

Prologue

“Jack, are you okay? He’s not moving.”

“See what happens when you tell your stupid jokes?”

“I’m not kidding, Sandhar, something’s wrong.”

“Jack, come on.”

“Jack, you’re scaring us, please stop.”

“Hey, it’s not funny anymore. You’re making Colin even whiter than he already is.”

“Oh shit, I think there’s something really wrong with him.”

“You’d better get Bruce. Go. Jack, Jack. Come on, you’re freaking us out.”

“What’s going on in here?”

“I don’t know, he just stopped moving.”

“Jack, are you okay?”

“It’s like he’s frozen.”

“No, don’t touch him. Jack, talk to me. Are you feeling sick? Jack? He’s not responding. Jane! Could you please come in here?”

“Yes, Mr. Mullory?”

“Jane, I need you to call 911.”

“Oh my.”

“Tell them we need an ambulance. And find Jack’s emergency contact information. Jack, can you hear me?”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe he had a stroke.”

“With his eyes open?”

“Well how would I know?”

“You moron.”

“Guys, cool it.”

“I called 911, sir, they’re on their way. His wife Carol is listed as his primary emergency contact.”

“See if you can get her on the line. Hey, everyone, return to your seats, there’s nothing to see here. Jack, say something. Blink if you can hear me. Jack . . .”

PART I: CONCURRENT

Chapter 1

Joel Avery got up from his desk and looked out the window, checking the street in both directions. Where was she? She had never, ever been late. She always called up to him; hollered was more like it, drawing the stares of passersby and, now and then, causing a window elsewhere in the building to slam shut. But it was her game, and how could he refuse to play? She would shriek with laughter when he stuck his head out and peered down to the street below, where she would be standing by the front doors. He would wave for her to come up, and she would wave for him to come down. Depending upon his mood, or hers, she would either run up the stairs to his office for her session or he would go down to meet her, and they would talk as they walked the streets of the city. But right now she was nowhere to be seen.

He had been afraid this would happen. He made one last check of the street, then walked down to the front desk.

“Did you see Silly come in?” he asked the receptionist.

“Haven’t seen her all day.”

“I’m going out to look for her. If she comes in, please send her up to my office and call me on my cell.”

Joel made his way through the late summer heat to Downtown Crossing, then headed toward Boston Common. He often spied her as he walked to and from work, sitting on the grass of the Common with some of the other homeless people, particularly Rudy, Donny, and Danny, known as “The Trio.” Her name was Maria Salvatore, but she liked to be called Silly. Joel guessed she was in her mid-forties, but she had the mental acuity of an eight-year-old. One of his few homeless patients, Silly had been extremely introverted when she showed up one day at the Boston Community Center in dire need of food and a bath, unwilling or unable to speak or respond to questions. Joel had to coax her in like a stray kitten for care and counseling sessions. But after a few weeks of daily sessions with Joel, she opened up and soon was as lively and talkative as a happy child.

From the Park Street plaza, Joel scanned the Common. The Trio were lying in the shade of the tree on the circular patch of grass across from the fountain, their faces flush from sun and

likely a good dose of store-brand mouthwash. Rudy had his shirt off, exposing a mound of pale, dirt-smudged flesh rising between his belt and neck. Joel approached to ask if they knew where Silly was, but they were either asleep or passed out.

For the past five years, The Trio had formed a part of his daily life, a source of information about some of his patients and goings on in the neighborhood, an odd and rather unstable three-part barometer with foggy dials that could warn of approaching mental storms and rising pressures in the streets. But after today, they would just be three homeless alcoholics forming part of the gritty background of the plaza.

Joel entered the Common and the welcome relief of the shaded paths. A few couples lay on blankets, bodies close but not touching, the heat stifling intimacy, while rollerbladers and bicyclists whizzed past. He crossed Charles Street and entered the Public Garden, a tree and flower-filled park with paths that curved around an artificial pond in the center. The paddle-driven swan boats were chained to the dock on one side of the pond, and the ducks and geese sat dozing in the shade, their beaks nestled in the feathers of their backs.

He finally spied her, sitting alone in the shadow of a tall maple, her knees drawn up to her chest, rocking ever so slightly. He approached slowly and stopped a few feet away.

“Hi Silly,” he said.

Silly looked at him, then returned to staring straight ahead.

“Is it okay if I sit down?” he asked.

Silly continued rocking and staring.

Joel slowly dropped next to her on the grass. He wrapped his arms around his knees and looked at her for a few moments.

“You’re mad at me, aren’t you, Silly,” Joel said.

Silly remained silent.

“Not only are you mad, but I’m guessing you maybe feel a bit sad, too,” he said.

Silly’s eyes flicked up and away.

“You know what?” Joel asked. “I’m sad too.”

She glanced over at him, then looked away.

“I’m going to miss you and all my friends at the Center. But just because I’m leaving doesn’t mean we aren’t still going to be friends.”

Joel had always felt uneasy about that word: “friends.” They weren’t friends, and any suggestion of more than a counselor-patient relationship was inaccurate. But his use of the term and the suggestion of that social construct had allowed her to open up to him, and he never foresaw the problem it could create if he left his job or moved. *Note to self*, he thought, but it didn’t help her now.

“Did I do something bad?” Silly asked quietly.

“No, Silly, of course not,” Joel said. “It’s just that a change has come into my life, one that is taking me away from here. That’s all.”

“You don’t want to talk to me anymore.”

“Of course I want to talk to you. But I won’t be working at the Center anymore. I’m going to be talking to children, little children, who are sad and also need someone to talk to.”

His new job finally allowed him to break free of his entry-level world, the scraping and scrapping to sustain a life in the city. After five long years, everything was about to change. The timing felt right; it was 1999, the eve of a new millennium. There was a sense of optimism in the air, a feeling of the world racing forward. And he was not going to be left behind.

He looked at Silly’s face and immediately felt a stab of guilt. That was the flip side of all this, the feeling of abandoning his patients. When a patient had completed a course of counseling and no longer needed his services, the separation felt like a graduation of sorts, a victory. But with a full schedule of patients in various stages of counseling, he couldn’t avoid feeling as though he were turning his back on family members who needed his help. On the one hand, it was just a job, but on the other, it was one that involved individuals and relationships, an opening up and baring of both the soul and spirit, a connection most people didn’t experience in their daily lives with even their most intimate friends. The patients opened up and trusted that he would be there with them and help them along to the end of the treatment path. And now his decision to move on laid bare the truth that he was making money from this connection and was willing to break it for more. *Much* more.

“Do you remember Jan, the woman who works with me?” Joel asked. “You met her last week.”

The transition session Joel had set up to introduce Silly to Jan, her new counselor, had not gone well. Silly had refused to look at or speak to Jan and even stopped talking to Joel for most of the session.

“Jan told me she is very interested in getting to know you. She likes talking even more than I do. Can you believe that? Remember when you called me a big blabbermouth because you said I talked too much? Jan is an even bigger blabbermouth, so you’ll have to do quite a bit of talking yourself to keep up.”

“I don’t want to talk to Jan,” Silly said quietly.

Joel reached over and put his hand on her arm. “Silly, you are going to be fine. Remember how I told you the same thing when you wanted to talk to Danny, and you didn’t believe me? And then you did talk to him and you were fine and now you’re friends? Well that’s how it’s going to be this time, too. Before long, you and Jan will be friends, too.”

He glanced at his watch. He would have to start heading back if he was going to be on time for his next patient.

“I have to go now, Silly. I wish I could stay longer and talk more but it’s someone else’s turn. But I’m sure I’ll see you again, Silly.”

Silly slowly turned her head and looked at him. “You will?”

“Sure,” Joel said, suddenly uneasy.

“You promise?”

Joel paused. He found himself at a line, a clear one, that he knew he should not cross. And he knew the right answer to her question—*no, I cannot promise that I’ll see you again. I’m no longer your counselor. Our relationship is over*—but couldn’t bring himself to say it. Not to Silly.

“Yes, I promise.”

And he would, he told himself. In the coming weeks and even months, he would make the time to walk the few blocks from where he lived and check in and talk. It would be good for her and make for a gentler transition. No biggie.

Joel studied Silly’s face, looking for some sign of understanding. Her expression didn’t change. He unclasped his arms and started to get up. Silly suddenly turned and threw her arms around him, squeezing him tightly, burying his face in locks of unwashed hair. Joel brought his arms up around Silly.

“I’ll miss you too,” Joel said.

Silly released him, looked at him for a moment, then jumped up and ran off into the Garden.

Joel watched her go, relieved at the closure. He had been worried about how their last session would go, but with that final gesture from her, and despite a few remaining patients, Joel finally felt freed from his old life and that his new one had already begun.

Chapter 2

They descended the hill smoothly, so smoothly he felt as if he were floating. Although his eyes were closed, he knew the path was rocky and muddy, winding through mortar-gouged earth and the shattered stumps of blasted vegetation; lying on the stretcher, though, he didn't feel a jolt or a bounce. And all was strangely silent, eerily so, as they made their way down. Had he left the theater of battle that quickly? He tried to open his eyes, but the lids were just too heavy.

At least he was alive. How badly injured he couldn't tell. He felt numb; shock, he figured. He'd heard of men in shock walking on mangled ankles when their feet had been blown off, others carrying on with holes punched through their torsos seemingly unaware until the blood loss caused them to collapse. Or had he actually seen it? He couldn't remember. . . .

He felt a slight bump, as though he was in a plane that gently touched down on a grass strip. Was he being flown to a field hospital? But that wasn't possible. He was being carried. They must have reached the bottom of the hill.

They were on level ground now. He could tell as he no longer felt the faint sensation of falling in his stomach. And then a sudden rush of noise. Like flowing water, or the surf. The call of seagulls. Were they near the ocean?

He heard the sound of metal doors being unlatched and creaking open. Felt a jolt. A scraping of metal. Doors closed. Silence.

A siren blared. An air raid? They needed to find cover! Why were they just sitting there? *Move! Move!* They finally started moving, but the air raid siren never diminished. How could that be? How could the siren be following them?!?

Bracing himself, he listened to the wail and counted the seconds ticking by, each one that didn't end in a sudden flash and roar and then blackness a gift. For he didn't want to die. He had to try again. He had to get another chance. He had come so close. His objective had been right there, *right in front of him*. . . . He had to get over that hill to deliver his message, one that would not just save lives, but turn the tide of the war.

He couldn't fail. He had to try again. There just had to be a way. . . . He visualized the hill and all its approaches as he jostled along, in the darkness, the siren pressuring his ears.

Sudden silence.

The doors creaking open. Light. Fuzzy shapes. Movement. The sun; he could tell from the way his eyelids turned bright orange.

They made it. He was alive. A wave of relief washed over him. But then the realization settled back upon him, pressing down as though he were at a great depth in the ocean. He had failed. He would rejoin the masses, nothing more than a number. And when standing in sight of the General, he would not stand out; worse than that, he would not even be seen.

He had to get back. He had to try again. He opened his eyes and tried to raise his head, but it was so heavy. And the light was too bright. He closed his eyes. He tried to feel his limbs, feel his wounds. . . .

“His eyes opened for a moment, he’s starting to come out of it. Jack, can you hear me? Jack. No, don’t try to sit up. Just relax, you’re going to be all right.”

What was that sound? Those impacts. Distant cannon fire? He could feel vibrations. He couldn’t move his arms but he could feel the shells exploding. Is that screaming? Footsteps, he realized. Just footsteps. But they were so loud. And the screaming; just the wind. Everything was just so loud. . . .

He was still on the stretcher, moving. Then the light suddenly dimmed and everything quieted. He opened his eyes. He was inside now, in a hospital, moving through hallways, guided by a medic.

He closed his eyes. Darkness and silence.

But then he heard a voice. *You failed*, it whispered. *You had your chance and you failed. You are not like him. You are not one of them.* The voice continued, repeating over and over.

No, he thought. No, he would try again. He would succeed. He needed the voice to stop. Please stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! He squeezed his eyes closed even tighter, trying, but failing, to silence the whisper.

Chapter 3

The sun was long gone by the time Joel's last patient had left and he had completed his evaluations. Jan had already gone, so Joel slid the final session notes under her office door. He descended the stairs, his normal weariness replaced by a lightness in his steps. He headed down the central hallway toward the door at the end, which stood ajar.

Dr. Maureen Connelly, the head administrator of the Center and his boss, was at her desk writing, looking down through bifocals perched low on her nose. Joel knocked lightly on the door with his knuckle. Dr. Connelly continued writing, then pounded a final period on the page and looked up. Her mouth turned up into a smile, but her eyes did not mirror the sentiment.

"So this is it," she said, her voice betraying a hint of resignation.

Joel nodded slowly. "The sessions are finished for the day, and I slid the notes under Jan's door. She has all the files and has met each patient. Everything is in place."

She stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. "As usual, you've exceeded my expectations."

"How so?" Joel asked.

"Joel," she said, in a tone of not-completely feigned exasperation. "It's Wednesday. Your job technically ended last Friday. Who stays beyond their end date?"

"I had to finish the transitions," Joel said.

"And you worked the crisis line this past weekend?"

"Everyone else was out of town. You know how summer is—everyone flees to the Cape or Nantucket."

"Joel, you're the only person I know who has ever shown up for work after eating their farewell cake."

"Thanks again for that," Joel said. "And the little party. I appreciate it."

"How could we not? You're one-of-a-kind, Joel." She stared at him for a moment, then motioned with her head. "Come in and sit for just a minute. I have something for you."

He pushed himself off the doorframe with his shoulder and dropped onto a chair.

From one of the drawers of her desk, Dr. Connelly pulled out a slim green hardcover book with gold letters on the cover.

"You recognize this?" she asked.

His eyes widened in surprise. “My master’s thesis.”

“You submitted this copy for our review when you applied for the job five years ago.” She looked down at the cover. “*Family, Tribe, and Island: An Evolutionary Approach to Universal Needs Structure and Identification in Counseling*. Do you remember what your thesis was about?”

“Of course. The basic needs of a patient can be met from the support structures found in families, from the meaning to their existence provided by their tribe, and from a stable island, their ethno-geopolitical construct, that, when static, provides stability and comfort against the unknowns and unfamiliar of the wider world.”

“Very good. And the material itself is quite engaging. But do you know what I find most interesting about this book?”

Joel shook his head.

“That you never asked for it back.” She looked at the book and then up at him. “How many of these do you have in your possession?”

Joel thought for a moment. “None actually. UMass made three copies: one for their library, one I gave to my mom that I borrowed to lend to Schneider & Associates, and the one in your hands.”

“Only three copies exist, and you have none of them. Any idea why that is?”

Joel thought for a moment. In the abstract, it was an interesting observation. That book contained two years of study and represented the sum of his graduate efforts. He thought a moment more, then gave up; he was too tired to figure it out. He shook his head.

“Most people who write something like this,” Dr. Connelly said, “stretch outside themselves to create it. They search around to find a topic, usually related to something they studied that they found fascinating, and they think up some big idea that they then explore, as though taking a journey through a distant land. And when they finish, when they finally pass in the final draft and get their passing mark, they return to the cognitive landscape they inhabited before writing the thesis. They go back to being themselves. And every copy becomes so precious, for it stands, completely on its own, as a first significant achievement in their field. But you didn’t ask for this back because what you wrote was simply an extension of yourself. Everything contained in these pages was already inside of you, part of you. You didn’t think to ask for the book back because in a way you already had it.”

She held out the book and Joel took it.

“You know Joel, when you gave notice, I told you I was very happy for you, and I am. It is great to see someone of your talent keeping an eye out for opportunities to learn and grow. However. . .” Dr. Connelly paused, then continued. “I was not completely honest with you about how I felt, and I want to give you a piece of advice. I know you have a high opinion of Doctors Schneider, Torini, and Nevill. But you need to understand something about them. To them, this is a business, not a profession.”

He had suspected she wasn't thrilled with the practice he was joining, and now he knew why. “But like I told you, they're research-focused,” he protested. “The study they're launching is designed to reduce the amount of medication children receive. And it takes money to fund the research.”

“Of course it does. Just look at this place and you'll see why we aren't on the leading edge.” Dr. Connelly smiled, but it quickly evaporated. “But haven't you wondered why they aren't affiliated with a university?”

“Not really, no. They formed a private practice, and I guess that's how they operate,” Joel said defensively. “They simply balance research and practice.”

“I know you see this as your opportunity to shine, to contribute something meaningful to the field. And that's wonderful, and I do wish you the best and great success. All I'm saying is that sometimes when we reach for stars, we can become so focused on the lights in the heavens that we don't realize what we're using as the ladder.

“Joel, I'm not trying to give you a hard time here. I'm sorry for how this all sounds. This is not quite the way I wanted to say goodbye. You have been a wonderful part of our family for the past five years. And you deserve nothing but thanks. And further, you care for your patients—individually, personally, sincerely, and deeply. But if I didn't say something, I would deeply regret it. I care too much for you and would hate to see your talent go to waste. You have such a rare gift for calming chaos within, for giving gray lives rainbow hues. And I just want to make sure you see that, that you recognize how talented you are and, more importantly, are fully aware of the choices you are making, for time only moves in one direction.”

“I understand,” Joel said, “and I do appreciate what you are saying.”

“I know you do. And I don't mean to sound like a mother. But I had to say it. Thank you for listening. And please know that you'll always have a place here,” she said. “I'm sure it

doesn't pay a *quarter* of what you'll be making now, and a community health center isn't quite as, well, glamorous."

Joel glanced around the office and grinned.

Dr. Connelly smiled. "I know; this place *is* a real dump. But it's not how we look to others, it's what we do for them. Honestly, if you ever want your office back, don't hesitate to call."

"I will," Joel said. "And thank you for everything."

She rose from her chair and came around her desk. Joel stood and extended his hand. She took his hand and pulled him into a brief hug.

"You're a good kid, Joel. Don't be a stranger. Now get outta here."

Joel left the Center and headed through Downtown Crossing toward home. People clutching briefcases and laptop bags emerged from every direction, homing in on the T station entrances. The department stores were in the process of closing, shooing out the last few stragglers and bolting the doors.

At the end of the street, Joel stopped and looked back. The Center had been a great first job, even though the patient needs were incessant, the place underfunded, his days ending only when he was too tired to think. But he could spend his entire career in that building, treating patient after patient, and in forty years he would just be a worn-out counselor using dated methods, his only contribution to the grander scheme a bit more happiness—or, in many cases, just a bit less misery—for a few thousand people. It was a difference, yes, but only a small and ephemeral difference, granular and limited, one that only persisted while his patients were still alive.

Now he had the opportunity to do more than that, to make a difference in the field, to make his daily fight—one fought patient by patient—a larger battle, a full-scale war, one that he would win for everyone, now and in the future.

And there was nothing wrong with getting a decent wage, having all appointments scheduled, having weekends free, and not having to work overnight crisis support shifts. So what if he was going to make more than the colleagues he was leaving behind? Just because his new firm was a private practice didn't mean he was going to provide a different level of care. He had done everything humanly possible for his patients at the Center and had no plans to do things

differently for his new patients. Connelly was right: time did go in one direction, and it was time to move on.

Chapter 4

Jack forced his eyes open, pulling himself out of the darkness. He was in a room.

A man in white came in. He talked to the medic who had wheeled him in. Their voices were muffled. The medic had something in his hand. A radio?

Give me the radio, he thought. He tried to say it, but he found it hard to move his tongue. *Hand me the receiver*, he tried to say. The medic looked at him, but he didn't know if he said the words aloud. *I just need to call the General. I need to let him know why*. Jack moved his hand. I'm okay, he thought. I just need to get up.

“Hey, easy now, Jack. Hold on. Alec, I need you in here.”

A large man in white came into the room.

“Can you please apply the restraints?”

What? Hold on a minute. . . .

Leather belts wrapped Jack's torso, arms, and legs.

Wait! Whose side are you on? *No!* He struggled against the straps.

“Nurse.”

A woman in white entered the room.

“Give him 10 cc's of lorazepam. I'll be right back.”

“Yes, doctor.”

What is that needle? No! Get it away from me!

She pushed it into his arm. He felt nothing. And then the darkness started to return. *No!* *No!* Can't succumb to it. Must get back. . . .

Jack had no idea how long he'd slept. But he heard someone familiar speaking.

“Jack, can you hear me? It's me, Carol. Jack. Jack!”

He struggled to open his eyes. But everything was so heavy. And it felt so nice, finally, to rest, to clear his mind.

To silence the Voice.

“Are you his wife? Hi, Dr. Richard Andersen. Sorry, we just administered a sedative. But it's temporary. Why don't you come into my office and we can talk. We'll have you back in here before he wakes up again.”

No, don't go. Stay with me.

The Voice swirled up like a gust of chilling wind. *She can't help you. She doesn't even know. You didn't tell her.*

Stop! Stop! Stop! Someone, please, help me. . . .