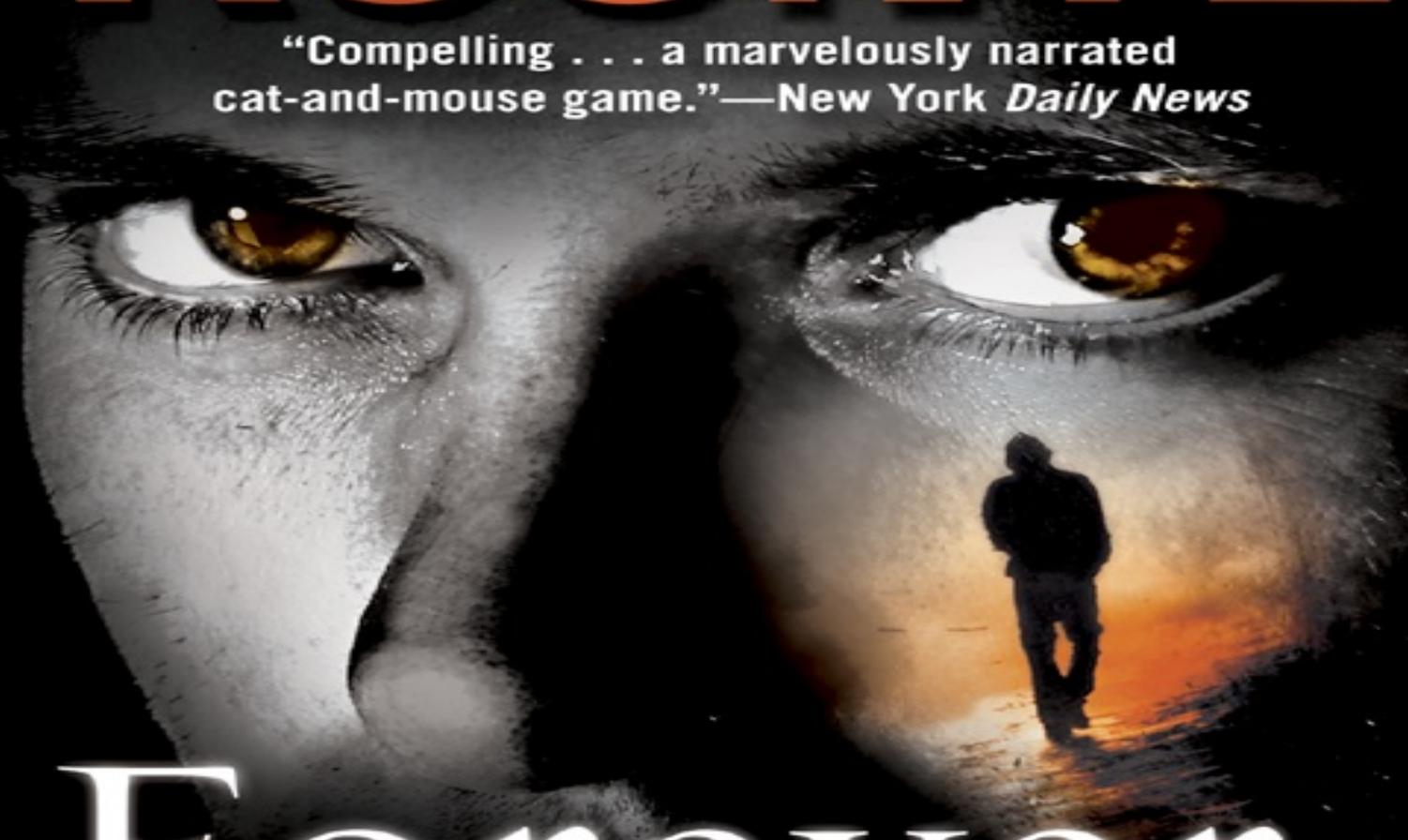


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Forever
AN
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B a n t a m B o o k s

FOREVER ODD

A Bantam Book

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Unearned suffering is redemptive.

—*Martin Luther King Jr.*

Look at those hands, Oh God, those hands toiled to raise me.

—*Elvis Presley at his mother's casket*

CHAPTER 1

WAKING, I HEARD A WARM WIND STRUMMING the loose screen at the open window, and I thought *Stormy*, but it was not.

The desert air smelled faintly of roses, which were not in bloom, and of dust, which in the Mojave flourishes twelve months of the year.

Precipitation falls on the town of Pico Mundo only during our brief winter. This mid-February night was not, however, sweetened by the scent of rain.

I hoped to hear the fading rumble of thunder. If a peal had awakened me, it must have been thunder in a dream.

Holding my breath, I lay listening to the silence, and felt the silence listening to me.

The nightstand clock painted glowing numbers on the gloom—2:41 A.M.

For a moment I considered remaining in bed. But these days I do not sleep as well as I did when I was young. I am twenty-one and much older than when I was twenty.

Certain that I had company, expecting to find two Elvises watching over me, one with a cocky smile and one with sad concern, I sat up and switched on the lamp.

A single Elvis stood in a corner: a life-size cardboard figure that had been part of a theater lobby display for *Blue Hawaii*. In a Hawaiian shirt and a lei, he looked self-confident and happy.

Back in 1961, he'd had much to be happy about. *Blue Hawaii* was a hit film, and the album went to number one. He had six gold records that year, including "Can't Help Falling in Love," and he was falling in love with Priscilla Beaulieu.

Less happily, at the insistence of his manager, Tom Parker, he had turned down the lead role in *West Side Story* in favor of mediocre movie fare like *Follow That Dream*. Gladys Presley, his beloved mother, had been dead three years, and still he felt the loss of her, acutely. On his twenty-six, he'd begun to have weight problems.

Cardboard Elvis smiles eternally, forever young, incapable of error or regret, untouched by grief, a stranger to despair.

I envy him. There is no cardboard replica of me as I once was and as I can never be again.

The lamplight revealed another presence, as patient as he was desperate. Evidently he had been watching me sleep, waiting for me to wake.

I said, "Hello, Dr. Jessup."

Dr. Wilbur Jessup was incapable of a response. Anguish flooded his face. His eyes were desolate pools; all hope had drowned in those lonely depths.

"I'm sorry to see you here," I said.

He made fists of his hands, not with the intention of striking anything, but as an expression of frustration. He pressed his fists to his chest.

Dr. Jessup had never previously visited my apartment; and I knew in my heart that he no longer belonged in Pico Mundo. But I clung to denial, and I spoke to him again as I got out of bed.

"Did I leave the door unlocked?"

He shook his head. Tears blurred his eyes, but he did not wail or even whimper.

Fetching a pair of jeans from the closet, slipping into them, I said, "I've been forgetting lately."

He opened his fists and stared at his palms. His hands trembled. He buried his face in them.

"There's so much I'd like to forget," I continued as I pulled on socks and shoes, "but only the small stuff slips my mind—like where I left the keys, whether I locked the door, that I'm out of milk...."

Dr. Jessup, a radiologist at County General Hospital, was a gentle man, and quiet, although he had never before been *this* quiet.

Because I had not worn a T-shirt to bed, I plucked a white one from a drawer.

I have a few black T-shirts, but mostly white. In addition to a selection of blue jeans, I have two pair of white chinos.

This apartment provides only a small closet. Half of it is empty. So are the bottom drawers of my dresser.

I do not own a suit. Or a tie. Or shoes that need to be shined.

For cool weather, I own two crew-neck sweaters.

Once I bought a sweater vest. Temporary insanity. Realizing that I had introduced an unthinkable level of complexity to my wardrobe, I returned it to the store the next day.

My four-hundred-pound friend and mentor, P. Oswald Boone, has warned me that menswear sartorial style represents a serious threat to the apparel industry.

I've noted more than once that the articles in Ozzie's wardrobe are of such enormous dimensions that he keeps in business those fabric mills I might otherwise put in jeopardy.

Barefoot, Dr. Jessup wore cotton pajamas. They were wrinkled from the rigors of restless sleep.

"Sir, I wish you'd say something," I told him. "I really wish you would."

Instead of obliging me, the radiologist lowered his hands from his face, turned, and walked out of the bedroom.

I glanced at the wall above the bed. Framed behind glass is a card from a carnival fortune-telling machine. It promises **YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.**

Each morning, I begin my day by reading those seven words. Each night, I read them again, sometimes more than once, before sleep, if sleep will come to me.

I am sustained by the certainty that life has meaning. As does death.

From a nightstand, I retrieved my cell phone. The first number on speed dial is the office of Wyatt Porter, chief of the Pico Mundo Police Department. The second is his home number. The third is his cell phone.

More likely than not, I would be calling Chief Porter, one place or another, before dawn.

In the living room, I turned on a light and discovered that Dr. Jessup had been standing in the dark, among the thrift-shop treasures with which the place is furnished.

When I went to the front door and opened it, he did not follow. Although he had sought my assistance, he couldn't find the courage for what lay ahead.

In the rufescent light from an old bronze lamp with a beaded shade, the eclectic decor—Stickley-style armchairs, plump Victorian footstools, Maxfield Parrish prints, carnival-glass vases—evidently appealed to him.

"No offense," I said, "but you don't belong here, sir."

Dr. Jessup silently regarded me with what might have been supplication.

“This place is filled to the brim with the past. There’s room for Elvis and me, and memories, but not for anyone new.”

I stepped into the public hall and pulled the door shut.

My apartment is one of two on the first floor of a converted Victorian house. Once a rambling single-family home, the place still offers considerable charm.

For years I lived in one rented room above a garage. My bed had been just a few steps from my refrigerator. Life was simpler then, and the future clear.

I traded that place for this not because I needed more space, but because my heart is here now, and forever.

The front door of the house featured an oval of leaded glass. The night beyond looked sharply beveled and organized into a pattern that anyone could understand.

When I stepped onto the porch, this night proved to be like all others: deep, mysterious, and trembling with the potential for chaos.

From porch steps to flagstone path, to public sidewalk, I looked around for Dr. Jessup but didn’t see him.

In the high desert, which rises far east beyond Pico Mundo, winter can be chilly, while on low-desert nights remain mild even in February. The curbside Indian laurels sighed and whispered in the balmy wind, and moths soared to street lamps.

The surrounding houses were as quiet as their windows were dark. No dogs barked. No owls hooted.

No pedestrians were out, no traffic on the streets. The town looked as if the Rapture had occurred, as if only I had been left behind to endure the reign of Hell on Earth.

By the time I reached the corner, Dr. Jessup rejoined me. His pajamas and the lateness of the hour suggested that he had come to my apartment from his home on Jacaranda Way, five blocks north in a better neighborhood than mine. Now he led me in that direction.

He could fly, but he plodded. I ran, drawing ahead of him.

Although I dreaded what I would find no less than he might have dreaded revealing it to me, I wanted to get to it quickly. As far as I knew, a life might still be in jeopardy.

Halfway there, I realized that I could have taken the Chevy. For most of my driving life, having no car of my own, I borrowed from friends as needed. The previous autumn, I had inherited a 1980 Chevrolet Camaro Berlinetta Coupe.

Often I still act as though I have no wheels. Owning a few thousand pounds of vehicle

oppresses me when I think about it too much. Because I try not to think about it, I sometimes forget I have it.

Under the cratered face of the blind moon, I ran.

On Jacaranda Way, the Jessup residence is a white-brick Georgian with elegant ornamentation. It is flanked by a delightful American Victorian with so many decorative moldings that it resembles a wedding cake, and by a house that is baroque in all the wrong ways.

None of these architectural styles seems right for the desert, shaded by palm trees brightened by climbing bougainvillea. Our town was founded in 1900 by newcomers from the East Coast, who fled the harsh winters but brought with them cold-climate architecture and attitude.

Terri Stambaugh, my friend and employer, owner of the Pico Mundo Grille, tells me that this displaced architecture is better than the dreary acres of stucco and graveled roofs of many California desert towns.

I assume that she is right. I have seldom crossed the city line of Pico Mundo and have never been beyond the boundaries of Maravilla County.

My life is too full to allow either a jaunt or a journey. I don't even watch the Travel Channel.

The joys of life can be found anywhere. Far places only offer exotic ways to suffer.

Besides, the world beyond Pico Mundo is haunted by strangers, and I find it difficult enough to cope with the dead who, in life, were known to me.

Upstairs and down, soft lamplight shone at some windows of the Jessup residence. Most panes were dark.

By the time I reached the foot of the front-porch steps, Dr. Wilbur Jessup waited there.

The wind stirred his hair and ruffled his pajamas, although why he should be subject to the wind, I do not know. The moonlight found him, too, and shadow.

The grieving radiologist needed comforting before he could summon sufficient strength to lead me into his house, where he himself no doubt lay dead, and perhaps another.

I embraced him. Only a spirit, he was invisible to everyone but me, yet he felt warm and solid.

Perhaps I see the dead affected by the weather of this world, and see them touched by light and shadow, and find them as warm as the living, not because this is the way they are but because this is the way I want them to be. Perhaps by this device, I mean to deny the power

of death.

My supernatural gift might reside not in my mind but instead in my heart. The heart is an artist that paints over what profoundly disturbs it, leaving on the canvas a less dark, less sharp version of the truth.

Dr. Jessup had no substance, but he leaned heavily upon me, a weight. He shook with the sobs that he could not voice.

The dead don't talk. Perhaps they know things about death that the living are not permitted to learn from them.

In this moment, my ability to speak gave me no advantage. Words would not soothe him.

Nothing but justice could relieve his anguish. Perhaps not even justice.

When he'd been alive, he had known me as Odd Thomas, a local character. I am regarded by some people—wrongly—as a hero, as an eccentric by nearly everyone.

Odd is not a nickname; it's my legal handle.

The story of my name is interesting, I suppose, but I've told it before. What it boils down to is that my parents are dysfunctional. Big-time.

I believe that in life Dr. Jessup had found me intriguing, amusing, puzzling. I think he had liked me.

Only in death did he know me for what I am: a companion to the lingering dead.

I see them and wish I did not. I cherish life too much to turn the dead away, however, for they deserve my compassion by virtue of having suffered this world.

When Dr. Jessup stepped back from me, he had changed. His wounds were now manifest.

He had been hit in the face with a blunt object, maybe a length of pipe or a hammer. Repeatedly. His skull was broken, his features distorted.

Torn, cracked, splintered, his hands suggested that he had desperately tried to defend himself—or that he had come to the aid of someone. The only person living with him was his son, Danny.

My pity was quickly exceeded by a kind of righteous rage, which is a dangerous emotion clouding judgment, precluding caution.

In this condition, which I do not seek, which frightens me, which comes over me as though I have been possessed, I can't turn away from what must be done. I plunge.

My friends, those few who know my secrets, think my compulsion has a divine inspiration.
Maybe it's just temporary insanity.

Step to step, ascending, then crossing the porch, I considered phoning Chief Wyatt Porter. I was worried, however, that Danny might perish while I placed the call and waited for the authorities.

The front door stood ajar.

I glanced back and saw that Dr. Jessup preferred to haunt the yard instead of the house. He lingered in the grass.

His wounds had vanished. He appeared as he had appeared before Death had found him—and he looked scared.

Until they move on from this world, even the dead can know fear. You would think they have nothing to lose, but sometimes they are wretched with anxiety, not about what might lie Beyond, but about those whom they have left behind.

I pushed the door inward. It moved as smoothly, as silently as the mechanism of a well-crafted, spring-loaded trap.

CHAPTER 2

FROSTED FLAME-SHAPED BULBS IN SILVER-PLATED sconces revealed white paneled doors, all closed, along a hallway, and stairs rising into darkness.

Honed instead of polished, the marble floor of the foyer was cloud-white, looked cloud-soft. The ruby, teal, and sapphire Persian rug seemed to float like a magic taxi waiting for a passenger with a taste for adventure.

I crossed the threshold, and the cloud floor supported me. The rug idled underfoot.

In such a situation, closed doors usually draw me. Over the years, I have a few times endured a dream in which, during a search, I open a white paneled door and am skewered through the throat by something sharp, cold, and as thick as an iron fence stave.

Always, I wake before I die, gagging as if still impaled. After that, I am usually up for the day, no matter how early the hour.

My dreams aren't reliably prophetic. I have never, for instance, ridden bareback on an elephant, naked, while having sexual relations with Jennifer Aniston.

Seven years have passed since I had that memorable night fantasy as a boy of fourteen. After so much time, I no longer have any expectation that the Aniston dream will prove predictive.

I'm pretty sure the scenario with the white paneled door will come to pass. I can't say whether I will be merely wounded, disabled for life, or killed.

You might think that when presented with white paneled doors, I would avoid them. And so I would...if I had not learned that fate cannot be sidestepped or outrun. The price I paid for that lesson has left my heart an almost empty purse, with just two coins or three clinking at the bottom.

I prefer to kick open each door and confront what waits rather than to turn away—and thereafter be required to remain alert, at all times, for the creak of the turning knob, for the quiet rasp of hinges behind my back.

On this occasion, the doors did not attract me. Intuition led me to the stairs, and swift up.

The dark second-floor hallway was brightened only by the pale outfall of light from two rooms.

I've had no dreams about open doors. I went to the first of these two without hesitation and stepped into a bedroom.

The blood of violence daunts even those with much experience of it. The splash, the spray, the drip and drizzle create infinite Rorschach patterns in every one of which the observer reads the same meaning: the fragility of his existence, the truth of his mortality.

A desperation of crimson hand prints on a wall were the victim's sign language: *Spare me, help me, remember me, avenge me.*

On the floor, near the foot of the bed, lay the body of Dr. Wilbur Jessup, savagely battered.

Even for one who *knows* that the body is but the vessel and that the spirit is the essence, brutalized cadaver depresses, offends.

This world, which has the potential to be Eden, is instead the hell before Hell. In our arrogance, we have made it so.

The door to the adjacent bathroom stood half open. I nudged it with one foot.

Although blood-dimmed by a drenched shade, the bedroom lamplight reached into the bathroom to reveal no surprises.

Aware that this was a crime scene, I touched nothing. I stepped cautiously, with respect for evidence.

Some wish to believe that greed is the root of murder, but greed seldom motivates a killer. Most homicide has the same dreary cause: The bloody-minded murder those whom they envy, and for what they covet.

That is not merely a central tragedy of human existence: It is also the political history of the world.

Common sense, not psychic power, told me that in this case, the killer coveted the happy marriage that, until recently, Dr. Jessup had enjoyed. Fourteen years previously, the radiologist had wed Carol Makepeace. They had been perfect for each other.

Carol came into their marriage with a seven-year-old son, Danny. Dr. Jessup adopted him.

Danny had been a friend of mine since we were six, when we had discovered a mutu

interest in Monster Gum trading cards. I traded him a Martian brain-eating centipede for Venusian methane slime beast, which bonded us on first encounter and ensured a lifelong brotherly affection.

We've also been drawn close by the fact that we are different, each in his way, from other people. I see the lingering dead, and Danny has osteogenesis imperfecta, also called brittle bones.

Our lives have been defined—and deformed—by our afflictions. My deformations are primarily social; his are largely physical.

A year ago, Carol had died of cancer. Now Dr. Jessup was gone, too, and Danny was alone.

I left the master bedroom and hurried quietly along the hallway toward the back of the house. Passing two closed rooms, heading toward the open door that was the second source of light, I worried about leaving unsearched spaces behind me.

After once having made the mistake of watching television news, I had worried for a while about an asteroid hitting the earth and wiping out human civilization. The anchorwoman had said it was not merely possible but probable. At the end of the report, she smiled.

I worried about that asteroid until I realized I couldn't do anything to stop it. I am not Superman. I am a short-order cook on a leave of absence from his grill and griddle.

For a longer while, I worried about the TV news lady. What kind of person can deliver such terrifying news—and then smile?

If I ever did open a white paneled door and get skewered through the throat, the iron pick—or whatever—would probably be wielded by that anchorwoman.

I reached the next open door, stepped into the light, crossed the threshold. No victim, no killer.

The things we worry about the most are never the things that bite us. The sharpest teeth always take their nip of us when we are looking the other way.

Unquestionably, this was Danny's room. On the wall behind the disheveled bed hung a poster of John Merrick, the real-life Elephant Man.

Danny had a sense of humor about the deformities—mostly of the limbs—with which his condition had left him. He looked nothing like Merrick, but the Elephant Man was his hero.

They exhibited him as a freak, Danny once explained. Women fainted at the sight of him, children wept, tough men flinched. He was loathed and reviled. Yet a century later a movie was based on his life, and we know his name. Who knows the name of the bastard who owned him and put him on exhibit, or the names of those who fainted or wept, or flinched? They're dust, and he's immortal. Besides, when he went out in public, that hooded cloak he wore was way cool.

On other walls were four posters of ageless sex goddess Demi Moore, who was current more ravishing than ever in a series of Versace ads.

Twenty-one years old, two inches short of the five feet that he claimed, twisted by the abnormal bone growth that sometimes had occurred during the healing of his frequent fractures, Danny lived small but dreamed big.

No one stabbed me when I stepped into the hall once more. I wasn't expecting anyone to stab me, but that's when it's likely to happen.

If Mojave wind still whipped the night, I couldn't hear it inside this thick-walled Georgian structure, which seemed tomblike in its stillness, in its conditioned chill, with a faint scent of blood on the cool air.

I dared not any longer delay calling Chief Porter. Standing in the upstairs hall, I pressed on my cell-phone keypad and speed-dialed his home.

When he answered on the second ring, he sounded awake.

Alert for the approach of a mad anchorwoman or worse, I spoke softly: "Sir, I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Wasn't asleep. I've been sitting here with Louis L'Amour."

"The writer? I thought he was dead, sir."

"About as dead as Dickens. Tell me you're just lonesome, son, and not in trouble again."

"I didn't *ask* for trouble, sir. But you better come to Dr. Jessup's house."

"I'm hoping it's a simple burglary."

"Murder," I said. "Wilbur Jessup on the floor of his bedroom. It's a bad one."

"Where's Danny?"

"I'm thinking kidnapped."

"Simon," he said.

Simon Makepeace—Carol's first husband, Danny's father—had been released from prison four months ago, after serving sixteen years for manslaughter.

"Better come with some force," I said. "And quiet."

"Someone still there?"

"I get the feeling."

“You hold back, Odd.”

“You know I can’t.”

“I don’t understand your compulsion.”

“Neither do I, sir.”

I pressed END and pocketed the cell phone.

CHAPTER 3

ASSUMING THAT DANNY MUST BE STILL NEARBY and under duress, and that he was most likely on the ground floor, I headed toward the front stairs. Before I began to descend, I found myself turning and retracing the route that I'd just followed.

I expected that I would return to the two closed doors on the right side of the hall, between the master bedroom and Danny's room, and that I would discover what lay behind them. As before, however, I wasn't drawn to them.

On the left side were three other closed doors. None of those had an attraction for me either.

In addition to the ability to see ghosts, a gift I'd happily trade for piano artistry or a talent for flower arranging, I've been given what I call psychic magnetism.

When someone isn't where I expect to find him, I can go for a walk or ride my bicycle, or cruise in a car, keeping his name or face in my mind, turning randomly from one street to another; and sometimes in minutes, sometimes in an hour, I encounter the one I'm seeking. It's like setting a pair of those Scottie-dog magnets on a table and watching them slide inexorably toward each other.

The key word is *sometimes*.

On occasion, my psychic magnetism functions like the finest Cartier watch. At other times it's like an egg timer bought at a cheap discount store's going-out-of-business sale; you set it for poached, and it gives you hard-boiled.

The unreliability of this gift is not proof that God is either cruel or indifferent, though it might be one proof among many that He has a sense of humor.

The fault lies with me. I can't stay sufficiently relaxed to let the gift work. I get distracted in this case, by the possibility that Simon Makepeace, in willful disregard of his surname, would throw open a door, leap into the hallway, and bludgeon me to death.

I continued through the lamplight that spilled from Danny's room, where Demi Moore still looked luminous and the Elephant Man still looked pachydermous. I paused in the gloom.

an intersection with a second, shorter hallway.

This was a big house. It had been built in 1910 by an immigrant from Philadelphia, who had made a fortune in either cream cheese or gelignite. I can never remember which.

Gelignite is a high explosive consisting of a gelatinized mass of nitroglycerin with cellulose nitrate added. In the first decade of the previous century, they called it gelatin dynamite, and it was quite the rage in those circles where they took a special interest in blowing up things.

Cream cheese is cream cheese. It's delicious in a wide variety of dishes, but it rarely explodes.

I would like to have a firmer grasp of local history, but I've never been able to devote as much time to the study of it as I have wished. Dead people keep distracting me.

Now I turned left into the secondary hallway, which was black but not pitch. At the end, a pale radiance revealed the open door at the head of the back stairs.

The stairwell light itself wasn't on. The glow rose from below.

In addition to rooms and closets on both sides, which I had no impulse to search, I passed an elevator. This hydraulic-ram lift had been installed prior to Wilbur and Carol's wedding, before Danny—then a child of seven—had moved into the house.

If you are afflicted with osteogenesis imperfecta, you can occasionally break a bone with remarkably little effort. When six, Danny had fractured his right wrist while snap-dealing a game of Old Maid.

Stairs, therefore, pose an especially grave risk. As a child, at least, if he had fallen down a flight of stairs, he would most likely have died from severe skull fractures.

Although I had no fear of falling, the back stairs spooked me. They were spiral and enclosed, so it wasn't possible to see more than a few steps ahead.

Intuition told me someone waited down there.

As an alternative to the stairs, the elevator would be too noisy. Alerted, Simon Makepeace would be waiting when I arrived below.

I could not retreat. I was compelled to go down—and quickly—into the back rooms of the lower floor.

Before I quite realized what I was doing, I pushed the elevator-call button. I snatched my finger back as though I'd pricked it on a needle.

The doors did not at once slide open. The elevator was on the lower floor.

As the motor hummed to life, as the hydraulic mechanism sighed, as the cab rose through the shaft with a faint swish, I realized that I had a plan. Good for me.

In truth, the word *plan* was too grandiose. What I had was more of a trick, a diversion.

The elevator arrived with a *bink* so loud in the silent house that I twitched, though I had expected that sound. When the doors slid open, I tensed, but no one lunged out at me.

I leaned into the cab and pushed the button to send it back to the ground floor.

Even as the doors rolled shut, I hurried to the staircase and rushed blindly down. The value of the diversion would diminish to zero when the cab arrived below, for then Simon would discover that I wasn't, after all, on board.

The claustrophobia-inducing stairs led into a mud room off the kitchen. Although a stone-floored mud room might have been essential in Philadelphia, with that city's dependable rainy springs and its snowy winters, a residence in the sun-seared Mojave needed it no more than it needed a snowshoe rack.

At least it wasn't a storeroom full of gelignite.

From the mud room, one door led to the garage, another to the backyard. A third served the kitchen.

The house had not originally been designed to have an elevator. The remodel contractor had been forced to situate it, not ideally, in a corner of the large kitchen.

No sooner had I arrived in the mud room, dizzy from negotiating the tight curve of the spiral staircase, than a *bink* announced the arrival of the cab on the ground floor.

I snatched up a broom, as though I might be able to sweep a murderous psychopath off his feet. At best, surprising him by jamming the bristles into his face might damage his eyes and startle him off balance.

The broom wasn't as comforting as a flamethrower would have been, but it was better than a mop and certainly more threatening than a feather duster.

Positioning myself by the door to the kitchen, I prepared to take Simon off his feet when he burst into the mud room in search of me. He didn't burst.

After what seemed to be enough time to paint the gray walls a more cheerful color, but what was in reality maybe fifteen seconds, I glanced at the door to the garage. Then at the door to the backyard.

I wondered if Simon Makepeace had already forced Danny out of the house. They might be in the garage, Simon behind the wheel of Dr. Jessup's car, Danny bound and helpless in the backseat.

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