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Ben (IV)

It was ten past nine on Sunday morning—a bright, sun-washed Sunday morning—and Ben was beginning to get seriously worried about Susan when the phone by his bed rang. He snatched it up.

“Where are you?”

“Relax. I’m upstairs with Matt Burke. Who requests the pleasure of your company as soon as you’re able.”

“Why didn’t you come—”

“I looked in on you earlier. You were sleeping like a lamb.”

“They give you knockout stuff in the night so they can steal different organs for mysterious billionaire patients,” he said. “How’s Matt?”

“Come up and see for yourself,” she said, and before she could do more than hang up, he was getting into his robe.

TWO

Matt looked much better, rejuvenated, almost. Susan was sitting by his bed in a bright blue dress, and Matt raised a hand in salute when Ben walked in. “Drag up a rock.”

Ben pulled over one of the hideously uncomfortable hospital chairs and sat down. “How you feeling?”

“A lot better. Weak, but better. They took the I.V. out of my arm last night and gave me a poached egg for breakfast this morning. Gag. Previews of the old folks home.”

Ben kissed Susan lightly and saw a strained kind of composure on her face, as if everything was being held together by fine wire.

“Is there anything new since you called last night?”

“Nothing I’ve heard. But I left the house around seven and the Lot wakes up a little later on Sunday.”

Ben shifted his gaze to Matt. “Are you up to talking this thing over?”

“Yes, I think so,” he said, and shifted slightly. The gold cross Ben had hung around his neck flashed prominently. “By the way, thank you for this. It’s a great comfort, even though I bought it on the remaindered shelf at Woolworth’s Friday afternoon.”

“What’s your condition?”

“‘Stabilized’ is the fulsome term young Dr Cody used when he examined me late yesterday afternoon. According to the EKG he took, it was strictly a minor-league heart attack…no clot formation.” He harrumphed. “Should hope for his sake it wasn’t. Coming just a week after the checkup he gave me, I’d sue his sheepskin off the wall for breach of promise.” He broke off and looked levelly at Ben. “He said he’d seen such cases brought on by massive shock. I kept my lip zipped. Did I do right?”

“Just right. But things have developed. Susan and I are going to see Cody today and spill everything. If he doesn’t sign the committal papers on me right away, we’ll send him to you.”

“I’ll give him an earful,” Matt said balefully. “Snot-nosed little son of a bitch won’t let me have my pipe.”

“Has Susan told you what’s been happening in Jerusalem’s Lot since Friday night?”

“No. She said she wanted to wait until we were all together.”

“Before she does, will you tell me exactly what happened at your house?”

Matt’s face darkened, and for a moment the mask of convalescence fluttered. Ben glimpsed the old man he had seen sleeping the day before.

“If you’re not up to it—”

“No, of course I am. I must be, if half of what I suspect is true.” He smiled bitterly. “I’ve always considered myself a bit of a free thinker, not easily shocked. But it’s amazing how hard the mind can try to block out something it doesn’t like or finds threatening. Like the magic slates we had as boys. If you didn’t like what you had drawn, you had only to pull the top sheet up and it would disappear.”

“But the line stayed on the black stuff underneath forever,” Susan said.

“Yes.” He smiled at her. “A lovely metaphor for the interaction of the conscious and unconscious mind. A pity Freud was stuck with onions. But we wander.” He looked at Ben. “You’ve heard this once from Susan?”

“Yes, but—”

“Of course. I only wanted to be sure I could dispense with the background.”

He told the story in a nearly flat, inflectionless voice, pausing only when a nurse entered on whisper-soft crepe soles to ask him if he would like a glass of ginger ale. Matt told her it would be wonderful to have a ginger ale, and he sucked on the flexible straw at intervals as he finished. Ben noticed that when he got to the part about Mike going out the window backward, the ice cubes clinked slightly in the glass as he held it. Yet his voice did not waver; it retained the same even, slightly inflected tones that he undoubtedly used in his classes. Ben thought, not for the first time, that he was an admirable man.

There was a brief pause when he had finished, and Matt broke it himself.

“And so,” he said. “You who have seen nothing with your own eyes, what think you of this hearsay?”

“We talked that over for quite a while yesterday,” Susan said. “I’ll let Ben tell you.”

A little shy, Ben advanced each of the reasonable explanations and then knocked it down. When he mentioned the screen that fastened on the outside, the soft ground, the lack of ladder feet impressions, Matt applauded.

“Bravo! A sleuth!”

Matt looked at Susan. “And you, Miss Norton, who used to write such well-organized themes with paragraphs like building blocks and topic sentences for mortar? What do you think?”

She looked down at her hands, which were folding a pleat of her dress, and then back up at him. “Ben lectured me on the linguistic meanings of can’t yesterday, so I won’t use that word. But it’s very difficult for me to believe that vampires are stalking ’salem’s Lot, Mr Burke.”

“If it can be arranged so that secrecy will not be breached, I will take a polygraph test,” he said softly.

She colored a little. “No, no—don’t misunderstand me, please. I’m convinced that something is going on in town. Something…horrible. But…this…”

He put his hand out and covered hers with it. “I understand that, Susan. But will you do something for me?”

“If I can.”

“Let us…the three of us…proceed on the premise that all of this is real. Let us keep that premise before us as fact until—and only until—it can be disproved. The scientific method, you see? Ben and I have already discussed ways and means of putting the premise to the test. And no one hopes more than I that it can be disproved.”

“But you don’t think it will be, do you?”

“No,” he said softly. “After a long conversation with myself, I’ve reached my decision. I believe what I saw.”

“Let’s put questions of belief and unbelief behind us for the minute,” Ben said. “Right now they’re moot.”

“Agreed,” Matt said. “What are your ideas about procedure?”

“Well,” Ben said, “I’d like to appoint you Researcher General. With your background, you’re uniquely well fitted for the job. And you’re off your feet.”

Matt’s eyes gleamed as they had over Cody’s perfidy in declaring his pipe off-limits. “I’ll have Loretta Starcher on the phone when the library opens. She’ll have to bring the books down in a wheelbarrow.”

“It’s Sunday,” Susan reminded. “Library’s closed.”

“She’ll open it for me,” Matt said, “or I’ll know the reason why.”

“Get anything and everything that bears on the subject,” Ben said. “Psychological as well as pathological and mythic. You understand? The whole works.”

“I’ll start a notebook,” Matt rasped. “Before God, I will!” He looked at them both. “This is the first time since I woke up in here that I feel like a man. What will you be doing?”

“First, Dr Cody. He examined both Ryerson and Floyd Tibbits. Perhaps we can persuade him to exhume Danny Glick.”

“Would he do that?” Susan asked Matt.

Matt sucked at his ginger ale before answering. “The Jimmy Cody I had in class would have, in a minute. He was an imaginative, open-minded boy who was remarkably resistant to cant. How much of an empiricist college and med school may have made of him, I don’t know.”

“All of this seems roundabout to me,” Susan said. “Especially going to Dr Cody and risking a complete rebuff. Why don’t Ben and I just go up to the Marsten House and have done with it? That was on the docket just last week.”

“I’ll tell you why,” Ben said. “Because we are proceeding on the premise that all this is real. Are you so anxious to put your head in the lion’s mouth?”

“I thought vampires slept in the daytime.”

“Whatever Straker may be, he’s not a vampire,” Ben said, “unless the old legends are completely wrong. He’s been highly visible in the daytime. At best we’d be turned away as trespassers with nothing learned. At worst, he might overpower us and keep us there until dark. A wakeup snack for Count Comic Book.”

“Barlow?” Susan asked.

Ben shrugged. “Why not? That story about the New York buying expedition is a little too good to be true.”

The expression in her eyes remained stubborn, but she said nothing more.

“What will you do if Cody laughs you off?” Matt asked. “Always assuming he doesn’t call for the restraints immediately.”

“Off to the graveyard at sunset,” Ben said. “To watch Danny Glick’s grave. Call it a test case.”

Matt half rose from his reclining position. “Promise me that you’ll be careful. Ben, promise me!”

“We will,” Susan said soothingly. “We’ll both positively clank with crosses.”

“Don’t joke,” Matt muttered. “If you’d seen what I have—” He turned his head and looked out the window, which showed the sunshanked leaves of an alder and the autumn-bright sky beyond.

“If she’s joking, I’m not,” Ben said. “We’ll take all precautions.”

“See Father Callahan,” Matt said. “Make him give you some holy water…and if possible, some of the wafer.”

“What kind of man is he?” Ben asked.

Matt shrugged. “A little strange. A drunk, maybe. If he is, he’s a literate, polite one. Perhaps chafing a little under the yoke of enlightened Popery.”

“Are you sure that Father Callahan is a…that he drinks?” Susan asked, her eyes a trifle wide.