

Epstein was startled by his caustic tone on the word, 'doc,' as if a source of acute pain lay hidden beneath.

"Charlie, are you considering harming yourself?" Epstein scrutinized as she asked, and watched him roll his eyes. Drawing a long, slow breath, he exhaled, opening them.

"What you're really asking is, do I want to kill myself?"

"Well - yes."

"I mean," he cocked his head, a wry smile forming, "seems like 'harming' myself," drawing air quotes with his fingers, "would be redundant, wouldn't it? I have enough pain for one life."

Dina nodded, listening.

"But, to your real question: do I want to *kill* myself? Depends. Do I want to die? Now, *there's* an idea."

"So, you DO want to kill yourself?"

"No, I'd probably just fuck that up, too. Doesn't mean I wouldn't welcome death."

"Why?" asked Dina.

"Why, not?" he snapped. "Truth is, I'm already dead."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you *think* I mean?"

"I don't know you, but you haven't answered my question. So, let me be more specific, and don't verbally joust with me. Tell me straight, do you have a plan to kill yourself?"

His stare had been alarming, angry, like a wounded animal. With this question, however, Charlie's eyes softened and he looked away. Dina knew he was calculating her possible reactions, based on his response. He bit his bottom lip hard, turning toward her.

"No," he offered, averting her eyes.

"Okay," she continued, "do you plan to harm anyone else?"

"No."

Silence – palpable – hung like rain suspended in a billowing dark cloud, while the second hand on the large clock above her desk ticked an audible cadence. Though Dina hardly believed him, she knew better than to badger him. If this was his answer today, perhaps he was safe...for today. Dina started to form her next question as she watched Charlie straighten himself, shifting his weight from left to right. He exhaled a long, heavy sigh.

“Had lunch with a friend of mine little over a year ago,” he began, “Two days later, he parked his car in a remote corner of his company’s parking deck...and ate a bullet.”

“I’m sorry,” Epstein feebly offered.

“You’re sorry? What *are* you talking about? You don’t even know me, let alone him!”

Epstein cleared her throat. “I mean, I am sorry you lost your friend. The two of you were close?”

“Close enough. He was a careful man who never did anything rash – never. Yet, two days later, he pulled the trigger.” Charlie shifted his weight on the couch as a searing ache vibrated from his lumbar up his spine, down his legs. “He had to have known, right? I mean, we’re sitting there, talking over pasta and salad, and there was *zero* indication he might be contemplating...*that*. Yet, he must have been – he had three kids and a lovely wife. Whatever compelled him to end himself, his behavior never gave a clue. He had to be thinking about leaving them behind. Or, not. Maybe that’s it – a man wakes up one day, looks around and says, ‘How did I get here?’ But ending it all? I never saw it coming.

So, good news, Doc – you might get lucky and never have to see *me* again!”

A chill vibrated down Epstein’s spine, shocked at the cavalier attitude of this man toward violence.

“Charlie,” she questioned, “where would *you* like to begin?”

“Dear God, I wish I could tell you – I honestly do. Sometimes I see myself in the mirror, and the only question that forms is, ‘How did I get here?’ Truth is, I get this overwhelming sense this is my...” he paused, “my destiny.” His gaze drifted out the window, fixed on the dormant apple tree in the courtyard.

Dina leaned tentatively forward, “How do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

More silence. Dina cleared her throat.

“Well, we can talk more about this when you’re ready. For the moment, I have some paperwork for you to complete. We could take care of this first...it’ll give you some time to collect your thoughts?” Epstein reached into the top rack of her desk organizer and lifted a packet of forms. She tilted back away from her desk, shifted her weight to her right, and leaned in Charlie’s direction.

“Here,” Epstein encouraged, “why don’t you begin by filling these out, and then we can talk. These may help you organize your thoughts. And please, don’t worry about it – many of my clients who come through my door the first time are also unsure where to begin.”

Grabbing the thick packet from Dina, he noticed a tattoo on her upper arm. His eyes explored her form...*another on her foot, still another smaller one on her lower neck.* Such tattoos were an inescapable reminder of Lizzie. Her involuntary gasp was audible. *Oh shit...I’m staring.*

“Are my tattoos bothering you?” she asked, reflexively standing, straightening her dress by sliding her hands from under her armpits all the way down to the bottom hem on her purple pencil dress. She saw how Charlie seemed drawn most to the tattoo on top of her foot. He stared at it, making Epstein quickly uncomfortable. She felt her face flush – an unfamiliar sensation.

“I was noticing the rose tattoo,” he said. “My daughter had a tattoo, same place on her foot. Hers was of a dove.”

“How old is your daughter, Charlie?” asked Dina.

“She would have been twenty-one in January.”