

Beverly Hills, California

So tell me. What did you think of the script?”
 “I loved it. I devoured it. It was genius.”

She was lying. In twenty years of acting, Olivia Hayden had never read an entire screenplay from cover to cover. Liv didn't like to read—it bored her. Whenever the studios sent over a script, she simply passed it on to her agent, Morty Biederman. She always let Morty digest the thing and evaluate her part, then run off the pages containing her dialogue and send them back to her, reducing the 120-page screenplay to a manageable few sheets of Courier 12-point text. Liv always told the tabloids that she didn't like to read because she was dyslexic, because that's what Tom Cruise had told them and it seemed to work for him—and Liv could stand a little more sympathy from the rags these days.

The young director let out a sigh of relief. “I was afraid you might not like it.”

“It's brilliant,” she said with just the right touch of breathless awe.

When the director glanced down at his feet in modesty, Liv used the opportunity to quickly look him over. *I wonder if this kid has a driver's license?* she thought, shaking her head

ever so slightly. The guy couldn't have been more than twenty-five—he probably had his UCLA Film School diploma still rolled up in his back pocket. But hey, the kid had a script and he had a studio backing him, and a part is a part. *Is that a pimple? Man, I'm old enough to be his . . . older sister.*

"You know, I cowrote this script," the director said.

"Astonishing. A multidimensional talent."

Liar. Who did he think he was fooling? Morty had already filled her in. The kid had just stumbled onto a decent story concept, then hired himself a second-string writer to hammer out a treatment and first draft. He probably bought the script outright and then pasted his own name on the cover to negotiate a better deal as a writer-director hyphenate, inflating his salary and granting him casting privileges. That's the only reason Liv was sitting there: if this kid wasn't casting the film she wouldn't even be talking to him. She rarely spoke to a director before a deal was signed, and writers—well, everybody in Hollywood knows that writers are basically pond scum.

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"I can't tell you how thrilled I was to find out you were available," he said.

"You were lucky," Liv said. "I happen to be between films right now."

Way between. Ten years ago she wouldn't have taken a second glance at a half-baked script like this, but it was a lead role, after all, and good parts were getting hard to find.

"What's the title again?" she asked.

"Lips of Fury."

She winced. "Catchy."

"I think some of the dialogue still needs a little tweaking," he said.

"Don't you dare change a thing. It's perfect the way it is." *Why bother?* She never argued about a script before she was

on the set anyway. Once production started the clock would be ticking and money would be flowing like water—then she would have leverage and she could rip the script to shreds.

They sat together at the bar at Kate Mantilini's on Wilshire Boulevard, perched on round gray barstools with tall rigid backs that were designed for appearance only—*like everything else in this town*, she thought. It was almost morning, though Kate's typically closed by midnight. That's the way Liv planned it; the director had requested the meeting, but Liv had insisted on choosing the time and place. The ridiculous hour wasn't chosen simply to ensure privacy, though Kate's had its share of celebrity patrons and annoying fans; the hour was intended to remind this kid who she was: she was Olivia Hayden, and Kate Mantilini's or any other eating establishment in Hollywood would stay open just as long as she wanted it to. Liv Hayden was used to getting what she wanted, and the sooner this kid learned that lesson, the easier it would be when it came to negotiations. Not negotiations over money—Morty always handled that. The negotiations she was interested in were the ones that took place on the set: when she wanted to shoot a scene without rehearsals, or when the director was demanding a third take when she preferred to head back to her trailer for a nap. She wanted things the way she wanted them, and she didn't want to have to flirt and pout to get her way each time. She had paid those dues by the time she was thirty; Liv was fast approaching forty-five now, and she didn't have the patience or the energy to play those games anymore.

The director grinned at her. "I'm really looking forward to working with you on this film, Ms. Hayden. I welcome your input—your opinion means a lot to me. I mean, an actor of your—stature."

Stature. The word stung, but Liv kept a smile plastered

on her face. *Stature—durability—longevity*—they were all just euphemisms for the same brutal reality: *age*. It was no picnic being a forty-plus box office icon in Hollywood, especially for a woman. Oh, sure, male actors complained about the ravages of time, too, but it was different for men. Less than a week ago she was lunching with Nic Cage at The Ivy when he started whining about hairlines and face-lifts and she shoved his corn chowder into his lap. She reminded him that Brando was the size of a Macy's balloon when they paid him \$3.7 million to do Superman—but let an actress pack on an extra twenty and the only role she'll get is doing commercials for Jenny Craig. *It's not the same*, she told him. *Women in Hollywood have to do everything men do, but we're supposed to do it crammed into a size four.*

4 And in Hollywood the cameras were everywhere, circling like buzzards, searching the landscape for sagging appendages or a heretofore unreported nip or tuck. The buzzards could smell death—*career* death—and the instant they detected the onset of death the cameras all went *click, click, click*. The digital cameras didn't even make a sound—you never knew where they were or when they were clicking away. And just when you thought they had finally left you alone, you would find yourself on the cover of a tabloid looking worse than you ever imagined possible, bulging out of some horrid swimsuit you should have had the sense to drop off at Goodwill ten years ago.

Buzzards, that's what they were. No—the cameras were worse than buzzards, because a buzzard can only eat you once, but a bad photograph can eat away at you forever.

"Why don't we talk about the part?" the director suggested.
 "Yes, let's do." *It's about time.*

She needed this part, because the only antidote for a bad photograph is a good one. The public doesn't have a short

memory; it has amnesia. The minute they walk out of that theater they forget your face, and the last image they see of you is the one they remember. This was a smaller film, a film she wouldn't have touched when she was at the top of her game—but that was then and this is now. At least it was a feature film with a respectable budget and decent distribution, not just some pathetic sub-fifteen-million-dollar trailer that would end up buried on the Lifetime Channel. And the role was a good one—the kind that was getting harder to find. Danielle Blakelock, sleek and seductive twenty-five-year-old microbiologist martial arts expert.

Twenty-five. Ouch.

But she could do it—she could still pull it off. After all, it was the same role she had been playing for twenty years. Different name, different location, same role. Twenty-five—it wasn't such a stretch. If shooting didn't start until summer, she still had time to squeeze in three weeks of green tea diets and detox wraps at Las Ventanas. That would do it. That would put her back in top form—except maybe for the close-ups . . .

“Will we be using a body double?” she asked.

The director frowned. “Why would we need to do that?”

She gave him a wink. “I knew I liked you the minute I saw you.” She casually laid her hand on her right thigh and hiked up her skirt a little to show just a bit more leg—then spotted a telltale lacework of faint blue lines and slid it back down again.

“I see this character as essentially tortured,” the director said. “I think her driving motivation is to relieve her own guilt by redeeming the soul of someone she loves.”

“I couldn't agree more.” *Whatever.*

“The opening scene finds her in an alcoholic stupor in the middle of a vacant lot. She opens her eyes and looks around . . . Where is she? How did she get there? How long has she—”

“Wait a minute. She’s an alcoholic?”

The director paused. “How could you miss that? It’s central to her entire character.”

Liv made a mental note to strangle Morty. “How long has she been an alcoholic?”

“Twenty, maybe twenty-five years.”

“What was she doing, sipping margaritas in her bassinet?”

“Huh?”

“The woman’s only twenty-five years old.”

“What are you talking about? She’s closer to fifty.”

Liv’s left shoe slipped off the footrest and clacked on the tile floor.

“Did she come across younger in the script? I suppose we could knock off a couple of years, but she has to be at least in her midforties if she’s got a twenty-five-year-old daughter.”

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“Daughter?”

“Danielle.”

“I thought we were talking about Danielle.”

“No, we’re talking about your character—Margaret Blakelock, Danielle’s alcoholic mother.”

A very long pause followed, during which Liv’s eyelids slowly lowered until her eyes were only burning slits.

“*Margaret Blakelock*,” she said.

“That’s right.”

“Not Danielle.”

“No, Margaret. Didn’t your agent tell you—”

“And may I ask who will be playing Danielle?”

“I haven’t cast that part yet. I’m thinking about one of the Olsen twins.”

Another long pause.

Without breaking eye contact, Liv reached to her left and picked up a bowl of mixed nuts from the bar. She held the

bowl in front of her and slowly sorted through them with her index finger, settling on a filbert of unusual size. She brought the nut to eye level and held it like a dart; she took careful aim, then tossed it at the young director. It bounced off the center of his forehead—*plink*.

The director sat speechless.

Liv reached for another nut—a cashew this time.

“Let me get this straight,” she said. “You want to cast me as the alcoholic mother of an Olsen twin—an actress who would make me look like John Madden in a housedress just by standing beside me.”

She tossed the nut—*plink*.

“I thought you—I thought I made it clear that—”

“Let *me* make something clear: I am Olivia Hayden. I have made twenty-seven feature films, and most of them turned a profit.”

Plink.

“I was starring in films when you were still in training pants. My face is known all over the world, and my name is practically a household word.”

Plink.

“I have played a sleek and seductive police officer, a sleek and seductive shuttle astronaut, and a sleek and seductive advertising executive. I can even play a sleek and seductive microbiologist martial arts expert, because I’m a professional and I have that kind of range. But I do *not*—”

Plink.

“I do *not*—”

Plink.

“I do *not* play the bloated fifty-year-old mother of an Olsen twin.”

She dumped the remainder of the bowl in his lap, slid

off her barstool, and headed for the door without another word.

Liv stood seething in the parking lot while the valet brought her car around. The young man opened the door for her and held it, smiling. She stepped up to the car and then stopped and turned to the valet. “Do you know who I am?” she asked.

The valet’s smile vanished. “Uh—BMW M6 ragtop—that’s what your claim check says, anyway. Is there some problem with—”

“Get away from my car, moron.” She jerked the door out of his hand and ducked inside.

She jammed the pedal to the floor and hit Wilshire Boulevard with the tires already smoking. It was after four o’clock and the streets were all but vacant; she raced down Wilshire without regard for speed limits or stoplights, half hoping that a cop would pull her over just so she could pull a Zsa Zsa and slap the fool broadside. She was dying to slap somebody—she needed it bad. She glanced around at the empty streets. *There’s never a cop around when you need one.*

She reached the 405 a few minutes later and headed south with no particular destination in mind. She just wanted to drive, and anywhere would do.

Margaret Blakelock, she thought. Not Danielle—of course not! No, we need someone younger to play that role, someone without distracting body features—like skin! An Olsen twin—I weigh more than both of them combined! I’d have to face sideways the whole picture!

She passed a minivan like it was standing still and crossed all eight lanes just to feel the car swerve.

The alcoholic mother, she thought. How glamorous! I can see it now: As the scene opens I’m lying drunk in some vacant lot. I lift my bloated head and drool runs down my chin . . .

Cut! Print it! Boy, I hope they pick a nice shooting location—a vacant lot in Jamaica maybe. Morty—he knew about this. I’m gonna kill that guy. You keep an agent for twenty years, and this is what he does to you? He didn’t send me the wrong pages—he did it on purpose! He’s trying to tell me that I’m getting old—that I’m going to have to start taking different parts. Well, thanks for the press release, Morty, but I already knew that.

She shot under an overpass at ninety miles per hour. The wind swirling behind her BMW blasted the concrete abutment with bits of sand and gravel.

Goldie Hawn was right, there are only three ages for women in Hollywood: Babe, District Attorney, and Driving Miss Daisy. What happened to me? Yesterday I was sleek and seductive—suddenly I’m the alcoholic mother of sleek and seductive. Tomorrow I’ll probably be checking myself into Betty Ford.

9

She glanced in the rearview mirror and to her astonishment found a vehicle trailing behind her barely a car length off her bumper. “Moron!” she shouted at the mirror. *Eight empty lanes and this idiot still wants to tailgate! Welcome to Los Angeles.*

For a split second she considered slamming on her brakes and sending him slamming into her tail end, but she knew that at ninety miles per hour his engine would end up in her lap. She tapped on her brakes instead; the car behind her slowed down a little but still remained a single car length behind.

She hit the gas and accelerated—the car behind her kept pace. She changed lanes twice—so did her pursuer. *Who is this idiot?* she wondered, and suddenly she knew.

Buzzards!

The paparazzi—they must have been waiting for her outside Kate Mantilini’s. Don’t those people *ever* have enough pictures? Doesn’t an editor ever have the decency to say,

“Enough! We’ve got photos of this chick coming out the wazoo—give her some privacy.” Couldn’t some sympathetic editor at least remind them, “Look—nobody wants to see this woman walking out of a Walgreens with a bottle of Metamucil. And no more shots of her stuffing her face with french fries either—nobody wants to see that.” But no, the buzzards were never satisfied.

She glared into the mirror. Where did this guy think she was going at four o’clock in the morning? What was the big attraction? The way he was driving you’d think he was following her to the Golden Globes!

She lowered her window and screamed into the wind, “Get off my tail, you moron! I’m just an alcoholic mother—you have me confused with someone else!”

10



But the car stayed right behind her.

And that’s when Olivia Hayden got mad.

She was sick to death of feeding these buzzards, and she made up her mind right then and there that this guy was one bird that wasn’t going to eat tonight. She would outdrive him if it took her all night; she would take the 405 all the way to Irvine, then jump onto the San Diego Freeway and take it all the way to Tijuana if she had to.

An Olsen twin, she kept repeating to herself, and her hands gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.



Ramon Munoz reached out the window and smacked the 24-Hour Pizza light that was magnetically attached to the roof of his car. The light flickered once and went out again, and he decided to leave it that way. Hey, it was only for advertising—what did he care? It’s not like he was driving a cop car—nobody was yelling, “Pull over! Let the pizza guy through!”

He glanced over at the street address taped to the top of the pizza warmer—someplace in Inglewood. He hoped he didn't get lost again. The drivers were no longer obligated to make their deliveries in thirty minutes or less—too many accidents—but a slow delivery meant a cold pizza, and a cold pizza meant a bad tip. *Why don't they give us GPS units? The owner—he's the man, he's got the money. A nice Garmin or something—that would speed things up.* Still, Ramon managed to make most of his deliveries in the originally promised thirty minutes or less, but not because of satellite technology. He managed it because he was smart.

Take this evening, for example. He had spotted the lone BMW zooming down the 405 and had pulled in close behind it, drafting in its wake. *Shrewd move, Ramon*—it would knock a few minutes off his time and it was good for gas mileage too. Hey—it worked for the NASCAR drivers, so it should work for him.

And the BMW obviously wasn't worried about the cops; maybe the driver was somebody important—maybe they had a radar detector. Besides, Ramon got a quick glimpse of the driver when she looked at him in her rearview mirror—the woman was hot. Who were the cops going to pull over, the pizza guy in the '97 Corolla or the *chica guapa* in the bloodred M6? He settled back in his seat and fired up the radio. Ramon knew he had it made.

He just wished the crazy woman would stay in one lane . . .

The two cars went screaming down the 405 bumper to bumper.



The instant Natalie Pelton opened the door she knew things were running behind. Leah was still sitting at the table in her pajamas, angrily picking the raisins from her toast and dropping each one on the floor in disgust. Mrs. Rodriguez, still dressed in her flowered housecoat, was standing at the counter smearing peanut butter over two limp slices of bread.

“Good morning, Mrs. Rodriguez. How are we doing today?”

“Me, I’m doing fine,” she said, and then with a nod toward the table: “That one’s a pistol.”

“One of those nights?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Natalie dropped her keys on the counter with a *chink* and walked over to her six-year-old daughter, planting a quick one on the side of her forehead. “Good morning, sweetheart. You’re going to be late for school. What’s the holdup?”

“Raisins.” Leah scowled, wiping off the kiss with the back of her hand and returning to her work. “She knows I hate raisins. She gives ’em to me anyway.”

“Don’t eat them.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t drop them on the floor either,” Natalie said, squatting down beside the chair and collecting the black dots with one quick swipe of her hand.

“Raisins are good for you,” Mrs. Rodriguez scolded. “Raisins are fruit, and you need three servings of fruit every day to stay regular. Dr. Oz says so.”

“We can argue about it later,” Natalie said. “Right now we need to get you to school, young lady. Get dressed and grab your backpack—let’s go.”

When Leah disappeared into her bedroom, Natalie turned to Mrs. Rodriguez. “How did things go last night?”

“No problems—no new ones, anyway. She did her homework and she watched one hour of TV. Then she read for a while—that girl loves to read. She was in bed by nine, I was in bed by nine fifteen. I swear, she wears me out. I raised three of my own, but I was younger then. Now I run out of steam.”

Natalie paused. “Any more stories?”

“Always stories. Lots of stories. She tells them to her dolls, she tells them to the walls, she sits on the front porch and tells them to the cars passing by. She has quite the imagination. Maybe she’ll be a writer or a poet someday. She’s gifted, that one—maybe that’s why she’s so *obstinado*.”

Gifted, Natalie thought. *That’s not the word the counselor used.*

“How was work?” Mrs. Rodriguez asked.

“It was work,” Natalie said.

“A nurse’s life is not an easy one.”

“I can’t complain. It’s only three or four nights a week.”

“But twelve hours straight, all night long. I don’t know how you do it.”

She glanced at Leah’s bedroom. “Neither do I sometimes.”



“But what would life be without work?”

She patted Mrs. Rodriguez on the shoulder. “I think they call it *play*.”

The door opened again and a man stepped into the kitchen. He was tall and good-looking, with thick black hair and dark eyes to match. He was dressed in blue nursing scrubs, exactly like Natalie’s.

He winked at Mrs. Rodriguez. “Hey, *mamacita*. Did you keep the bed warm for me?” Without another word he walked directly into the second bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Mrs. Rodriguez rolled her eyes. “I hate it when he calls me that.”

“He knows,” Natalie said. “Sorry.”

14



Natalie turned and followed the man into the bedroom. When she opened the door she found him already sprawled facedown across the bed.

“Kemp, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he said without opening his eyes.

“It’s your turn to take Leah to school.”

“Can’t be.”

“You know it is. I do it three days a week and you do the other two. Come on, we don’t have time for this.”

“School holiday,” he mumbled. “Give the kid a day off.”

“Come on, I’m not kidding. If you don’t leave right now you’ll be late.”

Kemp slowly propped himself up on the edge of the bed. “Why do we have to go through this every day? We don’t finish our shifts at UCLA until seven. By that time we’re both brain-dead—but then we have to race home just to get the kid off to a school fifteen miles away. This is Culver City, Natalie—they’ve

got the best public schools in West LA. They've even got these clever things called 'buses' now that'll pick her up right in front of the house."

"Kemp, come on."

"It's a waste of time and energy, not to mention money. Think about it, Natalie, ten thousand bucks a year for a private school. Think what we could buy with that."

Think what you could buy with that. "I'm not having the public vs. private school debate with you this morning. Are you taking her or not?"

He lay back down on the bed. "School holiday," he said. "Check the calendar; it must be Saint Somebody-or-Other's Day. We don't want to offend the powers that be."

"Fine." She turned on her heel and slammed the bedroom door behind her.

Leah was waiting for her at the kitchen door; she held her backpack open while Mrs. Rodriguez loaded her lunch box.

"Better not be any raisins," Leah grumbled.

"Oh, you scare me," Mrs. Rodriguez said. "Make your own lunch next time."

Leah looked up at her mother. "I thought it was Kemp's turn."

"Kemp had a long night," Natalie said. "You ready?"

"I like Kemp better," she said. "He drives real fast and he never talks."

"We'll have to speak to Kemp about that. Let's go."

"I forgot to tell you," Mrs. Rodriguez said. "My niece—she's moving back to LA."

"Your niece?"

"She has two little ones of her own."

Natalie's eyes widened. "Mrs. Rodriguez—what are you telling me?"

“She’s going to need me. I’m sorry, I have to take care of my family.”

Natalie closed her eyes. “When?”

“Soon—a couple of days maybe. I would have told you sooner, but I just found out myself. Sorry.”

“Mrs. Rodriguez, how am I supposed to replace you in a couple of days? Please—I need at least a couple of weeks.”

Mrs. Rodriguez smiled a sheepish apology.

“Is this about money? Because if it is—”

“It’s about family,” she said. “If it was money I would say so.”

“Do you know of anyone? Can you recommend somebody?”

“Let me ask around.”

16


“Please, I’d really appreciate it. Somebody who can sleep over; somebody who’s good with kids; somebody who might be patient with the—you know—the stories.” The more she described the person she required, the more hopeless she felt. Mrs. Rodriguez had been a godsend, and God didn’t seem to be sending her any extra blessings these days.

Natalie walked her daughter to the car in silence. She opened the back door and held it for her.

“I guess no more raisins,” Leah said.

“Just get in the car.”

She started the engine and pulled out of the driveway. They were already ten minutes late; she hoped she could make up the time on the freeway. *Her timing couldn’t be worse*, she thought. *How do I find another Mrs. Rodriguez in just a couple of days? There’s no way. Kemp and I will have to fill in—one of us will have to switch to days. Won’t that be wonderful—one of us working nights and the other one working days. We can shake hands at the door twice a day! Terrific—we’re not even connecting now.*

She felt a familiar knot in the pit of her stomach. *This is how it started before. I can’t let it happen again—I just can’t.*

“Put your seat belt on,” she called to the backseat.

“It is on.”

Natalie glanced in the rearview mirror. She could see the loose ends of the seat belt lying on the vinyl.

“Put it on, Leah—I mean it.”

“Fine.”

Several seconds passed before she heard the buckle click.

She thought about Kemp again—backing out of his responsibilities with Leah whenever it suited him. She wondered how many other single moms faced the same struggle with the men they allowed into their lives. Kemp was fine with Leah—even affectionate sometimes—right up until the moment it inconvenienced him, and then it was always, “She’s your kid.” Natalie hated that—it made her feel like she was begging: “Please—love my daughter as much as I do.” It made her feel weak and powerless, and that was something she despised.

When she merged onto the 405 her heart sank—eight lanes at a virtual standstill. There must have been an accident somewhere; even the 405 wasn’t usually this bad. She tried to look up ahead, but the vehicle in front of her was one of those towering SUVs that she always complained about and secretly wished she could afford. She eased out of her lane a little to try to peer between the lines of traffic, but the man in the car to her left laid on his horn and flashed the universal sign of brotherhood.

“He flipped you off,” Leah said.

“Yes, honey, he did.”

“Kemp always does the same thing back.”

“That’s something else we’ll have to talk to Kemp about.”

She pulled back into the right lane and into the shadow of the SUV.

It made her furious that Kemp had played the “private school” card again. He knew why Leah was in a private school; he knew that so many grade school kids in California were struggling just to learn the difficult English language that it sometimes slowed the classes down. It’s not easy to learn science or arithmetic when you don’t even have a basic vocabulary, but while those students were learning English, the other kids were learning nothing—or less than they could. That was the reason for St. Stephen’s Episcopal; that was why it was worth the ten thousand a year.

That was one of the reasons, anyway. The one that mattered to her more—the one she never mentioned to Kemp—was that there might be teachers there who would be a little more understanding of a child with Leah’s . . . uniqueness.

18



For Kemp it wasn’t about quality of education or what was best for Leah—it was just about money. Every time he saw a commercial for the latest luxury car or drove past some new upscale housing development, the subject of private school always came up. It was always about money with Kemp—but that’s because Kemp grew up with money and he didn’t have money now.

She looked at her watch: It was almost eight thirty and they were now hopelessly late. They had been inching forward for the last thirty minutes, and there was no breakthrough in sight. Natalie stopped entertaining the possibility of a miraculous on-time arrival and began to concoct an excuse instead.

“Once there was a girl with golden wings.”

Natalie looked in the rearview mirror. “What did you say, sweetheart?”

“The girl never showed her wings to anyone. She kept them folded under her clothing. The straps of her backpack rubbed them and it hurt, but still she kept them hidden.”

Natalie turned and looked at her daughter. “Did you see that on TV?”

“But when she was alone she would take off her shirt and stretch out her wings, and the gold was so bright that they would blind anyone who looked at them. That’s why she had to hide them. That’s why they had to be a secret.”

Natalie felt her eyes begin to burn . . .

Suddenly she began to see flashing lights and emergency vehicles lined up to her right along the shoulder of the road. There was a brilliant red fire engine with the LAFD logo emblazoned on the side, and two boxlike EMS trucks from UCLA’s trauma center. The traffic slowed down even more as drivers and their passengers rubbernecked to take in every detail of the terrible accident. It was like watching a parade, except that this parade stood still while the viewers passed by. First the fire truck, then the EMS rigs, then two firemen wielding some kind of cutting device, then a gurney with a pair of medics holding either end. They all looked exhausted, as though they had been working for hours.

At last came the parade’s grand marshal—the accident vehicle itself. It was a fiery red BMW—or what was left of one. The car was flattened and crushed, as though it had rolled several times. There was no roof on the car, and the windshield was nothing but a bent and empty frame. The vehicle was surrounded by medical and emergency personnel, and to Natalie’s horror she realized that the victim was still in the car—a blonde-haired woman slumped back in the driver’s seat with her eyes closed tight and her mouth gaping open.

“God help that woman,” she whispered.

As Natalie’s car drew even with the accident vehicle, the traffic came to a complete stop. Natalie heard the click of a

seat belt behind her and turned to find Leah standing in the backseat with her face pressed against the window.

“Leah, sit down!” Natalie said.

Leah continued to stare.

“Sit down and put your seat belt back on! Do it right now!”

But Leah was glued to the glass with eyes as wide as saucers.

“Don’t look at that woman!” Natalie shouted.

But Leah wasn’t looking at the woman. She was looking at a man standing beside the car. He wasn’t dressed like the others—he wasn’t wearing a fireman’s jacket or a doctor’s white coat. He was dressed in simple clothes—like a man passing by who had just stopped to take a closer look. He stood right beside the woman with the blonde hair, but no one seemed to notice him and no one seemed to care. The man stood quietly, peacefully, holding his right hand palm-down just above the woman’s head.

Then he turned and looked at Leah.

He looked directly into her eyes.

He smiled at her.

Then he put a finger to his lips and went, *Shhh*.



3

And how are we doing this evening, Mr.”—the man took a quick glance at the patient’s chart—“Jablonski, is it?”

“Not so good. I’m not sleeping.”

“That’s a common complaint in a neurological ICU. You’ll get used to it.” He flipped through the chart and quickly scanned the attached medical records. “Who’s your attending?”

21



“My doctor? I think his name is Smithson or something.”

The man looked unimpressed. “Smithson—did his residency at UVA.”

“Is that good?”

“It’ll do.”

“Who’re you?”

“My name is Kemp McAvoy. I see from your chart here that your initial diagnosis is CIDP?”

“That sounds familiar. What is that, exactly?”

“Chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy. It’s a disorder of the peripheral nerves caused by damage to the myelin sheathing. Essentially, your body’s immune system is attacking the covering that insulates your nerves—they begin to short-circuit like a bundle of stripped wires. Let me try something here. Can you sit up for me?”

The man sat up and dangled his legs over the edge of the

bed. “I hate these gowns. They leave your whole backside open.”

“That’s the least of your worries, Mr. Jablonski.” Kemp tapped the man’s knee with a rubber percussion hammer—there was no response. “Hmm.”

“What?”

“No reflex—just as I expected. Tell me, have you been experiencing weakness in your legs and arms?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Have they drawn spinal fluid yet to test for elevated protein levels?”

“What? No, I don’t think so. Does that hurt?”

“Tell me about the onset of weakness in your legs and arms. Did it happen over a period of months? Or was it more like weeks or days?”

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“I don’t know . . . over a week or two, I suppose.”

“Hmm.”

“What? You keep saying that.”

“I’m not convinced of the original diagnosis. Considering the fairly rapid presentation of symptoms, a better diagnosis might be Guillain-Barré syndrome.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll need a lumbar puncture to confirm it, but I’m fairly confident of the diagnosis.”

“Is that bad? What’s a lumbar puncture?”

Just then the door opened and another man stepped inside. He wore a white lab coat with a UCLA Medical Center ID that said SMITHSON, MD. Dr. Smithson took one look at his patient sitting upright in bed and Kemp holding the percussion hammer beside him and said, “What’s going on here?”

Neither man answered.

The neurologist pointed an accusing finger at Kemp. “I’m asking you.”

Kemp shrugged. “Just looking in on a colleague’s patient while she’s on break.”

“A *colleague*,” Smithson said. “You mean another nurse?”

Mr. Jablonski squinted at Kemp. “You’re a *nurse*?”

Smithson swung the door open wide. “I want to talk to you outside—right now.” He charged out the door and into the hallway.

Kemp looked at Mr. Jablonski. “It’s pronounced *Ghee-yan Bah-ray*—just tell them GBS. Somebody around here should know what it means—even if he went to UVA.” Kemp calmly followed the neurologist into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

Smithson was waiting for him. “What do you think you’re doing, McAvoy?”

“My job,” Kemp said.

“What were you doing with my patient’s chart?”

“Checking to see if there were any orders. That’s what nurses are paid to do.”

“I know what nurses are paid to do, and what they’re *not* paid to do—like second-guessing a physician’s diagnosis and dispensing medical advice. Don’t bother denying it—I’ve heard complaints about you from two other neurologists. I know about you, McAvoy. I’ve heard the rumors—and judging by the size of your ego, you probably started them. They tell me you went to med school at Johns Hopkins and even started your residency there. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, aren’t you the bright boy. What was your specialty?”

“Anesthesiology.”

“But I hear you never finished your residency. Is that true?”



“It’s true.”

“How far did you get?”

Kemp paused. “Third year.”

“You were in your final year of residency and you quit to become an RN? That was a shrewd career move. What happened?”

Kemp didn’t answer.

“I don’t really care what happened,” Smithson said. “What I do care about is that you seem to think you’re a doctor—and you’re not. Maybe you’ve got an MD and maybe you’ve got a license, but without that residency you’re not board certified, mister. You want to practice medicine? Go right ahead—move out to Bakersfield or Fresno and hang up your shingle there. But without that residency you’ll never have hospital privileges and you’ll never work in a place like UCLA—except as a nurse. *You’re not a doctor here*—got it? So why don’t you just check the vital signs and empty the Foleys and leave the practice of medicine to those of us who bothered to finish school?”

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Kemp just shrugged.

Smithson wheeled around to storm off but turned back for a final word. “And if I ever catch you second-guessing one of my diagnoses again, I’ll have you brought up on ethics charges so fast it’ll make your head swim.”

Kemp watched until the neurologist disappeared around a corner; when he turned around he found three of his colleagues at the nurses’ station diplomatically staring at the floor. “And that,” Kemp said loudly, “is the problem with health care in this country today.” He turned to the charge nurse. “I’m taking my break now, Shanice. Have someone look in on my patient for me, will you?”

He walked down the hall to the nurses’ break room. The room was empty and quiet except for a small television

chattering in the corner. Kemp flopped down on a natty plaid sofa and stretched his legs out on a coffee table littered with magazines and paperbacks.

Idiots, he thought. *My talents are wasted here. The average nurse in California has a two-year community college degree, and look at me—four years of med school and three years of residency, and at Hopkins no less. And I'm supposed to be draining catheters while fools like that are building vacation homes in Malibu? I've forgotten more about medicine than he'll ever know. Where's the fairness? Where's the justice?*

He hooked his right toe behind his left heel and pried off his shoe; when the shoe fell to the side it landed on top of a glossy paperback that caught Kemp's eye. He slid the book out from under his shoe and looked at it. The title read *Lattes with God: An Encounter with the Almighty over Caramel Macchiatos*.

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✎

He let out a groan and tossed the book aside—but not before noticing a golden seal on the corner of the cover that announced, “Runaway Best Seller—Over 12 Million Copies in Print.”

The door quietly opened and Natalie stepped inside. “I heard you were taking your break,” she said.

Kemp rolled his eyes. “And what else did you hear from my distinguished colleagues?”

“I heard you got a dressing-down from one of the neurologists. What happened?”

“Same old thing—professional jealousy.”

Natalie sat down on the sofa beside him. “You know, Mrs. Rodriguez can only work another couple of days. What are we going to do?”

“Do?”

“About Leah, Kemp. We've both been working nights, and

that's been working out great. We both work seven to seven, and that lets us get home just in time to take her to school—then I can grab a few hours of sleep and pick her up again. I get the afternoons with her and we all get to have dinner together—how good is that? And Mrs. Rodriguez helps out in the evenings and sleeps over. It's been a great fit—but now there isn't going to be a Mrs. Rodriguez anymore. Now what do we do?"

Kemp shrugged. "Find another *mamacita*."

"Maybe it would have helped if you didn't call her that."

"So now I'm the reason she's leaving?"

"I'm just saying, what are we going to do?" She waited for his response, but there was none. At last she said, "You're going to have to switch to days."

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"Me? Why me?"

"Because she's my daughter, Kemp—isn't that what you're always telling me? Think about it: When I work nights I get afternoons and dinners with her. If I have to work days I'll never see her—she'll be asleep when I leave for work and ready for bed when I get home. You've got to switch—it's the only way."

Kemp shrugged. "Then I wouldn't get to see her."

Natalie glared at him. "Maybe I should just cut back on my hours—switch to half-time."

"Forget that," Kemp said. "We're barely scraping by right now. How are we supposed to make it on half your salary?"

"It would be worth it."

"Not to me."

"Then switch to days—it's the only way."

"I happen to like nights, Natalie. The pace is slower; there are fewer procedures, fewer interruptions—fewer morons poking their nose in your business. Let's not panic here. Mrs. Rodriguez isn't gone yet—we'll find somebody else."

“How? Where? It could take weeks, and she’ll be gone in just a couple of days. You’ve got to switch to days, Kemp—at least for a little while.”

“Forget it.”

“Then I’ve got to cut back. You decide.”

Kemp allowed several seconds to pass. “Maybe I should just move out.”

“What?”

“It’s a fifty-fifty deal, honey. You chip in, I chip in, and together we make it work. Now you’re expecting me to work full-time while you cut back? How is that fair? I’d be better off on my own.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe you said that.”

“Hey, fair is fair.”

“It’s always about money with you, isn’t it?”

Kemp turned to face her. “That’s right, Natalie—it’s always about money. It’s about that moron out there who’s making four hundred grand a year while I draw thirty-five bucks an hour plus four bucks more because I work nights. It’s about a miserable two-bedroom, one-bath, eleven-hundred-square-foot hovel in Culver City that we shell out twenty-two hundred a month for. It’s about the \$700,000 it would take to buy that miserable dump—\$700,000 that we’ll never have because it takes every penny we’ve got just to scrape by each month. Yeah, it’s about money—you bet it is.”

“What’s eating you tonight? What’s the problem?”

“I’ll tell you what the problem is—the problem is *this*.” He picked up the copy of *Lattes with God* and held it up in front of her face. “Look at this—do you see what it says? *Twelve million copies in print*. Some idiot thinks he sees God because he’s overdosing on caffeine, so he scribbles it all down and presto—*twelve million copies*. Do the math, Natalie. A writer



makes, what—fifteen, twenty percent of net? So this guy’s making maybe a buck or two per book. Multiply that by twelve million and you know what you get? You get *my life*—the life I was supposed to have.”

Natalie let out a groan. “Not this again.”

“And the thing that absolutely kills me is that people actually read this garbage! This is a nurses’ break room in a neurological intensive care unit—that means one of our ‘colleagues’ out there bought this book and she’s been reading it during her breaks.”

“Or *his* breaks.”

“Whatever.”

Just then they heard the sound of the door opening again and they both turned to see an elderly African-American man quietly poke his head into the room and reach for a garbage can just inside the door.

28



“Maybe *that* explains it,” Kemp said. “Hey, you, come in here for a minute.”

The old man straightened and took a step into the room. “Me?”

“I think you forgot your book,” Kemp said, sailing it across the room so that it landed at the old man’s feet.

“His name isn’t ‘Hey, you,’” Natalie scolded. “That’s Emmet, Kemp. You know Emmet—he’s worked here for years.”

“Oh yeah, Emesis. How you doing, Emesis?”

“*Emmet*,” Natalie whispered.

“You left your book here in the nurses’ break room, Emesis. Better take it with you.”

Emmet stooped down and picked up the book. “Don’t believe this belongs to me.”

“No? Tell me, what are the custodians reading these days?”

“Don’t have much time for it myself,” the old man said.

“Can’t speak for the others.” He held up the book. “Is this what the nurses are reading?”

“No,” Natalie said. “Kemp mostly reads *Sports Illustrated*, especially if there happens to be a swimsuit inside. Sorry to bother you, Emmet. It’s nice to see you again.”

“I’ll just leave this with you then,” he said, setting the copy of *Lattes* back on the coffee table. “I’ll take the rest of the trash with me.”

When the old man closed the door, Natalie turned on Kemp. “Why do you always have to be so—”

“Now that’s really discouraging,” Kemp said.

“What is?”

“It wasn’t his book—that means one of our ‘peers’ is actually reading this drivel. These are supposed to be educated people, Natalie—they should know better.” He sank back on the sofa. “It can’t be that easy to make money. Seven years of graduate education and I’m making thirty-five bucks an hour. I must be missing something.” He looked at Natalie again. “It’s not fair. I’m brilliant, you know.”

“Yes, I know. You’ve told me.”

“I’m serious. Seven years at Johns Hopkins. So what if I didn’t finish my residency? I’m as intelligent as anybody around here, and I deserve to be making as much money.”

She didn’t reply.

“Don’t you think I’m brilliant?”

“Kemp—”

“Say it, babe. I need to hear it sometimes.”

She hesitated. “You’re not really going to move out, are you?”

“Tell me.”

“You’re brilliant, honey. You should be making as much as anybody here.”



“Thank you. At least somebody has some sense around here.”

The door opened once again and the charge nurse poked her head inside. “Kemp, you were supposed to take a fifteen-minute break. Would it inconvenience you too much to return to work? They just brought a new patient up from Trauma, and I’m assigning her to you.”

“I’ll be right there,” he said, then held up the paperback. “Hey, Shanice—you forgot your book.”

