

chapter 1

April 4

WHEN THE TELEPHONE WOKE her, Karen was dreaming...the soothing balm of her mother's voice, the fresh-scrubbed scent of her skin, the safe, enfolding warmth of her hand around Karen's. Though startled, she let go of the dream begrudgingly, preferring the death cheating feel of her mother, who'd passed away sixteen years prior, to the cumbersome dark of her bedroom, just a thought's breadth away.

The phone rang again.

And Karen sat up in darkness, aware of the dream taking a small, almost physical part of herself away with it—there was a palpable tug in her chest. But the tug became a tightness as she realized the hour. A ringing phone at three A.M. usually meant one of three things: a wrong number, a prank...or bad news.

Karen waited for it to ring again—and during that interminable pause, the worst catastrophes she could imagine marched through her mind. Was it her father? A wreck in that godforsaken pickup truck of his? But no...what would he be doing out at this hour? Besides, she'd said goodnight to him over the phone not five hours before. Maybe Uncle Ike had finally died, his heart—

The phone rang again, its intrusion somehow more insistent this time. Karen's hand fluttered out to answer it...then she thought of Cass, her best friend, who'd moved to Alberta a year ago. Was it Cass? The way she rodded around in that Camaro of hers...

Karen lifted the receiver in the middle of its fourth ring.

"Hello?"

A crisp male voice said: "Is this Karen Lockhart?"

"Yes." She had no idea who it was.

"This is Dr. Burkowitz calling, from the Civic Hospital in Ottawa."
Karen took a deep breath and held it.

"We've got a donor for you, Karen. They're working on him now, up north in Sudbury. We expect to be ready at this end by about five o'clock...that's just over two hours from now. Can you make it?"

"Of course," Karen said, a dozen conflicting emotions snapping at her heart. "I'll have my father drive me down." She swallowed dryly. "Where do I go once I get there?"

"Go through admitting. Someone will meet you there."

"Do I need to bring anything?"

"Just your hope," the voice said.

"Who is it?" Karen said, blurring the words. "The donor, I mean. I have to know who he is. How he..." What was the word for the state the donor was in right now? "How he died."

"We'll tell you all we can when you get here."

"Thank you," Karen said. "Thank you."

"Goodbye, Karen," the voice said.

Then there was only the dial tone.

She tried to find that hope as she dialed her father's number. For years she'd dreamed of this moment, this incredible chance. But when at last he came on the line and Karen explained what had happened, the only feeling she could clearly define was fear.

She packed in a kind of reckless frenzy, moving from closet to bureau and back again, stuffing into a suitcase items she would never really need. In her bedroom she knocked over the vanity stool with her knee, and when she hurried into her workroom to grab the manuscript she'd been working on, she elbowed one of her plants and it fell with a dusty thud.

By the time she reached the front door her heart was a creature of fury, battering the cage of her chest. She waited there for the sound of her father's truck.

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A quarter mile away, while Karen spoke with the doctor over the phone, Danny Dolan crept down the stairs of his mother's farmhouse. The pattern of two long rings had awakened him, and now he lifted the receiver—carefully, so as not to be overheard by the speakers. He was good at that; years of listening in on Karen's calls over the party line had made him good.

When he heard a man's voice a coil of quick, jealous rage tightened like a clock spring in his chest. But then the guy identified himself as a doctor and gave his news, and Danny's rage withered into something dark and unmaning. Lightheaded, he stood hunched in the shadows at the base of the staircase and waited. When the line went dead, he replaced the handset in its cradle and felt his way to the front vestibule, where a pair of patched coveralls hung from a hook behind the door. He took them down, pulled them on and thumped out barefoot onto the porch, letting the screen clap briskly in its frame behind him. He peered owl-eyed through the night toward Karen's wood-frame, a quarter mile west, but saw only dark against dark.

In the house the phone rang again, another familiar pattern, and a start slammed into Danny like a hammer blow.

She was calling her father...

And that meant it was true. He hadn't dreamed it.

Several times the pattern of three short rings repeated, and for a crazy moment Danny prayed Albert Lockhart wouldn't hear it—

he'd always been deaf as a post—and Karen would miss her chance.

But now the lights were on at Albert's farmhouse, a half-mile beyond Karen's, and the phone had stopped ringing.

Danny leaped off the porch and ran down the lane, cutting into the field at the gate. His stride through the stubby spring grass was long and he reached Karen's place in under a minute. From the willow at the edge of her property he had a clear, moon-sketched view of the house, which itself remained steeped in darkness.

He waited, his mind a whirlwind of dread.

Then Albert's pickup rattled into the yard and Karen appeared in the doorway, a suitcase clasped resolutely in one hand. She started down shakily, stumbled on the bottom step...then her father was there to help her.

They climbed into the truck and the truck sped away, its high beams knifing the night. Danny watched until the taillights faded to pinpricks, brightened briefly, and died. Then he turned and ran away.

The night swallowed him.

DR. SKEAD SAW THE donor for the first time in ICU at the University Hospital in Sudbury. Skead was the anesthesiologist on call. He'd had only four hours sleep in the past thirty-six and now he was cranky, feeling unfairly put-upon having to drag his ass in at two A.M. to anesthetize a dead man.

He waited until the big, hunched-over man at the bedside—the father, he assumed—had left, then he picked up the chart and got to work.

Skead didn't bother checking the donor's name. That was unimportant. What was important was the man's general state of health. That would determine how well he would tolerate the retrieval procedure. Once that was done, it wouldn't matter much anymore.

Standing at the foot of the bed, Skead scanned the medical history: white male; twenty-seven; single; unemployed; heavy boozier; heavy smoker; involved in a brawl out back of the Prospect Hotel on Elgin Street; acute subdural hematoma; admitted comatose, April 1, three days ago; hematoma drained, no improvement.

Sighing with fatigue, Skead glanced at the lean body on the bed.
Another loser.

Greasy black hair; blood-caked nose packed with gauze; lips swollen and raddled; endotracheal tube protruding from a gaping

mouth, each breath fed in by a mechanical ventilator; bile-filled nasogastric tube; Foley catheter leaking bloody urine.

Not a pretty sight.

Skead noticed a tattoo on the man's left forearm, a cobra coiled around a slim dagger, and he leaned in closer to read the inscription.

Live fast. Party hard. Die young.

Credo turned prophecy, Skead thought.

"Shall we get on with the nasty business at hand, Ed?"

Starting a little, Skead turned to face Ken Tucker, the surgeon who'd be removing the kidneys.

"Yeah," Skead said. "No time like the present." He waved a nurse over to help transport the donor to the OR. "Who's coming up for the heart?"

"The Ottawa team," Ken said, taking the chart and flipping it open. "And there's a real major-leaguer coming for the eyes. They're flying him in separately, in a Lear jet." Ken glanced at his watch. "Should be here any time now."

Ed regarded him curiously.

"German by the name of Hanussen," Ken said. "You might have read about him in *Time* magazine about a month back." Ed shrugged. "He's the guy who's done all the pioneer work in the field of whole-eye transplantation. Apparently he's had a string of successes over in Europe, decades ahead of anything we've got here. This'll be the first time the procedure's tried in North America. And I understand they've come up with a near-perfect tissue match. A twenty-eight-year-old woman, a writer."

A blind writer, Ed thought, bemused.

Ken returned his attention to the chart, leafing to the certificate of death, checking it for completeness. Thumbing next to the consent, he noted that it had been duly signed by the donor's

father. Ken was a cautious man. In a case like this, there was no room for error.

Satisfied, he started away. "See you in the OR, Ed."

"Yeah," Ed said. "Room five. Give me about ten minutes."

* * *

Bert Crowell had seen his son for the last time—lying whole and at least organically alive in his bed in ICU—and had felt nothing. That was the part which tortured him most: the not caring. He'd stood by the deathbed of his only child, searching his heart for even the faintest spasm of pain...but had found only relief. There was no sense trying to dress it up. His son had been a mean, self-thinking bastard whose life had come to a justly violent end. From the very outset the boy had lived at odds with everything his father held sacred and dear. Even in birth he'd shown his true colors, punishing his already frail mother through ten hours of labor only to suddenly pop out, minutes shy of the knife, robust and wailing. The boy's battle with the world had begun then, in the womb of a doting mother.

And it ended three nights ago, in a senseless, drunken brawl.

Sighing wearily, Bert Crowell climbed into his car. He drove out of the hospital parking lot and headed for home.

Dr. Tucker had called him earlier that evening to explain that technically Bert's son had died—that his brain was dead. He warned Bert that as long as the life-support systems functioned, his son's body would have the appearances of life, but that without it he wouldn't survive more than a few minutes. After offering his condolences, he told Bert the hospital hoped to obtain consent for organ retrieval—the deceased hadn't filled out

the release form on the back of his driver's license, so they needed a family member to sign.

When his wife, Eve, asked him who it was on the phone, Bert had lied. A problem at the smelter, he told her. He would have to go out.

They'd been forewarned of the gravity of their son's condition, that it was only a matter of time. But Eve had brushed it off, convinced her boy was just sleeping. "The Lord's sleep," she had told him solemnly. "And soon he will be re'wakened, cleansed and at peace in his soul."

Bert sighed again, his shoulders heaving under the weight of his anguish. He'd reached the traffic lights at Highway 69 South—the road out of town—and for a moment the urge to flee into the starless middle-night was almost overpowering. Then the light changed and he thought of Eve the way he'd known her, years ago, and the memory drew him homeward.

Donating the boy's organs was a chance, Bert had decided, to salvage something good from the wreckage. The doctors had told him to take his time, consider it carefully, go back home and discuss it with his wife. His son's body, they told him, could be kept viable almost indefinitely.

But Bert had signed the consent right away, without hesitation, excluding his wife from an important family decision for the first time in almost thirty-five years of marriage. His reason, although tragic, was simple enough. Eve had changed over the course of their lives together—changed for the worse. Her once moderate religious beliefs had taken on the sulphury flavor of fanaticism, and she'd drifted away from him, become someone he no longer knew or wholly understood. And Bert had known that, given her say, Eve would not have allowed the surgery. She'd have come up

with some cryptic Biblical quote, paraphrased it in her own zealous, self-serving way, and damned the whole thing.

So he'd gone over her head...and now he had to tell her.

Bert swung into the driveway and paused, heavy behind the wheel of his aging Chrysler, remembering dreams that had turned to regrets. Then he went inside.

Eve was there, sitting stiffly erect in her wheelchair, the bandaged domes of her arthritic knees pressed firmly together, her worn, leather-bound Bible laid open in her lap.

"You weren't at the smelter," she said. "I called."

Bert looked down at his feet. "I was at the hospital."

"Is he all right?" Eve said, her blue eyes suddenly bright with dread. "Is my baby all right?"

She was parked partway through the entrance to the living room, her grim face only half-lit in the darkened hallway. The light, yellow and flickering, came from the dozens of blessed candles she'd kept burning since the boy was injured. Behind her, Jimmy Swaggart crooned a scratchy, muted hymn on the stereo. It was almost four in the morning.

Bert paused in the vestibule, the urge to turn and walk away more compelling now than ever before. He'd thought of it often, how easy it would be to just cut and run, abandon his wife to her quotes and her tracts and her TV evangelists. But whenever he got close to actually doing it, the guilt would set in. He'd look at Eve and remember her as she had been—the wide, easy smile, that cute little notch in her turned-up nose, the round, inquisitive eyes cut from a clear summer sky—and he'd be powerless to do it. Something inside him kept hoping she'd go back to her old self, and someday soon they'd retire together, buy that mobile home, see a bit of the world before time finally planted them.

But in the haggard face that glowered at him now, Bert Crowell could see not even the faintest trace of the girl he'd once known.

"Is he all right?" Eve said again, Bert's silence catching at her mouth and twisting it.

Bert drifted toward her along the shadowy hallway, his shoes whispering over the worn runner. "No," he said before the light found his eyes. "He's not all right. He's gone."

"No."

"Yes, Eve," Bert said firmly. "He's gone."

Eve's face wilted. She clutched her Bible to her chest and her mouth began working around meaningless syllables; Bert got an absurd image of his wife speaking in tongues. Sick with pity, he knelt before her and took her hand.

"I have to see him, Bertrand," she said, sobbing miserably. "He isn't dead, he can't be..." She drew his face to her breast and Bert felt a warm surge of love for her. The Bible, smelling of dark leather, felt cool against his cheek. "He's my baby and I have to see him...I have to see him now."

This was the moment. "You can't see him now."

Bristling with fury, Eve took Bert by the ears like a recalcitrant child. "What do you mean I can't see him now? He's my boy and I *have* to see him. He's not dead, Bertrand...it's not possible."

Now, Bert thought. Tell her now.

But a part of him felt traitorous and ashamed, and the words lodged like gravel in his throat. In the ensuing silence, the grandfather clock at the end of the hallway bonged out the hour.

"The doctors asked me to sign some forms—" Bert began.

But before he could finish the clock struck four and Eve recoiled in her wheelchair, clutching her breast as if shot. Her head flew back and her face went gray, the cords in her neck bulging

horribly. Bert, stunned by this display, was certain she was having a coronary.

"Evie... ?"

"Oh, my God," she cried, her voice laced with pain. "I can feel..." Her body jerked once—

Then her eyes bore down on Bert like rifle barrels.

"What did you do?" she growled, each word tipped with poison. "What-did-you-do?"

"They said there were people who needed his organs," Bert said, fear spilling over him like slag. "So I—"

In a lightning-quick thrust Eve's hands curled into Bert's hair, grabbing thick handfuls and twisting fiercely.

"You did what?" she shrieked like something prehistoric.

And with strength Bert had never imagined her possessing, Eve wrenched his head back until their eyes met. He tried to pull free but couldn't, his balance in that moment pitched precariously backward. His eyes watered as he looked up in fear and awe at his raving wife.

"You did what?" she screeched again, her ice blue eyes screwed down to baleful slits. "You did *WHAT?*"

"Eve—"

With lethal speed Eve dragged a claw across Bert's face, opening furrows that reddened and wept. Bert half rose, stumbled, then toppled back heavily against the doorjamb, giving his skull a dizzying crack. In the swimming extremity of his gaze, the big mantelpiece portrait of Jesus eyed him with quiet benevolence—all seeing eyes of celestial blue, heart naked and aflame in a bracelet of thorns.

"*Murderer,*" Eve raged. She jerked her wheelchair forward, digging a footplate into Bert's ribs, lashing out again. This time Bert deflected the blow with an upraised arm.

"You've got to stop them. Stop them *now*."

Bert shook his head, tears still blurring his eyes. "It's too late."

"It is *not* too late."

Forsaking him, Eve wheeled sharply away, down the hall to the small back kitchen. Uttering prayers mixed with bitter condemnation, she picked up the phone and dialed in the flickering light of the range lamp.

"Oh please God I beg You damn this killing heathen hasten him on his hell bound path wield your Holy armor deflect the fiery darts of the fallen angel save my boy Your servant blessed issue—"

Then her whole demeanor changed. In a cadenced, controlled voice she said into the phone: "Give me the ICU please."

Bert rose to his feet, his face a stinging agony where Eve had clawed him. He moved to stop her, meaning to hang up the phone on her; then he thought better of it. Let them tell her. Perhaps the shock would settle her once and for all. He didn't regret what he'd done. The boy had been his, too. It was a good thing. Good from bad. Couldn't she see that?

He started into the stairwell, shutting out Eve's voice as she made her demands into the phone. At the top landing he paused and glanced into his son's bedroom, lit eerily now by the grinning Daffy Duck night-light Bert had bought for him twenty-five years ago.

It was a child's room still—stuffed toys with black-button eyes, stacks of dog-eared comic books, water-marked rocking-horse wallpaper, a football dimpled from lack of air...

Bert pulled the door shut, nauseated by the room's musty breath. He slouched down the hall to its far end, to his own room—Eve had shut him out of the master bedroom years ago—and lay down in the dark.

Far away, Eve's voice railed on.

After a while he got up and locked the door from the inside. For the first time in their long lives together, Bert Crowell was afraid of his wife.

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