

SHARED INNOCENCE

STEVE BRADSHAW

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“There are truths we have to grow into.”

Orson Welles

One

Tampa, Florida – July 14, 1970

“Stay in bed tonight,” Rose whispered as she tucked in Jack. Her ten-year-old had become quite the night explorer. “Your brother and sister are sound asleep and your father’s out of town just one night, young man.”

A gentle breeze left Hillsborough Bay, stirred the wildflower fields on Ballast Point, lifted the window sheers, and filled the bedroom with honeysuckle and sage. She moved hair from his eyes and kissed his forehead. “I don’t need any surprises tonight, my young man. I love you.” She closed his door, checked on the others, and went downstairs for some quiet time.

Two hours passed. The empty bottle of Lafite Rothschild sat next to the half-empty wine glass. Beneath a jumbled pile of newspaper, Rose had sunk deep into her chair. She did not hear the phone ring the first three times. On the fourth, she reached under the only lighted lamp in the house. With her eyes still closed she breathed, “Hello.”

“Hi. It’s me. Sorry for the lateness.” Sitting on the edge of his king bed at the Boston Downtown Marriott, Ronan kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie. He squinted at his watch for the first time all night. “Damn. I didn’t realize it’s after midnight, honey.”

“It’s okay.” With one eye open she reached for her wine glass. “I’m awake, now.”

“Today’s sessions were excellent,” he bubbled. “Damn board-of-governors dinner went way over again—happens every damn year. I just got to my room. Tinsley Swanson could not stop talkin’, the egotistical boob. I don’t know why I keep comin’ to this conference—”

“—because it’s a once a year thing and medical examiners love to talk about their most hideous cases. It’s one of those—*mine’s bigger than yours*—things,” she teased.

“Yeah. Well, I’ve grown out of it then. I swear this is my last time, Rose.”

“It’s okay. I enjoy my quiet time. It’s a beautiful night, on Ballast Point. Kids are in bed and the smell of fresh wildflowers fills the house. I’m sipping my favorite blended Cab-Merlot and enjoying the *Tampa Bay Sentinel*. You know I never get to read it without interruptions. I used to love slowly digesting the newspaper. Very medicinal.” She lit a cigarette. “And if Jack stays in bed all night, everything is just perfect.”

“Jack’s a typical ten-year-old boy. He’s curious. That’s all. It’s a stage.”

“Well, he could fall and hurt himself climbing on that old trellis. He could break his neck. If he fell, how would I know? Every little sound gets me up to check on him—”

“—you gotta stop, Rose. Stop worrying. I had the trellis fixed last week. He can’t pull it off the side of the house. I had Buford Penland personally cut back the ivy so Jack would not get his foot tangled. You know he’s been the family gardener since I was a kid. He loves our family. And Jack can climb just fine. I didn’t have a safe trellis when I grew up. And Otto never worried about me. There’s somethin’ magical about that field on summer nights. It draws a kid.”

“It’s not just the trellis. Our family has a lot of money, Ronan. Someone could be watching us. Someone could be waiting for an opportunity to—”

“—take one of our kids? I know, and I really don’t want to go there tonight.”

“Our family has two-billion dollars in assets. People know. It’s in the news all the time. We’re targets, Ronan. I am not at all pleased with your idea of security around here. We do not live in some middle-class neighborhood. We live on a twenty acre estate, on the bay, in an old house you refuse to update. We need more protection than a crumbling rock wall and old iron gates left open all the time. We don’t have anyone watching out for us, Ronan. We don’t even have a dog. At the very minimum we should not encourage Jack—”

“—to explore at night. I agree. I do not encourage him. I’m watching out for him, Rose. And I’m letting him grow up like a normal kid.” Ronan looked out the hotel window at the towering brick wall. “The real world closes in on us soon enough,” he muttered. “So, what if our boy sits in a field in the middle of the night with his dreams. The only thing he’s gotta worry about out there are the mosquitos.”

“I understand the *exploring-boy* thing. I’m a mother. I’m saying I worry about Jack out there alone, in the middle of the night exposed to unknowns. How can you be so smart and not see this? We need security. I should feel safe, in my own home. I felt eyes on me all week. I’m not imagining it. Someone’s watching our family. They probably know you’re out of town. It was in the newspaper—your big conference in Boston. Billionaires have security, Ronan. Add to that you’re a medical examiner handling homicides every day. Evil people take kids—”

“—and when I get home, I will fix it.” Ronan lit a cigarette and looked at his briefcase stuffed with presentations. “One session dealt with the new exposures medical examiners and their families face today. Pretty bad things, Rose. No. Tonight you did not need to say anything about our security. My eyes have been opened. It’s the ‘70s. The world’s changing. I realized today I cannot keep our home like it was when I was a kid. I’m sorry it took this for me to get it.”

“You see terrible things every day, Ronan. Your word is final. It changes people’s lives. To most it’s for the good. But to some it’s for the bad. As Hillsborough County Chief Medical Examiner, you are revered by most living in this city. I worry about the bad people out there that despise you, Ronan. They know where you live. They know you have a family. They know you have a lot of money. If just one of those bad people decides they want to hurt you, then God only knows what they are capable of doing if given the chance.”

“We’re in agreement, Rose. Can we please change the subject before we say goodnight? We need to slow down our heart rates. Tell me what you read in the *Sentinel* today.”

She scanned the jumbled pile and grabbed a section. “Actually, not much happened around here. The Atlantic Bank’s under investigation for fraud. Circus animals paraded down

Main Street and backed up traffic—one of the elephants got loose. Sears is expanding. And the Park Tower building downtown got some architectural-design award.”

“Sounds exciting,” he teased. “What about my area of interest?”

“No homicides, dear. And no accidental deaths. Nothing in the county. I guess you picked a good day to play hooky. Didn’t miss one juicy forensic mystery.”

“Well that’s good to know. I guess my job is safe.”

Rose flipped a few pages and took another sip of wine. “There’s a whole page dedicated to Lieutenant General Leslie Richard Groves, Jr. The man died. Says he was one of the bigwigs that oversaw the construction of the Pentagon in Washington DC.”

“Must have been a really slow news day. One way to get a page dedicated to you.”

She ran a finger down the article. “Says he directed the Manhattan Project.”

“That’s newsworthy. Now I remember Leslie Groves. He was one of the brains assigned to that top-secret project during World War II—development of the atomic bomb. It’s a shame he died. He will be missed. A very smart man, and an American hero.”

“I don’t think bringing the *atomic bomb* into the world makes one an American hero?”

“There are good people on both sides of that debate, Rose. World War II was terrible for everyone. The bomb did bring a bad thing to an end.”

She leaned closer to the newspaper. “Says he died on July 13; a heart attack caused by chronic cal-ci-fi-ca-tion of the aortic valve. He was 73.”

“Aortic stenosis,” Ronan said. “It’s an associated condition to one of the most common degenerative disease—atherosclerosis. It’s the one that gets most of us, in the end.”

“Lieutenant General Groves was taken to Walter Reed where he died yesterday. Says he’ll be buried in Arlington Cemetery.” A door whined. Rose turned an ear to the dark hall to the back staircase off the kitchen. “Better go,” she whispered. “I think our son’s on the move. He may be sneaking out the kitchen door.”

Ronan chuckled. “Probably hasn’t discovered the fixed trellis. See. He is a smart kid. After you get him back to bed, I want *you* to go to bed too. Know that your worry-days are over. I’ll be home tomorrow afternoon. We’ll take care of the family security. I promise.”

“Thank you. Okay. I love you. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Rose placed the handset on the cradle. A second whine floated into the room. This time it came from one of the many warped floorboards, but Jack knew them all. *You’re off your game tonight, son*, she thought.

“Jack. Is that you? Are you out of your bed?” She called out.

Nothing...

“It will be better for you to speak up now, young man.”

Nothing...

She downed her last inch of wine and tossed the newspaper onto the sofa. *I gotta leave the comfort of my chair and only light burning in the house...* Her bare feet inched along the cold wood floor to the edge of the hall. She leaned into the dark abyss. “Jackson Ronan Burcher, show yourself this minute,” she called out. “I mean it. I am not pleased. I told you to—”

—*maybe you're already outside.* She blindly fingered the wall for the light switch.

An arm fell from the dark. It wrapped around her. Like a python it squeezed the air from her lungs, and then lifted her off the floor. A hand covered her mouth and nose, and forced her head back, and exposed her throat. Rose kicked and twisted and squealed, but before she could grasp the terror, a crushing blow to the head ended everything.

Curtains lifted and floorboards whined. A blood trail crossed the wood slats and kitchen tiles and front porch steps. Like a bent rolled rug her lifeless body hung over the shoulder of a monster. They moved in the night fog toward the open gates and a long, gray tube with fins. It growled and hovered inches above the ground.

The unusual sound caught the interest of the ten-year-old boy lying in the wildflowers a hundred feet away. He had used the trellis Buford fixed the day before. His father said he could go out at night, but he had to be quiet—so as not to worry his mother. Most nights he sat in his matted nest and stared at the stars—*how could life be restricted to just one tiny dot in the vast, unending universe?* Jack's ten-year-old imagination, and his insatiable curiosity, often made it hard to separate fantasy from reality. On the night his mother disappeared, the growling sound broke from the cicada screams. It had to be real, an unexpected visitor to Ballast Point.

He had seen it before, in the movies. But this time he saw it with his own eyes a hundred feet away. He never thought it would happen on Ballast Point, but it did. There it was. The flying saucer emerged from the fog in a flash of white light—a long, gray tube with big fins and black windows on the top. It floated in the night fog on the other side of the opened gates.

From his secret nest he watched it float a long time. He would not get closer—he did not want to be abducted by aliens. He watched as it started to move. It sunk back into the fog. After another flash of white light, the UFO vanished. Jack ran to the spot where it had hovered seconds before. Standing there, the swirling leaves fell like confetti and settled to the ground around him.

When the police came, they told Jack his mother had been taken. Jack tried to tell them about the visitor at the gates, but Detective Francis Deron would not listen to the ramblings of a traumatized ten-year-old boy—especially one known for his wild imagination. Deron told Jack a UFO did not land on Ballast Point, in the early morning hours of July 14, 1970, and aliens did not abduct his mother.

The night she disappeared Jack was confined to his bedroom and the Tampa PD and Central-Florida branch of the FBI launched a five-county search for the kidnapped billionaire heiress. They set up the call-tracking center in the Burcher's kitchen. A small army watched the phone. They waited for a ransom call that would never come.

On the next night—July 15, 1970—Jack left his room his way. He climbed down the trellis and returned to his place in the field by the house. This time he did not look at the stars and dream the dreams of a boy. This time he struggled with a new kind of pain and confusion and terror. *Who took my mother and why? Did the aliens come for her? Why didn't I do something to save her? What kind of person am I...?*

Struggling with new burdens, Jack sat in the field of wildflowers. And then he heard the rolling growl and saw the flash of white light. *Am I asleep, he wondered? Am I dreaming? I gotta grow up. I gotta do something to find my mother.*

“Mom,” he whispered. With his head low, he parted the wildflowers and saw the long, gray tube. It hovered in the same place. *How long have you been here? Should I tell someone?*

There were two shadows. They stood on the edge of the driveway under the trees. One held a box. *Where did you come from? Are you going to or coming from my house? Why can't I see? Why am I confused.* Jack sank back into the weeds. He slapped his face and pinched his arm. *Wake up. Wake up. Pay attention.* He rubbed his eyes and spit on his hands. *Think! It's gotta make sense. Police are in the kitchen. You gotta be with them. But what about the growling thing outside the gates? The police weren't here last night, and you were. Did you take—?*

His hands trembled. He buried his head in his hands. *Please God. I don't want to be taken by aliens, but I do want you to make them give back my mother.* He took a deep breath and parted the wildflowers again. He looked past the opened gates at the gray tube. *There are still two of you. What are you doing? Why are you walking back and forth at the end of the driveway? Why are you moving a box around, to different places?*

Jack sank back down. *I gotta talk to them. I gotta ask 'em to give me my mom.* Minutes passed as he searched for the courage. He stuck his head out one more time. *Why do you have a shovel? Is he holding a potted plant, a bush?* Jack sank again. *I gotta do this.* More time passed. Then the rumbling growl got louder. He saw the flash of light—gone.

On the second night, Jack told the police about the box. He also told them about the two aliens and UFO. Detective Deron only smiled. He had no questions. They did not tell Jack what they had found inside the box delivered to the end of the Burcher's driveway. On that night, the search for Rose Burcher changed. The TPD and FBI took the box with them. They removed the phone-tracking equipment and left the Burcher estate. On that night, they put a needle in Ronan Burcher's arm and took him away by ambulance. Even after Jack's father returned home, Jack would be alone. The rest of his life. Except for the ten-year-old boy that now lived inside him—the boy who saw everything the night his mother was abducted by aliens.

Thirty-three Years Later

Two

Sun Bay Nursing Care Center – September 9, 2003 – 19:00

“Are you going in?” asked the pushy nurse with the cluttered food tray.

Jack stood outside his father’s room, his nose to the small window. He did not turn from his private moment. “When I’m ready,” he said steaming the glass. *Pop’s not going anywhere*, he mused. With a huff, the nurse pivoted and rattled her tray down the hall.

Family visitations trumped everything at the Sun Bay Nursing Care & Rehabilitation Center, one of the most advanced convalescent facilities in Florida. But, Ronan Burcher, Sr. would not benefit from any of the state-of-the-art treatment protocols. His decline left no options. He had been admitted eight years earlier. The family wanted their patriarch nearby, comfortable, and in a secured facility. Money was no object.

The well-dressed businessman in his mid-thirties eased up behind Jack Burcher and peered over his shoulder into the small window. “Heard the old man had a bad day.”

Still not turning Jack said, “So you got the call, too?”

“Mel was a bit more agitated than usual. She’s convinced something new is going on with Pop. I suppose it’s possible.”

“Maybe we can help sort things out.”

“You’re the doctor. I’m just a real estate guy.”

Jack turned to his younger brother. “I’m a forensic pathologist, David. Everyone I deal with is dead.”

“Okay. Point taken. But you do understand all that medical mumbo-jumbo. I don’t have a clue about any of it.” He loosened his tie and leaned closer. “Pop seems even more distant just standing there like that. Something’s bothering him. You think it’s possible to communicate some with him tonight? You know, the Parkinson’s and all—”

“Yes. I do,” Jack sighed. “We should be able to for a while longer, but stage-3 dementia does complicate things. It’s been eight years.” *A very slow process for all of us.* “We’re losing him physically and mentally. He’ll have fewer moments of clarity each day.”

“You mean those rare, lucid swings into the real world?”

Jack rubbed his chin half listening. “Yeah, swings.” He leaned closer. “It’s disturbing he’s not moved from the window since I arrived. Been almost ten minutes. He’s fixated.”

“You can see most of the Hillsborough Bay from there. Even now. After sundown.”

What are you looking at, Jack wondered, as he stared at the man he was losing?

“Melissa said he started talkin’ about mother again, and Uncle Leonard. This time he said their deaths are connected. I don’t know how Uncle Leonard dying in a car wreck in 1948 ties to mother’s abduction in 1970. One’s an accident and the other’s—”

“—an unsolved mystery.” Jack rubbed the back of his neck and studied his father like one of his forensic puzzles. “We don’t know much about Leonard’s accident. And we’ll forever be haunted by mother’s disappearance and, you know. Anyway, the two events may be Pop’s most painful memories—loss of an only brother and a wife. It’s possible the two have merged in his private world. Now they are one terrible nightmare.”

“That could explain why he hasn’t thrown in Aunt Caroline—her suicide in ’75—and Uncle Harold’s bizarre death in ’78.”

“Caroline and Harold Lawton are not his blood,” Jack muttered. “They’re mother’s.”

“Still doesn’t explain the other things he was saying, according to Mel. He thinks he’s next on the list. Pop said someone’s comin’ for ‘em.”

“Really? That is new.” Jack stood on his toes to see the crumpled newspaper hanging from Ronan’s trembling fist. “Did Mel bring Pop a paper today?”

“Yeah. She brings him one every time she comes. He seems to have an interest in the news. Puts on his glasses and fans through the paper like he’s lookin’ for somethin’. I think he’s just goin’ through one of his routines, life before Parkinson’s.”

“Before it robbed him,” Jack huffed. “I’ve been so busy I did not even know my dying father got some degree of pleasure from a newspaper.”

“Whoa, Dr. Jackson R. Burcher. Do not go there. Do not start with the blame game again. You’re a busy man. The Hillsborough County Chief Medical Examiner cannot just drop things whenever he wants. Unlike me and Melissa, you have real deadlines. Families, cops, and courts are waiting on you, Jack. They expect answers when people die. It’s no different from when Pop was the Chief M.E. around here. Back then he lived the same kind of life you live now. Don’t fight me on this, my brother. You know that is a damn fact.”

“No. I do not. In his prime, Ronan had way better control.”

“Not true. Nothing more than you do now. Pop was forced to step down in ’94 because of Parkinson’s. You took things over in ’95 because Hillsborough County wouldn’t take *no* for an answer. You caved and we were glad you did. The job’s right for you, Jack. You made Pop proud. I think it allowed him to face his inner demons, especially blaming himself for the loss of mother. He never forgave himself for not protecting her. The damn house unsecure and all.”

“It’s not that.”

“You can’t keep beating yourself up.” David turned Jack from the door window. “When mother was taken that God-awful night in 1970, you were ten. You couldn’t stop a thing. If you had tried, you would have been taken too, Jack. You wouldn’t be standin’ here today. Mel and I and Pop would have lost both of you that night.”

“I hear you. I just don’t know how to let it go,” Jack sighed.

“You’re a great M.E. Tampa’s lucky to have you. But that damn title does not make you responsible for all of life’s tragedies around here. You gotta stop with the self-flagellation, and the drinking. Both are gonna make you really sick someday.”

“I know you’re right but—”

“Hey, don’t forget I was two and Melissa five, when they took mom. We were there too, Jack. And we didn’t do a damn thing either,” he poked. “We found a way to move on.”

They embraced as Jack looked down the hall. The redhead nurse with the food tray leaned a grimace around the corner. “Okay baby brother, I just got the stink eye. We best go inside before the nurse-Nazi starts throwin’ knives.”

The spacious, well-appointed room with the enormous picture window smelled like old urine and fresh flowers. The two rounded the bed to where Ronan stood like a statue. His eyes were locked on something outside the window.

Jack squinted at the horizon. “Looks like a fire on Bird Island. Must be a big one. I can see flames.” He put his hand on his father’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “Pop. The fire. Is that what’s upsetting you today?”

“I bet it’s been smoking all day,” David said. “Sun’s down. Now the flames are visible.”

The east side of the ten-story Sun Bay tower gave a view of Hillsborough Bay to downtown Tampa, the main shipping lanes, and south to the Alafia River Channel. Beyond the shipping lanes Spoil Islands 2D and 3D sit on the horizon. Between them Bird Island and Sunken Island sit lower.

“The local chapter of the National Audubon Society’s gonna be pretty unhappy about the fire,” David scoffed. He and Jack flanked their father ready to catch him if he fell. “I think those people are way overprotective of all the bird sanctuaries around here. You’d think they’d give it a rest once in a while. It’s not like the damn birds are more important than people.”

“I hope Melissa’s not out there with her friends,” Jack breathed.

“Ornithologists are not called upon to fight fires, even on Bird Island, Jack.”

“Really David,” he shot back. “Our sister has official clearances to camp on those islands to do her research. Please call. I want to make sure she’s safe.”

“It’s ringing,” David had the phone to his ear.”

Jack knelt and looked up into his father's hanging face. Jack saw lines of angst and twitching eyes. *You're not looking at Bird Island. Or even the bay. You're looking down at the grounds of Sun Bay from your fifth-floor observation nest.*

"Mel. David. Where are you?" he barked into his phone. Then his tone changed. "Right. No ma'am. I understand, and yes, I do remember. Right! Okay, Mel. Damn it. Jack just wanted to know if— Fine then! Yes, I will tell him. We just wanted to make sure you were— What? We are with the old man right now. Yes, I hear you. I was gonna say somethin' but— Okay Melissa. Goodbye." He pocketed his phone and stared out the window.

"That went well." Jack got to his feet and studied the view below.

"Well, I managed to piss her off. She's so bossy. A guy can't even get a word in—"

"—edge wise." He chuckled. "You think?"

"Mel knows about the fire on Bird Island. She said it's arson. And no, she is not there. She's on Sunken Island with a covey of tree-huggin' bird scientists. I can't pronounce the name of the friggin' bird they're so concerned about today. All I know it's probably been on the planet for a million years. I do not understand why they need our help to hatch their eggs in 2003. Natural selection may be at work, Jack. Could be their number is up and we are in the way."

"Right. Now focus, David. What was Melissa upset about?"

"I forgot to tell you somethin'. She told me the old man told her there would be a fire on Bird Island today."

"Are you serious?" Jack said. "You think maybe that information should have been shared with me when I told you I saw a fire on Bird Island?"

"Probably. I mean, yes. Now I do. She also said he went on about Uncle Leonard and mother. She could not shut him up. That's when he dropped the *firebomb*. She ignored it at the time, but later felt she should tell us about it. Boom—there's a fire on Bird Island. Now she's freakin' out. She's convinced somethin' bad's gonna happen, and Pop knows all about it."

They turned back to Ronan. He had not moved since they arrived. A crumpled newspaper hung from his white-knuckled fist, and a fat string of saliva hung from his mouth. Jack wiped his chin. "Pop, what's going on with you today? Why're you upset? Is it the fire, or somethin' else? Talk to us, Pop. We're here to help."

"He doesn't hear you." David fiddled with the small vase of fresh flowers on the windowsill. He looked around for the *obligatory card*. "The old man's MIA today," he muttered. "What do you think? Has he lost more marbles?"

"Pop. Talk to me," Jack pushed. "Tell me what's bothering you?"

Ronan's lips started to form a word. He lifted his head. His eyes widened. He turned to Jack and shouted, "It—is—star—ting. It—is—time—ah—gain." Ronan's legs quivered. They buckled and he collapsed. On his way down, David and Jack caught him by his armpits and backed him to the edge of the bed. He sat. He hung his head like a ragdoll.

“What is *starting*?” Jack asked. “What do you mean *it is time again*, Pop?”

“I don’t think he knows,” David said.

Ronan lifted his head. His bloodshot eyes bulged from their sockets. He looked at the window and then at the crumpled newspaper. He started to gasp for air. His face turned beet red. A fat vessel ran down his forehead.

“He—killed—my—brother,” Ronan spewed. “Made—it—look—”

“Go ahead, Pop,” Jack said. “Made it look—?”

Ronan grunted, “He—took—Rose. Now—he—back—for—me. The fire. It—tells—you. It is a—sign.”

“Who is ‘*he*’, Pop? Why is he coming for you?” David asked.

“My—turn—to—sac—” Ronan crashed a fist on the bed and sobbed. Then he sat up straight, as if someone put a hot knife in his back.

“You’re okay, Pop,” Jack whispered as he rubbed his back. “You’re safe. No one can hurt you here. Tell us, who is coming. Tell us about the fire. A sign for what, Pop?”

With a surge of frightening strength, Ronan jumped to his feet. He broke free from the tight grips of his boys and pushed Jack away. David fell back on his own—cornered and on the floor, he hid behind his hands like a child at a scary movie.

Ronan changed before their eyes. He took a rigid stance and transformed into the man of thirty years ago. The steely, scrutinizing eyes. The enraged brow. The chin out. David and Jack blinked back into their childhood—the imperious Dr. Ronan Burcher now owned the room. He demanded respect and total compliance. The 2003 weakling had left the hospital room.

“I am a dead man,” he bellowed. He reached for the heavens with a trembling hand. “I ask for nothing—” Ronan raised the fist with the crumpled newspaper and shook it above his head. “—for I will die like each before.” His eyes froze. Then they rolled into his head. The white balls bulged from their sockets as his hard face melted like wax in the hot sun.

David and Jack watched Ronan return to his feeble state. The Parkinson’s and dementia and age resumed their undeniable death grip. Ronan whimpered, squealed, and then stopped breathing. Like a dead tree in the forest, he fell backward onto his bed and didn’t move.

“Holy Mother of God,” David gasped. “Did the old man just croak right in front of us? I’ve never seen anybody—”

Jack rushed to him. He checked Ronan’s pulse and listened to his chest as David crawled to the side of the bed and got to his feet. Jack opened each lid and passed his hand over each eye. In deathly silence, he lifted Ronan’s dead legs onto the bed and slid a pillow under Ronan’s limp head. Jack pulled up the covers. He stopped at the neck and tucked in the old man.

“He’s asleep—exhausted. He said all he’s going to say tonight.”

“Asleep? Jesus, Jack. What in the hell was that? The old man turned into the friggin’ monster we feared as kids. And what was he ranting about? He had the fear of God in his eyes. Scared the living shi—”

The relentless nurse with the food tray pushed open the door without knocking. Jack spun around and pounced. “Ronan Burcher will not eat tonight. So, take the tray away. He is sleeping and cannot be disturbed. He needs sleep more than the food you’re determined to unload. Please, leave the room. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” she said, her head down. Her red hair covered most of her face.

“Return in the morning—a late breakfast,” Jack ordered. “If my father is sleeping, let him sleep.” *You’re new*, Jack thought. *I’ve not seen you before*. “If anyone has questions, they can call me—Dr. Jack Burcher, the Chief Medical Examiner. Have I been clear, Miss—?”

She did not fill in the blank. She nodded and backed from the room as Jack watched the door muffle closed behind her. *I guess I wouldn’t give my name either*, he fumed. He turned back to his brother. “I didn’t mean to bark, but what was that all about?” he muttered.

“Forget about that. What’s this all about?” David scratched his head. “The old man said he’s dead, Jack. Said the one that killed Uncle Leonard took mother. And now that person is comin’ for him. Pop asks for nothing—what the hell does that mean? And Bird Island. The fire is some kind of a sign? For what? How the hell did Pop even know about a fire—”

“Stop, David. It’s all bizarre right now. We don’t know what’s going on in his head. I’m sure it can all be explained. He’s in an irrational state. All of this could be as simple as a problem with his meds. A reaction. I need to check his chart and see what changed.”

“Fine. But how’d he know there was gonna be a fire on Bird Island before it happened?”

“I don’t know. Maybe saw smoke. You said it had probably been smoking all day. Maybe that’s why he said something to Melissa. He said smoke and she heard fire. He looks out this window all day. It’s all he does now. I’m sure he could pick up on the slightest change in the haze over those islands. I’ll bet Melissa didn’t even look out there after he said it. There’re many plausible explanations for all of this. I can tell you one thing for sure. Pop did not predict a fire before it happened. That would be impossible.”

“You don’t know.”

“Seriously. That’s where you’re going with this?”

“Okay. Then what about the fire being a sign?”

“I don’t know what it means, David,” Jack snapped.

He took a deep breath and turned to his brother. “Look, I’m sorry. We’re both tired. This has been a long and strange day. I need time to review the medical aspects—where’s Pop in his disease process?” Jack attempted a smile. “Let’s talk tomorrow night. I’ve got cases stacking up. Another crazy day coming.” He touched Ronan’s arm. “Pop should sleep all night and most of

tomorrow. I doubt he'll have the energy to get out of bed for a few days. He's very weak. When he does wake up, he won't remember any of this."

He folded Ronan's crumpled newspaper and slid it under his arm. He glanced at the flowers on the windowsill. "Did you order the oleanders?"

Standing where he had found Ronan, Jack looked out the window and down at the busy hospital grounds—the changing of the guards. Medical staff flowed in and out of buildings to and from waiting cars. Then he saw his redhead pass under a light. *I couldn't miss that hair*, he thought. She looked back at the building. *Are you Asian? Wonderful. I bet you were just trying to do your job—a nurse's aide*. He squinted. *Maybe not fluent in the language. Probably didn't understand my subtle directives—but got my ire. The universal language. Just great. Well, still, you need to learn sometimes a nurse's agenda's not the only thing, especially in a place where the patients are on their last lap...*

"I didn't order flowers," David said as he held open the door into the hallway.

Jack perused the Sun Bay grounds from Ronan's bird nest. They moved in all directions like ants on a mound. "Okay," he muttered. "Did you find the note so we can thank whoever gave those flowers to Pop?" His eyes moved on a line from the redhead to a car parked under a giant oak tree on a side road. Jack leaned closer. He made out the old gray Cadillac with big fins and black tinted windows. His heart skipped a beat. He grabbed the windowsill to steady himself. Blood drained from his head.

"You okay?" David asked, his head leaning back into the room.

"I don't know what—" Jack took a deep breath and tried to focus on his feet. "I think I'm okay—"

"Good. If you didn't hear me, I said no note. Now, can we stop with the questions, forensic man? Let's go home. The old man's sleepin' like a kitten."

Jack swallowed hard. He patted the folded newspaper under his arm and forced himself to look out the window one last time. "Okay," he muttered. "You're right. We should go."

I guess the flowers are from Mel, Jack thought. *She's the bird and flower person in the family*. His eyes climbed the sidewalk to the side road and the oak tree. The old Cadillac and the redhead were gone.