

Chapter 6

When Dwayne arrived at his destination, he retrieved his package from the back seat, walked up to the house, and rang the bell.

The door was soon opened by a nicely dressed middle-aged woman. “Good evening, Dwayne.” She smiled. “Come on in. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Ramsey. How are you tonight?”

“I’m doing great. How about you?”

“I’m well. Here ma’am, I brought you something.” He handed her a flat box.

“Well now, what’s this?” she asked, opening it. “Oh my, strawberry cheesecake! Dwayne, this looks delicious, honey, but you didn’t have to bring dessert.”

“No, but I wanted too. I’m certain it will pale in comparison to your phenomenal culinary talents, but I’ve always been taught that it’s impolite to show up as a guest to dinner empty-handed.”

“My stars! You, sir, never cease to amaze me. And thank you for the lovely compliment. That was very sweet of you. Please excuse me for a minute while I put your cheesecake in the refrigerator.”

“Certainly. Take your time.”

“Cheesecake?”! A jovial man’s voice could be heard coming from the family room. “Did I hear someone say ‘cheesecake?’”

“Oh, Clark! Honestly!” Mrs. Ramsey laughed. “That was selective hearing at its finest.”

“It’s a special gift that we husbands have, Joleen.”

“Uh-huh. I hear ya, old man. Now get out of my way until dinner’s ready. Go say hi to

Dwayne. Take him to the game room or something for ten minutes. Maybe he'll be nice and let you win a game of billiards."

"Okay. I'll— Hey! What do you mean, 'maybe he'll *let* me win'? I shoot a good game of pool."

"Whatever you say, dear." She kissed him on the cheek as she hustled by. "Now scoot!"

Brushing off her wisecrack, Clark made his way out to the foyer to meet Dwayne. "Hey son, how ya' doing? Jackie's still upstairs primping. You know how women are."

"I heard that!" Joleen hollered from two rooms away.

"And she picks on me about *my* selective hearing." He rolled his eyes. "Would you like to shoot a game of pool, or just kick your feet up in a recliner and watch the idiot box for a spell?"

The mere thought of playing pool made him cringe, given how his arm ached. "I'd just like to watch a little television if that's alright with you."

"Sure. Have a seat anywhere you like."

"Thank you, sir." He eased himself into the closest chair. Just then, he got a whiff of something. "Mmmm, what smells so good?"

"Good as in 'food'? Or good as in 'weird'?"

"Good as in 'food.' But what do you mean by 'weird'?"

"The food that smells so good is the beef stew that Joleen's been slow cooking in the crock pot since this morning, and the weirdness you smell is one of those darn incense sticks she's got burning in here somewhere. I hate those blessed things."

"Oh, I'm familiar with incense sticks. My mother used to burn them too. I think her favorite was a scent called 'summer sunset.' No, wait. Maybe it was 'morning dew.'"

“That would be fine if Joleen purchased something with a pretty name like that. But Dwayne, I swear! The last thing that woman brought home smelled like it ought to have been called, ‘monkey’s ass!’”

Dwayne burst out laughing.

Clark raised his eyebrows. “I’m serious.”

Just then, a petite young lady emerged from around the corner, wearing an adorable sundress. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Oh my!” Dwayne popped out of his recliner, gazing at her long dark hair and big brown eyes. Swallowing hard, he tried to suppress the nervousness he still felt upon initially seeing her.

Jackie smiled, bit her lower lip, and then glanced downward before looking back up at him.

“Jackie, you’re— you’re so pretty,” Dwayne murmured in an airy voice of sincerity. “I mean, like... breathtaking.”

Jackie looked into his eyes and whispered, “I love you.”

Dwayne’s stomach filled with butterflies. “I—” his voice cracked. Embarrassed by the funny squeak that just escaped his larynx, he cleared his throat and tried again. “I love you too.”

She touched her hand to his cheek and smiled. “You can sit here and talk to daddy if you like. I’m going to go see if mom needs any help.”

“Okay.”

Jackie couldn’t have been gone for more than a minute or so when Joleen hollered, “Dinner’s ready!”

“Yes!” Clark jumped out of his recliner. “My two most favorite words in the world!”

Convening in the dining room, Joleen enjoyed watching the men drink in the mixture of

intoxicating aromas as they entered.

Even the table, itself, was a masterpiece: lacey trim embellished the outer edge of a fitted tablecloth; fresh, fragrant flowers composed the handmade centerpiece; and each place setting boasted warm buttermilk biscuits, a crisp garden salad, and a generous helping of beef stew — all accompanied by a glass of red wine.

“Whoa!” Dwayne gasped. “Mrs. Ramsey, you’ve outdone yourself. I’m speechless.”

“Speechless is fine,” Joleen replied. “People aren’t supposed to talk with their mouth full, anyway. So sit down and dig in.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Clark said, plopping into the closest chair.

“Huh-umm.” Joleen cleared her throat in order to get her husband’s attention. And when he looked at her, she nodded toward Dwayne, who was performing the old-fashioned custom of pulling Jackie’s chair out for her.

“So, did you get lucky when selecting your dessert?” Joleen asked. “Or did Jackie tell you that strawberry cheesecake is my favorite?”

“She didn’t tell me. I made a mental note of how much you and Mr. Ramsey enjoyed the Sykesville Strawberry Festival a while back. And when I was at the store, the bakery person recommended their cheesecake. So I guess you could say I merged the two thoughts.”

“Well, you did a fine job. I can’t believe you remembered me raving about the strawberry festival. That’s been ages ago. You’ll have to teach Clark how to make mental notes like that.”

“What are you talking about?” Clark asked. “I have a great memory.”

“Yeah, when it comes to how many home runs a player catches, you have a great memory. But not when it comes to things that matter.”

“Players don’t catch home runs, dear. They hit them.”

“I think he missed the point, mom.” Jackie giggled.

“No, he didn’t. Your father’s very sneaky. He’s just trying to avoid the question. Watch, I’ll test him.”

“Test me? But I don’t want to be tested! Since when did this become ‘pick-on-Clark night’?”

“When’s our Anniversary, Clark?” Joleen asked in a monotone voice, resting her elbow on the table, and her chin in her hand.

The poor man looked hopeless.

“Or how about my birthday?” She fired off a second inquiry.

“Who holds the record for most consecutive games played in baseball?” Dwayne asked, coming to his rescue.

Clark’s eyes lit up. “Calvin Edward Ripken Jr. Better known as Cal. Born 1960. The shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles was the American league’s most valuable player in 1983 and 1991. He broke Lou Gehrig’s streak of 2,130 consecutive games in 1995, and ended his own streak in 1998 at 2,632 consecutive games.”

Joleen rolled her eyes. “Amazing,” she muttered, taking a sip of coffee.

“Thanks for bailing me out of that one, Dwayne,” Clark said.

“No problem. I had to choose between throwing you a life preserver, or sinking your ship by joining in and asking you something crazy, like when *my* birthday is.”

“Well, thank you. I was starting to take on quite a bit of water, there.”

“Next week,” Joleen said out of the blue.

“What, mom?” Jackie asked.

“Next week,” she repeated.

“What about next week?”

“Dwayne’s birthday is next week.”

“No, it’s not. It’s... it’s... Hey, I don’t think you ever told me when your birthday is. *Is* your birthday next week, Dwayne?”

Dwayne peered over at Joleen. “Now how in the world did you know that?”

“Because I’m a mother. And mothers know everything.”

“So, it *is* next week?”! Jackie’s eyes widened. “But sweetheart, how am I supposed to buy you a birthday present if I don’t know when your birthday is?”

“You don’t need to buy me anything for my birthday. Presents are most special when they’re given as a complete surprise, anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

Jackie bowed her head. “Well, yeah... I guess so.” She pushed an abandoned pea through a puddle of broth on her plate. “But who does that?”

“I do.”

“Huh?”

“I do,” Dwayne repeated, reaching into his pocket, pulling out the skinny white box he’d retrieved from under his mattress.

“Is this really for me?”! Her eyes burst wide open. “But why?”!

“Like I said, regular people only give gifts on special occasions. But I like to give gifts just to say ‘you’re special.’”

“How sweet,” she whispered.

“How dear.” Joleen smiled.

“How ingenious!” Clark shouted, shattering the tender moment. “The boy’s a genius! That means he’s off the hook! He doesn’t have to remember any of those exact dates that you

girls get all goofy about, because he's covered his bases by buying presents randomly throughout the year! What a great idea!"

"You're hopeless, Clark." Joleen shook her head.

Jackie unwrapped her present. "A necklace! Mom, look! It's beautiful!"

"Wow, that *is* pretty! I love the heart pendant."

"That was very nice of you, son." Clark winked at him.

"Put it on, honey." Joleen looked around the room for her camera. "And Dwayne, you come over here and stand beside her. I want to take your picture."

Dwayne walked over and stood beside her.

Joleen looked through the lens. "Okay, say 'lovey-ducks'!"

"Say what?" Dwayne laughed just as she took the picture.

Joleen looked down at the screen display on the back of her camera. "Dwayne! What's wrong with you? Your eyes are closed and your face is all scrunched up like you got a horsefly stuck up your nose. Now smile right."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ramsey, but I was expecting you to say, 'say cheese.' You caught me off guard. Okay, I'm ready now."

Dwayne smiled nicely, and Joleen took another picture. "Got it!" She grinned. "Okay, you can go back and sit down now."

"Oh no he can't — not until I give him a kiss for my present," Jackie said, grabbing ahold of his arm.

"OWW!!" Dwayne cried out, dropping to his knees.

"Oh my God! Dwayne! What's wrong?!" Joleen stooped down beside him, placing her hand on his back.

Jackie cupped her hand over her mouth, her eyes widening in horror.

Clark sprung from his chair and raced to the young man's side. "Just keep taking deep breaths, son. Do you want us to call 9-1-1?"

"No." He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth.

"Can you tell us what's wrong?"

"I hurt my arm. It's sensitive," he replied in a wispy voice.

"How?"

"I— I hurt it." He tried making it to his feet.

"I know you hurt it. But *how* did you hurt it? What happened?" Joleen asked, helping him stand up.

Dwayne wiped his eyes, cleared his throat, and collected himself as fast as he could.

"Aw, you know how guys are, Mrs. Ramsey. We're always doing stuff, where we end up getting hurt."

"I know, but—"

"Pssst!" Clark got his wife's attention. He shot her a look to make her stop probing. "Can you make it back over to your chair, Dwayne?"

"Yeah." He hobbled to the recliner and sat down. Then his eyes drifted about the room until he located his girlfriend. "Jackie?" He whispered, licking his dry lips.

"Yes, sweetheart! What is it?"

"Jackie, can you come here a minute?"

"Oh, sure." She hurried to his side.

Everyone in the room held their breath, wondering what he was about to say.

"Jackie." Dwayne forced a smile to ease the tension. "You promised me a kiss a minute

ago, and I still haven't gotten it."

"Oh, Dwayne!" She giggled, breathing a sigh of relief, giving him his kiss.

Then Clark motioned for Joleen to join him in the kitchen.

Within seconds, Clark returned with an ice pack. "Jackie, your mother needs you in the kitchen a minute. Would you mind giving her a hand?"

"Oh sure. I'll be right back, Dwayne. You just sit there and take it easy." She left the room.

And then all became still. The two men were alone.

Dwayne sat in the recliner, and Clark on the sofa.

First, they just looked at each other.

Finally, Clark eased himself forward until his butt reached the edge of the cushion.

Leaning over, he rested his elbows on his knees and interlocked his fingers. But he still didn't speak.

Unable to take the silence any longer, Dwayne said, "Mrs. Ramsey's right, you know."

"About what?" Clark asked.

"About you being sneaky."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because, less than a minute after I collapse to the floor, you manage to empty the room of two women I scared to death; and you expect me not to notice. You're slick, sir. I'll give you that."

"Apparently not slick enough, though. I get caught every time."

Dwayne smiled, leaving an opening in their conversation. And Clark took advantage of it.

"Is it broken?" he asked.

“What? Oh, I didn’t—”

“Dwayne.” Clark closed his eyes and raised his hand. “Stop.”

“No, really. See, what happened was—”

“Dwayne! No.”

“What?”

“Don’t try to bullshit me. I may suck at being sneaky, but I can smell a bullshit story from a mile away. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now Dwayne, we’ve built a relationship based on many honorable values. And one of those values is ‘trust.’”

“Right. And...?”

“And I’m not exactly an advocate of keeping secrets, but we men have to stick together. Sometimes, we’ll learn stuff about each other that’s simply none of Joleen or Jackie’s business. And quite frankly, what happened to your arm is simply none of their business. They would just get all worried and make a fuss.

“And as men, it’s our job to minimize their worry, and to ensure they have harmony in their lives. Because, when the woman’s life is kept harmonious, the man’s life remains peaceful. Right?”

“Right.” Dwayne cracked a little grin.

“So, you see?” Clark slowed his speech. “It’s simply none of their business.”

“I understand.”

“But Dwayne...?” He looked him square in the eye.

“Yes, Mr. Ramsey?”

“You’ve become like a son to me. And I’m *making* it *my* business. Now, whatever I see under that shirt sleeve of yours goes nowhere. Nothing gets said outside of this room. You don’t tell the girls. I won’t tell the girls. But I *am* going to look at it and take care of you. Understand?”

Dwayne swallowed hard. “Yes, sir.” He raised his shirt sleeve, revealing a grotesque bruise containing blotches of deep purple.

He waited on Clark to freak out. But he didn’t. He didn’t even flinch. All he said was, “Let me see you wriggle your fingers.”

Dwayne successfully moved his fingers up and down, and curled them.

“How about your thumb?”

It also checked out.

“How about your arm? Can you bend it?”

Forgetting about his needle tracks, Dwayne bent his arm, exposing a long row of marks on the underside of his forearm.

Realizing what he’d done, he hurriedly straightened it back out.

But even then, Clark remained calm.

Dwayne’s mind was bursting at the seams with unanswered questions: Did he not notice the tracks because of all the bruising? Or did he see the evidence of his drug addiction, and just not say anything? But why? How could he not say anything?

Clark inhaled a deep breath, held it for a second, and then exhaled it through his mouth, blowing out his cheeks. “Well, I’m by no means a doctor, Dwayne, but I don’t think it’s broken. It’s going to be stiff and sore for a few weeks, but you should be fine.” Then he slid his butt back into the sofa and began watching television again.

Dwayne was speechless. He just stared at him for a few moments, until finally, he

couldn't take it any longer. "And...?"! he blurted out.

"And *what*, Dwayne? Look, I'm sorry, but I don't have a toy to give you for behaving like a good little boy during your visit to Dr. Ramsey's pretend medical practice, but if you go out to the kitchen, Joleen might have a cookie for you."

Dwayne looked at the man like he had three heads. "Huh! No, that's not what I—"

"Oh, and on your way back, bring me another glass of wine. I read somewhere that a glass of wine a day is supposed to be good for us old folks, so I figure I'll *double* the benefits by having two, right?"

"No. Uh, I mean— Yeah I don't know aren't you gonna bug me about how I screwed up my arm?"! he said without pausing between sentences.

"Nope," Clark replied, "but what I am going to do, is insist that you take the bottle of ibuprofen we have up in the medicine cabinet home with you when you leave tonight. Read the dosage instructions on the side of the bottle, then take twice that; it won't hurt you. It'll help reduce the pain and swelling. God knows Mr. Blackston probably doesn't keep any in the house."

"Mr. Blackston?" Dwayne murmured, knowing the name sounded familiar. Then his eyes became humongous. "Mr. Blackston! Mr. *Barry* Blackston! How do you know Barry? Better yet, how do you know Barry lives with—" Dwayne's mind surged into overdrive. Did Clark know about him living on the streets? Did he know his mom? Or about his past?

Suddenly, he felt sick.

"Aw, shit!" Clark dug around next to him in the sofa. "Here! Take this ice pack and put it on your arm; I went to the kitchen to get it for you, brought it back here with me, and then forgot all about it. See, that's what happens when you get old."

“Nice try,” Dwayne said.

“Nice try, *what?*”

“Nice try on avoiding my question, Mr. Slick. Now, how do you know Barry?”

“Dammit! I don’t know who’s more perceptive, you or Joleen. Alright, fine, Barry is one of my customers. He comes in to the garage to have his car worked on all the time.”

“Why’s he there so much?”

“Because he drag races on weekends, and ever since he had us put a NOS system in his car, it feels like he’s there every damn day.”

“That must suck. I can at least try to stay out of my house as much as possible, but you can’t stay away from your work.”

“You got that right. And Dwayne, you know me... I’m an easy going guy, right?”

“Oh, sure, Mr. Ramsey.”

“Live and let live, I always say.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean, shit, I’ve even been trying to watch my fuckin’ language lately.”

“And you’re doing a darn good job of it, sir!” Dwayne chuckled.

“But sometimes, I just want to shove that asshole’s head in a vice, draw it down tight on his skull, and jam a few screwdrivers in his eye sockets.”

Dwayne’s face lost all expression. He’d never heard Clark talk that way before. “Mr. Ramsey, that has got to be the wickedest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Wicked, huh?” Clark repeated the word from where he sat on the sofa. Then he forced a stern expression and stuck out his chest. “Yup, that’s my middle name. Clark ‘Wicked’ Ramsey!”

“I see,” Dwayne replied, raising his eyebrows. “Well, let me ask you this, Dr. Wicked, how did—”

“Oh, hey! I *really* like that!”

“Like what?”

“Being called ‘Dr. Wicked’!”

“That’s nice.” Dwayne ignored the digression. “So, how does Mrs. Ramsey know when my birthday is?”

“You happen to be dating our daughter.” He pointed to himself, touching his finger to his chest. “*My* daughter. Daddy’s little princess. Son, I check out anyone she spends a significant amount of time with.”

“Check them out? How?”

Clark picked up the television remote. He began channel surfing. “On the internet. There’s no such thing as privacy, anymore. Joleen pays a couple bucks a month to belong to one of those background check websites. All she has to do is enter someone’s name, and it tells her everything about them.”

For the second time in as many minutes, Dwayne felt sick to his stomach. “*Everything* about them?” He gulped hard, his heart racing.

“Yup. Everything,” Clark replied, never looking away from the television.

“So, you know all about my history, my family, my—”

“Yes. And the rehabs you’ve been to, your criminal record, the works. Hell, I can almost tell you when you last wiped your ass! Ain’t technology great?”!

“So, if you know all those horrible things about me, why are you still so nice to me? Why haven’t you forbidden Jackie from dating me?”

That question got Mr. Ramsey's full attention. He clicked off the television and turned toward Dwayne. "Many years ago, there was a young man who got wrapped up in the same things that are weighing on you right now. He couldn't hold a job, he had problems with alcohol and drugs, and he was in and out of jail more times than he could count.

"Nearly everyone who saw him judged him and deemed him worthless. But deep down, he was actually a very nice person. Not just a nice person, but a righteous, respectable, good-hearted person. A God-fearing individual who just had a lot of bad things happen to him. And those things led him to make some very poor decisions in life. But in spite of all that, there was one man who gave him a chance when no one else would. One man who believed in him when no one else did. And because of *that*, he managed to accomplish the impossible: he began to believe in himself. He grew strong and became confident. He got off the smack, cleaned up his act, and learned a trade. Ultimately, he turned his whole life around. He even ended up marrying the daughter of the man who believed in him, and they lived happily ever after. And do you know what, Dwayne?

"No. What?"

"That woman's father is Walt, my father-in-law; and the young man that he believed in, is *me*."

Goosebumps streamed down Dwayne's arms. "No way! Really?!"

"Yes. And now, the time has come."

"The time has come for what?"

"The time has come for me to pay it forward. You have a heart of gold. You make Jackie happier than I ever hoped she could be. I said you're like a son to me, and God as my witness, I have never spoken a truer word. You have some issues to work out, I know. Some of them, quite

serious. But look into my eyes when I say this.”

Dwayne sat erect in his chair. He looked into Clark’s eyes.

“I believe in you, son. I believe in you, and I welcome you into our family with open arms. It’s all up to you now. And you know what I mean. Look, you can do it. I’m behind you all the way, and I’m here for whatever you need, okay?”

“I... I don’t know what to say, Mr. Ramsey.” Dwayne’s eyes welled up.

“You don’t have to say anything. Actions speak louder than words. And if you ever decide that our little buddy, Barry, needs his attitude adjusted, you just let me know. I got some six-foot-tall, 300 pound friends down at the shop that would be more than happy to show him what it’s like to be on the wrong end of an unfair fight.” Clark pointed his remote at the television and clicked it back on. “I’m not insinuating he had anything to do with your injury, of course.”

“Pffft, no, of course not.” Dwayne rolled his eyes.

“I’m just saying, if you need me for anything at all, don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

“Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me.”

“No problem. Now go get the girls and tell them they can come back in. If they get to asking questions, we’ll just tell them that ‘it’s just a bruise, and you’ll be fine.’ And then I’ll change the subject really fast.”

“Uh, no offense, Mr. Slick, but let’s leave the crafty changing of subjects to me, shall we?”

“Smartass!” Clark chuckled.

“What if they ask us what took so long?”

“Eh, we’ll just say we talked about me borrowing your car tomorrow.”

“We’re gonna *lie* to them?”

“No, I really *do* need to borrow your car tomorrow, that is, if you don’t mind. Mine has to stay at the shop overnight because we’re only allowed to work on our personal vehicles at certain times, and I won’t be able to tear mine apart, and have it back together in just one day.”

“Oh, sure. You can borrow it anytime you need to. It’s going to embarrass you though, because it smokes a lot. And it may leave you stranded somewhere, so be prepared. And if it makes a bunch of clicking noises when you turn the key, just keep trying. It should eventually start... hopefully.”

“Okay. Thanks for the heads-up. And now it won’t be a lie when we tell the girls that we talked about me borrowing your car tomorrow.”

“Perfect. Okay, I’ll go get them. Besides, I still want my cookie for not giving Dr. Wicked a hard time during my doctor’s appointment.” Dwayne sniggered on his way to the kitchen.