

DEAD



WRONG

"A heart pounding, gritty medical thriller that puts Wyler on par with such terrific novelists as Robin Cook, Tess Gerritsen, and Michael Crichton. Highly recommended!"

—R. BARRI FLOWERS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MURDER IN HONOLULU*

ALLEN WYLER

Praise for Allen Wyler's Thrillers

“The book is a thriller on par with the novels of *ROBIN COOK* and *MICHAEL CRICHTON*.”

—*Tuscon Citizen*

“*DEAD END DEAL* is a medical thriller of the highest order, reviving the genre with a splendid mixture of innovation and cutting-edge timeliness. Neurosurgeon Allen Wyler knows of what he writes, and the result is a thriller that equals and updates the best of Robin Cook and Michael Crichton. His latest is terrifying, riveting, and a masterpiece of science and suspense.”

—Jon Land, best-selling author of *STRONG AT THE BREAK*

“*DEAD END DEAL* by Allen Wyler is a masterful medical thriller, intelligent, ferociously paced, scary as hell, ripping with suspense, and filled with fascinating (and horrific) details that only a neurosurgeon-turned-writer like Wyler could provide. If you like the medical thrillers of Robin Cook or Michael Crichton, you will absolutely love *DEAD END DEAL*.”

—Douglas Preston, author of *THE MONSTER OF FLORENCE* and co-creator of the *PENDERGAST NOVELS*

“The gritty, graphic details of cutting-edge surgical procedures, capped with an exciting conclusion should keep fans of the genre riveted.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“With its lightning-paced excitement and fascinating science, *DEAD HEAD* has everything you could hope for in a medical thriller!”

—Tess Gerritsen, author of *THE MEPHISTO CLUB*

“In the tradition of Robin Cook, Wyler takes us behind the scenes to show us things the medical establishment doesn't want us to see. *DEAD RINGER* builds a high-speed plot on a startling but all too-plausible premise. This is the stuff nightmares are made of.”

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“The suspense builds and builds in this riveting page-turner. It's a skillful merging of the medical thriller and political thriller . . . Tom Clancy meets Tess Gerritsen!”

—Kevin O'Brien, New York Times Bestselling Author of *THE LAST VICTIM* and *KILLING SPREE*

“You'll be asking the nurse to swab your forehead when you're admitted into this tense medical thriller exposing *DEADLY ERRORS*. Wyler does for hospitals what Benchley did for the ocean.”

—Joe Moore, co-author of the international best seller *THE GRAIL CONSPIRACY*

“Wyler writes a fast-paced thriller, which reawakens your scariest misgivings about the Medical Industrial Complex and the profit motive corrupting the art of healing.”

—Darryl Ponicsan, author of *THE LAST DETAIL*

“*DEADLY ERRORS* has a fascinating and frightening premise that gives it the potential to be a best seller in the Robin Cook mold.”

—William Dietrich, author of *HADRIAN'S WALL*

“This is an ‘up all night’ pass into troubled places that only hardworking doctors know about; a turbulent world of trusting patients and imperfect humans struggling with the required image of perfection. Only a gifted surgeon like Allen Wyler could craft such a wild and wonderful best-of-the-breed medical thriller!”

—John J. Nance, author of *PANDORA'S CLOCK* and *FIRE FLIGHT*

“Wyler’s debut novel is both an engrossing thriller and a cautionary tale of the all-too-frequent intersection of high technology and higher greed. It’s a message all of us better pay attention to, or face the consequences.”

—Mark Olshaker, author of *EINSTEIN'S BRAIN*, *UNNATURAL CAUSES*, and *THE EDGE*; co-author of *MINDHUNTER*, *JOURNEY INTO DARKNESS*

Dead Wrong

A novel by

ALLEN WYLER

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This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

DEAD WRONG

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Dedication

To Enoch

PROLOGUE

SEATTLE

BOBBIE BAKER JOLTED wide awake from a warm, floating sleep, heart pounding, skin prickling, vague hollowness in her gut warning of something . . . wrong. What? Someone in the house? She listened to a jet roar overhead on its approach into Seattle-Tacoma International. From the living room an announcer hawked malt shop love songs from the wonderful fifties: CD or tape, \$19.95. No other sounds.

Oh, shit! “Jordan?” The bottom dropped out of her stomach.

Shit, shit, shit. She’d intended to rest her eyes only for a moment.

“Jordan?” Louder this time. Pushing away the twisted sheets and blanket with her strong arm she glanced around the bedroom. Jordan’s toys . . . where were they?

“Jordan!”

Breathing hard from the effort, she rolled onto her good side, dropped both legs over the edge of the bed, and pushed up to sitting, her right arm no help at all. “Goddamn it.” With her soles firmly on the carpet she paused for the dancing black holes to dissolve from her vision, wiped her face, and fingertips combed her short damp hair in a useless attempt at some order.

Other than Jordan’s missing toys, the bedroom looked exactly as it had before she nodded off. Yet something wasn’t right. What? Ah shit: The accordion-style kiddy gate wasn’t there, leaving the hallway open to the living room. “Jordan!” It wasn’t like him to not answer, unless he was playing hide-and-seek. Sliding off the sheet onto her hand and knees, she peered under the bed. Not there.

With the help of her cane, she limped to the closet, slid open the door, and found only clothes, shoes, and the laundry hamper.

In the living room the television remained on the same channel, everything in place just as she left it, except for Jordan’s toys. Frantic now, she shuffled to the kitchen, bathroom, laundry room, and finally Trent’s small home office. No Jordan. No toys.

“Oh my God, oh my God . . .”

Mouth dry, heart ready to explode, she hobbled to the kitchen, propped the phone on the granite counter and punched in 9-1-1 with her good hand.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

“Help, please help me. My baby boy—someone’s kidnapped my baby boy.”

“Okay, ma’am, now calm down and tell me what happened,” the dispatcher said in a calm, unemotional tone.

Calm down? Jesus! “Someone just kidnapped my baby. Please, help me.”

“Is anyone with you?”

Bobbie glanced around in spite of having just checked the house. “No. I’m all alone.”

“An officer will be there shortly. Please stay on the—”

She punched off and hit speed dial. A moment later she blurted, “Trent? Oh my God, Trent, come home right now. Jordan’s been kidnapped.” Sobbing uncontrollably, she dropped the phone and slid slowly to the floor.



BOBBIE BECAME AWARE of pounding on the front door struggled to her feet, then opened the door to a tall uniformed police officer on the porch. He stared at her a beat before asking, “You the one called in a missing child?”

Slightly confused but relieved to see help, she opened the door wider. “Yes. Come in. Come in. Please.”

He leaned forward to peer in but did not step across the threshold. “You look distressed, ma’am. Anyone inside threatening you?”

“No, no one. I laid down to close my eyes for a moment, and when I woke up Jordan was gone.”

After scanning the living room, the officer stepped inside. He said, “Jordan?” while craning his neck to see into the interior hall.

Why didn’t he understand? She just told him. “Yes. My son.”

“Uh, ma’am, you sure no one else is on the premises? Your husband, a friend?”

Weeping, she dropped into an overstuffed chair. “Now you! Why won’t anybody believe me?”

“Ma’am, let me see if I understand the situation. You say someone entered your home and took your son from you?”

Bobbie felt she was about to explode from anger. “No, nothing like that! He was here and now he’s gone.” *Why won’t he listen?* “Please, why won’t you do something? It just happened. I was napping.”

“I understand, ma’am, but I need more information before I can do anything. Go on, finish telling me what happened.” He sounded less guarded now.

Unable to curb the frustration from her voice, she began deliberately, as if talking to a child. “I fell asleep. When I woke up Jordan was gone. All his toys are gone too. That’s what I don’t understand. She swept her good hand toward the rest of the house. “His red fire engine . . . his toys . . . they’re gone.”

Trent Baker, Bobbie’s husband, came trotting through the open front door. He stopped at the sight of the officer.

“What the hell?” Gasping for breath, he glanced at the cop, then at Bobbie, then calmly walked to her. “Bobbie, you okay?” Dropping onto his haunches, he grasped her right hand in both of his. “Honey, what happened?”

When she didn’t answer he looked up at the police officer. “She okay? What happened?”

With a shrug he answered, “Don’t know, sir. I’m trying to determine that myself. She called 9-1-1 and claimed your son’s been kidnapped.”

Trent shook his head. “My son?”

“That’s my understanding.”

Trent Baker sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you, officer.” He shook his head again. “We don’t have children.”

FRIDAY, DOCTORS HOSPITAL, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

FRIDAY AFTERNOON BEFORE Labor Day weekend—three blessed days without call. Having just signed out to another partner ten minutes ago, Tom McCarthy yawned and checked his watch: 1:07 PM. Maybe put in four hours of paperwork before heading home for a beer and some much-needed rest.

Yeah, a beer. He deserved it. Especially after last night. He'd rolled out of bed at 2:31 AM for an emergency case in the ER that ended up in surgery until 8:30 AM, dictated the operative report, checked on the still-unconscious patient in the recovery room, and rounded on three inpatients before enduring two back-to-back administrative meetings. The second one, the one he'd just finished, not only stretched on too long, but also included a buffet of crusty, dry lasagna and green salad drowned in a bad Caesar dressing. Which might've been tolerable except he was so hungry from missing breakfast that he scarfed down two helpings, which he now regretted.

"Afternoon, Maria." He entered his empty waiting room and closed the hall door, Styrofoam cup of coffee in hand.

His office manager glanced up from behind the reception counter and smiled, her flawless white teeth a contrast against her rich Filipino skin. Her desk radio softly played golden oldies, her favorite station. "Good afternoon, Dr. McCarthy. You must be tired after such a busy night."

"The good news is I have three days to rest up. How's your day been?"

"Slow. I let the others go at noon. Hope that's okay. I thought, give them an early start, this being a long weekend and all."

"Perfect. I'd take off early too, if I could. But hey, why don't you go ahead, get out of here?"

She glanced at the computer screen. "Maybe a little early, but I still have a few things to finish up. But now that you're here, you mind if I run downstairs to grab a sandwich before they close?"

"No problem. I'll be in my office." He headed that direction, thought about something, and turned back to her. "Doesn't your family have a picnic this weekend?"

"We do." She pushed back her chair and reached underneath the counter for her purse. "Oh, almost forgot. Two men came by to see you this morning."

"Oh?" Odd, he wasn't expecting anyone. "They say what they wanted?"

She brushed strands of glossy black hair off her forehead. "No, but they sounded like it was important."

Who could that be? A process server? No, most of those snakes worked solo. Not a drug company salesman because the office didn't allow drop-ins. "What'd you tell them?"

"The truth, of course," she said, flashing a conspiratorial smile. "That you were in surgery and by the time you got out, you would be tied up the rest of the day." She started for the door, slipping the strap of her purse over her shoulder.

Part truth, part white lie: her way of protecting his time, especially from two men without an appointment or a good reason to see him. She knew he'd want to leave as soon as possible, maybe spend the weekend readying his boat for fall. He hadn't told her about Caroline yet.

"I appreciate that. Now go get some lunch before you starve to death."



HE SET THE coffee on his desk, dropped into the chair, and eyed the stack of paperwork. Quarterly reports, budgets, productivity figures: information essential for managing a major department in a medical center. Maria strategically had the charge sheet for this morning's surgery on top, her not-so-subtle hint to fill it out first. He leaned back in the chair and sipped his coffee. Boring bureaucracy wasn't the career he had envisioned when working his ass off in med school.

Strange, the turns our lives take, and for what reasons. Two years ago—six months after Anne's death—he had accepted a headhunter's offer to interview for the chair of neurosciences. Moving from his married-life environment might provide a new start for him. And it did. Along with an increase in obligatory social functions, the kind more comfortably attended as a couple. He quickly began to involve with Caroline.

But that turned out to be a huge mistake. A classic trap, he realized two months into the relationship. She was Anne in too many ways: her sense of style, humor, taste in movies, and a thousand other attributes. Caroline had resurrected memories of his dead wife instead of being a fresh start, making it a situation that was grossly unfair to them both. The right thing to do was end the relationship before expectations and assumptions blossomed into regrets. So last week he tried to explain that he was involved with her for the wrong reasons, that it was a rebound thing and he felt a rebound wasn't the right basis for a relationship. She argued that they were good together, that she felt he genuinely cared for her. Feeling cornered, he disagreed and said that he wasn't going to continue seeing her. The conversation ended in bitterness and harsh words when she called him an asshole.

A man with a gruff voice said, "Put your hands on the desk and stand up."

Startled, McCarthy snapped out of his reverie and looked up to see a gun aimed at his head.

DOCTORS HOSPITAL, SEATTLE

SARAH HAMILTON'S EMOTIONS whipsawed between pissed and anxious. The lousy thing was she didn't know why. She slapped the large red button harder than necessary, causing a bang as loud as a gunshot. Embarrassed, she glanced around to an empty hall, thank God. The clock on the wall showed 1:07 PM.

Calm down, girl. Get a grip.

The heavy doors to Cardiac Intensive Care Unit whooshed open. She entered, heading straight to the nursing station. With her mother's black hair and delicate graceful features, Sarah was often mistaken for Italian rather than the child of a "mixed couple." She hated the expression, as if the union between her Cuban mother and African American father came out of a Waring blender rather than a Catholic marriage.

The charge nurse saw her approach and smiled. "Afternoon, doctor."

"Afternoon. Any inquires about 621?" she asked, referring to the patient admitted last night.

With a raised eyebrow, he asked, "You asking about the family or Dr. Witherspoon?"

"Witherspoon." Witherspoon was the code word used by staff to refer to a man impersonating a doctor who'd recently attempted to gain access to patient information.

The nurse leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Well, he's not been in here. But you heard, didn't you, a guy fitting his description tried again last evening in the Neuro ICU?" He pronounced the acronym "nick you."

A jolt of adrenaline tingled down her arms to her fingertips. "Oh? NICU? As in neuro, not neonatal?"

He nodded. "Right, neuro."

Her initial excitement morphed into a glow of vindication for having spent almost an hour at 2 A convincing administration to break the rules and admit Bobbie Baker under a false name and Social Security number. Not only that, but to also place her in the cardiac ICU instead of the neurology intensive care. On second thought, panic hit. Maybe Bobbie wasn't paranoid after all. Maybe someone really *was* really out to get her. She asked, "What exactly happened?"

"Not much fortunately. I mean, no scenes or anything. Apparently a security guard recognized him from description and confronted him. He turned and walked away. Wasn't much the guard could do but then."

Tom needs to hear about this. Now. "And he's not shown up here?"

The nurse gave a sideways glance of suspicion. "No, but now I get the distinct impression you're part of this drama. Mind telling me what it's about?"

Tell him? Why not? As long as she didn't divulge Baker's true identity, what harm could it do? "What do you know about her history?"

The nurse studied his palm computer a moment, then slid it back into the breast pocket of his scrubs. "She's an overdose. She was admitted here because neuro is full."

Perfect. That was the fabricated cover story exactly. "This isn't—" she caught herself before using Bobbie's real name, "—Leslie's first admit. During a prior admit to Nine West a man claiming to be Dr. James Witherspoon tried to access her chart. You know Diane Halvorson?"

The nurse nodded. “Charge nurse on psych?”

“Yup. She’s been here longer than God and knows just about everyone on staff. Anyway, this Witherspoon shows up on her ward asking for Leslie’s chart. Diane doesn’t recognize him so she asks him for his ID. He pulls one out of his pocket. It looks okay, but something just doesn’t sit right so she digs in and says no. You know how most docs would be—they’d go bat shit on her. But this Witherspoon guy just walks away without a word.

“Soon as I heard about it I called medical affairs. Turns out Witherspoon’s not on staff. That got me curious, so I checked with the King County Medical Society and the state licensing office. Same thing. There’s no such doctor in this state. He’s a fraud.”

The charge nurse adjusted his wristwatch. “So, what’s up with him? I mean, why all the lurking around?”

Crap. She didn’t want to go into details. On the other hand, it’d feel good to defend herself against all the accusing stares from the other residents. She imagined the rumors floating around about her incompetence. Rumors that would quickly spill over from house staff to nursing staff.

“It’s complicated, but here’s the short version: She’s in for a Valium overdose, obviously.” Baker had washed down a bottle of Valium with most of a bottle of Cutty Sark. “But here’s the thing: with her history of depression, she never should’ve been given the Valium in the first place. Turns out when they checked the prescription, my name was on the bottle. And that’s nuts. I never prescribed a sedative for her, much less Valium.” Too much emotion spiced her words, she realized. *Tone it down.* “The only prescription I ever wrote her was Paxil.”

The nurse’s silence prompted Sarah to continue. “Turns out the Valium came from the same Walgreens she uses for other prescriptions, but when I checked with the head pharmacist there, he claimed there’s no record of a Valium script for her. None! It was fake.”

The nurse asked, “So what are you saying, that this Witherspoon gave her that prescription?”

Exactly! At least, her gut knew that was it. But gut feelings didn’t prove a thing and certainly couldn’t exonerate her for apparently prescribing the wrong drug for Bobbie—a drug that would’ve killed her if Trent hadn’t come home in time. The only person to know for certain who gave her the prescription was Bobbie, and right now she was in the other room drugged and intubated.

“I don’t know. But I intend to find out. Until this is cleared up I’m on probation.” She should get to work. “Sorry, I’ve taken too much of your time. I’ll let you get back to your patients. Thanks for the information.”



AS SARAH ENTERED room 621 a nurse in purple scrubs connected a liter of normal saline onto a IV holder, a clear plastic tube snaking down to a vein in the back of Bobbie’s hand. A single sheet covered Bobbie’s body; her eyes were shut, and a breathing tube and bite block were taped securely to her mouth. At the head of the bed a corrugated plastic tube linked an air humidifier to a tube in Bobbie Baker’s trachea inserted three days ago as a lifesaving measure when Baker was too drugged to breathe. The respirator next to the bed stood silent now, allowing her to breathe on her own. The question being, Was she breathing well enough to remove the tube?

“How is she?” Sarah asked.

Caught by surprise, the nurse jumped and spun around. “Oh, hi, Dr. Hamilton. Sorry, didn’t hear you come in.” She took a deep breath before returning to Baker to prod her shoulder. “Leslie! Wake up. Dr. Hamilton’s here to see you.”

Bobbie’s eyes flickered open but squinted in the light.

Sarah leaned over the side rail and gently squeezed the young woman's hand. "Hi, kiddo."

Way Sarah saw it, Bobbie owed her life to the Mariners' lousy bullpen. If they had put away the Oakland batters instead allowing base hits, Bobbie's husband, Trent, might've stayed at Safeco Field. Instead, he walked out before the end of the seventh inning, came home, found her sprawled over the couch barely breathing, and called 9-1-1.

She should be dead.

Bobbie closed her eyes and turned her head away.

The nurse shrugged. "Her blood gases looked good enough for a trial off the respirator. She's been on room air since eight o'clock. Plan to check another gas in a few minutes. If things still look good, they'll pull the tube."

As a psychiatrist, Sarah wasn't responsible for Bobbie's ICU care, because Neurology handled overdoses. Bobbie had become her patient in the early morning hours two weeks ago when she showed up in the Emergency Room after being seen but not treated at the Lakeview ER.

"What's up?" She asks the ER doc who had called her down for a consult at 2 AM. She's standing at the nursing station, the usual early morning bedlam of a busy ER playing out around them.

He glances up from the chart he's involved with. "She's nuts."

"Can you be a little more specific?"

Obviously irritated at the interruption, he sniped, "You're the shrink, ask her. Room 5," and returned to filling out a form. Then as an afterthought he added, "Husband's name's Trent."

"She remembers the delivery in so much detail—right down to the name of the nurses and the date and the time—that it just sounds too real to be made up." Trent admits.

Sarah asks, "Yet you say she's never been pregnant?"

He shakes his head. "No, never. And I know what you're thinking. Believe me, I would know if she had been."

She looks at Bobbie, curled into the fetal position on the exam table, picking at something on the sheet only she can see. Sarah believes the acute problem is psychosis due to seventy-two consecutive hours of sleep deprivation. She tells Trent, "I'm sorry Lake view wouldn't take her, but they don't have an inpatient psych ward other than the medical ward of the county jail. We do. I think she needs to be admitted and allowed to sleep. The Haldol looks to be kicking in, so she should be okay."

Trent appears grateful. "Thank you, doctor. But what's causing the memories?"

Sarah didn't have any idea. "Let's take one thing at a time, get her settled down, and then see what we can find out." She circles back to an important point. "The head injury, can you tell me a little more about it?" Trent has initially glossed over it, as if it were something difficult to discuss.

He puts a protective hand on Bobbie's shoulder, lowers his voice, and looks past Sarah at a spot far away. "She just got in her car . . . it was at Walmart, the parking lot . . . this guy jumped in the passenger seat and pulled a gun on her." He swallows, looks at the floor. "Forced her to drive to this deserted road and raped her. Beat her pretty bad too. Would've died except for a jogger found her and called 9-1-1."

Sarah looks at the still-visible scar on Bobbie's head. "Was that when her head was operated on?"

"Yeah. The docs at Lakeview saved her life. That's why I couldn't understand why they didn't admit her tonight. I mean, she was their patient."

Bobbie's diagnosis had morphed into the psychiatric case from hell. No psychiatrist on staff had ever seen anything like it. And Sarah couldn't find a case in the literature to come close to resembling hers. The symptoms—vivid memories of giving birth to Jordan, a son she never had—defied diagnosis.

Multiple Personality Disorder?

Sarah didn't buy it.

When her chairman, Herb Ripley, had suggested she ask Tom McCarthy about the case, she replied, "What good's a neurosurgeon going to be diagnosing psychiatric symptoms?"

"Because," Ripley had answered, "what if it's a little-known complication of head injury?"

Now Bobbie was in the cardiac ICU recovering from an overdose of a drug Sarah didn't prescribe but was being blamed for giving her. Nothing made sense. Sarah leaned close to Bobbie. "Hey, kiddo, did you hear that? You might get that tube out of your mouth later today. Isn't that terrific?"

Bobbie ignored her.

Sarah nodded for the nurse to step out of the room with her. Once in the hall out of earshot Sarah asked, "You heard about the guy who tried to get into neuro ICU last evening? Witherspoon?"

"I'm pretty sure everybody in the place knows about it by now. But so far there's been no sign of him since."

"Let's hope he stays away."

"You got that right." The nurse checked her watch. "Jeez, I better get that blood gas going. You coming back later, after the tube's removed?"

"You bet." Sarah realized her hands were balls of blanched knuckles. The bastard who'd slipped Bobbie the Valium knew enough medicine to kill her and get away with it. And he would've succeeded if Trent hadn't come home. Well, she'd find out who gave her the prescription as soon as Bobbie started talking. But that still wouldn't address the real question: Why would anyone want to kill the poor girl?

DOCTORS HOSPITAL, SEATTLE

SPEECHLESS, TOM MCCARTHY stared at the man in the doorway and the gun in his hand. Another man moved into view behind the first. No facial hair, short haircuts, and serious as hell expressions—McCarthy thought *military* without knowing why.

The white guy holding the gun said, “Sir, you’re Tom McCarthy. Affirmative?” His free hand withdrew a wallet from his inside coat pocket.

Confused by the situation, McCarthy said yes, then realized his mistake. Always answer with a question, put your accuser on the defensive, and then start a dialog to sort out this mistake before something goes sideways. But he couldn’t move his eyes from the gun barrel. Worse yet, it had a suppressor attached. Why the gun? Why a suppressor? His mouth went bone-dry.

“Warren Sikes. Department of Defense.” Sikes let the wallet drop open, exposing an official-looking ID. “This here’s Elroy Washington,” he said with a nod in the black guy’s direction. Elroy didn’t offer ID, a nod, or a smile. He just stood emotionless, yet alert, muscles ready for the unanticipated.

Sikes ordered, “Sir, keep your hands above the desk where we can see them and stand up slowly. No sudden movements.”

McCarthy detected a touch of Mississippi cracker in Sikes’s voice.

Jesus Christ! A silencer! The full impact of seeing the weapon took his breath away. Why a silencer? Heart pounding, gut churning, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. *Department of Defense?* What earthly reason would a legitimate investigator have for aiming a gun at him? “What’s this about?”

Sikes flicked the gun left. “Sir, move away from the desk.”

McCarthy’s toe caught on the desk leg, tripping him. He lurched forward. Sikes stepped back, adjusted aim, tightened his finger on the trigger.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, take it easy.” Hands raised, McCarthy crab-stepped left, away from the chair. “Put the gun away. There’s no need for it.”

Sikes flicked the gun left again. “Farther. Clear the desk so I can see all of you.”

McCarthy did as ordered. “What do you want?” His dry throat was making his words coarse and weak.

Sikes said, “Cooperation. That’s what we want. Total cooperation.”

McCarthy flicked his parched tongue across his lip to no effect. His eyes locked on Sikes’s trigger finger. How much more pressure would be needed before firing? He realized nothing good would come of this encounter, yet felt powerless to change anything. And this realization terrified him even more than the gun. “No problem, just put that gun away; it makes me very nervous.”

Sikes remained focused, his eyes never wavering from Tom’s hands. “Serves a purpose. See, in my experience it gives a boy like you good reason to cooperate.”

McCarthy blew a hard breath and forced himself to not panic. “Cooperate? I don’t have any idea what I’m supposed to cooperate with.”

“So far, sir, you’re cooperating just fine.” Sikes flicked the gun toward the hall. “Move on out of there.”

Cautiously, McCarthy sidestepped from the desk toward the door, making no sudden moves, giving Sikes no reason to misinterpret his intention. Sikes pointed to the reception area. “Out there.”

In the waiting room Sikes pointed to a chair. “Sit.”

Washington waited, leaning against the hall doorjamb, a similar gun in hand, taking in the scene as if this was routine.

Heart pounding, forehead sweating, McCarthy sat in the chair, too afraid to raise a hand to wipe away the beads.

Sikes asked, “The classified material you stole. Where is it?”

“Sorry, I don’t think I heard right. Did you say classified material?” Not having a clue what Sikes was talking about made the anxiousness in his gut worse.

Sikes rocked his head side to side like a fighter loosening up his neck before a round. “Don’t go the other way, McCarthy, I’m impatient. Insult my intelligence, I get mad. And believe me, you don’t want the wrath of my vengeance brought on you.”

Washington pushed off the wall, as if readying for action. “Man means what he says, McCarthy.”

McCarthy raised both hands. “Take it easy; this is a mistake. I’m serious. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sikes stepped closer, shifting the aim of the gun from McCarthy’s chest to his head. “Let me be more specific: Where are the DARPA documents? Who’d you give them to?”

“DARPA?” The word meant nothing to him. Did he hear wrong?

Washington said, “My man gets downright medieval at times. Seen it with my own eyes, so I suggest you answer straight up.”

McCarthy said to Washington. “If I had the slightest idea what the hell you were talking about, I’d be happy to cooperate. But I don’t. This is a mistake. You’ve got the wrong person. I don’t know how to say it any clearer.” He started to push out of the chair.

Sikes aimed to McCarthy’s right and squeezed off a round, blowing away the table lamp. “Sit the fuck down.”

But McCarthy was up now, heading toward the door. A sudden blur in the corner of his eye appeared as pain exploded in his temple.



THE NEXT THING he knew, he was on the floor, looking up at Sikes. Sikes grabbed his shirt, jerked him up into a sitting position.

Breathing hard, face crimson, Sikes said, “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Your call, but I’m not leaving until I have the files and the names of anyone you gave copies to.”

Mistaken identity or not, the situation was out of control. “Listen to me, I’m telling you the truth. He spoke with a slight pause, punctuating each word. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. This is a mistake.”

“You don’t, huh.” Sikes turned. “Elroy.”

A fist slammed into McCarthy’s cheek, whipping his head left. Stunned, McCarthy gasped. “Stop. I don’t know.”

Sikes’s eyes were slits, his jaw muscles bulging. “Where are the DARPA files?”

“You got the wrong person. I don’t have them.”

Maria screamed.

McCarthy turned to see Maria just inside the office door, hands to her face, cardboard tray, coffee, and sandwich strewn across the carpet. As she turned to run into the hall, Washington yelled. “Stop.”

right there, ma'am; don't move."

She kept moving, right hand pushing off on the doorknob. McCarthy heard a *thump*, like a fist hitting a pillow. Maria's thin body hit the heavy door. Still upright, face against the dark wood, she struggled to move but her strength seemed to vanish as a red spot enlarged on her white blouse. Her mouth opened as both knees buckled. She slumped onto the door then slid to the floor, legs twisted awkwardly, leaving blood streaks on the wood.

"Maria!" McCarthy scrambled up off the chair, rushed to her, and knelt. He slipped his right arm under her back and lifted. She felt surprisingly light and delicate. He put her flat on her back, straightening both legs, and felt the large exit wound on her chest. He heard the sickening sucking of her lung deflating. Gently, he pressed a palm against the wound to stop entering air from collapsing the lung further.

He realized she was dying in his hands.

Suddenly, a tug on his collar catapulted him back, pulling him off balance. Both arms windmilling, his hand slammed into something hard just before his head hit something harder.

Fireflies danced in his dim vision. He sat against the wall, disoriented, believing he would die soon. He watched Washington kneel beside Maria to check for a neck pulse. He probed again, then shook his head. "Fuck, man, she gone."

Sikes nodded, licked his lips, glanced around. "Secure the entrance, disable all communication—phone, wireless, everything. I'll deal with him."

"Roger that." Then Washington was up, closing the hall door.

McCarthy was still sitting with his back against the wall, fighting to clear his mind when Sikes leaned down to get directly in his face. "See what you did, motherfucker? You killed her. If you'd cooperated, none of this would've happened. Time to get with the program, McCarthy. Where are the documents?"

"Front office secured, sir." Washington called, moving behind the reception desk.

Still in McCarthy's face, Sikes called, "Communications?"

Washington ripped the main phone line from the wall. "Disabled."

Sikes grabbed McCarthy's necktie, jerked him to his feet, pulled him down the hall to his office like a dog on a leash, and shoved him into one of two chairs in front of the desk. For a moment Sikes glared, Washington's large frame appearing behind him in the doorway.

Sikes bent down, his face an inch from McCarthy. "Listen up, asshole, we *will* get the information. One way or another. My advice? Save yourself a shitload of hurt. Tell us where they are."

McCarthy thought of Maria in the other room, bleeding, most likely dead, but maybe not. Maybe a small chance still remained to save her remained. He had to do something for her. If he could get the second alone . . . *Tell them anything to get them out of here.*

"The computer down the hall," he said, lying. "In there."

Washington muttered, "That fucking workstation? Shit. Might've known."

Sikes said to Washington, "Guard the front. I'll check out the computer." Then to McCarthy, "Don't fucking move till we get back, hear?"

"But Maria—"

Sikes grabbed his neck. "I *said* stay the fuck put. Keep your sorry ass glued to that chair."

"Understood." *Just get out of here long enough to dial 9-1-1.*

Frustrated, Sikes shook his head, took a quick look around the room, stepped over to the wall, and ripped the computer and phone lines from the outlets—then crushed the connectors with his heel. Satisfied, he pointed at the door. "If I see you in that hallway, you're one dead doctor. Got that?"

McCarthy said, "Go to hell."

Sikes nodded, "Just keep lipping, see what it gets you." Sikes grunted and started for the door.

“When I get back I want the names of everyone you work for and how many copies you passed.” He stormed out.

McCarthy closed the door just enough to reach his sports coat on the coat hook, pulled out his cell phone, and checked the signal strength. Zero. His office was a cellular dead zone. He dialed 9-1-1 anyway. Nothing.

Frantic, he scanned the room for a way to summon help. The window? Break the glass and yell? Those two whackos would be on him before he could catch anyone’s attention. There was no ledge, just a nine-floor drop onto concrete.

He peeked out the doorway toward the reception room where Maria still lay. He blinked: did she just take a breath? At the end of the hall, Washington aimed the gun at McCarthy. “Thought Sikes warned you to stay the fuck down.”

McCarthy drew back just as bits of drywall sprayed from the jamb, peppering his forehead.

He brushed a splinter from his forehead and glanced up. He caught sight of the ceiling, then did a double take. A false ceiling actually, made of acoustical tiles and recessed fluorescent lighting, created a space for ventilation ducts, electrical conduits, and plumbing to run to various offices. Could the struts support a man’s weight?

Good question.

Quickly, he stepped from a chair onto the desk, pushed up a tile, and poked his head into dense, warm darkness. A rectangular grid of inverted steel T-rails bolted into the real concrete ceiling supported the tiles, forming a vertical crawl space three feet high for a maze of pipes, conduits, and heating ducts wrapped in silver insulation.

He heard Sikes yell something to Washington.

Okay, here they come.

CONFERENCE ROOM, THE PENTAGON

COLONEL CLYDE CUNNINGHAM pressed a button and the fifty-inch plasma screen came alive with the image of a middle-aged male at a table in a small cramped interrogation room, his interviewer sitting across from him.

Cunningham scanned the eyes of the seven CIA brass he'd handpicked for this highly sensitive meeting—each a trusted friend. That is, if such a thing existed in the intelligence community.

On screen, the man—visibly uncomfortable with what he was about to say—started speaking:

I stop at the curb in front of this tacky joint that claims to be a sports bar on account of they got these bigscreen TVs for watching ESPN. Call it what you want, it's still a piece of shit tavern filled with alcoholics who think hanging there's a social outlet. This pale, skinny chick, about twenty, comes over to the passenger window, leans down so I can see her tits, says, "Looking to party?"

I noticed her on my first pass. Picked her out from the others on account of she's more attractive and younger. More important, she's too fucking strung out to be task force. I mean, seriously, how stupid, the cops telling the media about the decoys. What'd they think? It'd scare me off? Fuck no. Only thing it does is make it more exciting.

I can still see the red and blue neon on her pale skin. Gave her a kinda punk look. She had this silver ring through her eyebrow and this bar through her lower lip. Always wondered how one of those would feel on my cock.

I tell her, "Got that right. Wanna come?" Emphasizing the last word, seeing if she'd catch it and say something witty. But she didn't. Dumb bitch.

Instead, she fakes this smile. I always know when they're faking it and I hate that.

She says, "This girl is always looking for a party. What'd you have in mind?" She's wearing cutoffs, a skimpy halter, and dirty white low-top deck shoes. It was warm that night. But she's got that ugly acne on her chin the makeup can't hide, and her breath stinks. She had to be less than twenty but Jesus, the meth makes her look more than thirty, especially with two lower teeth gone and these really rotten gums.

So I tell her, "Hey, you tell me," 'cause then I knew for sure she's not a cop. Besides, no cop would be that skanky.

She opens the door, slides in, puts her hand high on my thigh. "Hundred for a suck and fuck. Fifty for a blow. But you gotta use a rubber to fuck."

Way too high. I know damn well I can get her down to twenty, she's so desperate. But hell, she ain't leaving with it anyway, so why bother. Instead, I tell her, "Shut the door and let's party. I know just the place."



AS THE INTERVIEW continued, Cunningham studied his guests' faces, their eyes riveted on the man's story. But, could he sell it? Any brilliant concept has a downside. Would they accept this one?

The interviewee finished his story, his eyes to the floor, face painted with disgust and self-loathing. Cunningham stopped the video, freezing the image on screen.

Mike Lawson, the most senior agency official, flashed a what-the-hell-was-that-all-about look.

“This discussion,” Cunningham began, “is highly classified. What I’m about to tell you will not leave this room. If any of you have a problem with this, leave now. Anyone?”

No one moved.

“Shall I continue?”

All the CIA brass nodded in unison. Two shifted in their chairs, impatient.

“This man,” Cunningham said with a nod at the screen, “describes murdering a prostitute. Okay, what? We’ve all seen videotaped confessions. This one’s different. Because in spite of vividly describing his memory of the incident, he wasn’t there and he’s not the murderer. He doesn’t know and has never met, the person who actually committed the crime. The man you see on screen is instead, a volunteer in a small study code-named Operation Cuckoo’s Nest. The experiment was designed to test the feasibility of transferring memories from one person to another by transplanting small homogenates of the brain. As fantastic as this may sound, the experiment you just witnessed proves that memory transfer *can* be done.” He paused to sip water, allowing this last statement to sink in.

Lawson started to say something but Cunningham raised a hand, cutting him off. “Before you ask how we know his story isn’t total fabrication—one that he drummed up from watching *CSI: Miami* or *Dexter*, or even hearing it from the real killer—let me finish.”

Lawson wasn’t the only one who appeared to have doubts.

“The man the police believe is the killer had a tiny bit of brain removed before he died. This brain matter was transplanted into the man in this interview.”

Lawson started, “Still—”

“Please, Mike, let me finish. His description contains information never released to the media. And,” raising his voice to emphasize the point, “there’s no evidence that the recipient ever met the murderer in person or via any other means of communication.”

“If the facts were never released, how can you attest to their validity?” asked Tony Hennessey, the least senior agency member present.

“Because I verified them with the King County police. King County, as in Washington state, the one in the state of Washington is.”

Hennessey began drumming a ballpoint against his free hand. “Wouldn’t they be suspicious of someone verifying unpublicized details? I certainly would.”

“I have a contact within their department.” Cunningham rubbed his thumb and fingers together, the universal sign of money. “He checked the case files to validate the details. Also, I emphasized that this was a classified issue with national security implications.”

Cunningham let Hennessey and the others chew on that a few seconds. “Granted, it’s impossible to prove my claim beyond any doubt—especially to a group of intelligence officers—but take my word for it: the memories he described were embedded in the man here,” he said, pointing to the screen. “from a small bit of brain tissue instead of any firsthand experience.”

Lawson still appeared skeptical.

Cunningham continued, “There are other facts that help validate this experiment. For example, the interviewee’s wife swears he never mentioned those memories prior to receiving the implant. And believe me, he would’ve. Why? Because, as I think, as you all appreciate, they’re extremely upsetting to him.”

“I would hope so. If he were normal.” Frowning, Linda Rasmussen, a Middle East analyst, leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped tightly. “Which brings us to the next question. Why o

earth would you do this to him?"

Cunningham suppressed a smile. *She was listening.*

"In this particular case the transplanted memory turned out to be an unpleasant one, which is admittedly unfortunate outcome. Believe me, that wasn't our intent. I wish to emphasize something touched on earlier: This was only a feasibility study to explore *if* memory could be transferred. It is not the endpoint of this work, not even close. But because this is exploratory, we had no control over *which* memories might be transferred. My collaborator and I talked long and hard about whether or not to use this particular example for this demonstration. We decided to use it precisely because of one very compelling reason: It makes a very crucial point, and does it well. The man is so convincing. And this is specifically because of being so tormented by the memory. Even the Hollywood actor couldn't match his sincerity. This fact alone should help persuade you the results are real, that these specific memories were embedded in him."

Rasmussen shook her head in dismay. "Who is your collaborator?"

"Bertram Wyse. A neurosurgeon in Seattle. Have any of you heard of him?" It'd be a surprise they had, but it was flattering to be asked. And sucking up to the person you were trying to sell never hurt.

No one answered.

"PTSD has been his field of research for years. His focus is to find an effective treatment. He's made quite a name for himself in the field, I might add."

"Posttraumatic stress disorder?" Lawson seemed bewildered.

"As you know," which, Cunningham figured, they didn't, "there's no effective treatment for it. Not only that, but an increasing number of vets are suffering from it. This is the reason the VA has supported his research. Two years ago, before leaving DARPA, I heard about this work, so I visited him in Seattle. In a nutshell, he believes PTSD is triggered by memories of the traumatic event. He contends that if he can pinpoint where the memory is stored in the brain and remove that area, the PTSD will vanish. No different from removing a bad appendix."

He paused to let that point sink in before moving on to the next one. "I started wondering, if that little chunk of brain that's removed still contains the memory, is it possible to somehow retrieve the memory? Like playing a DVD on a different device than it was recorded on."

The room remained silent, all eyes on him now.

"You can see where this is going, can't you?" Another dramatic pause. "Each one of you knows too well one of the biggest problems in intelligence work is evaluating the validity of information obtained during an interrogation. Especially when using stress-inducing techniques such as water boarding. How valuable would it be to have absolute faith about the validity of the information obtained from a terrorist?"

He let that percolate a moment before dropping the bomb.

"What if there were a way to physically pluck specific memories from a terrorist and read them with total accuracy?" He was on a roll now, his voice rising, reflecting his passion for his plan. "What a win-win that would be for us! Picture it—the insurgent no longer remembers the information because we have it. Not only that, but the validity of our newly obtained information is as good as gets. Obtained directly from the terrorist's mind. Think about it."

Lawson shook his head. "Aw, Christ. Congress shit all over us for water boarding. I can just imagine how they'd react to—" He shook his head, at a loss for words. "These volunteers," he said, making quotation marks in the air with his fingers, "how does Wyse recruit them?"

Cunningham said, "Keep in mind this work is still early stage, so like I said, what you see here doesn't model the real situation as we envision it. At the moment, he obtains small bits of brain from trauma patients. The ones who, unfortunately, are not expected to survive."

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