speed—”

“I’ll make it simple,” interrupted Ben. “Statistically speaking, Ethel can’t accelerate faster than Lucy can safely apply the brakes. Big wreck happens. People die.”

Ben’s summation had the tonal finality of a surgeon delivering the bad news. The patient has expired.

“Okay,” said Josie. “Important safety tip. Now, why I was calling was—”

“It gets worse.”

“Of course it does,” said Josie. “It always gets worse.”

“Josie?” asked Ben in a smiling tone. “You wouldn’t be mocking me?”

“I would never mock the man who signs my paycheck.”

“Now you’re kissing my ass.”

“Dying to know why it gets worse,” said Josie, sarcasm between a drip and a trickle.

“During normal traffic jams, fatal accidents are minimal because of slow moving cars. Factor in a fatal accident during rush hour and how the hell are emergency services going to respond in a timely manner? Traffic is already backed up. It triples the time of first responders to the accident.”

Ben took a much-needed breath and suddenly worried if he had missed his exit, then added, “The whole diamond lane thing is a first-class government fuckup.”

“What isn’t?” quipped Josie.

“You’re calling about the Carson plant,” guessed Ben.

“How’d you guess?”

“I’m a good guesser.”

“Some assistant plant manager keeps leaving voicemails. He sounds pretty anxious.”

“Tell ’em I called my guys at OSHA and got their inspection pushed until I submit my recommendations.”

Of course you did, reasoned Josie. If Ben Keller informed the Office of Safety and Health Administration that he was a paid consultant for Foster Farms, they would put inspections on hold under the direct assumption that Ben would convincingly keep any and all chickens out of harm’s way.

“Anything else?” asked Ben.

“Not much. Jack Stein had to cancel lunch tomorrow, it looks like that tire recall is going to go through, and World Toys has a question about a shipment of kids’ jewelry they just got from China. Oh, and you got a weird-looking, registered letter that says PERSONAL all over it in purple Sharpie. Want me to see what it is?”

“Nah. It can wait. Probably nothing. Gotta go, now,” said Ben

before smoothly merging his Volvo to the right and into the paired traffic lanes earmarked for the southbound Interstate 5.

By the time Ben finished the commute to his Burbank office he had forgotten about the curious letter. It was an uneventful, low-key day. With no big fires to put out he was able to catch up on returning emails and touch base with some clients about recent legislative changes. With ever-changing government regulations there were always new and higher standards that his clients had to meet. They trusted Ben to keep them safe from consumer and employee lawsuits and stiff federal and state penalties should they be found in violation of any codes or policies.

Before folding his laptop promptly at five, Ben went to Google Maps to see what the drive home had in store for him. He scrolled along the 5 and 118 freeways and mercifully saw nothing but green and yellow lines. He should be home by six. All red and that would have meant anywhere between seven and nine and a cold plate waiting for him in the microwave.

Ben made his way to his Volvo. As he pulled his keys from his shoulder bag he also happened to pull out the forgotten and unopened padded envelope marked PERSONAL. The package tumbled down in an arc and landed behind the car's front tire. Ben stooped to pick it up, sat in the car, buckled his seatbelt and turned over the engine. Curious, he unzipped the envelope's pull tag and discovered a CD along with a handwritten note.

He shoved the disc into the CD player and unfolded the letter

*Dear Mr. Keller,
My name is Debbie Pepper. It is with a heavy heart that I write this letter. I am enclosing a recording made by my father, Arthur Pratt on his deathbed at the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City He mentions a crime which may unfortunately be of interest to you.
May God Bless you and keep you,*

Debbie Pepper

Ben felt chilled. He wondered just how long he had been sitting there, rereading the short and to-the-point letter. At some point, the Volvo's air conditioner had mysteriously switched to full arctic blow. The temperature in the car had to be sixty-two. Yet Ben was

sweating. He finally guided the setting back to AUTO and the fan slowed. That's when Ben heard the voice. Arthur Wayne Pratt's voice, barely audible, as if whispering through his car speakers. Without thinking, Ben jammed his index finger at the eject button. The whispering stopped and the player gently spit out the CD.

"Christ," said Ben aloud.

Ben knew instinctively that listening to the CD while driving would certainly be unsafe for him. Not to mention the other drivers on the road. The CD would have to wait.



Alexandra Love Keller was a true blue Valley Girl. Born and raised in the suburban hills overlooking Tarzana, she was the youngest of three children born to Maurice Keller, of the famous Keller Karpert and Flooring. One of her earliest memories was a television image of her late father pitching wall-to-wall shag. For a time, her old man was a genuine Southland celebrity. "As recognizable and tan as a TV weatherman," Maurice would often boast to his youngest child. Of course, little Alex was only four and at that tender age, there were no TV stars bigger than Big Bird and Elmo.

Unfortunately for Maurice, the celebrity factor, fueled by a thousand dinner-hour commercials, proved to be the downfall of his first marriage. With Keller Karpert and Flooring showrooms expanding as far away as San Diego, Alexandra's beloved father was spending so much time south of Disneyland that he felt oddly compelled to start a second family. At the time of Maurice Keller's death-by-heart-failure, he had garnered eight children, two ex-wives, and a mountain of red debt. What leftover assets weren't picked over by banks and the government were eventually held in trust—the Keller Family Trust—shared equally by the thirty-eight-year-old Alexandra and her seven siblings. Alex's stake was by no means a fortune. But the trust did provide her with enough of a stipend to provide an early retirement from her not-quite-flourishing singing career and a small college fund for her three daughters: Elyssa, Nina, and Betsy.

"Nina!" barked Alex. "Where's your sister?"

“Which one? I’ve got two,” quipped Nina, only nine but a wiseass in the making. She wouldn’t look her mother in the eye, preferring to mentally catalogue the miles of breakfast cereal choices.

“Betsy,” answered Alex. “Just find her, will you?”

“After I make my choice.”

“Now or there’ll be zero choice.”

“Almost done.”

“Cold oatmeal for the rest of your life.”

“Fine!” spat Nina, trudging off down the supermarket aisle to search for her six-year-old sister.

Strange how the world has changed, thought Alex. *Cold oatmeal of all things*. What was repugnant to her middle child had been a breakfast favorite of hers since she could remember. “From the old country,” her father would say to her. From Russia. Cook the oatmeal, chill it overnight, and serve with warm molasses on top. Like bread pudding. Alex had wisely chosen not to share the story with her girls. Not yet. Not while she could still use the threat as leverage.

Next on Alex’s list were rice cakes, applesauce, and tomato paste. Like some über-organized moms, Alex had a list neatly ordered by supermarket aisle. Like Patton, she refused to battle through the same real estate twice. And if she missed an item, one of her girls was there to fetch it.

“They don’t have the soymilk Ben likes.” Eleven-year-old Elyssa appeared from behind Alex. She was holding two different half-gallon cartons of soymilk, fully expecting her mother to choose.

“You pick,” said Alex.

“No way,” answered Elyssa. “Then it’s my fault if he doesn’t like it.”

“If he doesn’t like it, he won’t drink it,” said Alex flatly.

“That’s so wasteful.”

“What’s more wasteful?” asked Alex. “Buying a half-gallon of soy that Ben won’t like or wasting time and gas driving to another supermarket that still may not have what Ben likes?”

“Okay. So choose,” the eldest persisted, pre-adolescence infecting her tone. “My arms are getting tired.”

“Find Nina and Betz. Have Betz eeny-meeny-miny the soymilk. She likes to do that.”

“Whatever.” Elyssa spun on her Converse All Stars, tucked those cartons of soymilk under her arms like footballs, then trudged off to find her sisters.

Alex checked her watch. It was two minutes shy of six. *Home by six-thirty*, she calculated. *Set the girls to homework, begin preparing dinner by seven*. Ben would let her know when he would be home. There would be a voicemail, email, or text message. He was good that way. No mystery or big surprises. Ben was steady, stable, and predictable.

Ben was safe.

The thought made Alex smile, ever mindful of the times in her life when everything seemed unsafe. Especially unsafe were the men she had been with and the substances she had experimented with. Especially unsafe was her first husband and the father of her precious daughters. God rest his tortured soul.

By the time Alex had piled eleven bags of groceries and her three daughters into her black Escalade, she had checked all her electronic sources for messages from Ben. So far she had received none. It was odd, but she expected she would hear from him any minute. He was that regular.

But Ben wouldn't call or text or leave a voicemail because he wouldn't need to. Ben was already home.

“I'm not a well man. Docs say the fuckin' cancer's just about everywhere. But that's just the shit they say. I never seen it. Nobody had a mind to even show me a picture. Cons get no goddamn respect.”

Remote control in hand, Ben unconsciously rode the volume on the CD player. Every time that hollow voice inhaled, Ben experienced an irritating, high-pitched whistle. An audio anomaly produced somewhere in the transfer. Ben could have simply filtered out the annoying noise by reducing the high frequencies on the equalizer. But that assumed Ben could move more than his right thumb. It was volume up, volume down. Dry swallow. Then wait for the next mumble of recorded words.

Ben had the blackout shades drawn in his backyard office. The office was above a game room, roughly paneled with board-and-batten painted a country cream. The room sported an open-

beam ceiling and an old, school fan that never stopped turning. The furniture was a mix of warm oaks and leather. The single wide window overlooked a coral-blue swimming pool. The pool itself was horse-shoed by a 1995 two-story, stucco family home. The Kellers' home was on a cul-de-sac snugly fit into the planned community of Vista Viego. "Vista" suggested foothills and the two-hundred-plus houses in the development had sweeping views of the incorporated city of Simi Valley, California.

"Fuckers use all these words. Curse words to make people sick. Like what... Like glioblastoma. Don't remember most big words but that ugly fucker stuck in my head. Bet if I said glioblastoma ten times on this tape you'd get the cancer, too. Fuckin' glioblastoma. Hope the docs get it just so they know that the shit feels worse than it sounds."

Glioblastoma.

Ben thought maybe he had heard or read about the disease. Glioblastoma described a difficult-to-treat brain tumor. *Cellular phones?* wondered Ben. Maybe those university studies were on to something. Cell phones were going to kill everybody. The final human solution courtesy of Nokia and Motorola.

"Like you give a shit about my problems. You don't know me and I don't know you. Already said that, I think."

Damn straight, thought Ben. He didn't know the voice at all. Not a whisper of recognition. So why the hell was he still listening, rapt, cemented to his reclining desk chair? The gristled voice escaped from the speakers in a disembodied, poorly recorded, and cryptic monotone. As Ben listened on, he felt the sweat from his neck coagulating between his lower skull and the leather headrest.

The voice grew weary.

"Suppose you're tired of me babbling... Suppose you want to know what this shit's all about."

At every pause or broken thought, the automatic gain on the original recording would elevate as it sought to register the thinnest decibel. This provided an increased hiss that Ben found irritating. He instinctively lowered the volume, but then found himself leaning forward, listening more intently. He could hear the old con's breathing slow, a certain sign that either sleep or death was just around the corner.

"Tired," popped the voice. "Tired of holding it in. Tired of

remembering the pictures in the papers. Just pictures. Your wife and baby girls. Twins, I think. Did I read that or was that a picture, too?"

A rush of heat surged inside Ben. It was a sudden autonomic thrust of blood turning his skin pink and squeezing fresh perspiration from every pore. His stomach tightened.

"Was right around them riots. I was in County and there was a guy who'd just got popped for beatin' on his girlfriend. Happiest guy to ever get popped. Happy cuz he was inside while the cops were outside lookin' for the guys who did it."

Doors opened in Ben's mind. He could actually see them swinging free like those of a saloon. His thoughts and memories flooded through without the usual interceptors.

"Anyway. He wasn't braggin' or nothin'. He was relieved. Why he told me? Fuck knows. I coulda turned him over. Made a deal for somethin' but I figured he knew I wouldn't. I was pure convict. Code and shit."

Lunch, thought Ben. He hadn't eaten lunch. Otherwise he would be vomiting.

"Guy didn't think he'd go down for it. Said it was real clean. No evidence. In, out, cash, jewelry..."

Another silence came, followed by a room-shaking hiss, like a giant gas valve had blown and was filling the room with nothing but earth-moving sound waves.

"Twins. That's why I remember. It was the twins. See, I met some evil fuckers inside. Why they made the inside, man. Had to have a place to put all the evil. But this one, he got out. Free bird and hell if anybody ever knew what he did. Hell if you knew what he did. Maybe he got caught. I just never knew. Was those little twin girlies that stuck in me. Those sweet little faces."

Those sweet little faces.

"Lea and Mae," uttered Ben.

Names he hadn't spoken in years. Not a single whisper. Twins. His precious girls.

"Mom looked kinda pretty. And young, I guess. Were you that young? Suppose we all were, once."

Sara, thought Ben. This time his lips didn't move. Surprisingly, he remembered her often. More so than the baby girls. He wondered why that was. First real love? Only real love? Questions he had learned

not to ask. Not if he wanted a real life again. Not if he wanted to move on.

“Stu,” said the voice. “Guy’s name was Stu. Stu Raymo. Cons called him Stuey. I might be old, but I didn’t forget that one. Evil fucker killed those sweet faces.”

Stu Raymo didn’t register for Ben. He was good with names and phone numbers. Faces too. Ben was so good at matching the faces with the names and the numbers he would often see the face, think of the phone number, then pull up the name. Stu Raymo had no face or number. He was just a name served up by a faceless voice. *Why?* wondered Ben. *Why that voice, that name, and that moment? Why now? Why me? Questions without answers,* thought Ben—*anchors that keep life from moving on.*

“Stooo-ey,” said the voice, purged and groggy now, inviting sleep. “Stooo...”

“Evil fucker!” shouted Ben, kicking over a nearby floor lamp before succumbing to tears. He wrapped himself tight with his arms and pulled his knees up. The sobs came faster and harder than Ben could ever remember. Painful wrenchings, eventually bringing on an involuntary sleep.

Ben would later calculate that he was out for nearly an hour, snapping to from what he thought was an earthquake. His chair was vibrating as was just about everything else in the office. The loudest racket came from a wastebasket full of recyclable diet soda cans. Wall to wall, the room itself was physically buzzing. As Ben reclaimed consciousness he soon discovered the remote control still in his fist, the volume maxed. Five hundred watts of electronic nothing were surging through the 5:1 speaker system. The subwoofer had caused so much vibration that objects in the room had seismically shifted.

Ben stiffly rose from the chair, ejected the CD from the tray and with shaky hands, repacked it and buried it deep in the back of his top desk drawer. It was 6:16. Alex and the girls would be returning home any minute.

Ben managed to get through the rest of the evening on autopilot and after lying about having post-lunch-food-poisoning, none of the girls expected him to sit at the dinner table.

The evening assumed the usual tag team effort. Ben drilled Nina on her spelling, played good cop to Alex’s bad cop on the

subject of Elyssa's failed pre-algebra exam, and cuddled with Betsy for the umpteenth reading of *The Runaway Bunny*. Ben did his evening rounds without any indication whatsoever that there were stirrings underneath his usual sunny demeanor. Nobody, not even Alex, suspected a rearrangement in Ben's inner chemistry—that an emotional wrestling match raged just beneath his skin. He seemed merely himself. Ben. And for a short while even Ben believed it too. That he was himself.

Until, of course, the bedroom lights were extinguished and Alex curled into him. After Ben complained that his stomach was still cramping, Alex kissed him goodnight, wished for him a better tomorrow, then quickly sailed off into seven easy hours of sleep. She was magic that way. A true talent. No matter what her workload or level of anxiety, Alex could go horizontal, flick a mental light switch, and be snoring before Leno's opener.

As Ben twisted toward the flat-panel screen, he upped the volume two notches before surfing the tv. He was searching for a program engaging enough to occupy his mangled brain, but narcotic enough to lull him to sleep. The exercise proved fruitless. For no matter what channel he rested on, at the precise point his body gave in to sleep, his subconscious would come alive with the same soul-jarring propaganda. Sounds, faces, snapshots from the past rushed in. Smells even. Crime scene photos. Not to mention the voice on the CD. *Who was that anyway? Was he dead already? Did the cancer kill him?* Ben hoped so. Ben wanted the voice dead. Wished for it. Even prayed.

“Who's Stu?”

Had Ben imagined Alex's voice? He could feel her breathing, slow and steady, and was certain she was asleep. That was until Alex asked, “You awake, hon?”

“I am, now,” lied Ben.

“I asked who is Stu?”

“Don't know what you mean.”

“You said some names. Sounded like you said Stu and Sara.”

Had he actually fallen asleep? How else would Alex have heard the names?

“Musta been talking in my sleep,” said Ben.

“Sounded kinda creepy.”

“I don’t remember.”

Alex folded herself in closer to Ben, molding her body to fit his.

“You’re warm and sticky.”

Ben took her hand, briefly fondled her wedding ring then pretended he was going back to sleep.

“Anything you wanna talk about?” she asked.

“No... Everything’s okay.”

“Mmmm. Awake now.” Alex stroked Ben’s thigh, knee to hip.
“Wanna fool around?”

“Stomach’s still a little...”

“Okay. Feel better. G’night.”

And then she was gone. Asleep again. Her gift at work. The invitation for sex, he reminded himself, was her conditioned response to anything that was “Sara.” Psychologically speaking, it was perfectly normal. Healthy even. As long as Ben didn’t use his dead wife as emotional leverage, Alex could express her natural possessiveness with sexual affection without recrimination.

Funny, thought Ben. When the subject of Alex’s dead husband bubbled up, the last thing he wanted was a 1:00 A.M. screw. Ben made a mental note for their next couple’s session, then slid from bed. Sleep was no longer an option that night. Nor denial. Ben needed to go back out to the office, dig the CD out of his desk, and listen to it again. Not all of it. Just the bits at the end. The hard parts about Sara, the twins, and the stranger named Stu Raymo. If he had learned anything from twelve years of grief counseling it was the following: the only way out of an emotional wreck is a good road map.

No time like the present, thought Ben.