

One

Adrian Douglas heads for the operating room doors. He glances back at the argon beam coagulator, the hydraulic operating table, and brilliant OR lights. As sterile as the filtered air and gleaming instruments may be, the place is a thing of ineffable beauty. It signifies a kind of artistry, one he's spent years mastering. Adrian thinks this after every successful surgery, and for the moment, the OR is the best thing in his life. He knows it's good to be alive and in the life-saving business.

The patient had been dying—his heart barely able to pump blood. They had cracked open his chest, bypassed the clogged coronary arteries, and closed up in near-record time.

A stitch in time . . .

"Great job, Adrian," Fred Bailey, the assistant surgeon, calls across the room.

"Thanks, Fred. Thanks, everyone. Fabulous work, guys," Adrian says, snapping off his surgical gloves.

"Hey, Adrian," Dottie, the chief OR nurse, calls.

"Yeah?"

"Chalk another one up for the good guys."

Though her face is masked, Adrian sees the shine in her eyes. And he hears the smile in her voice.

Still wearing surgical scrubs, Adrian dons his windbreaker and New Balance running shoes and then takes the elevator to the

hospital's main floor. He leaves through the emergency room. It's a balmy night in early September, and a brisk breeze whips up the ambulance ramp, which is illuminated by sodium vapor lights. Though he's been on his feet since six this morning, he feels invigorated with the postsurgical high he loves and doesn't want to make the lonely drive back to his cottage in Simpson.

Looking up at the hospital facade, Adrian tells himself he's glad he left ground zero of the medical universe—Yale-New Haven Hospital—and took the job at Eastport General. He's in on the ground floor of an exciting new heart surgery program. At Yale, he'd be just another guppy darting about an aquarium of sharks cannibalizing one another.

None of that political bullshit for me. Not anymore.

It's nearly midnight as Adrian crosses Fairfield Avenue. He passes a row of shuttered stores—a Kinko's, a Wendy's, and a Starbucks that's closing for the evening; Adrian realizes that no barista will serve up a steaming latte, Frappuccino, or foamed macchiato at this hour. It's time to go more downscale, and besides, a little alcohol would be better than some caffeine-laced brew. So he heads for King's Corner, a watering hole two blocks away. He's grown absurdly fond of this dated pub with its beer-stained mahogany bar, neon Schlitz signs, potted snake plants, and 1950s-style, CD-filled Wurlitzer jukebox. It's so retro, it reminds Adrian of the old Irish bars in Manhattan he'd frequented as a medical student.

Entering the place, Adrian hears the first lines of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." The acoustic guitar sends out a mournful melody; it's joined by the soulful recorder. Then comes the plaintive vocal by lead singer Robert Plant.

The place is dimly lit and smells of malt—actually, stale beer. And there's the faint odor of piss, or, Adrian wonders briefly, is it sweat? No matter. It's familiar, comfortable. A muted cathode-ray television on a shelf casts an aqueous hue over the place as the

Red Sox play the Yankees—it must be extra innings to be running this late. Swivel-top, vinyl-covered stools line the length of the bar, like soldiers at attention before an iron-pipe foot rail. There's a vintage tin ceiling. The dim seediness seems welcoming after hours in a brightly lit OR with its modular orbital lighting and antiseptic tile walls.

Vinnie, the thirty-something bartender, turns to him, his face creasing into a smile. “How ya doin’ Adrian?”

“Good, Vinnie. You?”

“Can’t complain.”

“How’re the wife and kids?”

“They keep me workin,’” Vinnie says, and shakes his head.

Vinnie has a flattened nose and rough-hewn features and always sports a thick stubble of beard. He looks like a guy who’s seen his share of barroom brawls. He wears faded jeans and a tight-fitting, sleeveless T-shirt. His bloated biceps are covered with a riotous array of tattoos.

“Bottle of Bud, Adrian?”

“Right on, Vin,” he says as the music in a minor key hits its ethereal stride.

Adrian and Vinnie usually talk about the Red Sox. As a former college baseball player, Adrian loves the game.

“Score’s tied . . . five apiece,” Vinnie says, setting the bottle on the bar.

A smoky vapor rises from the open top.

Adrian puts the bottle to his lips, takes a gulp, and feels the cold effervescence at the back of his throat. After a long day in the OR, the beer’s warmth mushrooms through his belly and rises to his chest. It’s followed by a deliciously light buzz. Adrian feels his muscles loosen.

“That’s damned good music, Vinnie,” he says.

“Adrian—my *man*,” Vinnie calls. “Nobody loves Led Zeppelin like we do.” Vinnie moves down the bar.

He's had only one swig, but Adrian already feels a foamy web of warmth in his head. He seems to float in the bar's dimness.

Adrian hears a voice—but it's muffled by the music.

He takes another pull on the Bud. A haze settles in his brain.

"I said . . . *Adrian?*"

Startled, Adrian peers to his right.

A ruggedly built man in his midthirties stands at the bar. He stares intensely with cold, deep-set gray eyes. The guy's about six two, maybe taller—with sloped, powerful-looking shoulders and a broad, well-muscled chest. He has a bull neck with cordlike veins that look like blood-filled pipes. Even in a flannel jacket, the man's arms are thick, sinewy. His hands are huge, with thick, gnarled fingers.

"*Adrian?* Do I know you?"

Adrian suddenly feels a clenched dread. A knot forms in his stomach. A shudder floats through his chest. He draws back as if by instinct. The man is steep-jawed; he has a Vandyke beard and closely cropped blondish hair cut in a semimilitary style.

"I don't think so . . ."

"Oh, yes . . . I *know* you . . ."

The guy edges closer, looming larger.

Adrian thinks the man's nostrils quiver as though he smells something. Even in the bar's dimness, Adrian registers the strange grayness of the man's eyes, with their pitted-olive black pupils reflecting a purple neon sign. Adrian sees a dark madness there, a smoldering rage, and something cold crawls through him.

"Adrian . . . That's a girl's name. You a faggot?"

Adrian's mouth goes dry. The guy reminds him of a beast—something lethal, soulless. Adrian's fingers tingle; his scalp dampens.

Holy shit. This is unbelievable. It's not from the life I've been living. What's this guy about?

"Look, mister," Adrian says. "I don't know you and I'm—"

"Hey, *you*," Vinnie growls from behind the bar.

The man's eyes shift to Vinnie. The guy has yet to blink.

Voltage charges through the air.

Except for the jukebox, the place goes quiet.

"Vinnie," Adrian says, "there's no need—"

"It's okay, Adrian," says Vinnie as his sumo-sized arm slips beneath the bar. "If you're looking for trouble, you son of a bitch, you've come to the right place." A blue-black baseball bat appears in his hand. "Get the fuck outta here. *Now!*"

Suddenly, the guy's arm lunges out in a mercury-quick movement; his beer bottle slams onto the bar. The bottle bounces, topples, and twirls wildly as foamy beer spurts out its neck. He glares at Vinnie with those cold, unblinking eyes. "I'll be back," he says and then turns to Adrian. "And I'll see you too, faggot."

Adrian's skin feels like it's peeling. His insides go cold, as though an ice floe encircles his heart.

The guy turns, casts another look at Vinnie, and saunters out the door.

Led Zeppelin's chorus fills the room.

Adrian's armpits are soaked. His heart batters his rib cage, and his knees feel weak.

"You know that guy?" Adrian asks, surprised at the steadiness of his voice.

"Nah," Vinnie says, setting the bat behind the bar. "Been hanging around a couple a weeks now. Looks like he's been waitin' for someone."

"Looks like he was waiting for me . . ."

"He's just killin' time—comes in around seven, stays an hour or two, leaves, then wanders in again around eleven, stays another hour. Nurses a bottle of beer, that's all. Doesn't talk to anyone. Strange guy." Vinnie swipes the beer bottle, tosses it into a bin, and wipes down the bar top. "In this business, you meet all types . . ."

Vinnie heads toward the grill area.

Adrian waits for the adrenaline rush to subside. He feels his heart still throbbing in his throat. He swigs his beer, and it shoots right to his brain. His legs are unsteady. He plops down on a stool.

The last stanza of “Stairway to Heaven” resounds through the bar.

The front window shatters. A scorching air blast whooshes through the room as bottles detonate in a percussive blowout. Glass, liquor, and debris scatter as neon explodes and everything flies. Everyone drops to the floor.

Another blast sprays the place.

The lights flicker; one goes out.

Smoke, plaster, and dust float in the air.

“A shotgun!” shouts Vinnie; he leaps over the bar and rushes out the front door.

A dangling ceiling light sizzles.

A babble of voices rises; panic-level fear takes over as patrons stampede toward the back of the place. It’s pure mayhem.

“Don’t go out the door,” someone shouts. “He could be there.”

Vinnie bursts back in, looking around. “Anyone hurt?”

“What the hell was that?” someone calls.

“A shotgun,” Vinnie says, snapping open his cell phone.

A patron swipes shards of glass from his hair. Another guy curses. Someone whimpers. A few men rush for the front door.

Adrian gets to his feet. “You see who it was?”

“Probably that bastard I kicked out,” Vinnie says, dialing 911. “It was a black pickup, a big Ford or Chevy with a steel toolbox behind the cab. He was goin’ like a bat outta hell.”

“You get his plate?”

“Nah . . . He was goin’ too fast.”

The place smells like malt and acrid smoke—a trace of whiskey, too. The walls are pocked with pellet holes. Ceiling wires dangle, spit, and sputter.

“It’s King’s Corner,” Vinnie says into his cell. “There’s been a

drive-by shooting through my front window.”

A pause as Vinnie listens.

“No . . . nobody’s hurt . . .”

The music builds in a surge of guitars and vocals. The air is hazy, yellowish, and caustic. It smells chemical. Booze drips from shattered bottles.

Vinnie’s still on his cell, talking to the police dispatcher.

The music hits a crescendo and then goes serene.

A police siren burps and then whoops. Whirling lights suddenly appear; they carousel everywhere.

The Led Zeppelin vocalist ends the song in a voice that conjures up angels.

Two

Adrian stands on the cafeteria line. It's a hospital lunchtime madhouse. Pure bedlam. The expanse seems to swell like a roiling sea.

A thunderous crash erupts amid the maelstrom. Adrian reflexively whirls and crouches. An electric surge rips through him. *Shotgun!*

Adrian realizes a huge metal tray cart has overturned. The floor is piled with plastic trays and debris. The moment of shock evaporates. People help the cafeteria workers pull the cart upright and slide trays back into the racks.

Last night's shotgun blast tramples through Adrian's thoughts. The air-sucking whoosh, the glass shards, the smoke, the sizzling ceiling wires, the pockmarked walls, all of it. It's life and death—in the OR and at King's Corner.

"Adrian? Do I know you? You a faggot?"

The words bubble through him like a hemorrhage—again and again—and each time, a sickening wave of dread washes through him. He feels his guts contract as he recalls that moment. Adrian tells himself to push the memory away; it's an aberration, not part of his life. His life is here, at Eastport General, where lives can be saved. After all, that's the business he's in.

Amid the oceanic roar of the cafeteria, Adrian slides his tray along the three-barred railing, picks up a container of chicken

soup, a slice of carrot cake, and plastic utensils, and then fills a cup with diet soda from the dispenser. No ice.

Adrian spies his surgical team at a table—six people in hospital greens and surgical caps, chomping sandwiches, guzzling mineral water or coffee, talking and laughing. No seat there. The place is a fluorescent-lit sea of white coats and surgical scrubs—doctors, nurses, attendants, technicians. EMS people and visitors in civilian clothes, too.

Adrian looks about for a seat, catches snippets of conversation amid salvos of laughter and aromas of lunchtime fare—chicken soup, meat loaf, pizza, and tuna fish. He and Richie Moscatello see each other and smile. They've known each other since medical school at Cornell, where they did plenty of late-night drinking after exams. That ended when Richie got married and had a kid. Everyone, it seems, has kids.

But not Adrian.

Passing some scrub-suited orthopedic surgeons, Adrian sees a brawny guy with a stethoscope dangling around his neck. The guy's arms bulge in the surgical greens; it reminds Adrian of that madman in King's Corner last night. That face, the neck, those huge hands, the quivering nostrils—and those eyes—unforgettable.

Adrian? That's a girl's name.

You a faggot?

Adrian knows he's still spooked by that steely eyed psycho. The rawness of the encounter has begun fading, but the adrenaline needs time to burn off and dissipate the way a foul odor dissolves with time. But the jangling sensation peaks in an instant—shoots through him—like when the cart overturned. Or earlier this morning when a tire blew out in the hospital garage. Adrian's insides jumped.

I'll be back.

The fucking Terminator—a scene right out of the movie.

And I'll see you, too, faggot.

Adrian scours the cafeteria. Not a single seat in sight. He wonders if it might be better to brown-bag it from now on; it would be easier, much less fuss, but he'd miss the connectedness of the cafeteria, the nearness of life around him.

On the other hand, the camaraderie of the place just heightens his loneliness.

As he passes a group of nurses, Mary Pearson, a tall blonde, winks at him. She's been incredibly flirtatious since Adrian's divorce from Peggy. He and Mary had had a brief, tempestuous fling at Yale, long before he and Peggy had met. Only a few months ago, a message arrived at his hospital e-mail. It said:

Adrian, I'm around. Mary.

He didn't respond; he thought it would be unwise.

Then another one popped up.

We can still be friends, can't we? Mary.

For sure, it's a small universe: Eastport, Yale, and Bridgeport Hospital. Everyone knows everyone—and they know everyone's business, too. It's a gossip mill. But Adrian doesn't want to get into the casual friends-with-privileges thing. Stir up dead embers and you can ignite an unwanted fire—a shit storm of recriminations. And you don't shit where you eat, he thinks. He throws Mary a tight-lipped smile, an unspoken *Yes, we shared a moment of need and convenience back then, but not now.*

He finally spies an empty seat and moves toward it. A woman sits alone at the table. She's drop-dead gorgeous. Adrian feels his knees wobble; he's riveted by her.

"May I join you?" he asks. It's the obligatory self-invitation—not overly friendly, just plain straight-talk—merely asking in a polite and casual way. Walking the social high wire—sending out carefully calibrated cues. Not too hot, not too cool . . . just right. The Goldilocks approach.

She looks up briefly and nods indifferently; he sits down.

Settling into the chair, Adrian realizes he's been on his feet since six thirty. His arches ache and his feet feel leaden. Maybe he's a candidate for orthotic inserts. No wonder most surgeons retire by age sixty. So . . . at forty, he's got twenty more years of cracking chests and mending hearts. Plenty can happen in twenty years, he thinks.

Twenty years . . . I can't think that far ahead . . . and I don't want to think of the past.

Steam rises from his soup in a vaporous cloud. It's too hot to slurp. The bowl, the soup's aroma, and the plastic tray remind him of the dorm food at Cornell; they bring back the verdant rolling hills of the Finger Lakes, rowing on Cayuga Lake and playing center field on the varsity baseball team. It's amazing—Ithaca, New York—merely a whiff away.

He glances across the table—eyeballs the woman. She's staring down at a book; an untouched egg salad sandwich sits on her plate. A container of coffee sits nearby. It's obviously cooled down—there's no vapor. She's wearing green surgical scrubs and a long white coat. Her name tag says, "Megan Haggarty, RN." Beneath it, "Neonatal Intensive Care."

Adrian . . . do I know you . . . ?

That shock-like sensation jolts through Adrian. His legs tighten. Forget last night, he tells himself. It was a few moments of craziness in an otherwise sane world.

He peers at Megan Haggarty. God, she's gorgeous. Her face has the look of unbroken Celtic lineage—beautiful Irish features—unattainable beauty, he thinks. She's in her early thirties, Adrian guesses. She has fiery red hair with an iridescent hint of blond and a coppery undertone. It looks silken soft and shines under the fluorescent lighting. Pulled back, it flows into a hair clip, perfectly framing her oval face. He can almost smell it through the curling soup vapor infiltrating his nostrils.

Is blood rushing to his cheeks? Or is it the steaming-hot soup?

Either way, he feels flushed.

Megan Haggarty's forehead is high; her cheekbones are prominent. Her nose is delicately sculpted, while her jaw is square, firm. Auburn eyebrows accentuate her forehead. Her skin is bone-white and looks creamy, luscious. What would it taste like? he wonders. Staring at her, he knows he's incapable of subtlety.

Her eyes flick up—past him. They're hazel with emerald-green rings around the irises. He's never seen such eyes—so soulful and sad in a way. She's seen hard times, he thinks. It's in those eyes. He could *fall* into them.

She turns a page. Adrian realizes he might as well be a vapor wafting in a wind.

God . . . she's a work of art.

He scans the book upside down, a skill he refined riding on subway trains in Manhattan years ago. *In Cold Blood*. Oh, right—Truman Capote. Four poor souls murdered by two madmen using a shotgun in the Kansas night.

A shotgun. It reminds him of that bastard at King's Corner. "Stairway to Heaven," the guy's piercing, gray eyes, and his quivering nostrils.

I'll be back.

You gotta put that out of your mind. That was then; this is now.

Megan Haggarty's fingers are long and graceful, with perfectly shaped nails—no polish, just natural pink nail beds—with light half-moon crescents above the cuticles. And, the most important feature—the *crucial* one—no ring. Adrian wonders if it's possible she's not married, but he knows lots of nurses wear no jewelry while working in the hospital.

Ring, no ring, married, living together, looking, hooking up, lost and found . . . it's all complicated. Jesus, man . . . what're you, Sherlock Holmes? Looking for clues, bits and pieces . . . trying to dope out this puzzle?

Adrian waits for his soup to cool. He wonders if Megan

Haggarty could possibly make him feel something—anything—because since the divorce from Peggy, he's felt forever soured, emotionally mutilated, as though indifference runs thickly through him, slows his blood, and chills his heart. He knows he's too young to feel this way; there's too much to look forward to, yet life's vividness seems drained, washed out.

It occurs to Adrian that there could be something chemical in one's attraction to another. It could be inborn, something beyond control, hormonal—maybe pheromones, some elemental attractant—that draws a man to a woman and makes someone irresistible. And he suddenly realizes he's nearly leaning across the table, even trying to get a whiff of Megan Haggarty's hair or her milky skin. And he's aware at that moment that approaching women was always emotionally charged with some nascent fear he'd be spurned, or worse, he'd be laughed at.

Megan Haggarty picks up her sandwich and bites into it, eyes still fixed on the page. He recalls first seeing Peggy devour a sandwich. He'd thought back then—nothing original, for sure—the heartier a woman's appetite, the more robust her sexual hunger.

It's kid stuff, pure fantasy.

She sets her sandwich back on the paper plate. A perfect half circle is gone. There's scalloping where her teeth severed the bread. Her throat moves up and then down as she swallows. Adrian notices that she's tall, maybe five ten, though he can't tell for certain. Peggy was tall, too, as have been all the women he's desired.

"Your soup's getting cold," she says, her eyes still riveted on the book.

His throat closes; it feels like a thicket of thorns forms deep inside.

She looks up now, directly at him. Those eyes—emerald-green rings around hazel irises—are simply gorgeous. Be careful, Adrian tells himself. He grins—caught looking—and he sees a

smile form on her bow-shaped lips. Her teeth are perfect, and dimples form on her cheeks as she smiles.

And she closes *In Cold Blood*.

He's trumped Capote. Adrian wonders if it's possible a connection is forming. Or will she simply toy with him because now she thinks he was copping glances like a teenager? Maybe she thinks he's a flirt, a third-rate Casanova trying to score.

"Are you new here?" he asks.

"I've been here for two years." Her head tilts.

"Funny, I haven't seen you around."

How lame. What a contrived opener. . . Adrian tells himself.

"Well, Dr. Douglas," she says, a smile filling her voice, "the neonatal ICU's very far from the cardiac surgery center."

So she's read his name tag. Small triumph, he thinks, but he'll take it.

"And I rarely come down to the cafeteria."

"How come?"

"Oh, we're very busy with the newbies. But we get a little time off."

And of all things, he finds himself wondering what she does with her time off. It could be spent with her husband and kids, he thinks. Or, if she's single—which seems unlikely—she could hit the local bars with her girlfriends, go clubbing, drinking, and dancing, or maybe troll the Post Road gin mills, where lonely singles guzzle their nights away, often looking to hook up.

Alone and single? Megan Haggarty? Not a chance.

"I grew up on long shifts, too," he says.

"You must keep very busy fixing God's mistakes."

He laughs, suddenly aware that she's wise to the swaggering bravado of chest-cracking surgeons. "So, you've met cardiac surgeons," he says, grinning self-consciously.

"Oh, yes, but you don't seem to be like the rest of them."

"You mean grandiose?"

She nods and smiles with her eyes.

“Just filled with themselves? Real gunslingers?”

She laughs; her mouth opens. God, those perfect teeth.

“Where were you before Eastport?” he asks.

“At Yale-New Haven.”

“Me too.”

“Our six degrees of separation,” she says, canting her head.

Her earrings tilt.

“It’s a small world.”

“When did you come here?” she asks.

“Two years ago. Same time you did.”

There’s a brief pause. The cafeteria noise hits a crescendo.

“What made you leave the center of the medical universe?” he asks, hoping he doesn’t sound too cynical, even bitter about Yale.

“Oh, lots of things . . .” she says, her voice trailing off.

She won’t talk about it; he’s certain of that.

She must be very smart, Adrian decides. Yale—it’s the core processor of the nursing profession. And neonatal nursing—top-shelf credentials, right up there with OR and ICU work. It’s the most technical and demanding nursing work around.

His stomach grumbles; he realizes he’s starved.

“It’s much better in this little pond than the ocean at Yale,” she says.

“Yes,” he says, wondering if some upheaval drove her from Yale. Something personal, meaning marital trouble—separation or divorce.

Like what happened to half the people in this cafeteria, a congregation of troubled souls, each with a personal tragedy.

“You live here in Eastport?” he asks.

“Yes. I’ve rented a condo.”

Near the hospital. And she used “I,” not “we.”

Adrian realizes he’s sifting through her every word, each nuance, making inferences. It’s fucking Sherlockian.

“And you?” she asks, those hazel eyes questioning him. God, how he could stare at them forever and how he wishes time could slow so this conversation could last longer.

“I have a rental too . . . in Simpson.”

“Simpson?”

“Yes.”

Adrian’s certain she knows Simpson’s a bedroom community; so, maybe she thinks he’s married, just game-playing. She may feel he’s doing the big flirt, that he’s ready for a casual fling, a fuck-buddy thing, nothing more.

“The rental market in Eastport’s impossible,” he adds quickly. “I took a place in Simpson so I didn’t have to buy a condo.” He purposely used “I,” hinting at his single status.

She nods, and he wonders what she’s thinking.

The conversation shifts—comfortably for Adrian—to their work. She loves the neonatal ICU and working with newborns. The only shame is when a crack baby is born. The nurses know its mothering will be awful. “It’s terrible when a mother doesn’t want a child,” she says, a tinge of sadness in her voice.

Staring into those eyes, Adrian knows he can’t get enough of her.

“But then a fragile little preemie comes along. If we save the baby, it’s great, because we know the parents want this child more than anything else.”

“So it’s more than just a job?”

“Yes, *much* more. And I imagine it’s the same feeling for you with surgery.”

“Absolutely. It makes my day.”

There’s a pause in the conversation. The cafeteria hum seems louder in his ears.

Then she says with a smile, “Now your soup’s *really* cold.”

“And you’ve taken only one bite of your sandwich.”

They laugh. He notices how her lips spread into a smile and

the way her eyes brighten and become lively. The sadness he saw is gone, evaporated. He feels somehow they've shared something as inconsequential as a brief, self-conscious laugh amid the din of this cafeteria, and he feels close to her in a way he doesn't quite understand. It's very strange, and Adrian wonders if she can possibly know he's insanely glad he couldn't find a seat and finally plopped down at this table.

He wonders, too, if Megan Haggarty has *any* idea—even a seminal notion—of the effect she has on him. Can she tell that he's hanging over the table, edging closer to her? He realizes he's engrossed by her. He's looking into her luminous eyes, making intimate and earnest contact, and it feels so terribly comfortable. It occurs to Adrian that if another surgeon could take over his afternoon surgeries, he'd stay right here with Megan Haggarty.

He asks himself if she can even imagine—with the tumult of sound and patina of lights—that years from now he'll try desperately to recapture the memory of the moment he first saw her, surrounded by an ocean of doctors and nurses and aides and hospital workers and porters and cafeteria workers, amid hospital greens and white coats and hairnets and name tags and stethoscopes and the smells and sights and sounds of this stadium-sized cafeteria in Eastport Hospital, and all the while, she was completely oblivious to his existence.

Adrian thinks there's something unadorned, even earthy about Megan Haggarty. He's quite certain she's very different from Peggy, who thought nothing of buying herself a \$100,000 Mercedes SL roadster, who shopped tirelessly at Betteridge Jewelers in Greenwich for Van Cleef & Arpels bracelets or Paolo Costagli earrings, or rummaged through the Ralph Lauren Collection at the store, and pushed relentlessly for them to buy a Manhattan pied-à-terre (which he resisted, much to her chagrin) so on weekends they could eat Kobe beef or world-class sushi at Nobu or the latest culinary constructions at Daniel and

then take a taxi back to the apartment rather than drive back to Connecticut.

But that was then and this is now, and Adrian wonders if there's a remote possibility this chance encounter with Megan Haggarty could lead to something exciting—a relationship with substance, one that might endure—even though he barely knows her. He questions why he's suddenly thinking this way because until twenty minutes ago, he thought he was limping through his life—steeped in a sour marinade of pessimism—forever brooding, feeling emotionally crippled because of what Peggy did.

Three

Megan thinks Adrian Douglas is quite a physical specimen. He has a great body—wide, powerful-looking shoulders, a narrow waist, athletic-looking from stem to stern. She noticed it as he was ambling toward the table. She'd long ago learned to recognize a man's athleticism from Conrad, her ex—a superb athlete and winner of the Colorado State high school heavyweight wrestling championship. He was also a cross-country skier and a superb mountain climber.

The thought of Conrad sends a galvanic charge through her; and at that moment, Megan wonders if Conrad will always haunt her life. *He's part of your past life, girl, so just live in the present . . . Forget back then.* Without seeming obvious, she focuses on the man sitting across the table.

Adrian Douglas is probably about six one. His hair is light brown and closely cropped. He has cornflower-blue eyes, a strong jaw, and good, manly features. Yes, Adrian Douglas is handsome, but not in a pretty-boy way; he has what she would call rugged good looks. But unlike Conrad, there's a gentleness glimmering through, and Adrian Douglas has kindly looking eyes, so different from Conrad's, which could sear you like a scalpel.

Please, Conrad, go away. Just go and be gone forever.

Adrian . . . It's an unusual handle for a man, but in its own way, quite masculine. *Douglas.* It's likely of English, or maybe

Scottish origin—probably a mixture. It's kind of rare in this part of America—the border between Fairfield and New Haven Counties, Connecticut. Actually, if Megan thinks about it, Adrian Douglas is—what's the old-time expression?—a bona fide hunk; but she senses he doesn't realize how good-looking he is. He exudes a sort of calmness she sees too little of in the hard-bitten, life-and-death world of doctors and nurses. That's especially true with surgeons. And he has a soft voice, not brash sounding like so many of the galloping surgical cowboys she's run into. Probably has a great bedside manner. She nearly laughs to herself. Is this high school back in White Plains? Is there a girlfriend to whom she can give a slight elbow nudge? *Bedside manner* . . . It's been ages since she's had a bed partner.

She peers at Adrian's baby blues. God, his eyes are so different from Conrad's.

But remember how charmed you were by Conrad when you first met him.

So, Megan thinks, *Adrian Douglas lives in Simpson—really, a bedroom community.* When she heard that, she was certain he'd be married, but he's a renter, not a homeowner. Renters can be transient. But he's around forty, not a kid. *So where is he in his life?* Megan wonders.

God, she's been talking her head off about the newbies and her hectic schedule. In the middle of their conversation, she finds herself wondering if Adrian Douglas is simply toying with her because she's just *here*. The hospital's a player's paradise.

He's glanced at her ring finger—twice. He tried to be subtle, but she spotted the furtive looks. There are always messages . . . unsung songs wafting through the air. It's a virtual chorus in this hospital with its singles—divorced and separated doctors and nurses. Megan wonders if he assumes she's married but doesn't wear her ring, or assumes that she's divorced. Does he assume *anything at all?*

Still overthinking it, Megan, like you always do . . . But then, you didn't overthink things when it came to Conrad.

She asks herself why Adrian Douglas should be more than an afterthought to an egg salad sandwich and coffee in a crammed cafeteria in Eastport General.

"How come Simpson?" she asks.

"Well, after my divorce, I wanted to get away from New Haven. Eastport had begun a new heart surgery program. I had to decide about living arrangements, and the housing market in this town is abysmal."

She nods. "So is it Wednesday nights at Applebee's with the kids?" she asks, imagining a dad—guilt-ridden as hell—doting on his spoiled-rotten kids.

"No kids," he replies. The corners of his mouth seem to droop. He blinks.

"I guess I made a silly assumption," she says, shrugging, trying to appear casual but feeling she made a cringe-worthy comment.

"Most people do."

Megan feels exquisitely embarrassed by her supposition. But he's not defensive; in fact, he's smiling, and those eyes of his—indulgent, but not patronizing. And besides, doesn't everyone assume things at some point in life? "Yes, having kids is a big deal and they're complicated," she says.

Now his eyes are wet. Did he lose a child? You never recover from that, ever. And it can lead to mutual blame, resentment, anger . . . divorce.

"How about you?" he asks. "Are you married?"

"I'm divorced, too."

He nods.

What does that mean? God, Megan, you're reading too much into every little thing, each inflection or gesture. Straighten up, girl. Get with it; you're not a kid back in White Plains in the high school cafeteria.

“So . . . we’re bobbing along in that sea of uncertainty,” she says.

“It’s tough out there,” he says. He clears his throat and blinks.

Yes, there’s a scab there, she thinks, and she’s unwittingly picked at it. Now it’s raw and exposed.

She nods knowingly.

“You know, it’s funny,” he says. “I thought medical school was rough . . .”

Megan’s certain she knows what he’ll say next.

“Then there was the internship and residency, the whole life-and-death thing . . .”

She anticipates his next words.

“And when I got to be a surgeon, I thought the hardest part of my life was over.”

She feels her lips spread into a smile.

“But *then* it really got rough.”

“And it isn’t over yet,” she says, giving him a don’t-we-know-it look.

They talk on—it’s a zigzagging, word-filled blur, a back-and-forth exchange of thoughts and feelings about marriage and divorce—amid a fluorescent-lit sea of people with plastic spoons, knives, forks, plates, and paper cups—all disposable—the air redolent of soup, pizza, tuna fish, and fried chicken, and they’re surrounded by a babble of voices, volleys of laughter, chirping beepers, and trilling cell phones. They talk about other things, too: the realty market, the hospital’s fund-raising campaign, the demands of the OR and neonatal ICU, comparisons of Eastport to Yale, plenty of conversational fodder for people uncertain of what direction—if any—the encounter will take.

And Megan realizes that not only does she find Adrian Douglas attractive, but feels comfortable with him, and she could actually imagine being with him, doing things together, enjoying each other. She’s startlingly aware that it doesn’t feel

choreographed, like the Waltz of the Singles, that overly practiced art form that's become so old and so very stale at this time in her life—thirty-two years old. She also feels an edge of wariness: after all, how much do you know about someone in a half hour? Or, for that matter, how much can you *really* know in the first few weeks or months?

Don't forget, there was Conrad.

She glances at her watch. "My lunch break's pretty much over," she says.

It's an opening. God, she's on tenterhooks. This is so absolutely silly—even juvenile.

"You haven't eaten a thing," he says.

"Neither have you . . ."

His laugh is robust, uncontrived. Sometimes things can be so simple, so uncomplicated, she thinks.

What happens now? Is there more?

The cafeteria hum peaks. It's a frenzy of movement as people come and go.

"You know, since we didn't really eat lunch, maybe we could get together and have dinner," he says.

"Yes. Eating like *this*, we'll both starve."

There's more laughter.

"That'd be nice." *Nice*. So plain vanilla, she thinks. "Actually, dinner would be fun."

"Can I have your number?"

"Of course," she says, reaching into her lab coat pocket; she sets a pad onto the table and scrawls on it. Then she rips out the page and hands it to him.

He tucks it into his pocket and says, "Are you free this weekend?"

"I can find time . . ."

"Can I call you this evening?"

Her eyebrows rise. "I work until seven."

“How ’bout I call at eight thirty?”

A fluttering rises in her stomach. She nods and picks up her tray. “That would be fine,” she says, trying not to sound too casual or overly eager. She gets up and looks into his eyes. “Actually, I’d like that,”

“Talk to you,” he says, “tonight . . .”

“At least eat your carrot cake,” she says with a grin.

He laughs and picks up his plastic fork.

She wends her way past people chomping, talking, and laughing. Megan feels Adrian Douglas’s eyes bore into her. It’s like heat searing through her lab coat and greens; it shreds the skin on her back. It’s that strange feeling of being watched, of being followed. It reminds her of Conrad, of his rage-filled explosions and his stalking her. As thoughts of Conrad shuttle through Megan’s brain, she shudders inwardly.

She suddenly recalls how it felt to look over her shoulder entering a supermarket or a boutique, or going to the hospital. How she wouldn’t work the night shift. How she asked a security guard to walk her to her car because the darkness was too eerie. And how she changed her phone number and made sure it was unlisted. How she got an order of protection. How her skin crawled back then. Yes, being watched—that feeling of exposure, a raw sense of nakedness—was creepy.

But maybe with Adrian Douglas, being watched is a good thing.

She feels lightness in her chest. It’s been so long since she’s flirted with a man, she’d begun thinking she forgot how. But you never forget. *Yeah . . . it’s like riding a bicycle.*

Megan asks herself if they’d actually been flirting. They’d spoken about work and marriage and divorce and living arrangements, about nursing, the ICU, and surgery—yes, they’d talked about very *substantial* things.

So, they were substantially flirting.

And . . . she never said a word about Marlee.

But they'd just met, and they knew very little about each other—even after a half hour. It'd be crazy—utterly insane—to talk about Marlee, to dive into the complications of her life.

And yet she felt tempted to tell Adrian Douglas how it all began.

Why on earth would she even *want* to tell him her most deeply held secret? For that matter, why would she tell him a single solitary thing now? That would be crazy.

Four

Megan's apartment is on the ground floor of a two-story, cedar-shingled condominium complex near Eastport's heavily trafficked Post Road. Getting out of the car, Adrian feels his stomach flutter. A first date and he feels the slow burn of anxious anticipation. How juvenile, how incredibly retro it is—to be wondering how the evening will go, if the momentum will slow, if she'll be as attractive tonight as when they met a few days ago. He's amazed at the tingling in his chest and realizes it's the sheer vitality of the unknown. He recalls these feelings as a student at Cornell—dates and mixers—thinking back to when it all seemed new and exciting, all of it muted now in the stream of time.

Megan appears at the door and, God, she's beautiful, even more striking than in the cafeteria. She wears charcoal-gray slacks and a beige sweater. A pearl choker offsets her neck. She looks incredibly different out of her hospital scrubs and white coat—so non-Eastport General, so *I've got a real life and you're about to enter it*. Her hair is swept back in a fiery French braid. Her hazel eyes with those incredible green rings look ethereal. He'd thought of Megan so often these past two days; the reality of her seems chimerical.

Her apartment is a potpourri of contemporary style: the walls are eggshell white; the space is open and airy, with skylights, oak hardwood flooring, and trapezoid windows. The apartment is

furnished with a mix from IKEA, Pier 1, and Pottery Barn; the impression is one of casual modernity and slap-dash transience. Adrian suddenly realizes he's squinting as he peers about the place.

"It's strictly utilitarian," Megan says, as though she's read his thoughts. "It's a month-to-month rental until things get settled."

"Settled? What things?"

"Oh, my life," she says with a quick laugh. But Adrian detects discomfort when she says *my life*. "I should really say *our* lives," she adds, pointing to a beige-colored Victorian-style dollhouse with lilac and pink gingerbread trim. "That's Marlee's . . . my daughter . . ."

"How old is she?" he asks, trying to sound casual, as though it changes nothing, but it had been a big problem with Peggy.

"She's five."

"Is she here?" He half expects to see a kid come charging out of a bedroom.

"She's at my sister Erin's for the evening. I couldn't get a sitter," Megan says, slipping into her coat. "And she loves staying with Erin and Bob. It's almost Marlee's second home. My sister's a stay-at-home mom, and Marlee spends the days there when I'm working. She's crazy about her cousins and their little dog." She pauses and then says, "Also, there's something I'm trying to avoid . . ." She looks up at him with those emerald-ringed eyes.

"What's that?" he asks, sensing he knows.

"She can get attached very easily. She really misses out on having a dad."

He thinks suddenly how he and Peggy were childless. But it's a loaded topic, not to be discussed, at least not now.

"Does she see her father?"

"No. He's been in Colorado since Marlee was two."

"You said things need to get settled? What things?"

"Oh, my sister and brother-in-law may move to Hartford. It

depends on his job situation. And I can get a good position at Hartford Hospital, but I'd hate to move again. They're family, and Marlee's cousins are almost brother and sister to her."

Giovanni's is an intimate, candle-lit trattoria on the Post Road in Westport. It has rough-hewn stucco walls, the clichéd checkered tablecloths, and black metal wall sconces. A recording of Pavarotti singing Neapolitan love songs pipes through the sound system. They feast on bruschetta, Caesar salads, shrimp scampi, and a seafood pasta, all washed down with a straw-colored Pinot Grigio. They talk for a while about hospital gossip—it's safe, neutral ground—nothing intimate or overly revealing.

"I see you stay with the low-fat dishes," she says. "Does being a heart surgeon influence what you eat?"

"It probably does. I see decrepit hearts every day," he says with a laugh. "How about you? Does the ICU influence how you feel about kids?"

"It's the other way around. How I feel about kids got me into working with them."

"In the cafeteria, you talked about feeling terrible when a child is unwanted."

"It's a tough topic for me."

He nods, hoping she doesn't think he's too inquisitive.

"I was adopted," she says with a slight tremor in her voice. "It's something that stays with you forever."

"That somebody didn't want you? Gave you away?"

"Exactly." She smiles weakly.

"But somebody else wanted you."

"And that's the lifesaver. There's a special place in heaven for adoptive parents."

"Tell me about them."

"My parents couldn't have kids, so they adopted Erin and me

as newborns—Erin first and then me a few years later. We grew up in White Plains. Dad worked at an ad agency in Manhattan and Mom was a teacher in Yonkers. It was a pretty traditional Irish family.”

“Megan and Erin . . . it doesn’t get more Irish than that.”

She laughs. “Erin’s three years older than I am.”

“And you two are close?”

“As close as sisters can be.”

“Where’re your parents now?”

“They died in a car accident when I was nineteen,” she whispers.

“I’m sorry.”

“Erin and I moved to New Haven, where Erin was working.”

“Then what?”

“Erin was at Merrill Lynch; then she met her husband, Bob, an engineer at Sikorsky. I went to nursing school at Yale. When I found pediatric nursing, I knew that was what I wanted. And then . . . the newbies.”

“So it’s not just a job, is it?”

“It’s much more than that to me, Adrian.”

A flush creeps into his face when she uses his name.

“How about you? Why cardiac surgery?”

“I guess the easy answer is that my father died when I was six . . . a heart attack.”

“My God, how terrible.”

“Right in front of me and my mother.”

Her hand covers her mouth. “You actually *saw* it happen?”

“Yes. We were in a restaurant and he just keeled over and died.”

“How terrible that must have been. A young boy seeing his father die.”

He nods. He hadn’t expected the conversation to veer in this direction. Not great topics for a first date—abandonment,

adoption, and death. His throat thickens and his toes curl.

“That’ll make a difference in your life,” she says with wet eyes.

“For sure,” he replies, watching her hands on the tabletop.

“So . . . we come to our work because of our early lives,” she adds. Her voice sounds clogged.

He nods, staring into her eyes. “Is Haggarty your married name?”

“It’s my adoptive parents’ name.”

“Do you know your birth name?”

“No. As far as I’m concerned, I’m pure Haggarty.” She smiles. “It’s who I am.”

“Even when you were married?”

“Even when I was married. It was the name I grew up with and the one I became a nurse with. So I stayed with it.” She pauses and then says, “And Marlee’s last name is Wilson . . . her father’s surname.”

“Marlee Wilson. It’s a pretty name.”

“She’s a pretty little girl.”

“Well, her mother’s very beautiful,” Adrian says, aware his pulse is throbbing. And his hand is now resting on the tabletop.

A smile forms on her lips. He thinks she’s blushing, though it’s difficult to tell in the peach-hued lighting. She looks surprised, even embarrassed. Adrian wonders if Megan Haggarty realizes how ravishingly beautiful she is. He’s certain many men have told her that, and he wonders if she carries the burden of beauty. Has she been the target of a lifelong cortege of flattery—mostly genuine, some counterfeit, meant to entice, to seduce—and has it made her skeptical, even untrusting of men? Or is she like some women he’s met—beautiful, yet convinced they’re ugly, scarred by disappointment, by rejection?

“Torna a Surriento” soars through the restaurant. The wine and music fill him with warmth and contentment.

“This is very different from the cafeteria,” he says, knowing the conversation has veered into different territory from hospital

gossip.

“Yes, it is. Do you know why?”

“I think I do . . .”

“So do I,” she says, leaning toward him. “It’s because we want to be here.”

“Oh yes,” he says, and a moment later, their fingers are intertwined. Her hand is soft, warm, and he feels her fingers pressing his; a hum courses through him. Adrian’s heart swells with possibility.

“It’s like an adventure, isn’t it?”

Yes,” he says with a laugh. “I have a confession to make . . .”

“What?” Her grasp is firmer now and her head tilts. A smile stays on her lips.

“I’m glad for that one empty seat in the cafeteria.”

“I’m glad, too.”

“The second I saw you, I knew I wanted to sit there.”

“I was watching you.”

“Were you?” he says, genuinely surprised. “I thought you didn’t know I existed.”

“Oh, I knew,” she says with an amused look.

“You didn’t give me a glance.”

“Oh, I looked. And I was thinking, too . . .”

“Thinking what?”

“I can’t tell you that *now*.”

“You were very subtle, sitting there with your paperback, never looking at me.”

“You can’t know what was going through my mind then.”

“I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Life’s full of surprises, isn’t it?” she says, squeezing his hand.

At her apartment door, she moves close. The scent of her makes his knees weak. “I’d ask you in, but I’m not sure I want to go

there . . .”

“Go where . . . ?”

She smiles, touches his arm.

A thrumming courses through his chest.

“You know where,” she whispers, her finger brushing his cheek. His skin tingles. “At least not yet . . .”

“We’ll just let things go where they will . . .”

“In time, they will,” she whispers, drawing closer.

He can smell her hair, her skin, the wine on her breath. The hospital seems forever ago, a lifetime away. Her hand strokes his chin gently; then her palms rest on his cheeks. His face is on fire. His heart flutters as he looks into those amazing eyes and knows again he could fall into them. Her scent is vaguely reminiscent of wisteria, or is it lavender?

When they kiss, her lips are moist, full, and pliant, and the taste of her mouth blends with wine and sambuca.

They draw away and look into each other’s eyes. Her hand rests at the back of his neck. “This is the strangest thing,” he says.

“What’s strange?”

“It feels like . . .” He shakes his head, not knowing what to say.

“Like what?”

“Like we’ve known each other for a long time.”

“Yes. It does.”

“And there’s something else,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“I feel like a kid.”

“That’s a good feeling, isn’t it?”

“Like it’s all the first time, but I’m too old to feel this way.”

“No, you’re not,” she whispers.

“And . . .” A thousand thoughts cascade through his mind—a frenzy of words and images—but he can’t find a thing to say.

“And what?” she says softly, her lips hovering near his.

“How does this happen so quickly? This feeling . . .”

“I don’t know. But I feel it, too,” she whispers. Then she buries her face against his chest; she looks up and those plush, moist lips press against his neck, kiss him—very gently—and his arms wrap around her, pull her so close, he feels the heat of her body, and a soft moan comes from her throat. Her lips linger on his neck, and his skin feels like it’s on fire. He tilts his head downward so their mouths come together.

They kiss again, this time, more deeply.