

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED

By Derik Cavignano

Chapter One

The old man staggered into the restaurant with such a clamor that Jacob Hanley dropped the menu and knocked over his drink. A stream of ice water surged toward his lap, and Jacob jumped to his feet in time to see the old man lurch into the dining area.

Wild tufts of ivory hair crowned the man's scalp, his skin pale gray and liver-spotted. His features were so gaunt that Jacob imagined an invisible force might soon collapse his eyes, nose, and lips into the hollows of his skull.

A hush fell over the crowd as the man stumbled toward Jacob, his arms pinwheeling for balance. He would have hit the floor face-first had Jacob not caught him around the waist and eased him into an empty chair. Jacob held one hand against the man's chest to keep him from falling. "Are you okay?" he asked.

The old man gasped for breath, his vibrant blue eyes locked on Jacob. "Beware the Order," he whispered. "The plane of the Symbios. The Great Elder...he will destroy—"

And then the old man drew a broken breath and died. Just like that.

As Jacob reflected on it later, sitting slouched on his living room sofa, he couldn't help but wonder how you could be alive one minute, so utterly there, and then be gone the next. It had to be a joke. Some sick cosmic prank to keep God amused.

He pulled off his glasses, rubbed his eyes. It was getting late. He was thinking about Megan again. These days, it seemed all thoughts led back to Megan.

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He stood up, suddenly itching for movement, and found himself at the bookshelf by the TV. He reached for a photo taken on the coast of Maine two summers before. Megan stood on the rocks by the shoreline, a weathered lighthouse rising up in the distance behind her. She held her arms outstretched and struck a pose for the camera, trying to ruin the picture with a goofy grin and a scrunched up nose.

It was classic Megan, so free-spirited and full of life. It was such a perfect picture, such a perfect day. Who would have guessed she'd be dead within a year?

He pressed his nose against the glass, stared into Megan's smoky blue eyes, and willed himself into the picture. A tear rolled down his cheek and splashed onto the frame, triggering a memory of that rainy March morning at the funeral parlor. The cloying scent of lilies and eucalyptus had invaded his nostrils as he stood beside Megan's casket while friends, family, and strangers patted his clay-cold hands and assured him it would get easier as time wore on.

She'd been dead fifteen months now, but it seemed an eternity. Sometimes it was hard to remember that he was happy once, that laughter had filled this house. All he had now was the faint echo of her memory, a teasing reminder of her absence, like the lingering scent of perfume on her clothes.

Footfalls shook the porch. The bell rang—a ding without a dong. It hadn't worked properly since he first installed it, which wasn't a surprise considering that Megan had long ago declared him to be more handicap than handyman. She loved ribbing him about it, and it soon became part of the secret lexicon of their marriage. Every time it voiced its lonely ding, she would arch an eyebrow in that way of hers and ask, *What's wrong with your dong?*

Jacob opened the door to find his brother standing on the worn welcome mat with his fists thrust into his pockets. At six foot four, Ray stood five inches taller than Jacob, although both had the same

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liquid brown eyes, same wavy brown hair, and the same pale skin with a spattering of freckles around the bridge of the nose.

“I thought you were playing cards tonight,” Jacob said.

Ray shrugged. “I was. But you sounded upset, I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“What are big brothers for?”

Jacob held open the door, shrugged. “You used to give a mean wedgie.”

Ray grinned. “Remember that time in the mall? When I lifted you off the ground and ripped the underwear right out of your pants, showed all your friends you were wearing Mighty Mouse Underoos?” He chuckled. “You bawled like a little girl.”

“I thought you were here to cheer me up.” He walked into the kitchen. “You want some coffee? I just brewed some decaf.”

“Sure.” Ray sipped from the mug Jacob offered and winced. “You put Drano in here or what?”

“It’s my secret ingredient.”

Ray cleared his throat. “So tell me again what happened at the restaurant—some old guy started spouting gibberish and then keeled over dead at your feet?”

Jacob nodded, recalling the look of desperation in the old man’s eyes. “It was weird, you know? I was just sitting there, waiting for a client, and in walks Father Time.”

“Sounds to me like the guy was nuts.”

“I don’t know, it just got to me—watching him die. I don’t see the point.”

“What point?”

“In dying.”

“Everyone dies, Jacob.”

“But it seems like such a waste. We’re born, we grow old, we die. How can you live with that constantly hanging over your head?”

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“Are you listening to yourself? Christ, Jacob. I know you loved her, but you’ve got to move on.”

Jacob felt his face flush. “Do you think I can just flick a switch and forget I ever knew her? What if Michelle died—would you be able to just move on?”

“I don’t know what I’d do, Jacob, but you’ve got to face facts. You’re thirty-two years old. Megan’s dead. You’ve got to stop acting as though you are too.”

Jacob sighed. “A part of me died with her, Ray. Something inside me shriveled up and turned to dust. And now... now I just feel empty.” He shook his head. “Maybe I need more time.”

“Why? So you can continue to lose yourself in your work, come home and sit here all alone, cut off from the rest of the world? You can’t live in the past, Jacob. The past is a graveyard, nothing but ghosts and shadows.”

“You don’t understand, Ray. You’ve got your life together, you’ve got Michelle and the kids, all of you healthy.”

“Yeah, but any one of us could get hit by a bus tomorrow, get killed just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “Death’s everywhere, Jacob. Always lurking around the corner, waiting for its chance. But you don’t see me moping around the house, feeling sorry for myself, getting depressed over things I can’t change. It’s not worth it. What you need to do is get out of the house, meet new people. Find yourself a hot little blond. The world’s not over, Jacob. Not if you don’t want it to be.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It’ll only get harder if you keep shutting everybody out.”

Jacob stared out the window. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Course I am.” Ray clapped him on the back. “When have I ever been wrong?”

“You want a list?”

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“Don’t get wise, little brother. You’re not too old for a wedgie. By the way, you owe me forty bucks.”

“For what?”

“You bet against the Sox.”

“That wasn’t a serious bet.”

Ray folded his arms. “You welching on me?”

“What are we, eleven?” He dug his wallet out of his pocket, and what he found inside prickled his skin with gooseflesh.

Ray furrowed his brow. “What’s wrong?”

“This license. This... it isn’t mine.”

“Let me see.” Ray snatched it out of Jacob’s hand and tilted it into the light. The man in the picture was thirty years old, clean cut, with spiky blond hair and ice blue eyes. “Charles J. Riggs III. Thirteen North Broadway, South Boston.” He glanced at Jacob. “Where’d you get this?”

“I don’t...” But then he remembered—the old man at Victoria’s. After the ambulance had pulled away, no flashers, no sirens (the man was pronounced dead at the scene) Jacob went back inside, forced down half a turkey club, and paid the bill (his client never showed). He’d assumed the license on the table was his, figured it had fallen out of his wallet when he pulled out his MasterCard. And so he’d picked it up without a glance and slid it into his wallet behind a dog-eared business card.

He peered at the license over Ray’s broad shoulders. “He’s got the same eyes as the old man in the restaurant.”

“Maybe it’s his son.”

Jacob shook his head. “Grandson, maybe; the guy looked older than Methuselah.”

“I wonder if they were able to ID the body. This happen in the city?”

Jacob nodded. “Post Office Square.”

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Ray tapped his thumbnail against the license. “If you want, I can bring this to the precinct with me tomorrow, help locate his next of kin.”

But Jacob didn’t answer.

“Jacob?”

“Yeah?”

“You alright?”

“Yeah, I was just... I don’t know. I watched him die, Ray. I watched the light wink out of his eyes.”

“He was an old man.”

“I know.” He set down his coffee. “I think I need to get out of the house for awhile, go for a walk or something.”

Ray lifted an eyebrow. “You kicking me out?”

“I want to clear my head, think about what you said.”

Ray studied him a moment, liquid brown eyes filled with concern, and Jacob wondered, not for the first time, how much worse things would be if he didn’t have his big brother to lean on.

Ray nodded slowly. “I’ll walk you out.”

The screen door banged shut behind them, wrested from Jacob’s grasp by a gust of wind. The sun hung low in the sky, like the last bloody ember of a dying fire. From the street came the clattering roll of a kicked can, followed by the excited cries of children scattering to find a hiding spot.

Ray climbed into his truck—a black Ford Explorer he bought after his promotion to detective earlier that year. He twirled the keys in his hand. “You gonna be all right?”

Jacob nodded. “Don’t worry.”

“All right, but watch out for those roving gangs of rich kids.”

“I’ll be extra careful.”

Ray was always giving him a hard time about living in Stonefield. It was a haven for young professionals, a quaint suburb with ornate Victorian homes, expensive cars, and manicured lawns. It

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seemed everyone here was a doctor, a lawyer, or a banker. Jacob, who was none of these, had always thought it would be the perfect place to start a family.

He and Megan had been trying for a year before she died. He used to love the way the ritual began. Megan would come into the living room and tap him on the shoulder. *Wanna make some babies?*

And he would scoop her into his arms, carry her upstairs, and drop her onto their bed. Then he'd pretend like he'd thrown out his back and point to her belly. *Sure you don't already have one in there?*

"See you later," Ray said.

"Huh? Oh." Jacob lifted a hand. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Forty bucks," Ray said, and pulled away from the curb.

Jacob stared after the Explorer, watching until it crested the hill at the end of his street and disappeared from view.

Move on.

What kind of advice was that? Ray meant well but, God, he had such a habit of oversimplifying. How could he possibly replace Megan? And why was everyone always pressuring him to forget her?

He glanced up as he approached Stonefield center. Light glowed in the windows of the boutiques on Main Street, their awnings illuminated by the old-fashioned gas lamps that lined the streets. A granite obelisk commemorating the Revolutionary War rose up from the landscaped rotary ahead where Main, Summer, and Central streets intersected.

The Stonefield police station sat at the junction of Central and Main. It was a monster of a building—a concrete beast guarded by stone lions. It was set back from the road, the rear of the structure dissolving into the shadows that draped Kennedy Park and Whitecap Lake. Had it been midday, the lake would have been teeming with windsurfers skipping across the rough amber swells. But the water was dark now, the lake silent.

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Crickets chirruped in the gathering twilight, the sound of Jacob's footfalls eliciting a momentary hush from the grass near his feet. He gazed at the sky through the canopy of trees and could see the first stars piercing the velvety darkness like pinpricks.

The scuff of a shoe snapped him to attention. He glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of a stocky kid in his early twenties closing the gap between them. It was difficult to tell in the failing light, but it seemed as though the kid was staring right at him.

Stop being so paranoid; he's probably just in a hurry.

But the seed of anxiousness that had taken root in his brain and flowered these last fifteen months begged to differ. Something about the kid unnerved him, and the need to dart across the street and seek refuge in the bright lights of the boutiques gripped him with a maddening sense of urgency. But he steeled himself against it.

He could hear the kid's feet grinding sand against pavement, could hear the whisper of fabric as the kid's legs scissored in what he imagined to be a jog. He held his breath, waited for the kid to pass.

A hand clamped onto his shoulder and spun him around. "Gimme your wallet." The kid's grip was like iron, their faces so close they might have been lovers. The kid's broad features were almost mongoloid in appearance. He had a chalk-white complexion and the thin purple lips of a corpse.

For a moment, Jacob was sure he'd seen the kid before... but where? And then he spotted a man climbing into a car across the street.

The kid followed Jacob's gaze. "You scream, you die."

Jacob noticed a butterfly knife clutched in the kid's hand.

Mugged! He was being mugged.

"You deaf or something?" The blade whisked before his eyes.

Jacob thrust his wallet into the kid's hands. "Take it."

The door to the police station creaked open. A middle-aged man in police blues lit up a cigarette and froze on the steps, his gaze angled in their direction. "Hey!"

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The kid's jaw dropped open. He shoved Jacob to the ground and fled into the street.

The cop pitched his cigarette and raced down the stairs.

A black Lincoln swerved around the corner, screeched to a halt. The kid dove into the back and the car peeled away from the curb, leaving a cloud of burnt rubber pluming out behind it like smoke from a cannon's mouth.

Jacob rolled onto his side and caught a glimpse of the first two numbers of the license plate before a mechanized panel of tinted glass slid over it and everything faded to black.

Chapter Two

Boston's chief medical examiner was an old acquaintance of Ray's. The doc was overworked and understaffed, and seemed to prefer it that way. Trying to reach him by phone was always a crapshoot, and today proved to be no exception.

"Detective Hanley, been a long time. I was beginning to think you retired."

"It's been a slow month for homicides. The gangs are getting lazy—must be the heat."

"My apologies for not answering sooner; I was elbow deep in intestines when you rang."

"Sorry to spoil the party."

"What can I do for you?"

"You get any John Does yesterday?"

"A couple, yes."

"This one would've been pretty old—eighty five to ninety, Caucasian, blue eyes."

"Uh-huh, sure. We got one fitting that description. He had no ID, but we got a match on his prints."

"His name Riggs?"

"How did you know?"

"He died at my brother's feet in a restaurant downtown, left a license on the table that I think belongs to his grandson."

"Charlie Riggs III?"

"That's right."

"That's not his grandson."

"No? Who is he then?"

"Same guy I've got lying in cold storage."

"What are you talking about?"

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“Charlie Riggs—the old man who died at your brother’s feet—was only thirty years old.”

“Hold on, Doc, how is that possible?”

“Well, it’s actually quite interesting. You see, there are two genetic disorders known to accelerate the aging process.”

“Give me the abridged version. I want to be off the phone in time for the Sox game next week.”

“Shall I cast aside any words over three syllables?”

“Now you’re talking.”

“Okay, then. As I was saying, these two genetic disorders are called Progeria and Werner Syndrome.”

“So which did Riggs have?”

“Well, that’s the interesting part. Children born with Progeria age seven times faster than the normal rate—a kid of ten looks seventy, usually has dwarf-like features, a pinched nose, and bulging eyes. Most kids who have it don’t live past thirteen.”

“Okay, so that’s out. What about Werner Syndrome?”

“It’s similar to Progeria, but commences later in life. If Mr. Riggs had Werner Syndrome, it would be apparent in his license photo.”

“Apparent how?”

“Well, he wouldn’t exhibit the dwarfish features that are characteristic of Progeria, but he would certainly look old. The onset of rapid aging occurs following puberty, sometimes as late as age twenty or thirty.”

Ray glanced at the license. “What if I told you he looks thirty in this picture?”

Doc Death was silent a moment. “That would mean he aged sixty years since the photo was taken.”

“Looks like he renewed his license two years ago. Can someone with Werner Syndrome age that fast?”

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Doc Death sucked in his breath. “That would be unprecedented.”

“So what are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is that I have no scientific explanation for what happened to Mr. Riggs... at least not yet.”

Chapter Three

The window behind Jacob's desk offered a spectacular view of Whitecap Lake, the last slivers of daylight streaking its waters scarlet as the sun settled on the horizon. His was the only light still burning in the offices of Crantz, Hanley & Mathis, his partners Wes and Gary and the rest of their staff having gone home more than an hour before.

The setting sun transformed the window into a mirror, and he could see himself reflected in the glass—arms folded, tie pulled tight, cufflinks gleaming beneath the harsh glow of florescent lights. He was the picture of success, had worked his way through the slave ranks of Big Four public accounting (back when it was still the Big Six), made manager a year early, quit, and co-founded his own firm. After four years of hard labor, the practice was finally flourishing.

But what did it matter? What good was success when you had no one to share it with, when you went home every night to an empty house where no one ever laughed?

He laid his head on the desk and thought about the day that Megan died. He was here when it happened, sitting at this desk, looking out this window. It was March 5—the tail end of the busy season—and he was reviewing a client's annual report when the phone rang.

He picked it up, expecting Megan. But it was her sister Susan.

The sound of her voice prickled his skin with gooseflesh. Why would Susan be calling him at work?

Jacob, it's Megan. She...

That was all he heard—that and the word aneurysm.

The next thing he knew he was on the floor, the phone dangling from his hand, Susan's voice calling to him from somewhere far away.

He shook the memory from his mind and gazed at the wedding photo on his desk. They were so naïve, standing there cheek to cheek

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in their first dance as husband and wife. He wanted to reach through the glass and shake them until they understood, shout at himself to treasure every moment, order Megan to see a doctor about the time bomb ticking in her brain.

The phone's shrill cry jolted him to attention.

"What the hell you still doing at the office?" Ray asked.

Jacob swallowed. "Just catching up on some work."

"You had all day to do that, time to pack it in."

"I just have one more thing to wrap up."

"You're not listening, little brother."

"Alright, alright." Jacob rolled open a drawer and groped for the wallet that wasn't there. "Great."

"What?"

"Nothing. I just can't get over the fact that I got mugged last night."

"Didn't I warn you about those gangs of rich kids?"

"It's not funny, Ray."

"It is a little. That punk charge anything on your credit cards?"

"No."

"You're lucky."

"Then why do I feel so stupid? Why did I just stand there and take it?"

"He had a knife, Jacob. Didn't you learn anything from what happened to Dad?" When Jacob didn't respond, he said, "You have any luck with the Stonefield police?"

"Not really. They said that without a license plate number, all they can do is post the sketch artist's drawing and hope that someone recognizes him. I got the impression that as soon as I walked out of there, they would just slip the report into a file cabinet and that would be the end of it. Maybe I'm being too cynical. What do you think?"

"I think your ordinary street corner thug doesn't dive into a Lincoln Town Car after mugging someone. And I've never heard of a

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license plate tinting until you couldn't read the numbers anymore—sounds like something the mob would use if they went high-tech.”

Jacob chewed his lip. “Something about that kid was familiar. I just wish I knew what.”

“You've got to think about your daily routine, run down all the places you normally go.”

“I've done that about a hundred times.”

“Well, keep working at it. And if anything comes to you, let me know.”

“I will. Did you ever get in touch with the old man's family?”

“Not yet. A patrolman went to the house this afternoon, but no one was home.”

“So that's it? You try once and then give up?”

“Relax Jacob, we'll notify them. We just have to find them first. And by the way, he's not an old man.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ray filled him in on his discussion with the medical examiner.

Jacob was stunned. “What did the autopsy results say?”

“Doc said the results aren't available yet.”

Jacob frowned. Thirty years old. Another life extinguished too soon.

“Jacob, you there?”

He closed his eyes. “Yeah.”

“Are you alright?”

“I don't know. I guess I've just been really emotional lately.”

“Is it that time of the month already?”

“Ha, ha. You're a riot. You want to laugh at my expense?”

“Any chance I can get.”

“Alright,” Jacob said. “Here's one for you. The other night I cried at that dog chow commercial—you know the one where the dog gets so old it can barely make it up the stairs?”

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Ray erupted in laughter. “Christ, Jacob. Megan died and now I have a sister. Hike up your skirt, will you?”

What’s wrong with your dong?

And then Jacob was laughing too, laughing until he was crying. He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I needed that.”

“That’s what big brothers are for. That... and giving wedgies.”

“Enough already with the wedgies. I’m sorry I ever brought it up.”

“I can’t help it. I’m starting to sound like the kids. Do you know the other day Jason came home from school and said to the cat, ‘Come here, you dorkwad’? You believe that? Kid’s in second grade and he’s calling Mr. Snuggles a dorkwad.”

“I can’t believe you named your cat Mr. Snuggles.”

“He’s snuggly soft, Jacob...what’s not to understand?”

Jacob could hear Michelle calling out in the background.

“Listen, Jacob, I got to go. Michelle needs to call her mother. Let me know if you remember anything more about the mugging.”

“I will.”

“And for Christ’s sake, go home.”

Jacob sat in the dark and listened to the groan of the Victorian’s ancient joints. Its walls had weathered the bitter cold of a hundred New England winters, had suffered the persistent fury of the shrieking wind, and through the years had witnessed the birth, growth, and death of generations.

It was within these walls that Megan died, within these walls that she drew her final breath while scrubbing the pot that had cooked her final meal. It was Susan who found her spread eagle on the kitchen floor, the glittering debris of a broken bowl scattered around her. The doctor said later that she didn’t suffer... but she’d died alone doing what she hated most.

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Jacob twisted his wedding band around his finger and stared at the muted TV. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. He and Megan were supposed to raise a family and grow old together. She was supposed to be here now, her head nuzzled against his shoulder. But she was gone, and so was the magic... and all that was beautiful, all that was colorful, drained from the world.

It was strange; before Megan, he never needed anyone. He was Jacob Hanley, the smart kid from the poor side of town, full of confidence and ambition, so sure of who he was and who he wanted to be.

Then one day during his last semester at BC, he spotted a girl reading a book on the quad. She was sitting cross-legged beneath an ancient elm, her bare toes flexing in the grass. Her hair framed a face that would have been angelic if not for the low cut tank top and the devilish grin playing at the corners of her mouth.

He was charging after a Frisbee when he saw her. She glanced up from her book and smiled, and he plowed into a trashcan and flew headlong into the dirt. When he came to his senses, she was bending over him, a lock of hair hanging in her eyes.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, just taking a little rest here.”

“Are you sure? Because I really think your coordination skills could use some polishing.”

That night, he took her to dinner, and by the time the main course had arrived, he knew that she was the one. She filled a void he never knew existed. Their lives came together in a seamless fusion of love and laughter, and it was hard to imagine he had ever lived without her.

He lowered his head. He had to stop torturing himself like this. Ray was right—he had to get his mind off her. But what else was there to think about? The mugging? The old man in Victoria's?

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He forced himself to focus on it. What was it Riggs had been trying to say? Who was the Great Elder? What was a Symbios? It didn't make any sense. And maybe that was the point—maybe whatever disease Riggs suffered from had ravaged his mind as well as his body.

But why would he leave his license on the table? It was almost as if he'd wanted Jacob to find it and discover his true age.

Whatever the reason, he was dead now, and his family didn't even know it. Which was ridiculous—how long would the police wait before telling them what had happened? If something like that had happened to Megan, he'd be furious.

And suddenly he *was* furious... and he had to get up, had to get out.

A passing shower had sucked the warmth from the night, leaving in its wake a raw and seeping chill. The biting wind carried the damp fragrance of fertile soil, and as Jacob stepped into the driveway, he could see his breath rolling from his lips in wispy plumes of white vapor.

His Lexus gleamed like a bullet cloaked in night's shadows. Moonlight reflected off its chassis, chrome and glass glittered in the dark. He glanced skyward before climbing behind the wheel, observed the bright pinpricks of stars between the scudding clouds, and thought of the summer nights when he and Megan would sit on the porch swing until the wee hours, sharing a bottle of wine and searching for shooting stars.

The revving engine pulled him back into the present. He strapped himself in, shifted into gear, and sped out of the driveway. He drove with the radio off and the sunroof open, letting the wind roar in his ears. It felt good to have a purpose, felt good to get his thoughts off Megan, even if only for a little while.

Twenty minutes later, he had reached his destination, found it without so much as a single wrong turn—Megan would have been

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impressed. He cut the lights, killed the engine, and gazed at the silhouette of Charlie Riggs' house—a single family cape wedged between a pair of triple deckers.

His stomach knotted when he saw a light burning in the window. What was he doing here? Did he really intend to tell these people that Charlie Riggs, a man whom he didn't even know, was dead?

Maybe he should call Ray and tell him someone was home now. But then he imagined Riggs' family being roused from their beds hours from now by some rookie cop who didn't give a damn about Riggs or his family.

He climbed out of the car and stalked toward the house. He was halfway down the walk when he noticed that the front door was cracked open. He glanced back at the car—it wasn't too late to bail out of this. But some inexplicable need to see this through marched him up the porch steps and held his finger against a bell whose ring boasted not only a ding, but also a dong.

Showoffs.

When no one answered, he poked his head through the crack in the door. "Hello? Any—"

An ambulance careened around the corner, its wailing siren drowning out everything but its own lunatic fury. Jacob stepped inside the foyer and pulled the door shut behind him. "Hello?"

A narrow hallway led into a kitchen where recessed lighting illuminated granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and cherry cabinets. On the left side of the hall, a flight of stairs ascended to the second story. On the right, a doorway opened onto a carpeted living room furnished with a recliner and matching loveseat. The lamp on the end table cast a jaundiced glow on the stucco walls.

Jacob bit his lip. Where was everyone? And if no one was home, why were the door open and the lights on?

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He shook his head. This was crazy. What was he doing here? He reached for the doorknob... and froze at the sound of voices coming up the walk.

A man was speaking, and he sounded big. His voice was deep and raspy, laced with the rough edge of a New York accent.

Bronx. Definitely Bronx.

A familiar voice said, “But why do we have to come back tonight?”

The hairs on Jacob’s arms bristled as if electrified. He backed away from the door.

The mugger!

And then all at once he realized where he knew the kid from, where he knew them both from.

The porch boards groaned beneath their weight.

Better hide, Megan’s voice advised.

Jacob scrambled into the living room and ducked behind the recliner.

The front door flew open. “Didn’t I tell you to lock it?” the big guy asked. “And to shut off the frigging lights?”

“I thought I did.”

“Why you always lying to me?”

“I ain’t lying.”

“What’d I just say?”

The kid let out his breath in a huff. “Whatever.”

Jacob heard the sharp crack of a slap.

“Ow!”

“Open your mouth again and I’ll yank your tongue out.”

“I don’t even know what we’re looking for.”

“I told you already—anything that looks important. Now quit yapping and start looking.” The floorboards creaked as the big man mounted the stairs to the second floor.

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The kid stomped off into the kitchen, muttering under his breath.

Jacob's pulse thundered in his ears. What was the mugger doing at Riggs' house?

Never mind—just get out!

It was Megan's voice—and it was good advice—but what if the kid spotted him running for the door, what if they caught him before he made it to his car?

Jacob could see the kid through the doorway that connected the living room to the kitchen. He was shuffling from one cabinet to the next, prodding behind the china with his meaty paws.

If he comes in here, he'll see you.

But where else could he hide?

He peered over the recliner and took a quick inventory of the room. The recliner and the loveseat came together to form an L. An oval coffee table sat between them, scientific trade journals fanned out over the glass top. A bookcase occupied the far wall, its shelves crammed with leather-bound volumes. To the right of the bookcase, nearer to the kitchen, was what looked to be a closet.

The kid turned toward him.

Jacob dropped to all fours and wriggled behind the loveseat. He heard the kid's feet slap against the kitchen linoleum. Then came a creak and a whisper of cloth as the kid stepped onto the living room carpet.

Jacob fought to control his breathing. Cold sweat leaked from his armpits and trickled down his ribs. A sudden certainty stole over him—his feet were protruding beyond the end of the loveseat. The kid would see them—probably already *had* seen them—and would draw a gun and move up behind him, grinning like the Cheshire cat. He'd call to the big man upstairs and then they would kill him.

He stared at the floor as he thought this—at a broken potato chip snagged in the rug.

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Please God, don't let this be the last thing I see before I die.

The closet door opened. The kid began rooting through it—sweeping aside clothes, rummaging through boxes. A few minutes later, the kid heaved a sigh and shut the door.

Jacob peered over the loveseat. The kid stood at the bookshelf, scanning the titles. A ceiling light illuminated his spiky black hair and a round scar the size of a dime at the base of his neck. Jacob watched him pull a book off the shelf, flip through the pages, and toss it to the floor. He repeated the process until the bookcase was empty, then slammed a fist against the shelf and cursed.

Jacob dropped behind the loveseat and huddled against the wall, pressing a hand over his racing heart.

A progression of creaks emanated from upstairs as the big guy searched the rooms. For a moment, there was silence. And then came an electronic beep and the whirring hum of a computer booting up. He could picture the big guy hunched over the keyboard, his wide frame squeezed into a tiny chair.

“Why don't I hear you searching those drawers?” the big guy asked.

“I was just—”

“Get back into the kitchen and do it right.”

The kid extended his middle finger to the ceiling. “Why don't you do it?” he muttered, and shuffled back into the kitchen.

A moment later, a drawer full of silverware crashed to the floor.

The big guy bellowed from the top of the stairs. “The hell you doing?”

“It slipped.”

“So will my foot when I cram it up your ass.”

“Sorry.”

“You will be,” the big man growled, beginning his descent.

Jacob went rigid. He had to find a better hiding place. But where?

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His eyes locked on the closet—the kid had already checked it. He scurried inside just as the big man stepped into the foyer.

It smelled like mothballs and musty, old magazines. A heap of junk littered the floor, the objects coming into focus as his eyes adjusted to the darkness—a can of furniture stain, a frayed paintbrush, two shoe boxes, a pair of decrepit Nikes, and an old Monopoly game. A garment bar cut the space in half; about a dozen coats dangled from wire hangers. Even if he stooped beneath the garments, he'd be visible from the knees down.

He just had to pray that no one opened the door.

A tremor ran through the floor as the big guy stepped into the living room. "Find anything?"

Jacob shrank against the wall and drew a trench coat over his face.

"No."

"The way you look, that don't surprise me."

"Will the G.E. be mad?"

"What do you think?"

One of them stepped in front of the closet. Jacob could hear his nasally breathing, could smell his dime-store aftershave.

The kid sounded indignant. "I checked that already."

The knob to the closet rattled.

Jacob seized the other end and held it.

"You lock this?"

"Must be stuck."

Sweat rolled down Jacob's forehead and bled into his eyes. His legs felt rubbery. If the big guy pulled hard enough, the door would open. And if that happened, his only chance would be to release the knob and let the big guy's momentum send him sprawling. If he was lucky, he could leap over him, swerve around the kid, and flee out the front door.

"You checked all the shelves?"

“Yes.”

“Looked in all the boxes?”

“Yes.”

“Fished through all the coat pockets?”

“I said I searched it. Stop treating me like a kid.”

“I ain’t treating you like a kid. I’m treating you like the sixty-year-old moron that you are.” He released the doorknob. “You better have checked it good.”

“I did!”

“Don’t take that tone with me.”

“Alright. Jeez.”

The big man grunted. “We’ll search the place again tomorrow.”

They stepped away from the closet. Jacob listened to their footfalls retreat into the foyer. When the front door slammed shut behind them, he collapsed against the coats and let out a shuddering sigh.

God, that was close.

He counted slowly to thirty before venturing into the living room. What were they searching for? His gaze fell on the stairs. Ray would never leave without taking a look around.

You’re not Ray.

True, but he couldn’t leave until those goons were a safe distance away, so what did it matter how he spent that time?

The light to the second floor was off, but the computer bathed the study in a liquid crystal luminescence. Jacob eased himself behind the desk and hunched over the keyboard.

Had the big guy really said that the kid was sixty years old? He shook his head. He must have heard wrong. Or maybe he was losing his mind. He imagined his elderly neighbor Mrs. Bradshaw watering her petunias while talking to Mr. Humphrey, the pompous old Brit with the annoying basset hounds.

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Poor Jacob Hanley, Mr. Humphrey would say. Lost his wife and went completely mad.

A pity... Mrs. Bradshaw would say, but it's always the way. Frankly, I don't see how you men ever manage on your own to begin with.

Jacob felt his face burning.

Megan's voice said, *Do you want me to go over there and kick some wrinkled butt?*

No thanks, Babe, I think I can handle those two all by myself.

He scrolled through the files on Riggs' computer and wondered how healthy it was to carry on these conversations with Megan. It had seemed harmless at first, a way to keep her memory alive and dull the pain of her passing, but now it just seemed crazy.

I think it's post traumatic stress disorder, his mother's voice said.

“Great. The whole gang's here. And now I'm talking to myself. I hope someone brought a straight jacket.”

The computer hummed softly to itself. Jacob opened a folder labeled *Stuff* and browsed the files in its two child directories: *Articles* and *Favorites*. The first contained articles Riggs had written for various science journals on an array of topics: an outbreak of Ebola in Zaire, genetic engineering, a cloning experiment that he claimed was based on faulty data.

He continued to the second directory, which turned out to be a ten gigabyte repository of porn.

Should have gotten out more, Chuck.

Aside from those folders and the standard program files, there was nothing else on the PC... which seemed odd considering that the computer was the focal point of the study. Wouldn't a scientist use his computer for more than just the occasional article and a private porn collection?

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The recycle bin drew his eye. Riggs couldn't be that stupid, could he?

He could have been in a hurry.

Inside the recycle bin was one item—a folder called *Work*. According to the file properties, it had been deleted yesterday morning at ten and the original location was the *Stuff* folder.

Could this be what those thugs were after?

He clicked the restore command and drilled down on *Work*. The first child directory was *Symbios*, and beneath that was a subfolder called *Project Noah*, which contained a single file: *SX4.doc*.

His pulse quickened at the sight of *Symbios*. He clicked the file, and the document flashed onto the screen. He leaned forward, adjusted his glasses, and skimmed the text. It was a lab report, but it was too technical to make sense of at a glance.

Why don't you just e-mail it to your office? Megan suggested.

Not a bad idea. Riggs' e-mail program was already open in another window. Jacob composed a new message and attached the file.

A board creaked.

Jacob cocked his head to listen, fingers suspended over the keyboard. And then he heard the rattle of the front lock, the groan of a hinge. The shuffling thud of footsteps followed.

"Why is it I can't trust you with anything?"

"I probably just left them on the counter."

Jacob settled his forearms on the desk—away from the keyboard—and concentrated on not making a sound. He didn't realize that he'd sent a fountain pen rolling until the front quarter of it teetered over the edge of the desk. It probably would have balanced there forever, but in his haste to catch it he instead knocked it onto the hardwood floor.

He sucked in his breath at the clattering impact. Maybe they didn't hear.

But the big guy's response was immediate. "The hell was that?"

"Sounded like it came from upstairs."

Jacob felt the tremor of the big guy's weight on the steps. He had ten seconds, maybe less, to e-mail the file and hide. He clicked Send, then deleted the history from the Sent Items folder. His instincts screamed for him to run, to dart across the room and jump out the window, but he couldn't afford to make the same mistake as Riggs. He had to empty the recycling bin.

Something clicked on the stairs—a gun. Someone had cocked a gun.

He emptied the bin and backed away from the PC. His butt bumped the desk chair and sent it rolling across the hardwood.

From the stairway, the big guy's gruff voice: "Stay here."

Jacob backed away, his heart lodged in his throat. He had to find a way out, had to get moving, but it was too late. If he tried running out of the room, the big guy would intercept him in the hallway, wrap him in a crushing bear hug, and toss him down the stairs.

Let's see if accountants can fly!

He had a vision of his head cracking open on the edge of a step, his glasses flying off as he somersaulted down the entire flight. He shook himself out of the daze and glanced at the door. A flimsy eyehook lock was drilled into its frame. It wouldn't hold for more than a second or two, but if he was lucky (which he seldom was), it might be all the time he needed.

The big man was charging down the hall when Jacob reached the door. For a brief moment, their eyes met. He was exactly as Jacob remembered him—a barrel of a man, greasy black hair framing a moon of a face pocked with acne scars.

He rushed Jacob like a linebacker on a blitz.

Jacob slammed the door, engaged the lock, and watched a plume of plaster dust belch into the air.

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The big man met the door with his fists and howled in rage, but Jacob was already across the room, fumbling with the latch to the window. He yanked it up and peered outside. The drop measured fifteen or twenty feet, falling away into a weed-choked garden.

What if you break your leg? What if you sprain your ankle even just a little? You'd be as good as dead.

That decided him. He braced himself against the wall and kicked out the screen. It flew in a twirling arc and clattered onto the patio bricks beyond the garden. Then he spun around, lunged for the slatted wooden closet, and slipped inside.

The big man crashed through the study door, ripping the eyehook lock from the frame and sending it flying. It landed somewhere in the middle of the floor with a muted plink.

Jacob peered through one of the downward-facing slats and watched the big man approach the window. The back of his neck displayed a smooth white scar the size of a dime—exactly like his son's.

Could you inherit a scar?

Never mind, Megan's voice said. Get ready.

Alright, Jacob thought, and drew a deep breath. "Hey!" he shouted.

The big guy's head snapped toward the closet.

Jacob threw open the doors.

A grunt escaped the man's lips as one of the doors slammed into his forehead and sent him staggering backward.

Jacob leapt out of the closet and bolted into the hallway. He raced down the stairs on the balls of his feet. Halfway down, he spotted the kid standing in the foyer, gazing up at Jacob in wide-eyed panic.

The kid reached behind his back, and Jacob knew he was going for a gun.

Jacob heaved himself over the railing and dropped into the hall. He hit the ground hard, absorbed the force on all fours before tucking

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into a roll and crawling crab-like into the kitchen. He was almost to the back door when the big man reached the top of the stairs, screaming at the kid to watch where the hell he was waving the gun.

And then the doorknob was in his hand and he was out of the house, tearing through the yard while a cool wind chilled the sweat on his brow.

The Lexus roared to life as he raced across the street. He ran with his head ducked between his elbows, and made a mental note to thank the salesman for talking him into buying the remote starter.

The big man and the kid were just entering the street when he dropped behind the wheel and peeled away from the curb in a wailing screech of burning rubber. The Lexus shot through the darkness like a rocket. When he glanced in his rearview mirror, he saw the big guy and the kid jump into their Lincoln and take off after him.

At the end of the street, Jacob yanked the wheel to the left, barely tapping the brakes as the car screamed around the corner and barreled toward a stop sign at the next intersection. He gunned through it, gritted his teeth, and tried to ignore the blaring horns and swerving cars.

He turned down the next street, checked the mirror, and saw that he'd widened his lead. They hadn't rounded the corner yet. He'd have to take advantage of it while he still had the chance.

A darkened driveway stood empty on the right—a narrow gash cut between a pair of triple-deckers. He steered into it and killed the lights.

A moment later, he heard the Lincoln, its engine roaring as it shot past the driveway in a blur of chrome and steel. He slumped down in the driver's seat and watched them vanish into the night.

He shook his head, drew a shuddering breath.

What had he gotten himself into now?