

## The Bell

“Doctor Myers will see you now, Miss Daniels.”

I’m exhausted but we shake hands and chat about the weather and the location of his office—in one of those new corporate parks landscaped by migrants. He gestures toward a leather couch and I sit—the soft, cool surface feels good. Then it’s right down to business.

“As you know, you’ve been referred here by Janice Waits, your supervisor over at Duke. She spoke to me about some problems you’re having at work?”

“Yeah, screw ups—you know, three strikes and you’re out kind of thing.”

“She seemed very concerned about you over the phone.”

I just nod and glance at a wall; it’s painted a dark shade of blue. Shouldn’t it be yellow or something? My damn knee won’t stop bouncing.

“Miss Daniels, you seem a bit tense, and that’s understandable, but I’m here to help, and this is all confidential. We can talk about the work incident later. For now I’d like you to tell me how you’re feeling lately—your overall health.”

Okay, he’s going to ease into this. The guy seems young for a psychiatrist. Very formal in a suit and tie—looks competent.

He's wearing a ring—I wonder if he tells his wife about us patients? He tires of my silence and gets specific.

“How has your sleep been lately?”

“Um, not good actually. I can't seem to get much rest.”

“For how long?”

“Ah, past seven months or so, in particular.”

“Have you had any significant dreams you'd like to tell me about?” His pen hovers over a clipboard.

“No.”

“What do you think about when you can't sleep?”

All this prying. “Not much. It's kind of personal.”

“Miss Daniels, I know how hard this is but—”

“No you don't.” He stares at me in the silence, his face serene. My eyes escape to a window; outside somebody fires up an annoying leaf blower.

“Your supervisor informed me that you've been uptight lately, defensive, losing your patience?”

I smile at his unintentional pun, too depressed to laugh.

“That's not a good thing to say to a nurse—losing your patients.”

“Oh, right. I didn't mean it to come out that way.”

“I know.” He smiles, blushes a bit. He is human after all, and cute, I must say, like a little boy getting caught saying something naughty.

“May I call you Tamie?”

“You may.”

“Tamie, I imagine you’re concerned about losing your job, but Missus Waits has told me you’ve been an excellent nurse, that she’s noticed this change in you only in the past few months. So something happened recently—a trigger or something—to cause these anxieties which are so distressing for you. And concurrent with some medical tests, I’d like to work with you and get to the bottom of all this. But I need you to be completely open and honest with me. Can you do that? Can you work with me?”

He lets me go early, after I acquiesce, and I hurry through the tiny waiting room, nodding at the receptionist as she waves goodbye, then down the hall with its fiber wallpaper and light sconces, out the double doors and into the sweltering parking lot. I’ve left blood on the trail; after I snapped at him during our little talk, I had rubbed a tear from my eye.

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I wander around Duke Gardens. It’s hot and muggy for May, and my dress sticks to my back—but it feels good to walk the paths. It’s so pretty here. I have plenty of time—I’ve been suspended for two weeks, then probation for another six months when I do go back. Absolutely no screw-ups, no losing of patients as my Doc would say. I’ll get fired and it’ll be on

my record. Only twenty-five and such a loser. I don't know what happened that day. I don't know what's happening to me now. I try to avoid thinking—I'll go feed the ducks.

I follow the path along the edge of the pond. Just past the concrete pagoda, I spot them by the Japanese bridge. As soon as they see me, the little buggers paddle over. "There you are—you know who your momma is, don't you." I walk up to the center of the arch and start tossing my breadcrumbs out and laugh when they lunge and quack to nab their treats. But there's always one duck slower than the rest and he never seems to get his share. Leaning on the rail, an incredible sadness descends over me. Down below in the murky water, the ducks paddle about, waiting. As they wander off and the ripples subside, I am startled to see my reflection. The joy has vanished. And then I hear it—faint, like it's some distance away. I block my ears but it's no use—it gets louder and my heart starts pounding and now the panic begins. I glance about, stunned that it found me here. I dump the rest of my crumbs and leave the bridge. I hurry along a shortcut, but halfway back—fearing it will catch up to me—I begin to run.

I make it to my car drenched in sweat and feeling lightheaded. The shade has left my parking spot and everything is hot. I see a nearby fountain with water spraying out from several vertical jets. I don't care who sees me—I need to get in

to cool down or I'll pass out. I fling my shoes off and ease in, ass first. I exhale and go under and all I hear is the spray splashing down above—so cool, so peaceful.

I drive home soaked. I lock myself in my apartment and strip off my clothes. I'm not a skinny girl nor beautiful to most men I suppose, but I am a woman—a bit of a wreck now, but I'm not a complete loser. Tomorrow I'll see the Doc again, then every third day after that—intensive therapy they call it—and I'll get better.

It's still light out when I go to bed. I lie naked between the cool sheets and resist the urge to pleasure myself. Instead I pray to God to release me from this nightmare.

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“Good morning Tamie—you look refreshed today.”

I give him a big smile. “Thank you, Doctor Myers, I slept well. I think I was so tired nothing was going to disturb me.”

“Very good. So what did you do yesterday?” He doesn't have his clipboard out this time.

“I, I enjoyed Duke Gardens and then I fed the ducks.” In the spirit of cooperation or to fill dead space I tell him, “I also had a panic attack, then I did something crazy.” What an idiot.

“Go on please.”

“Well, it was so blasted hot after I got back to my car that I got down into a fountain—the one in front of that new building

by the parking lot. I went right under and held my breath, and it worked.”

He smiles, looking amused. “Amazing, you discovered your own water therapy. By saying it worked, do you mean to cool you off or to stop the panic attack?”

“Both, I guess.”

“Have you ever done this sort of thing before?”

“No, first time.”

“What do you think caused your panic attack?”

“I, I don’t know. It just came over me as I fed the ducks by the pond—I was on the Japanese bridge. Have you ever been there?”

“Yes, it’s a very peaceful place. You’ve written on your self-evaluation form that you are feeling depressed, irritable, fearful—all of these symptoms within the last year. Was there any unusual incident, any change in your routines, anything that you can recall that could have precipitated your anxiety?”

My throat tightens and I turn away from him.

“Look at me please.”

I shoot him a dirty look. “No, I don’t remember anything in particular, just started getting real sad, you know—in the fall, last year.”

“Tamie, I believe you’re holding back. If you find it hard to be open with me, we can always refer you to another therapist.

Is that what you want?"

My mouth hangs open. Either he's run out of patience or this is a tough love ploy. My body language must be an open book to him. I start to tear up. "No, no, Doctor, it's just that—it's so hard to talk about all this, and then the hospital will find out and—"

"No they won't. You're not on trial here, this is—"

"Yes I am on trial," I snap, almost yelling. I glare at him, my lower lip quivering. He sits beside me and cups my hand within his.

"Look, you're shaking you're so anxious. I'm not here to hurt you any further, but this can be painful—I should have explained better. That's my fault, not yours. I can see that you are a beautiful, caring person, but something's eating at you and we have to find out what that is. Okay?"

His touch is welcome, soothing—and so unusual for a doctor. "Aren't you breaking protocol," I ask.

"I don't care. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that and I apologize."

"It's okay," I mumble, realizing that he might actually care about me, that I'm not just another appointment slot. I decide to tell him.

"Something did happen. I was at a gas station, one of those rural mom and pop stores, and it was last October. It was the

first nice day in awhile, sunny but not hot, no humidity, pretty blue sky. I hadn't been feeling like myself—a general unease I couldn't explain, but that day I was excited. My friend Julie had invited me to hang out at her parent's home for a picnic and swimming—it's out in Granville county and they have their own private pond. Well, I was on my way but needed gas. When I first pulled in I noticed this little kid riding her bike around the store. Didn't think anything of it, but while I pumped gas she rides up to me, stops and starts ringing the bell on her handlebar. Ring-ring, ring-ring. She just kept ringing it, staring at me. Well I got real agitated, my stomach in knots, and I just wanted her to stop and go away—so strange because I like kids. Then something just snapped. I slammed the nozzle back into the pump and stepped over to her. I clamped my hand down over her tiny hand and said in a nasty voice—you just stop that. She looked so scared—I made that sweet little girl cry, Doctor. I went in to pay quick as I could, totally flustered, and then drove away going the wrong direction. I felt so sick. I went home and called Julie and canceled the whole day with her.” I stare at the floor, too ashamed to look at him.

“What did you do the rest of the day?”

Well I was so shaken I couldn't concentrate on anything. It was like something had slammed into me. I was tired but paced about my apartment until I decided I had to get out. I thought a

jog would settle my nerves, but I didn't get but a little ways when this wave of guilt came over me. It was horrible, like fingers pointing at me, accusing me of terrible things. I turned around and slunk home. I went to bed early but didn't sleep well—I awoke in the wee hours, covered in sweat, my heart pounding. And I haven't slept well since.”

“Can you tell me in more detail what happened during that night?”

“Well I had this dream, about the little girl.” I pause, struggling to speak, unable to shake my disgust, but he simply waits for me to continue. “I dreamt I went back there—to the store, and found her still riding her bike. I went over to her as she sat there looking up at me. I yanked her off the bike and she screamed and then I shoved her to the ground. I was in a rage—so unlike me—and then I looked down and saw all this blood on my dress. I think I must have killed her. It was so cruel, what I did.”

“Is that what woke you?”

“Yes, that and the damn bell. I can't get the ringing out of my head—it wakes me up most every night. Even without the nightmares I hear it, coming from who knows where, tormenting me. I even heard it at the bridge feeding the ducks, but I didn't tell you. I was so scared—first time I heard it outside, during the day. I just wanted to enjoy my ducks.

Maybe I am a bad person, but I don't know if I can take any more of this. Can you help me, Doctor?"

"Yes, I'm going to help you. Our time is almost up for today, but I want to thank you for sharing all this—I realize it wasn't easy—but you did it, and no, you don't deserve this misery. I want you to promise me something. If you ever have a panic attack again, say a sudden desire to duck under a fountain, please call me. Here's my home phone number. If I don't answer right away, here is a hot line you can access anytime—a nice person who will talk with you. We're in this together now, you're not alone."

He stands and I follow his lead, looking hard into his eyes, and then I hug him, squeeze him and hold on, and he squeezes back without flinching. "Thank you, Doctor, you've been so understanding. Um, what will we talk about next time?"

"I am going to explain some things to you, then I think we need to talk about your childhood."

Damn. The last place I want to visit—like a stupid kid beating a wasp nest—nothing good to come of that, but today I feel different about him—I believe he truly wants to help me.

We say our goodbyes but I pause in his doorway. "I look forward to seeing you on Monday, Doctor Myers." I smile, then slip out, clicking his door shut.

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It's Friday night and I'm in the lounge at the Marriott, sitting alone at a table for two. I stare into my drink, stirring it with the straw, thinking of him. He said I'm beautiful. I day dream about running into him tonight, but he's a married man and wouldn't go alone to a place like this. Maybe I'll meet another guy, one like the Doc, who could hold me and not judge me and understand and love me despite my faults and—no, I sigh, who am I kidding? But I don't care—I'm feeling reckless. I already ate too much at the buffet. I'm going to have a few drinks here, then go to another bar and down a few more.

I stare at a guy walking in for one, long second. He nods with a quick smile and I flutter my eyes down into my drink. Looks to be in his thirties and nice looking, very neat in a business suit—a salesman?

“Would you care for some company?”

My head jerks up; he's standing beside my table, smiling.

“Oh sorry,” he says, “didn't mean to startle you—you're probably waiting for someone.”

“Uh—no, nobody. Sure, I could use some company—please sit down.” He's smooth, not like the clumsy, younger guys.

He buys me drinks and makes me laugh and listens to me, saying my name over and over, and then he leads me up to his room. I want to melt into him and we make love throughout the

night and in the early morning he said he had to go, that he had a meeting. I beg him to blow it off and stay with me—I could show him around Durham since he’s from out of town and we could have a picnic and feed the ducks. He tells me to meet him in the lobby at twelve and we’ll have the afternoon to do whatever I want. Giddy, I prepare food at my place for our picnic—no wine because we were both a bit hung over—but then I get a sinking feeling in my gut and call at ten, and yes, he’s checked out, but that’s not unusual, and so I drive over to wait for him in the lobby.

At one he’s just late, at two he may still come, by three I’m feeling sick and everything crashes inside. I pray to God not to hear the ringing and yet it comes, barely audible, and my heart starts thumping so hard it hurts. I have my phone with me and fumble in my purse and pull out the Doc’s number. I just stare at it. He’ll know I’m weak, a nuisance, a loser. It gets louder. I run from the lobby and onto the blazing street, into a blast of car horns—anything to escape the torment, anything to drown out the sound of that bell.

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“These are for you, Doctor—for your desk.” He stands as usual to greet me as I hold out the flowers. He’s surprised and has a big smile for me. My body tingles.

“Wow, these are beautiful—I love flowers. Thank you so

much. Is it my birthday or something?”

I giggle at his teasing and my belly grows warm. “No, I mean, I don’t know when your birthday is—there’s no special reason—just wanted to give them to you. I arranged them myself and the vase is blue, like your office.” He doesn’t have to know they were swiped from the Sara P. Duke Gardens. Placing the vase on his desk, he pulls his chair up to the couch and we sit, facing each other, so close our knees sometimes touch.

“Well Tamie, I—”

“I almost called you Saturday. But I didn’t want to disturb your time off, you know, with your wife and all. It was no big deal.”

“Now remember I said it’s okay to call me. What happened?”

“Nothing much, just wanted to hear your voice.” I look away from his deep blue eyes—hiding, teasing, making him come get me.

“Tamie?”

“All right, if you must know, I got stood up by a guy—the jerk.” I won’t tell him of my night of debauchery.

“Guys can be like that.”

“You’re not.”

He sighs. “We all have our faults. What happened after

that—what were you feeling right before you almost called me?”

“I heard the ringing again—like it waits in ambush, ready to mock whatever happiness comes my way, or kick me when I’m down—and everything turns black. I get so scared because I don’t know what it is or why it’s after me. It started in the lobby of the Marriott—you know, downtown? I finally ran into the street and the cars honked and it stopped.”

“Hmm,” he says, looking concerned. “The results of your neurological tests don’t indicate any type of brain abnormality that might be causing your symptoms, and I don’t believe you are schizophrenic. Are you familiar with any of the theories concerning the subconscious mind?”

“Yeah, somewhat—it’s where your dreams come from, right?”

“Yes, but it’s more than that. It’s there all the time, day and night. Because your conscious mind is resting at night, your subconscious is given free reign to express itself, in the shape of dreams. But it’s also there during the day—in the form of intuitions, warnings—and it actually effects much of your behavior, including those that are considered dark or destructive.”

I feel his words prick my heart and I turn my face away in shame. Does he think I’m a bad girl? He couldn’t know how

much I want him—how can I help it? He’s smart and sweet and caring—but he’s taken, and I’m selfish, weak, and—”

“Tamie, look at me so I know you’re getting all this. The subconscious is thought to be the seat of your truest self—your soul some would say, and if there is some deep seated trouble, something out of balance between it and your conscious mind, it will try to correct it, or at least try and make you aware there is a problem you’re not facing. It can do this through dreams, hyper sensitivities, compulsions, and even hallucinations.”

“Like the ringing?”

“Yes. There’s something buried inside it wants you to see, and that incident with the little girl at the gas station triggered it. Something about that girl, the bike, or the bell, or all three. We need to find out what that is, or it will continue to make you sick, and possibly something worse. I’m concerned about these panic attacks. Have you ever thought about or tried harming yourself?”

My jaw sets hard as I look past our knees into the carpet and he knows I can’t hide and he’ll have to report me—serious risk of injury—and then the sheriff will come and take me away. “Doctor, I better go, I’m feeling dizzy,” but before I rise he’s got my wrist. I jerk my arm back and then wince from a jolt of pain. He lets go and stares as a tiny stain forms on the white sleeve of my blouse. I cover it with my other hand and

press it against my chest, but it's too late—he's seen the blood.

“Please don't report me, please?”

He holds his hands out and I take them; he stands and I rise and then he hugs me—his warmth, his touch so familiar—rocking me from side to side and rubbing my back until my heart stops pounding, until I feel safe again. I wish I could remain forever in his arms.

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I spend the next two days alone in my apartment, struggling with my illness. He's given me his number with orders to call, anytime. He's been patient but next time he's going to push. I try not to think of him—all my desires judged shameful and wrong by a guilt that haunts me like a curse. If I was braver maybe I could fix things—I could drive back to that store and find that girl and tell her I'm sorry—then buy her some ice cream or maybe a toy, but the thought of the bell paralyzes me with fear.

I stay busy watching television, cleaning out closets and now I put on music and start my latest picture puzzle, a cast off bought for a quarter at a yard sale. The photo on the box cover is of a castle on the Rhine, and there's a light on in the window of the tallest tower. It's beautiful—I like it and wish to visit there some day. I dump the pieces onto my kitchen table and the cardboard smells good. I flip the pieces color side up and

start fitting them together. I make quick progress, but I can't find the one with the lighted window, and it's starting to bug me. I fit everything together except this piece and three others. I look all over the floor—nothing. So strange, such a trivial thing, but I stare at the puzzle and begin to sob as an overwhelming sense of loss comes over me. I jump when I hear a ring—just the phone, thank God. I turn the stereo off and compose myself.

“Hello?”

“Oh hello Tamie, this is Doctor Myers. I just wanted to check in on you and see how you're doing tonight.”

He actually called me on his own time. “Oh Doctor, that's so nice of you. I'm doing fine now, now that I hear your voice. I just finished a picture puzzle and got a bit sad, but then you called, like you knew.”

“Well I'm glad I called then, because I know how reluctant you are to call me, and I, I care about you Tamie. I want you to know that.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, my throat tightening. He pauses but his words catch me flatfooted—I'm burning to reveal my feelings but I'm so nervous and then he speaks again and the opportunity passes.

“Tomorrow we are going to discuss your early childhood memories, and I gather it won't be easy for you—it may reveal

things that are painful, but I'll be there right beside you. I want you to rest tonight, relax, and let me carry some of your worries. You may feel you're in a dark forest, lost, but we'll find a way out, I promise."

Afraid my heart will burst and I'll say something stupid, I can only mumble, "thank you," for the second time. He wishes me a goodnight and I put the receiver down.

I stare out the window of my living room; it's starting to rain, a steady, gentle rain. This is my front yard, my view—this pathetic parking lot. No rivers, no castles. The asphalt glistens with distorted reflections—cars pulling in from work, strangers with umbrellas. I'm so mixed up. My Doc is trying hard and I must be strong tomorrow, but as I ponder the severity of my situation, I realize he's the only thing holding me together. I am helpless.

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I rise from bed late but still manage to slam down two cups of coffee. I hurry to get ready and fumble with my best fitting, black dress. It doesn't exactly slip on. I apply lipstick before I brush my teeth—does he even realize the spell he has on me? In a daze I drive on autopilot, thinking of him. He's booked two hours for today's session. After yesterday's rain the air is soft and a warm breeze presses against me as I exit my car. I stare at the square tin resting on the car seat—should I bring it in?

He loves homemade cookies. He gives me a hug then relaxes his arms but I hold on, squeezing him long enough to send a little message. I let go and just stare with a tight smile until I shiver from the cool air. I wrap my arms about my sleeveless dress.

“Oh you’re cold,” he says. “I’ll get this AC turned off, and—here, put this on until it warms up.”

He takes his suit jacket off and drapes it over my shoulders. It’s warm and soft and he’s so gentle with me, and I struggle to keep my shameful feelings in check and at the same time give myself completely over to him. He’s put off another appointment to get the two hours, to make up for the time I’ve wasted and to push uninterrupted into my past. I’m anxious to get started. We both sit in our usual position, knees to knees.

“Tamie, I want you to know you’re safe here—nothing is going to harm you. Even if you happen to hear the bell, I’m with you and we’ll talk through it. I’ve got the lights dimmed and the shades drawn, but the main thing is for you to relax and place all your worries with me—for the time being anyway—you can have them back later if you want. Agree?”

His voice is like warm water flowing over my body, gently tugging at me like a river current, lifting my toes from the bottom and carrying me away.

“I’m ready, Doctor. I had a scary dream last night. Do you

want to hear it?”

“Absolutely. I’m all ears.”

“I dreamt of my family—my first, biological family, and they were calling me, all of them, my momma and daddy, my little brother. I was in the woods that surrounded our house, but I couldn’t see them, just heard them calling my name over and over, and I kept running and yelling trying to find them. I found our house and ran inside. It was deserted, everything gone except a few things scattered on the floor. I ran up the stairs, jumping over the missing steps, and then rushed into my parents’ room. It was empty. I yelled again, but their voices were gone and in the silence I heard the ringing off in the woods somewhere. It got louder and closer and I didn’t dare look out the window—I just froze and forced myself to wake up, somehow.”

“How did you feel once you woke up?”

“Very upset—I was soaked in sweat and had such an ache inside, longing for my family. But the bell—that bell felt evil.”

“So you were raised by a second set of parents?”

“Yeah, they fostered me at first, then adopted me, and they were and are so good and loving. They would be very disappointed now, if they knew about all this.”

“Disappointed? No, I think they would be very concerned. But tell me about your first family.”

“Well, we were very poor for one thing. My parents were good people, but they always seemed to be on the wrong side of luck, or maybe God’s blessings. We lived in an old, busted down house—it was unpainted and I’ll never forget the smell of the clapboards on a hot day, the weedy yard, the woods full of junk. But my brother and I were happy there—it was our home. The house was abandoned when my daddy found it and he never had title to it. We were squatters.

“Tell me about your father.”

“Daddy worked at a mechanic’s garage on the main road. He would always walk with me on the lane, across that old, steel bridge, and on up to the road where I caught the school bus. Then he’d continue on to work. He was so handsome—he had deep blue eyes just like you, and I loved it when all the kids on the bus saw me with him, as if they didn’t have a father as special as mine, and would be jealous. In school I’d make him presents and he’d put them up in his tool chest—I saw them there once, and he said, he said—” but here I feel such a wave of pain that I shake my head and start to tear up.

“It’s okay,” Doc says, “I can tell he was very special to you.”

“Yes.” I was surprised at the sudden surge of emotion—I hadn’t thought about him in such a long time. “Anyway, my brother—he was five and I was seven—was old enough for

kindergarten but didn't go. My parents kept him home. He had medical problems I never fully understood, so my mother watched over him and tried to teach him simple things—you know, like colors and shapes—as best she could. Momma spent an awful lot of time with him. We often played together, but he could be a handful. Once we were in our playhouse—daddy and I had built it out of bits of plywood and tarps—and Sammy got in one of his moods over something and pretty much trashed the inside. Then threw my favorite doll up in a tree. I was so mad I took him by the ear to see momma and boy, did she lay into me. Seemed a little unfair for me to get the blame all the time. But I was just a kid.”

“Did you love your little brother?”

“Yes, well, of course.” His question was so simple and I tried to think back, but it was so long ago. “I mean, I never really got to know him for very long—we were separated soon after that.”

“How did you come to be separated?”

“Do we need to get into all that?”

He nods.

I stare into a blue wall and know he's waiting, watching me squirm and rub my hands over my knees until I rock—he has to see this is hard for me, but he doesn't come over and hold me, he doesn't budge. He just sits there. I finally turn and glare at

him.

“I know you can do this, Tamie.”

“But I don’t feel so well, this is making me sick.”

“You’re making yourself sick. You can lie down if you want, but you need to tell me what happened.”

“But I might hear it—don’t you see? I don’t want it to find me here, where I’m safe, with you. How could I take that chance? You understand—I know you do.”

I feel bad—he’s trying so hard. Perhaps sensing my resistance, he ends our session after only forty minutes. If only I could keep him he would always protect me. We still have time left, though. I could invite him to the gardens—we could walk together and talk about other things, anything but this, and then feed my ducks. It would be good therapy—yes, I will ask him, but oh how woozy I feel when I get up to hand him his jacket and then I fall into darkness.

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I awake in bed, fully clothed except for my toes poking out from the hem of a quilt. I hear rustling noises coming from somewhere nearby and a cupboard door closes. And then my arms jerk back and I’m up on my elbows, staring in disbelief. It’s Doctor Myers, holding a cup, gazing at me from the doorway of my bedroom.

“I thought you seemed a bit tired, young lady—you took a

heck of a nap.” He walks over and hands me a cup of tea.

“Did I black out? In your office?”

“Yes, you fainted but I was close enough to catch you. You recovered but were very unfocused, let’s say. Your vital signs were good, but I still took a gamble by not bringing you into Duke’s ER. My assistant drove your car here. My hunch was right—you were exhausted and needed rest.”

I gasp when I look at my watch. “It’s almost three. Were you here with me the whole time?”

“Pretty much—someone needed to keep an eye on you. I wanted to monitor your sleep anyway. But you slept like a baby. Are you hungry? Because I’m starving. Let me treat you to dinner.”

I just stare, overwhelmed; he’s trashed the rest of his day for me. He’s taking risks and breaking rules, and though I feel I’ve failed him, for once I let myself breathe free, without guilt.

“Yes, Doctor, I would love that.”

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The restaurant is nearly empty at this hour, and the muffled sounds of Ninth Street seep into the soft clatter of a waitress setting tables. We share a white linen tablecloth and a slender vase with a single, red rose. He informs me that at our next meeting he’s going to try some relaxation and then regression techniques with me—that I have a serious blockage of sorts.

Then he says no more therapy for today, just normal, adult conversation. But nothing is normal, and I have to ask him something. I hesitate, repeatedly sipping water, but this could be my only chance.

“You know Doctor Myers, I am more than just my illness, more than just a patient. I have other feelings, and I know you are more than that suit and tie. I see it today. You go out of your way for me. Why?” For once he looks uncomfortable; I knead my napkin, waiting.

“Yes, I realize you are more than your illness, but it’s complicated.”

Complicated? Life is complicated. Not an answer. My heart starts pounding because what I’m about to say is out of line, but my selfish desire won’t let it go. “You must know by now how I feel about you—are you attracted to me, I mean, as more than just a patient—as a woman?”

My napkin is now balled up in my fist, and he covers it with his hands. “Tamie, you are special to me, but my only priority is to get you well, and nothing must get in the way of that. Sometimes I have to toss out the book and take risks, and my instincts in your case told me this was necessary. I want to remain your friend after all this, but first let’s get you feeling better, okay?”

My head drops and I nod because I know he’s right, but in

my fragile state the hurt is magnified and I simply stare at my plate. I feel his fingers under my chin, and I look up. I start to apologize but the waitress appears and we haven't even looked at our menus. We order while she waits, and when she leaves I resolve to keep our meal together a positive experience. I smile and tap the top of his hand.

“Tell me about your sports car—a Chevelle I believe you called it. Did you restore it yourself?”

We manage pleasant conversation over a deep, red wine and he pays for the dinner and then drives me home. He walks me to my door. I unlock it and turn to gaze upon him and he doesn't look away. Pushing into him, I squeeze my arms around his waist, my cheek pressing tight against his chest, his hands upon my back. I know I can't ask him inside so I hang on until he whispers, “I better go now, Tamie.”

\* \* \*

Another horrible two days. Always anxious, always fearful, and getting worse, I bounce from hope to despair within minutes. I have less than a week left before I return to work, before my coworkers stare and whisper and my supervisors watch my every move. My parents want to see me but I turn them away with excuses—they don't know I've been suspended. Nights are bad and last night was no exception; more dreams, the ringing, then staring out my living room window in the dark,

flipping a razor blade over and over between my fingers.

I get out of my car in jogging sweats. Doc wants me in comfortable clothes for this morning's session—he wants me to be relaxed. No makeup and my long hair is in a ponytail. He switched out with another patient to get our morning slot, and likely has canceled the next patient's appointment as well.

Too weary for decorum, I tell him, "I've missed you."

"I know Tamie, but you're here now and today we'll make some progress. I'm going to relax you and you are going to listen to my voice and nothing else. We are going on a walk together, so to speak, and I won't let anything harm you. So whatever you hear or feel or see, just let it come to pass. I'll be right by your side. Okay?"

He has me straddle a long, padded bench. He sits behind me. I feel his hands start to squeeze and rub my shoulders and also my upper arms and it feels so good. He takes his palms and works my spine and I have to lean forward and brace my hands on the bench he's pushing so hard. My body warms from all the friction and I'm becoming hopelessly aroused. He speaks to me in a low voice and I know he desperately wants to help, that this is not about seduction, and so I resolve to bury my desires and let his voice carry me wherever he wants to go.

He now sits in front of me. He begins massaging my temples and then all over my head and suddenly I realize he's

asking questions.

“Tamie, what’s a favorite memory from your first family?”

“Oh, everything about daddy. Yeah. He was so nice.

Everyday I waited for him to come home from work. He was sad sometimes, but I could cheer him up and he did the same for me. Kids in school would tease me because of my clothes and being shy, and I would come home all upset, and he would say they were just jealous, because I was so beautiful.”

“What about your mother?”

“She cried a lot. I think she was overwhelmed—with our poverty, my brother. He was so frail, not well from the get-go, and they spent a lot of time at the hospitals with him, then fussing over him at home. But especially her. I probably had no idea how much he suffered—don’t even know what became of him, my own brother.”

“Can you tell me what led to your family’s separation?”

There’s a jolt of revulsion in my body but I nod anyway. I’ll only do this for him because he’s a lovely man and because I know he’ll protect me.

“It was a summer day, and I was playing outside with my brother. But he must’ve wandered off, or I did—I can’t recall exactly. I do remember the cicadas and birds singing, the sunlight flickering up in the pines, and then I heard him scream. There was a path that led down to the river, and I found him

there, just standing and screaming, blood gushing down his head by the buckets. I grabbed his hand and led him back to the house and momma, she went crazy, yelling, ‘What happened, what happened?’ I was so scared I lied about not watching him—told her he fell and hit his head on a pile of junk. She washed and bandaged his scalp and then ran carrying him down the road to my father’s garage—with me scurrying behind, trying to keep up. We had to borrow a car to get him to the hospital.”

I pause, lost in the memories of that morning: my mother gasping for breath as she ran with him—his leg swinging from her body—and then that first, bitter taste of guilt. Exhausted, I had to stop and was left behind, and then I became aware of a vague presence lurking in the woods that bounded the road, watching me.

“I was just a little girl—I was scared too.”

“Yes, I’m sure you were. It was a traumatic experience, and we’ll talk more about that in a minute, but what happened at the hospital?”

“Oh, they stitched him up good and momma calmed down. But then the strangest thing happened. Daddy hugged me like he always did, thanking me for helping Sammy, but I didn’t feel a thing. It was like I was out of my body, somewhere else. I remember that feeling and I didn’t like it. Anyway, we were

told to stay, and these three people came into the waiting room and looked my brother all over and asked my parents all kinds of questions. There was a man and two women, and I'll never forget their faces. They even asked why my brother and I had no shoes on—well, we didn't wear them much in the summer. It was all down hill after that. Turns out they were from Child Protective Services, and soon they came to inspect our house and they didn't approve of anything they saw. No running water, no electricity, open flames, missing steps, piles of junk with sharp edges—it was all noted I'm sure. There were hearings, but one day the sheriffs came and took me and my brother away, just like that. There was no remediation offered far as I could tell—the judge ruled them to be unfit parents. Of course us kids had no say in anything. It was horrible.”

“I'm sorry you had to endure that experience, but I appreciate you telling me. It's difficult to relive these things but often it can be helpful.” He begins massaging my head again. “I want you to close your eyes, let go and relax, and listen only to my voice—I just have a few more questions. Tamie, did you or your brother ever have a tricycle, or a bike?”

“A bike?” Heat flashes up my neck.

“Yeah, you know, like many kids have bikes.”

“Well, I don't recall. We probably did—I don't remember.”

“You can remember other details from that day, but not if

you had a bike, that you ever rode a bike?”

I open my eyes as my stomach churns into a knot. I pull his hands away from my head and start to seethe. “I told you I don’t remember any bike. What do you mean by asking that, what’s that got to do with anything I’ve said?”

“The bell, on that little girl’s bike—at the gas station and in your dream. Remember? That’s what triggered your problems.”

I clench my fists. “What are you getting at?”

“There’s something you’re not telling me and it has to do with that bell. Now what might that be, what is it?”

My breath comes hard and fast as I begin to panic. “I’m going home, this session is over.” I jerk upright onto my feet and try to swing my leg over the bench but his hands grip my arms and I’m held fast.

“Tell me, Tamie, about the bike—what happened with the bike?”

And now I hear what I dread, in his office—my sanctuary, and he knows it. It’s loud and close and my brother is screaming—my yellow dress smeared with blood and I don’t know what to do. I try to push into him, to hide within his arms, but he holds me away. I struggle against him but I’m small and weak and now he’s yelling at me.

“Your daddy needs to know so he can forgive you, so you can forgive yourself. You were on that lane with the bike, with

your brother, weren't you? And you lost your temper, didn't you? You need to tell him what happened to your brother, how he got hurt—your daddy is right here, waiting. We can make things right—tell him, Tamie, tell him!”

“I did it I did it I did it!” My breath hisses through my teeth, the ringing and screaming stop, and I remember. Tears stream down my face. “He wouldn't get off my bike—he kept ringing the bell like he was going to break it and I got mad and shoved him. I'm sorry Daddy, I didn't mean to hurt him—please don't be mad at me, please.”

But daddy fades even as my fingers dig into his arms, and I collapse into Doc, sobbing in painful groans. Trying to catch my breath, I feel his warm hands cradle my head, then draw my face toward his. “It's okay sweetheart,” he says, “it's over now. Your daddy's not mad—he forgives you.”