

IN SESSION

DR. MORGAN SNOW

WITH

STEVE BERRY'S
COTTON MALONE

LEE CHILD'S
JACK REACHER

BARRY EISLER'S
JOHN RAIN

SHORT STORIES BY

M.J. ROSE

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In Session:
Dr. Morgan Snow with
Steve Berry's Cotton Malone,
Lee Child's Jack Reacher
&
Barry Eisler's John Rain
Written by M.J. Rose

From the Files of Dr. Morgan Snow

I have been privileged to be a sex therapist at the Butterfield Institute—one of New York City's most highly respected sex clinics—for more than twelve years. In that time I've been given the gift of having my patients open up to me and share their deepest fears and desires, thereby affording me the opportunity to help them find out more about who they are and why they are.

I've seen everything from the abused to the depraved, from the couples grappling with sexual boredom to twisted sociopaths with dark, erotic fetishes, and the Butterfield Institute is the sanctuary where I help soothe and heal these battered souls.

Occasionally I meet people who aren't patients but who touch my life in some special way, or who see into my own darkness and shine some light on my troubles or fears—even when they don't know it. And to them I am eternally grateful.

I

EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

Cotton Malone

“So how can I help you?” I asked.

The woman sitting opposite me seemed nervous, and I could tell she wasn't accustomed to that emotion. Everything about her whispered class and money—from the Chanel ballet slippers to the luxe cashmere jacket. She'd called two days before saying a former patient had referred her. Only in town for two weeks, she'd explained, and she really needed to see me. When I explained I was booked up with regulars, she offered to take any cancellations no matter what the time of day.

“The problem isn't mine,” she said, in a slightly accented voice, Spanish or Moroccan, at the start of our first visit.

“That's okay.”

And I offered an encouraging smile.

I was used to this opening gambit. Many people who visit sex therapists are embarrassed to own the problem that's made them seek help. I don't mind. If by convincing themselves that the problem is their partner's they manage to find the door to see me, that's all that matters. So I'm more than happy to go along with the charade. Usually, after two or three sessions,

they lower their guard and confess. Being patient is a prerequisite in my business. The human mind tangles reality, fantasy, fears, and wishes into convoluted knots that can take years to unravel.

But this woman didn't seem to have years.

She came right to the point.

"I'm very much in love with the man I'm seeing."

"Is it mutual?"

She nodded, and I waited for her to continue. Silent pauses were common. This one lasted about forty-five seconds. I had the impression she was measuring her words carefully.

"He's very private and somewhat reserved. It's affecting our ... sex life."

"How so?" I asked.

"I'm not reserved." She paused. "His hesitancy ... in certain areas ... is making me self-conscious."

Being able to sense when a patient is telling the truth can be a valuable trait, one that saves a lot of time. With this woman there was no doubt. She was being painfully honest.

"Are you able to talk about it with him?"

Soft afternoon sunlight filled my office. The dusty rays turned her swarthy skin golden and lit the auburn highlights in her hair on fire when she shook her head—*no*. “He really doesn’t seem able to ... address it.”

As we continued—me asking questions, her answering—she painted a picture of a fairly healthy relationship. Her issues were not yet a big problem, but she was right; in time they could fester and become disruptive. Trust is important, and when one partner is secretive and withholding, it tests the bond in a relationship.

Sometimes to the breaking point.

This woman was a planner. A fixer. And she cared.

So, over the next two weeks, I saw her four more times and we made progress. At the end of the last hour I told her that her partner would be a good candidate for counseling.

She agreed. “He needs help breaking through. Just a small crack would do it.” Her eyes appraised me with a tight gaze. “But you don’t think he’d ever agree to go to a therapist, do you?”

“Given everything you’ve told me about him, I can’t see that happening without there being ... extenuating circumstances.”

She sat silent for a few moments.

Another of those pauses I’d come to expect from her.

“Maybe those can be arranged,” she said.

The psychiatric conference I’d attended in Berlin, Germany ended on a high note. My talk, about the residual ramification of Internet pornography on the partners of those addicted, had gone well and I was encouraged by the audience response. I’d planned to stay on a few days after the conference and be a tourist. My fourteen-year-old daughter, Dulcie, was away at camp. Noah Jordain, the NYPD detective whom I’d been seeing for the last few years, couldn’t get away and had stayed home. It had been a long time since I’d had a vacation, so I rented a car and drove through Germany, into Denmark, hugging the coast.

Eventually, I found Copenhagen.

I spent my first morning there walking its storied streets, thinking about Hans Christian Anderson and Danish kings, and feeling far away from New York City. It was easy to see why someone might escape here. That afternoon I had an appointment at one of the many rare bookstores that filled the *Stroget*. I collect erotica and had called the proprietor a few weeks before, after seeing online what he had for sale. There was one particular volume I’d been lusting after for a long time. It was out of my price range but, when I asked if there was room to negotiate, he’d chuckled and said *there’s always room for that*.

When I arrived, the bookseller was talking to a middle-aged couple examining another book.

“Have a seat. I’ll be with you as soon as I finish up,” Cotton Malone said, in words softened with a clear Southern accent, one that had been less pronounced on the phone.

I walked past the trio and glanced at what they were inspecting: A colorful volume of old maps. I sat in one of the club chairs that dotted the shop and soaked in my surroundings. Like so many antiquarian bookstores, this one smelled of aged paper and dried leather. The still air was cool and dry, the sounds from busy Højbro Plads outside a comforting monotone.

I felt a stare and glanced over.

The woman examining the map book averted her eyes.

Something about the furtive way she’d looked away concerned me.

Then, a series of noises—books falling, glass breaking, the man, the woman, and Malone all speaking at once—startled me.

The woman had knocked over her pocketbook, which in turn had pushed over a stack of books on the counter, breaking a glass cabinet front. An assortment of broken shards, a compact, pills, and coins lay scattered on the floor, along with all of the books that had fallen. Malone bent down to retrieve his wares.

The couple grabbed the map book and bolted.

Malone’s gaze came level, then he eyed the open front door.

Too late.

They were gone.

He sprang to his feet and rushed after them. “Lock the door,” he called out to me. “I’ll be ...”

The rest of his words were lost in the sounds of the crowd outside.

I did as he asked, then inspected the mess on the floor. Nothing unusual in the clutter. Lipstick. Wallet. Comb.

All looked fairly new.

I walked around the store inspecting the bookshelves, the framed prints, the knick-knacks here and there used for decoration. There was something utterly personal about the place, easy to glean an insight into the man who owned it. He wasn’t flashy, but he knew quality.

Behind his desk in a small rear office was the best ergonomic chair you could buy. The large screen computer was Apple, state of the art, the newest generation iPhone plugged into it, charging. A Dale of Norway sweater hung on a wall hook. Top quality. On a corner table lay some English biscuits, a jar of French jam, mugs, and tins of expensive tea. The water in the Krupp’s was hot so I poured myself a cup and dropped in a tea bag. The blend was rich and slightly bitter.

With my tea I returned to perusing the shelves, walking up one aisle and down the next. There were books in all languages, on all subjects, everything perfectly organized. A

volume of artwork by Jung jumped out at me. I freed it from the stacks and laid it on a table. Jung's mandala paintings had always fascinated me. He'd developed his principal theories of archetypes, collective unconscious, and individuation at the same time he'd been painting. A creative feat that one had to admire.

A knock on the front door caught my attention.

Cotton Malone had returned.

I released the lock and he stepped inside. "Sorry about that."

He was cradling the stolen book in his arms like a wayward child.

"You got it back. Good job. They had a head start. How'd you do it?"

"I almost got to them, but they tossed the book down and hauled ass."

A sheen of sweat coated his face and he was slightly out of breath. But not by much. From his broad shoulders and trim gut he apparently didn't spend all of his time selling books.

"Is it valuable?" I asked, pointing to the volume.

"There are only a dozen known. This one isn't even one of the best, but it's worth over 5000 Euros."

“Definitely worth going after.”

“It pisses me off when people try crap like that.”

I nodded.

He replaced the book on the counter. With his back to me he asked, “So you came to see the *L’Adamite*?”

“Copies don’t come up often.”

He turned back around toward me. “I’m sorry you had to wait.”

“Not a problem. Your store is wonderful. I was more than entertained.”

“And I see you found the tea.” He motioned to my mug on the table beside the Jung volume.

“An excellent blend. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Compensation for your services in minding the store.”

I smiled at his graciousness. “Have you had this shop long?”

“A few years.”

An expression crossed his face. Melancholy? Regret? I wasn't sure.

"Would you mind if I straightened up?" he asked, indicating the spilled bag and books.

"Not at all."

He was a bit compulsive; the order in the store demonstrated that. Not being able to leave a mess on the floor simply confirmed it.

He found a pair of white cotton gloves behind the counter and slipped them on. Then a plastic bag, into which he proceeded to drop the evidence from the floor.

"You weren't wearing gloves while you were showing the couple the map book. Don't you always wear them?"

"It depends on the age and condition of the book. Sometimes they can actually do more harm than good."

I recognized the double C logo on the lipstick container he lifted. Chanel. He dropped it into the bag. Next he lifted a comb.

His attitude suggested he knew his way around a crime scene and I recalled what I'd been told about him. A former Navy commander and lawyer who worked for a covert unit within the Justice Department. Tired of the risks, he'd retired early and moved to Denmark, opening an old bookshop.

He picked up the wallet and opened it. “No ID. Everything, including the pocketbook is new. Clearly a decoy. The whole thing was a set-up to distract me.”

He’d almost finished cleaning up when the police arrived. He greeted them, then returned his attention to me. “I hope this isn’t too much of an imposition. If it is, we can reschedule our appointment?”

“I don’t have any plans for the afternoon. Take your time.”

He gave me a curious glance and returned to the police, who were quick and efficient. Malone was self-assured with them, being neither rattled nor in awe. He answered their questions with succinct responses.

The police left.

“They won’t find them,” he said, as he shut the door. “Those two are good at both stealing and disappearing.”

“So why toss the book away?”

“It was their way of saying, here, take it back, no hard feelings, okay?”

I smiled. Malone was insightful, too.

He re-locked the door. “So let me show you what you came to see.”

He hurried up narrow steps to the second floor. Less than a minute later he returned carrying a book. Not as gingerly as the map book he'd saved, that one he'd cradled like a child—this one he held slightly away from him, like a precious object d'art.

He laid the volume on the table in front of me.

The word *L'Adamite* was spelled out in deeply incised letters still showing traces of gold leaf in the deepest recesses. The caramel leather was worn with age. Water spots dotted the exterior. The upper right-hand corner was ripped—the reason, Malone had explained in his advertisement, that the book was even on the market.

“How long have you been collecting?” he asked.

“About ten years. I don't have a large erotica collection. I'm careful and go slowly. I enjoy it.”

He nodded toward the book. “Go ahead, you can open it.”

“No gloves?”

“Not necessary.”

I caressed the leather. Soft and supple.

“This volume was supposed to have belonged to Henry Spencer Ashbee who bequeathed most of his collection—at least 1,400 erotic books—to the British Museum. But there's no documentation. That's another reason for the lower price.”

Honest disclosure seemed important to him.

“It’s hard to collect erotica and not know about Ashbee,” I said. “I once tried to view the British Museum collection, but no one gets to see that anymore.”

I turned to the frontispiece and read the subtitle—*Le Jésuite Insensible*—beneath which was a date—1684. A faded outline indicated there’d once been a bookplate affixed to the facing page.

He noticed my interest.

“The collector who sold me this said Ashbee’s personalized bookplates fit the measurements of the glue stain exactly.”

I turned to the next page and studied the first illustration. Pre-French revolutionary corruption of both the church and the state had made obscenity with priests and nuns easy targets. And so the goings-on in monasteries among monks and nuns became a common theme in 17th century erotica. A slap in the face to an arrogant institution. I examined the drawing of a nun kneeling at a prie dieu, bestowing a grateful priest fellatio.

The image was both lewd and charming.

Malone stood behind me.

In the next illustration the nun was in a confessional, her habit raised past her thighs. She was caressing herself, fingers disappearing inside of her. Through a grate, the priest watched with a lascivious smile on his face.

I examined more pages, imagining some proper English gentleman in his private library, gathered with friends, showing off the art to everyone's amusement.

I pointed to slight discolorations along the side of the page. "Can you tell me about these condition issues?"

He hovered beside the table, barely glancing where I was pointing. "We'd expect some foxing on a book this old but, overall, the condition is good."

I turned a few more pages. Pausing at other illustrations.

"Do you carry a lot of erotica?"

"It's not one of my specialties. I just happened onto this book. Is this all you collect?"
"A professional hazard."

"Which is?"

"I'm a sex therapist. One of my client's husbands was an avid collector. She was really embarrassed by the hobby, but we worked through it. As a gift, at the end of her time with me, she gave me my first book. I was hooked. I prefer 18th and 19th century to the earlier stuff. Unfortunately, that's also what's most expensive. But I also like some later work—specifically Oscar Wilde's drawings."

"I'd be happy to keep my eye out for anything you'd be interested in."

“That would be great. I’ve thought a lot about why I like these books, why I’m fascinated by them. I think it’s their secretiveness.”

“I can relate to that. I like secrets, too. They can actually get me into a bit of trouble from time to time.”

“But not sexual secrets?”

He took an imperceptible step backwards and didn’t answer.

The most important time to ask a patient a question is when you know they would prefer you not ask. “Don’t you think sexual secrets are the most revelatory?”

“I’m not sure I’m the best person to ask that.”

“You don’t have any?”

He blushed, and seemed surprised by my forwardness. Then recovered and said, “I’m an open book.”

He smiled at his own pun.

“Most of us have something in our pasts ... often in our childhoods ... that we’ve buried deep and keep well-hidden. Mine is that my grandfather was too familiar with me—nothing that could be called predatory, but it was suggestive. He’d whisper off-color jokes in my ear. Touch my hand a fraction of a second too long. Smile in a not-so-grandfatherly way.”

I laughed, wanting him to know I was okay despite what I'd told him. Confessions can make some people uncomfortable. So the silence that followed was no surprise.

I turned another page in the book.

The illustration showed a priest, in full regalia, standing at the pulpit. Before him in the first pew were two nuns, habits opened to reveal bare breasts.

They were fondling each other.

Malone glanced, then looked away.

"These are pretty lascivious," I said.

"Especially for an altar boy."

Curious *non sequitur*, I thought.

"Is that what you were?"

He nodded.

"There are so many terrible stories about incidents being hushed up. I hope nothing serious happened to you."

He didn't answer.

I waited a few moments, then asked, "Did you enjoy it?"

“I loved the pageantry of the mass. The solemnity and ritual. The idea it had been going on for thousands of years the same way, and I was part of that history. I liked the smells, too. The candle wax. The incense.”

He smiled as he remembered, and I smiled with him.

“What didn’t you like about it?”

He glanced down at the book. “That’s curious. You asking that now.”

“Why is that?”

“The coincidence.”

“My mentor, Dr. Nina Butterfield, who heads up the institute where I work, says there are no coincidences. She believes, like Jung did,” I nodded towards the book of his drawings, “that the same way events are grouped by cause, they can also be grouped by meaning.”

“Father Matthew ...” He started, stopped, and then pointed to the book on the table. “Let’s just say that our parish priest would have liked this volume.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I know what you’re thinking, but it wasn’t like that. He wasn’t a molester, or anything like that. He was a good man. A good priest. He just enjoyed an occasional magazine.”

I knew what he meant. “Masturbation?”

He nodded. “Something a twelve-year-old doesn’t forget.”

“You saw him?”

“One time. He didn’t even know I was there.”

“Did you know what he was doing?”

He shook his head. “No way. And why am I telling you this?”

“I’m a therapist.”

He smiled. “And you’re pretty good at disarming people.”

“What’s the harm? It’s like this book here. An interesting diversion. But let me guess. You probably were mystified. What was he doing? You were twelve and had no idea. Sure, you knew it was something unusual. You and your friends probably talked about dirty books and used the language heard from older siblings—but none of you really knew what any of it meant.”

“You’re good.”

“It’s not my first dance. Tell me the rest.”

“Who said there was anything more?”

“Your eyes.”

“I did what any curious twelve-year-old would do. A few days later, while he was busy somewhere else, I stole into his office for a look at the magazine. A copy of Penthouse. I’d never seen anything like that. I was too frightened to stay for long, but I have to say, I kept thinking about it. So I went back to see it a few more times.”

“Until your luck ran out?”

He nodded. “The good father caught me. I was sitting on the floor under his desk with the magazine open.”

I let him gather his thoughts.

“He yanked me out and threw the magazine across the room. Then he spanked my ass, the whole time yelling that what I’d been doing was evil, I was turning myself over to the devil. That I wouldn’t go to heaven.”

He paused.

Remembering.

“How did you feel about the photographs you saw?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you have a sexual response to them?”

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t have to. I knew.

“I thought it strange that I got spanked, but he could look at it.”

“It’s a valid contradiction.”

“I liked Father Matthew. My own dad died when I was ten.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“We’ve gotten this far, why not?”

“I imagine that incident left a mark. I don’t know you, but I can guess the results. I’d say, sometimes you find yourself embarrassed by your sexual responses. Maybe you can make love in the dark, but not in the light. Or you enjoy having sex, but can’t talk about it. Or while you’re showing a client a book of erotic drawings, you feel terribly ashamed without knowing why.”

“That obvious?”

“Like I said, it’s not my first dance. The past affects the way we act. That’s basic psychology. It would be normal for you to react to a traumatic episode, like what happened with Father Matthew. It affected you. But your present-day reaction—the one you’re still having—is still that of a twelve-year-old. You don’t have to be ashamed anymore.”

Malone lifted the *L’Adamite* book from the table. This time he didn’t hold it as far away. He seemed more comfortable with it.

A small, but symbolic step.

He stared at me.

I'd seen the look before.

The light that switched on at the moment of realization.

He smiled, then carried the book to the counter and wrapped it with butcher-block paper. I watched how careful his movements were.

Then, he handed it to me.

"I'm sorry, it's more than I can afford," I said.

"It's a gift."

"I can't take this."

"Why not?"

And then I saw that he was right. I had to take it.

His payment to me.

For pointing out something he should have realized long ago.

Outside, a pleasant Baltic breeze ushered in twilight. I walked half a block, then stopped by a canal. I found my cell phone and dialed my client's number. A therapist never talks about what goes on in therapy with a patient.

But Cotton Malone hadn't been my patient.

Cassiopeia Vitt, the woman who loved him, was.

I heard her voice as she answered, the same warm tone from my office two months ago. I could still picture her simple elegance.

"I just left his bookstore," I told her.

She'd known I'd be here today. That was why the two "thieves" were there, ready to cause a scene, generating those "extenuating circumstances" which just might drop Malone's guard enough. That was also why I'd requested specifically to see *L'Adamite*. During those five sessions with Cassiopeia she'd told me of how Malone had hinted to his childhood and time as an altar boy. Seemed like the best place to start. Nothing better to free up a person than some relevant show and tell.

"I gave him the opening he needed," I told her. "He's going to be fine. Go slow and easy. Don't pressure him. But the door is ajar now. With someone as smart as he is ... he'll work it through."

“How can I thank you?”

I tucked the precious book under my arm.

“Already done.”

And I strolled off into the night.

II

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

John Rain

A good therapist would never ask an ex-patient to introduce her to an assassin. But I wasn't sure I could qualify as a good therapist anymore. I was too scared. In a way I had never been before.

It had started two weeks earlier.

A patient I'd been seeing for the last two years—Sarah J—was married to a wealthy politician named Michael who, before taking office, had made a fortune in New York City real estate. Michael was surrounded by rumors—mob connections, CIA connections, high-ranking cops who owed him favors. None of the talk had impeded his political ascent, which suggested the substance of it was true.

The Butterfield Institute has its share of celebrity clients—the rich, the famous, the powerful—and, to accommodate clientele for whom discretion is critical, has a back entrance that leads to a tunnel connecting to a garage half a block away.

Sarah and Michael were bad for each other. It was a co-dependent relationship involving sexual practices she found demeaning but that she craved. And that he demanded.

I don't believe in normal or abnormal sex. Other than extreme pain or practices that are dangerous, I believe we are all entitled to our fantasies and should be empowered to have fulfilling sex lives. I've been doing this long enough to know what is good for one person will be insufficient, or too extreme, for another. I don't judge. I try to give my patients the tools to enable them to decide for themselves what they want and don't want. To empower them either to get it—or leave it.

With Sarah, it was the latter. Michael needed to be degraded during sex. Physically and verbally. He liked her to urinate on him. To berate him. To tell him how worthless and vile he was. Sarah knew Michael was bad for her, and desperately wanted to leave him, but she didn't want to give up her financial or social position. She was invested in her image as the wife of this powerful man. But more than that—in the dark and shadows of her soul—she was obsessed with and addicted to her husband sexually. No matter how bad she felt afterward, she always craved more. She loved that he needed her to satisfy his needs.

When he called and asked when he could come and see me, I told him I'd have to ask Sarah if it was all right. At that, he told me he didn't need anyone's permission and hung up. A few hours later, a bouquet of white lilacs was delivered to my office with a note apologizing.

At her next session, Sarah told me it was all right with her if her husband came to see me. Would I agree?

“If you're sure it's what you want,” I said.

She nodded, a light in her eyes I hadn't seen before looking like relief. “I think he's ready to start working on our

problems. He said I've been doing too much of the heavy lifting on my own."

"That's an important step," I said. "Do you think he's ready to come in for joint counseling?"

"I don't know—I didn't bring it up this time. I was just happy enough that he wants to see you."

I agreed. Every time Sarah had broached the subject of joint therapy with Michael, he'd become furious. He accused her of betraying him. "We don't have problems. You might have issues but they go back to way before you met me!" And for weeks afterward, he would turn away whenever she tried to touch him. Those stretches were brutal on her, Michael's deliberate cruelty bringing her to the edge of a breakdown before he'd finally relent.

When Michael called, I agreed to an appointment for the next afternoon. He arrived twenty minutes late and offered no apology.

"It's good of you to come," I told him. "It's always better when both partners are willing to confront the issues."

"There are no issues I have a part in," he said.

Not a surprising response from a husband whose wife has been in therapy as long as Sarah. I've seen other spouses hesitant to confront issues they know have been discussed without them present.

If you saw him on the street, you'd probably notice Michael. He's six feet, in good shape, with beautiful, black

curly hair. His clothes are impeccably tailored. But it's not his looks or clothes alone that would draw your attention—it's his presence, his charisma, the light in his eyes. He's the kind of politician who gets votes because men want to have a drink with him and women want to go to bed with him. Most people don't even know which side of the issues he's on.

But in my office, sitting on my couch, the public magnetism I'd seen on television was replaced with surly anger.

"It's not about blame," I said. I was in the chair in front of my desk, my back to a wall of bookshelves. He was looking past me at the books. "What matters," I continued, "is that you and Sarah acknowledge there are parts of your relationship that need work."

Suddenly, Michael got up and walked past me. I turned around. He was inspecting the titles of my books. I had the unsettling sense that he was searching for something he might use against me.

"Michael, could you sit down?"

A moment passed while he continued reading the spines.

"Michael?"

He turned toward me but again didn't look at me—now he was standing behind my desk, his hands on the back of the empty chair where I sat to do paperwork and use the phone. He was examining my desktop. Looking at all the personal items I had there that patients couldn't normally see from the couch.

“I’m going to have to insist.”

He looked at me and smiled just slightly, as though to let me know he knew I was bluffing. And I realized, uncomfortably, that I was. What power did I have to compel him? And he seemed to revel in silently letting me know it.

Apparently, his silent demonstration was enough, because he returned to his seat.

I tried a few more opening salvos, but couldn’t get Michael to open up at all.

“Michael, can you tell me why you decided to come in to see me if you aren’t willing to talk about what’s going on with Sarah?” I finally asked.

“I just want to know how much you’d charge to give me back all my wife’s files.”

“Give them back?” Was he trying to buy his wife’s files from me?

“I don’t want the files to be kept here. They’re not secure. I have enemies, and those files could be used for blackmail.”

It wasn’t the first time a spouse or family member expressed concern about information that had been shared in therapy. I do keep notes. And there are files. If anything were stolen, the information could be used to embarrass many of our clients.

But I explained to Michael that the files were safe. That we code the files with numbers, not names. That it would be virtually impossible for anyone who got their hands on anything to figure out what any of it meant, or to whom it applied.

“I appreciate your efforts,” Michael said, “but I can’t let you keep the files.”

“They belong to your wife. The only person I can give them to is her.”

He said nothing, but a cold rage seemed to emanate from his whole body. He got up and walked out without saying a word.

Sarah came to see me the next morning and asked me for her files. Her eyes were bloodshot and there were deep circles underneath them. Her hands were shaking. She was wearing a wrinkled shirt and sweatpants—the first time I’d seen her in anything other than fabulous clothes. She was obviously in distress.

In the two years Sarah had been seeing me, she’d never suggested her husband was violent. She was not afraid of him. Actually, the opposite. She lived in fear that he would ignore her physically—deprive her of her fix. She felt raw and cheap

after having sex with him. But she also felt alive. It was the only time she really did feel alive.

Their co-dependent relationship worked—until she discovered he was paying women to meet him in hotel rooms and do the same things she did to him in their bedroom.

That's when she started seeing me.

I took the files out and sat with them in my lap. "Is this what you want, Sarah?"

She stared at them and started to weep. "No. I need you to keep them. I need you to keep them."

I wasn't surprised.

"Your wife doesn't want me to give you the files," I told Michael the second time he came to my office.

"I don't care what she wants."

"Well, I'm sorry, but without Sarah's permission, I can't give them to you."

“I paid for them. I paid for her to come here.”

“That’s not the issue.”

He stood up and once again walked behind me and over to my desk. Walked around behind it and sat down in my empty chair.

“Michael. I need you to sit on the couch, or I’ll have to end the session.”

I told Michael I had an alarm. A button on the floor I could step on that rings at the receptionist’s desk and at the police station.

“I’m guessing you don’t want me to bring the police here, do you?” I asked.

He picked up the silver-framed portrait of my daughter, which none of my patients could see from where they sat. I preferred not to share my personal life, but at the same time I liked having her there in the office with me.

He continued holding onto the frame. Looking down at Dulcie. It was a year-old photo. Taken when she’d just turned thirteen.

“Dulcie, isn’t it?” he asked. “Fourteen, right? That’s a lovely age. Poised at that stage where she’s still a girl, but with all the potential of adulthood, you know? All the... responsibilities.”

Hearing her name on his lips, a bubble of panic rose in my chest. How had he found out about her? I realized it would be a trivial matter for someone in his position to find out about me and my family. The thought was nauseating.

“She’s beautiful. Usually divorced parents of only children are overly protective. She must be so precious to you.”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure I could trust my voice.

“As those files are to me. You understand?”

“If you don’t leave my office right now,” I managed, “I’m going to have the police escort you out.”

“I’m going to have those files, Dr. Snow. The police won’t help you keep them from me. They’re worth a lot to me. How much are they worth to you? How much are you willing to sacrifice to try to keep them from me? Think about that.”

He smiled a horribly chilling smile, then turned and left.

I didn’t move. Not for five or ten minutes. Not until I could get my heart regulated again. He hadn’t really made a threat. He hadn’t said he would do anything. But I was certain that he was as determined as anyone I’d ever met.

And so I went home and made dinner for my daughter and watched her eat a piece of sautéed chicken with mushrooms and spinach and drink apple juice and then wolf down a piece of blueberry pie for dessert. I listened to her tell me about her day, and a test she’d aced, and a girlfriend she’d fought with, and what she’d read, and what she was worried

about, and the whole time all I wanted to do was go to her and wrap my arms around her and magically make her tiny enough so I could carry her around and protect her from everything and everyone in the world who might ever want to harm her.

I didn't give myself away. She had no idea how upset I was. I listened and asked questions and smiled and pretended everything was fine, that the carefully constructed world I'd created for our small family was under no threat at all.

Have you ever thought the thing you loved most in the world was at risk? It overwhelms every moment and poisons every thought.

I couldn't relax. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't figure out what to do or who to ask because going to anyone was a breach of ethics. I was ashamed to find myself wishing Sarah had just given me permission to give Michael her files. And to find myself tempted to confide in Sarah, to ask her to let me give Michael her files. But I didn't know how she'd react. And even if I did know, in asking I'd be putting my interests ahead of those of my patient. She'd already told me she didn't want him to have the files. I thought about just destroying the files and telling Michael I'd done so, but I needed the files for Sarah's treatment. Again, I couldn't protect my interests by abusing hers.

And I couldn't go to the police. Not even to Noah Jordan, the man I was seeing, who was a NYPD sex crimes detective. Yes, one word from me, and Noah would have Michael in cuffs and under investigation. But what would happen when the higher-ups intervened? When Noah couldn't prove anything? What would Michael do then?

I went to a jazz club for Noah's performance that night. Playing out was, he always said, how he kept his soul intact. And he was damn good at the keyboard. In the lobby was a poster advertising an upcoming gig by an ex-patient. Midori.

I had thought of calling Midori earlier, but was stymied again by the thought of violating therapist/patient confidences, and of involving a client in my personal life. But while I sat by myself at the table, nursing a vodka and tonic, and listening to Noah make love to the keys, I couldn't stop thinking about the things Midori had told me about the father of her son. And how of everyone, he might offer the solution to my dilemma.

"My son's father is ... dangerous," Midori had told me after two months of therapy. After two months of never being able to articulate what was bothering her.

"How so?"

"He kills people."

"Is he a ... soldier?"

Her only answer was a single tear, which she wiped angrily away. For the rest of the session she was silent.

The following week I waited for her to come. I knew there was a strong possibility she wouldn't. Sometimes avoidance wins.

But she did come. Her desire to engage with her life and her problems was greater than her fear.

“I want to tell you about my son’s father,” she said. “But please don’t ask me any specific questions.”

I agreed.

“I couldn’t keep my hands off him even though I knew every second I was with him was a mistake.”

She stopped talking for a moment. Closed her eyes. Took a deep breath.

“The men I was with before him ... I look back, and they all seem so insipid. Even before I knew what he was, I think I sensed it. I sensed how dangerous he was, and ... God, it turned me on. It still does, when I remember. He gets in my head and I can’t make it work with another man. What’s wrong with me?”

Once again she stopped.

“At some point he was some kind of covert soldier. Now he works on his own. An assassin, although he doesn’t use that word. He says he won’t hurt women or children—those are his rules.” She laughed bitterly. “As if what he does wasn’t hurting us.” Another laugh. “He works alone. Maybe because he prefers it that way—maybe because he’s paranoid. He doesn’t think he deserves anything. He expects to be left out and shunned—and when it happens, I think he’s secretly satisfied. Except something would happen to him in bed. It

was as if as much as he wanted to punish himself, his life force was too strong. Some part of him insisted on that one joy.”

Midori looked down at her hands—turned them over—searched for some solution written in her fingertips. Then she looked up at me. “I once stupidly told him if he ever gets out of that world, he could call me. But he won’t ever get out of it. I thought the baby would be enough, but no. You know what I think? I think he’s addicted to what he does. I think he likes it.”

The conversation came flooding back to me and I could barely wait to get to the office on Monday and call her. It was an awkward call—ending with me asking her to meet me for coffee anyplace convenient for her. She chose a patisserie near her apartment in Soho and was waiting for me when I got there.

“I want you to introduce me to your son’s father,” I said once the waiter had brought over our coffees.

She stared at me as though I was crazy. “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“I think the best thing would be to not tell you anything.”

“I haven’t talked to him in ... years.”

“I know better than anyone what kind of favor I’m asking of you. I wouldn’t if it wasn’t important.”

“If you wanted anything else, I’d do it. I owe you so much. You helped me regain my sanity, put my life in order. Be a better mother for my son. But ...”

She was sitting still, but I sensed movement. I looked down and saw, under the table, her fingers playing her thigh.

Her discomfort was my fault. But I didn't have any other choice. "If this was about me I'd never ask you to help me. But it's not—it's about ... a child."

Midori had once told me that she would do anything to protect her son. And though she hadn't elaborated, I sensed she meant it literally.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "I'm not even sure I can reach him."

Two days later I got a text.

"Our mutual friend said you'd like to meet me. I can be at the Boat House in Central Park at 2 pm. Text me back and let me know if that works."

On Wednesday I was there fifteen minutes early. It was a warm spring day and there were a fair number of people in the park. Walking, bike riding, rollerblading. Mothers with kids, nannies with their charges, dogs walking their owners and owners walking their dogs. There were dogwood and apple

blossom trees in bloom, and I knew everything probably looked glorious. But I couldn't see through the veil of anxiety.

“Dr. Snow?”

I turned and saw an Asian man, maybe fifty, dark hair turning steel gray at the temples. He was wearing jeans and a navy blazer, and though he wasn't big, he looked extremely fit. There was something about him that was both still and watchful, though I couldn't articulate exactly why he struck me that way. I didn't feel the danger Midori had talked of. I did feel like he would be impossible to sneak up on.

“Yes.”

“I'm John Rain. Why don't we take a walk?”

As we walked along the pathway that looped around the lake, I told him about my patient and the threat. I told him how scared I was and how desperate I was and why I couldn't go to the police.

“Why don't you just give him the files?” he said.

I told him about therapist/patient confidentiality. About how Sarah didn't want her husband to have the files.

“And I can't destroy them for the same reason,” I said. “I have to put my patients' interests first.”

“First before your daughter's?”

That hurt. I said, “I’m trying not to have to make that choice.”

We walked in silence for another moment. “There is another way,” he said.

“What?”

“This guy has told you in the clearest terms how much of a threat those files are to him, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then use them. Make a copy, give the copy to a trusted friend with clear instructions, and explain to the guy that if anything ever happens to you or your daughter, the files get released and the whole world learns of what he likes done to him in bed.”

“I couldn’t live with the uncertainty—with the waiting to see how he copes with that. I need to do something now and know it’s been handled.”

“You’re afraid he’d think it was a bluff? Because, from what you’ve told me, having the world know his proclivities is about this guy’s greatest fear.”

“He’s a master at manipulation. I don’t want to guess and wonder. I want it to end. Isn’t that what you do—bring things to an end?”

I was watching him as we walked. And he was watching me. For the first time in a long time, I felt as if someone were

seeing more than I might have wanted him to. As if he were seeing a ruthlessness in me that I didn't even know I had until that moment.

“Dr. Snow, it sounds like you're asking me to kill someone.”

I didn't know how to answer. I could only think of the way Michael had picked up the picture of Dulcie—about how much he'd found out about her—about how powerful he was.

“Am I mistaken?”

“I want the threat to go away.”

I was shaking. The words had come out of my mouth. They were mine. But what I was saying was horrific—even given the circumstances. Could I do this? Ask for this?

“Is that the only way for you to make the threat disappear?” I asked him.

A woman walked by then. Dark. Slight. About thirty. Lovely and sexy in a subtle way. Rain followed her with his eyes and I sensed—almost smelled—a response in him. Like an animal he reacted physically. He came awake.

The request forgotten for the moment, I observed Rain as if he were in my office. The conversation had aroused him.

He became aware of my observations.

“What?” he said.

“Talking about this—you’re excited by it, aren’t you? You want me to give you the charge. You want to take on my request... . It’s energizing you sexually.” I realized what I was doing. Shook my head. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Occupational hazard. I can’t seem to get away from wanting to help people reach insights about their psyches and psychology. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I’m not. I’m intrigued.”

“Have you ever been in therapy?”

“An army psychiatrist had a go at me a long time ago.”

I shook my head.

“You’re good Dr. Snow,” Rain said. “I hadn’t thought of it in those terms, but ... yes. Maybe it is sexual.”

Suddenly, sadly, watching Rain respond to my analysis, I understood something about myself.

“I don’t think I can ask you to help,” I said.

“No?”

“I just realized how much I’d lose of myself if I were ever responsible for someone’s death. What I do is help people come alive. Help them realize their full potential as sexually, emotionally, intimate beings. I could never interfere with a life. Even for Dulcie’s sake.”

“I wish things could really be that simple.”

“What do you mean?” I asked

“When a soldier has to make a decision. Or a cop. Or a doctor. You might save one life, at the expense of another. You might save the wrong life, and sacrifice the wrong one, too.”

“You’re trained to make those decisions. I’m not. You’re taught how to cope with the results. I’m not.”

“Will that matter if you make the wrong decision here?”

“Have you ever made the wrong decision?” I was thinking about Midori and Rain’s son—even in this very private and secret conversation I couldn’t break the patient/doctor confidentiality code and refer to either of them unless he wanted to talk about it. And even then I’d have to tread carefully.

“My whole life is a wrong decision. One more one way or the other is a statistical rounding error. For you, it would be the whole game. But you still have to decide.”

“You want me to say yes. Everything in your body language is telling me that. I can feel your energy.”

“No. I want you to answer honestly. With precision. And clarity. And you’re avoiding that, Doctor. And perhaps projecting, too.”

“I’m being who I am ... ” I stopped. Thought about what I’d just said. Thought about Dulcie. About Michael. About his

wife. About this man walking with me down a tree-lined path who no longer knew his own son. “I’m going to have to find another way.”

“Are you sure? I think you also want to feel what I’m feeling. What you think I’m feeling. Don’t you?”

His insight surprised me. So did the fact that he’d identified something about me I hadn’t even guessed at. On her own couch, no one is her own therapist.

I spent the next day and night not knowing what I was going to do. Not having any idea how I was going to ultimately deal with Michael and his threats. I vacillated between thinking I should tell Noah and then deciding that was wrong and instead I should do what Rain had suggested—make a copy and counter-threaten Michael. But I couldn’t risk that. I didn’t have that kind of bravado. Couldn’t pull it off. Couldn’t take the chance.

I wasn’t functioning well in sessions. Wasn’t focusing the way I needed to on my patients’ issues.

And underneath it all was the image of Rain in the park. Of that way he’d come alive. Of the power he held.

And of my jealousy of it.

I wanted what he had. The ability to take charge. To forge ahead. To risk everything and feel what he felt. To be willing to make that mistake he talked about, but know that I'd risked it. Doing the wrong thing for the right reason. Wasn't there courage in that?

His kind of courage though. Not mine.

And then a package arrived. By bike messenger, with no return address. I opened it. It was a small audio player. I put the ear buds on and pressed the play button. It was John Rain's voice, clear, steady, and intimate.

Dr. Snow, I enjoyed meeting you the other day. You gave me some things to think about. Perhaps I did the same for you.

I think you sensed that it would be easy for me to solve your problem the way I solve most problems. And also tempting. But I think I found something better.

If you check your security systems, you'll discover there was a breach in your office two nights ago. You might have already discovered this, but believed it to be a mistake because nothing was missing. Indeed, nothing is missing. Something was simply copied. That copy was shown, in person, to the man who has been a problem for you. He understands if he causes you any further problems, the copy will become very public. He might have doubted your resolve had you made such a threat. I assure you, he didn't doubt mine. Nor should he have.

You were smart to be yourself. And I was pleased to offer you the luxury of doing so. Still, my apologies for handling this in a way you most certainly would have refused had I asked for permission. But many times, it's better to seek forgiveness than it is to ask permission, don't you agree? Or at least, I'm sure you'll agree this one time. After all, regarding the copied file, I think you know you can count on my discretion, as I can count on yours. And don't worry about your codes. They were good. I'm just a bit better.

So your problem, I believe, is now solved. You didn't have to decide because I decided for you. And if you're so inclined, I'd ask that you do me a kindness in return. Tell Midori there's good and bad in all of us. Yin and yang. Tell her ... I think of her.

I'll think about what you observed in the park. It was an interesting place to conduct a therapy session, don't you agree?

My best to you and your daughter. I think she has a good mother. Don't over-analyze her, though, all right? Save that for strangers in the park, who you'll never hear from again.

III

KNOWING YOU'RE ALIVE

Jack Reacher

Jack Reacher heard the explosion two seconds before he saw the flash of light. Without thinking, he sprinted across 65th street and ran up to the building's front door, tried the handle, found it locked and stepped back.

Already the glow emanating from inside the building was bright. The heat was palpable.

The man he'd followed here over an hour ago used at least two names. There might be more but Reacher was going by the name on the mail he'd intercepted—Ted Carlson. And he was inside.

Till now Carlson's day had been uneventful. He hadn't ventured out of his Hell's Kitchen apartment until sundown. Then it was just to walk to the subway. Reacher had followed.

When the train had pulled in at 65th street and Carlson exited, Reacher did the same. Keeping a safe distance, he trailed his prey for two blocks, from Lexington Ave. to a limestone turn-of-the-century mansion between Madison and

Park. Carlson had rung the doorbell. Less than a minute later, he disappeared inside.

Reacher had waited five minutes, then ambled across the street and read the name on the brass plaque. *The Butterfield Institute*.

For almost an hour Reacher had watched the building's entrance. He didn't like staying put, but it was a pleasant spring night and pedestrians hadn't taken much notice. Just a guy in khakis and a white shirt sitting on the steps of a brownstone and reading a paperback. Checking his watch every few minutes as if he were waiting for someone to come home and let him in.

No effort was required to keep the Institute's entrance in sight. But he had been looking down the moment the bomb had gone off.

Now Reacher needed to get inside. He hadn't spent this much time on Carlson to lose him like this.

A wisteria vine the thickness of a man's arm climbed up the side of the building and wrapped around the small balcony's railing. The only problem was, the terrace wasn't completely secured to the façade anymore. Rocked loose by the explosion, it was hanging at an angle. Too much movement or weight might send it crashing. There was no way of telling.

But it was that way or no way.

Without hesitating, Reacher grabbed hold and hoisted himself up. Being 6'5" had its advantages and his long legs made the 15-foot climb less arduous. As he shimmied up,

gracefully putting one hand above the other, he listened for the sound of fire engines and police cars. It had been maybe two minutes since the explosion. Someone must have called them by now, but there was only the hum of uptown traffic—light, steady and uneventful.

As he grabbed the rail of the terrace above, Reacher felt the balcony shift and heard it groan against his weight.

He swung his long legs over the railing. Glass crunched as his feet landed on the slanting floor. The French doors were shattered so badly they looked like a pair of serrated scissors.

If he'd had the time, Reacher would have wrapped his hand in his shirt before trying doors. Instead he grabbed the handle with his bare hand and jumped into the room before the pain had a chance to register.

The mangled terrace behind him creaked and crashed. Pushing ahead, he tried to see through the fog of smoke. There was a gaping hole in the south wall. The smoke was billowing from there. Sniffing the air, he didn't smell fire. Destruction, plaster, and spent explosives—but no fresh flames. At least not yet.

He sensed something. A movement.

“Anyone here?”

“Yes, I am.” A woman. Only a few feet away.

“Keep talking so I can find you. I can't see though this smoke.”

“I’m over here.”

Reacher followed the sound. “What’s your name?” he asked

“Morgan. Morgan Snow.”

He climbed over a pile of plaster. Had to keep her talking—it was still too smoky to see much.

“Are you hurt? Are you alone?”

Reacher stepped around a piece of chair, onto a pile of books.

“No,” she said. “I mean—yes—I’m alone. I’m not hurt too bad.”
Reacher fanned smoke away, saw the woman lying on the floor.

Inside a cave of debris. A couch had partially collapsed on top of her; a wooden beam lay on top of the couch. There were books and papers and bits of plaster everywhere. She’d used her arms to push as much debris away as she could. Despite her efforts, her face was all of her he could see. Her eyes were wild and frightened. Dust coated her lips, was in her hair.

Reacher saw her hand. Put his fingers on her wrist to feel her pulse but she grabbed his hand, hard. Panic and relief in her touch.

I thought I was hallucinating. A mind under extreme circumstances can manufacture all sorts of comforting images. I believed I had conjured this man. Someone to come to my rescue. Pain was clouding my head. Smoke was making my eyes tear. He was hazy in the light.

He had to be real—I was holding fast to his hand.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“My name’s Jack Reacher. I’m going to get you out of here.”

Very specific. He had to be existent. “Where did you come from?” I asked.

“I was walking down the street. Heard the explosion. Looked up. Saw your lights on.” He was on his knees next to me, was taking my pulse. Blue eyes searching my face. “So what hurts?” he asked.

A broken laugh escaped from my throat. “Everything.”

He smiled. It looked like he wasn’t used to moving his mouth that way. It occurred to me that he was smiling for my sake, to reassure me.

“Okay let’s see what we can find out. We know you can move your arms and head. Go slow, tell me, what else moves?”

I tried to connect to my body—to find the motor skills to make the effort. It took a few seconds but I thought the words and the body parts responded. Neck. Hands. Arms. Breathe, I told myself. Deep breathing can stave off panic. Breathe.

He must have known what I was doing.

“Good girl. Take a good long couple of breaths. How are you doing? Everything moving?”

“Yes. I think I’m basically okay except for my ...” I had to focus—left or right? “Left foot,” I said. “I can move it but ...” I broke off. The pain made me nauseous.

“Okay. Keep still now. Let me—”

A sudden heaving sound interrupted. Like the room was crying out. Then a crack. Behind Reacher, in the smoky mess, I saw a chunk of the ceiling fall. Then the area around the door caved in.

“How are we going to get out of here?” I heard how shaky my voice sounded.

“Impatient aren’t you? Just take a little more time now but we’ll get out.”

“What’s on top of me? Why can’t I move?”

“You’re under a couch. And the couch has all kinds of crap on top of it. Stuff from upstairs that fell through the ceiling. The ceiling itself. You’re pretty lucky. Except for your foot—your couch took the brunt of it.”

“I have to get to Dulcie!” I said urgently.

“There’s someone else in the building?”

“No. She’s my daughter. I need to call her. Make sure she knows I’m okay ... we have this connection ... when one of us is hurt ... the other one knows ...she’ll know ... she’ll worry ...”

He was nodding. “Okay we’ll do that but first you need to tell me—is there anyone else in the building?”

“No one else, no. Nina and her last patient left together.”

“You sure?”

“I saw them go.”

He was frowning.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Are there two exits to the building?”

“Yes. Front door. Back that goes through to the garage next door.”

He nodded. Looked annoyed. I wasn't sure why and he didn't offer any explanation.

“Okay, Morgan. Let's see about getting you out of here.”

For the next few minutes he made several attempts to unbury me—but the ceiling beams were too heavy for him.

“Doesn't look like I'm going to be able to do much on my own. And to tell you the truth—I'm not too keen on upsetting the balance of this mess. I can't be sure about the building's stability. We'd better just sit tight. The police and fire department should be on their way.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“The explosion?”

I nodded.

“Has all the hallmarks of a bomb.”

“A bomb?”

“Yes. What is this place?”

“A sex therapy clinic,” I told him.

“And you're a ...”

“I’m a sex therapist.”

He didn’t react. Or if he did, didn’t show it. Watching him, trying to figure out who this stranger was, paying attention to something other than my pain was a relief. Analyzing people, gauging and guessing what goes on behind the façade of the persona they present to the world, is an occupational hazard.

“I need to call Dulcie,” I said.

“You have a cell?” he asked.

“In my bag,” I said.

He looked around. “Any idea where that could be?”

“Used to be in a drawer in my desk but...”

Didn’t he have a cell phone? Or didn’t he want to use his own cell. And if he didn’t—why not?

“The desk is pretty much demolished. The drawers are crushed. But the police should be any second.”

He stood up and sudden panic rose in me. “Are you going?”

“No, Morgan. I’m staying right here with you. Just going to the door to see if I hear anything.”

“You don’t have to,” I said with more bravado than I felt.

He laughed. I heard irony. “Doc, even if I wanted to—there’s nowhere I could go. We’re trapped.”

“But you got in.”

“Before the balcony fell off and the rest of the ceiling came down and blocked the door.”

He’d found some pillows, dusted them off and brought them over. With one hand he held my shoulders up, with the other he pushed a cushion under my head. I must have winced.

“Something else hurt?”

“No. I moved my foot.”

He sat down beside me on the floor. “Don’t do that.”

I smiled. “I know enough about what I’m going through from a clinical point of view to think that it would be good for me if you stayed close by for a while. Maybe held my hand.”

“Damn weird. You just shrinked yourself. You do that a lot?” He took my hand. His skin was cool and dry and a little rough. His fingers were long and strong.

My panic lowered a notch.

“Any idea why any one would want to blow up this building?” he asked.

“At least a hundred and twenty reasons.”

He was already there. “Patients’ secrets.”

“Our only inventory.”

“All the keys to personal destruction were in your office files.”

“That about covers it,” I said.

“You know anything about your partner’s last patient?”

I shook my head. “I don’t even know who was in there with her.”

“You didn’t see him?”

“Not his face. I saw him from the back, so I know it was a man ... but that’s not much help, is it?”

“We’ll get there,” he said.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure. You’re the shrink. Isn’t that your natural default?”

“Why do I think you know something about what happened here tonight?”

He said nothing.

“Come on. You’re not the average passerby,” I said. “I mean this isn’t even the ground floor. What did you do? Climb up a vine? Come into a building that might crumble at any movement. That means you’ve had experience with disasters, crime scenes. And no panic when you found me here. You acted as if this was standard operating procedure. The way someone would who’d seen and done far worse. “

Again he said nothing.

“Your reactions are totally professional. Nothing personal except one reassuring smile.”

“You’re good,” he said at last.

“None of us is ever good enough, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was thinking about Nina. She didn’t suspect her client was this desperate. It comes down to ego. A therapist’s worst enemy—we think we’re doing such a good job and making progress and then it blows up in our face.”

“Literally.”

The floor was hard. My antique Persian rug was expensive but not thick enough to be much of a buffer between my spine and hips and the hard floor. Then I realized it wasn’t expensive anymore. Like the rest of my office, it was ruined.

Not a good place to let my mind go. I shifted. Too much. The pain in my foot screamed.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Do you have any pain killers on you?”

He shook his head. “All out. Sorry,” he joked. “Used the last of my morphine before lunch. Sometimes distraction works.”

“You’ve had a lot of experience with pain?” I asked.

“I’ve had my share.”

“Have you ever been to a therapist, Mr. Reacher?”

“If you’re going to ask such personal questions, you might as well call me Jack.”

“And you don’t like personal questions?”

“I don’t like the reasons people ask them.”

“Okay then. No personal questions. But you’re right—I need some distraction from the pain ... how about you tell me a story.”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that before.”

I looked. He wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.

“So you don’t have kids?”

He arched an eyebrow.

“Right. A personal question. I retract it.”

“Good girl. So what kind of story do you want to hear?”

“Tell me about the best sex you ever had.”

“Dr. Snow!” He feigned shock.

“Indulge me. I’m trapped under a couch in excruciating pain with no painkillers. I don’t know what I’m saying. Besides, it’s a story. It doesn’t even have to be true. Make up a story about the best sex you ever had.”

From outside we heard the sounds of encroaching sirens echoing in the room.

“Finally,” he said.

I sensed he was relieved about the interruption more than the actual arrival of the fire department.

“How long till they get to us?” I asked.

“I don’t know what’s outside this door. Could be five minutes. Could be an hour.”

“Long enough for a story.”

He laughed, a genuine guffaw. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“The pain isn’t giving up.”

“Okay a story. But not about me.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“You think you’re smart.”

“Smarter than you think I am—but not as smart as you think *you* are,” I said.

He smiled.

“The story?” I prompted.

“Insistent.”

“I’d rather have morphine—but considering how ill-prepared you were ...”

“Okay. Once upon a time ...” he started.

“You don’t have to go that far.”

“Do you want to hear the story or critique it before I even start?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, please proceed.”

And he did.

I knew an army cop once who told me a story that might do the trick. He didn’t usually make mistakes but he was still young and green and too heroic for his own good. Following a lead, he wound up in the wrong place, seriously outnumbered. Four of them and one of him. He put up a decent fight but they beat the crap out of him. He passed out. They were stupid enough to think that he was dead and took off.

When he came to a day later he was alone in the same god-forsaken cabin where he’d followed them. A one-bedroom rustic shoebox at the foot of a mountain that very few people climbed in the rain. And it was pouring.

As far as he could tell his nose was broken; he was nauseous, dizzy and had a headache—which meant he probably had a bad concussion. There was a sink, a toilet. No food. No phone. No way of getting any help short of walking out into the storm. And he knew better than to try that with severe double vision and head trauma.

He figured he’d give it another day.

For the next twenty-four hours he slept until a gunshot woke him up.

He opened his eyes. A woman was standing at the door, rifle in hand. While he tried to figure out what was going on, he saw a black blur in his peripheral vision. Turned. A bear was climbing out the window.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked.

“What the hell was that?”

“A bear. Now your turn.”

He told her his name, rank, said she could find his wallet on the kitchen counter with his ID. She opened it. Checked.

“What are you doing here?” she asked

He explained.

She didn't look happy. By the end of the story, her eyes were wet with tears. He expected to hear that one of his attackers was her husband or boyfriend. Turned out that one of them was her brother.

“This place belonged to our grandparents. He's not supposed to use it but ...” she shrugged. “Are you hurt?”

“Beat up. But thanks to you I'm alive to feel the pain.”

“Next time close the windows. Bears are clever and hungry. You must have been quiet for too long. He was a baby. But even so he could have mauled you badly.”

“Would you have killed him?”

“If I had to.”

“Have you ever had to?”

She didn’t answer. “How long have you been here?”

“What day is it?”

“Friday.”

“Then I’ve been here since Wednesday.”

“Have you had anything to eat?” she asked.

“No.”

“Let me get my stuff from the car—I’ve got supplies.”

“What about the bear?”

“He’s long gone. And now that we’re making noise he’ll stay away.”

She came back lugging two big canvas bags. One she dropped by the bed, the other she took to the kitchen area and unpacked a feast. Roast beef sandwiches on fresh bread. Chips. Beer. Oranges.

He couldn't walk to the table without her help. The storm in his head threw off his equilibrium. But once he was sitting again, he was okay. He'd been through worse—in survival training had gone days without eating anything except what he could forage. He knew to pace himself. But damn, that orange was a revelation. He was astonished something so simple could taste like that. And the beer.

Afterwards she helped him back to the bed.

"Anything you need?" she asked.

"Yeah, actually, I'd kill for a shower."

"We've got nothing but cold water from a rain barrel. "

"I don't care about the cold ..."

"You can't stand up in a shower by yourself," she said.

Asking for help wasn't something he was good at.

"Maybe ..." he stopped, smiled, started to lie back down.

"You can't, maybe I could help you? I've got a bathing suit in here somewhere. Let me find it."

A couple of minutes later, she came back wearing a black swimsuit. Simple and uncomplicated. Showed off every curve. She wasn't skinny. Had the kind of body that women think they shouldn't have—but that men wish more of them had. Then she helped him out of his clothes.

“You seem pretty adept at doing this,” he said.

“You’re not the first man I’ve seen in his underwear.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed I was.”

She put her arm around his waist. The touch of her flesh on his was like an electrical shock. After the last two days and the beer he shouldn’t have had, her touch went right to his addled head ... and to his groin.

Reacher had mostly been looking off into space as he told the story. Suddenly he looked down at me. As if he was gauging my reaction.

“Like the woman in your story, you’re not the first man who’s referenced getting an erection in front of me.”

“No, considering what you do for a living, I suppose not.”

“Should I be insulted by that comment?”

“No, you shouldn’t be.”

He gave me the kind of glance I could read without help.

“You’re doing a great job. You ever think of being a writer? Maybe you are a writer? I don’t even know what you do.”

He ignored the questions. “So where was I?”

“She was taking him ...” I was careful to say ‘him’ not ‘you’. “Taking him outside to the shower.”

Reacher nodded.

It was the craziest night. Cold water from the shower mixing with hot summer rain. Lemony-smelling soap. He used the wall of the lean to for balance and tried to soap himself.

“You look like you’re having a tough time. Can I help?” she asked.

He handed her the soap.

Taking it, she lathered up and then washed him. Like he was a baby, with gentle hands and a slow touch, trying not to put any pressure on all the black-and-blue bruises decorating his body. He shut his eyes and took in the smell of the cedar planks, the soap, and her hair as her hands moved over him.

She didn’t say a word. Just washed him.

Once the grit and grime was gone, she turned off the water, wrapped him in a big towel and helped him back inside

where she dried him.

“Why don’t you sit in the chair while I get you some clean bedding,” she said when she was done.

She came back wearing an oversize t-shirt. Moving efficiently, she changed the sheets, pulling, reaching, and stretching. Just as she was finishing, she noticed something on the floor. Bending over, she picked it up. It glinted in the light.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Bullet casing,” she said and pocketed it. Then she helped him back to bed. “You should sleep now. In the morning I’ll take you to the hospital a few towns over—just to make sure you’re okay.”

“No need to go to all that trouble. If you can just drive me to a bus stop I’ll get myself back to the base. They can check me out there.”

“We’ll talk about it in the morning,” she said.

He lay down.

She shut out the light.

After a few minutes his eyes adjusted to the dark and he could see her sitting on the edge of the couch, toweling dry her hair.

When she was done, she stood up and walked over to the bed.

“Move over soldier—there’s only one cot here and I’m too old to sleep on that lumpy couch. It was fine for weekends when I was a kid ... but ...”

“You’re not a kid anymore?”

He made room for her. And then he fell asleep smelling her lemony soap.

She didn’t let him sleep long. This time instead of the sound of a gun shot, it was her hands that rubbed him awake.

Before he could say anything she put her finger on his lips and whispered: “I’ve always wanted to do this to a man—trap him and take advantage of him. Just be the guy for once. So since you’re basically helpless and have no choice in the matter, I’m going to make my wish come true.”

It was an hour of crazy torture. He couldn’t take over—couldn’t take charge—every time he tried to lift his head up the dizziness overtook him. So he did something he’d never done. He submitted. And after the first few minutes didn’t care. He just lay back and let her do what she wanted.

Every move she made felt intensified. Her hair on his chest was like electric currents. Her fingers were electrified. Her tongue left traces of liquid fire. He was burning up from the inside. She controlled the pace for him. Not letting him speed her up or slow her down.

It was like nothing that had ever happened to him before. He was open. All of him. Just that time. Just with her.

And after that last critical moment, he thought that he'd go through being beat up all over again for another night of this.

In the morning she drove him to the base. They took him to sick bay and gave him a battery of tests. When they were done and brought him to his room, she was gone. There was an envelope waiting for him on the bedside table.

Inside was the spent casing from the bullet she'd shot to scare the bear away and a sheet of paper with two sentences scrawled in blue ink.

'Needing someone doesn't make you weak, it makes you feel. And feeling is how you know you're alive.'

By the time he'd finished, the police and the fire department determined there were no other incendiary devices in the building. They cleared a path and carried me down the steps and into a waiting ambulance. One of the EMT's called Dulcie for me, let her know I was okay.

Jack Reacher went with me to the hospital. My foot was broken. The bones were smashed and I needed surgery. He was gone by the time I came out of recovery but Nina—my mentor and my daughter's godmother—was there. So was Dulcie.

It hadn't been a complicated procedure and I was fine. In a cast, and outfitted with a cane, they let me go home that night.

The Butterfield Institute didn't fare as well. The building's structural damage was so severe it had to be torn down. There was insurance money if Nina wanted to rebuild, but she wasn't sure she was going to.

Maybe it was time for me to go out on my own. The Snow Clinic. I liked the sound of that. It was something to think about.

The police found no trail to the bomber. It seems Nina's patient had been using an assumed name.

The letter came in the mail a week after the incident. No return address. Three stamps. Somewhat bulky. Inside was a piece of paper folded around a spent brass casing.

If there'd been any question that Jack Reacher had been telling me a story about himself, the eighteen words scrawled on the lined sheet removed all doubt. He'd recognized something about me in himself. And he'd passed along a message he might or might not have ever heeded—but one I hoped I could.

Needing someone doesn't make you weak, it makes you feel. And feeling is how you know you're alive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 2006, Lee Child and Barry Eisler were chatting on the LeeChild.com message board. The two thriller writers were kicking around the idea of their characters taking each other on: Lee's Jack Reacher versus Barry's John Rain.

After reading their back and forth, I jumped in and said I'd love to have my character, NYC sex therapist Dr. Morgan Snow, get both of those tough guys on the couch and analyze them.

It's been a while, but I finally got my wish.

This summer I asked Lee Child and Barry Eisler if they'd allow Dr. Snow to shrink them. I also asked Steve Berry, whose Cotton Malone I thought would also be a great therapy candidate.

Reacher, Rain and Malone would never willingly go to therapy, but their creators agreed that if I could figure out how to get them there, they'd go along with it.

No matter how many books you've written, you lose all confidence when you sit down at your computer and take on three iconic thriller characters.

Emailing the stories to each of these *NYT* bestselling writers was nerve-racking. I hoped, but didn't dare expect, that they'd each approve of what I'd done.

They all did.

Steve edited Cotton's dialog and filled in some details about his rare books store. Lee read his story and was amazing with his praise. Barry suggested we head over to Google Docs and write the Rain/Snow scene together in real time—we did and had a total blast.

This project shows the true generosity of these three authors. That's why all the proceeds of the audio book and a share of the proceeds of the ebook are being donated to David Baldacci's Wish You Well Foundation. That supports family literacy. (<http://wishyouwellfoundation.org/>)

It's the least Morgan Snow and I can do.

ABOUT THE WISH YOU WELL FOUNDATION

The Wish You Well Foundation, established by Michelle and David Baldacci, supports family and adult literacy in the United States by fostering and promoting the development and expansion of new and existing literacy programs. To combat illiteracy in America, the Wish You Well Foundation raises funds that help provide literacy solutions while keeping abreast of the evolving needs of those with low literacy skills.

For example, monies are awarded to programs identified for their best practices in dealing with issues of illiteracy. To learn more about the foundation or to find out how you may help visit www.WishYouWellFoundation.org

SUGGESTED READING LIST:

For more great reading from these wonderful authors, click to order any of them directly by clicking on each cover or following the links included here.

Steve Berry – *The Jefferson Key* (May 2011)

Four United States presidents have been assassinated—in 1865, 1881, 1901, and 1963—each murder seemingly

unrelated and separated by time.

But what if those presidents were all killed for the same reason: a clause in the United States Constitution—contained within Article 1, Section 8—that would shock Americans?

This question is what faces former Justice Department operative Cotton Malone in his latest adventure. When a bold assassination attempt is made against President Danny Daniels in the heart of Manhattan, Malone risks his life to foil the killing—only to find himself at dangerous odds with the Commonwealth, a secret society of pirates first assembled during the American Revolution. In their most perilous exploit yet, Malone and Cassiopeia Vitt race across the nation and take to the high seas. Along the way they break a secret cipher originally possessed by Thomas Jefferson, unravel a mystery concocted by Andrew Jackson, and unearth a centuries-old document forged by the Founding Fathers themselves, one powerful enough—thanks to that clause in the Constitution—to make the Commonwealth unstoppable.

http://www.amazon.com/Jefferson-Key-Novel-ebook/dp/B004P8JPIQ/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1315266978&sr=1-1

Lee Child – *The Affair* (Sept. 2011)

With Reacher, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Lee Child has created “a series that stands in the front rank of modern thrillers” (*The Washington Post*).

Everything starts somewhere... .

For elite military cop Jack Reacher, that somewhere was Carter Crossing, Mississippi, way back in 1997. A lonely railroad track. A crime scene. A cover-up.

A young woman is dead, and solid evidence points to a soldier at a nearby military base. But that soldier has powerful friends in Washington.

Reacher is ordered undercover—to find out everything he can, to control the local police, and then to vanish. Reacher is a good soldier. But when he gets to Carter Crossing, he finds layers no one saw coming, and the investigation spins out of control.

Local sheriff Elizabeth Deveraux has a thirst for justice—and an appetite for secrets. Uncertain if they can trust each other, Reacher and Deveraux reluctantly join forces. Reacher works to uncover the truth, while others try to bury it forever. The conspiracy threatens to shatter his faith in his mission, and turn him into a man to be feared.

A novel of unrelenting suspense that could only come from the pen of #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Lee Child, *The Affair* is the start of the Reacher saga, a thriller that takes Reacher—and his readers—right to the edge ... and beyond.

http://www.amazon.com/Affair-Reacher-Novel-Jack-ebook/dp/B004P8JPS6/ref=tmm_kin_title_0?ie=UTF8&m=AG56TWVU5XWC2

Barry Eisler – *The Detachment* (Sept. 2011)

John Rain is back. And “the most charismatic assassin since James Bond” (San Francisco Chronicle) is up against his most formidable enemy yet: the nexus of political, military, media, and corporate factions known only as the Oligarchy.

When legendary black ops veteran Colonel Scott “Hort” Horton tracks Rain down in Tokyo, Rain can’t resist the offer: a multi-million dollar payday for the “natural causes” demise of three ultra-high-profile targets who are dangerously close to launching a coup in America.

But the opposition on this job is going to be too much for even Rain to pull it off alone. He’ll need a detachment of other deniable irregulars: his partner, the former Marine sniper, Dox. Ben Treven, a covert operator with ambivalent motives and conflicted loyalties. And Larison, a man with a hair trigger and a secret he’ll kill to protect.

From the shadowy backstreets of Tokyo and Vienna, to the deceptive glitz and glamour of Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and finally to a Washington, D.C. in a permanent state of war, these four lone wolf killers will have to survive presidential hit teams, secret CIA prisons, and a national security state as obsessed with guarding its own secrets as it is with invading the privacy of the populace.

But first, they’ll have to survive each other.

The Detachment is what fans of Eisler, “one of the most talented and literary writers in the thriller genre” (*Chicago Sun-Times*), have been waiting for: the worlds of the award-winning Rain series, and of the bestselling *Fault Line* and *Inside Out*, colliding in one explosive thriller as real as today’s headlines and as frightening as tomorrow’s.

Buy it here:

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Detachment-ebook/dp/B005CDHZS0>

M.J. Rose – *The Book Of Lost Fragrances* (Pre-order—coming March 2012)

http://www.amazon.com/Book-Lost-Fragrances-Suspense-Reincarnationist/dp/1451621302/ref=ntt_at_ep_dpt_3

More books by M.J. Rose in the Butterfield Institute Series with Dr. Morgan Snow.

The Halo Effect

Prominent New York sex therapist Dr. Morgan Snow finds her life taking a dangerous turn when her client, a high-priced prostitute, gives her a manuscript vividly detailing all of the sexual favors and fantasies she has performed for the city's most powerful men, and then disappears.

“Believable and hair-raising. THE HALO EFFECT will have you on the edge of your seat from page one.” — *Katherine Neville, New York Times bestselling author of The Eight*

“I dare you to read the first five pages and not be in its thrall

... a compulsive artful page-turner.” —*Doug Clegg, author of The Hour Before Dark*

http://www.amazon.com/Halo-Effect-Butterfield-Institute-ebook/dp/B0052ZGFJ8/ref=ntt_at_ep_edition_2_2?ie=UTF8&m=AG56TWVU5XWC2

The Delilah Complex

The Scarlet Society is a secret club of twelve powerful and sexually adventurous women. But when a photograph of the body of one of the men they're recruited to dominate—strapped to a gurney, the number 1 inked on the sole of his foot—is sent to the *New York Times*, they are shocked and frightened. Unable to cope with the tragedy, the women turn to Dr. Morgan Snow. But what starts out as grief counseling quickly becomes a murder investigation, with any one of the twelve women a potential suspect.

The case leads Detective Noah Jordan—a man with whom Morgan has shared a brief, intense connection—to her office. He fears the number on the man's foot hints that the killings have just begun. With her hands tied by her professional duty, Morgan is dangerously close to the demons in her own mind—and the flesh-and-blood killer.

“... M.J. Rose is a bold, unflinching writer and her resolute honesty puts her in a class by herself.” —*New York*

Times bestselling author Laura Lippman

“Utterly fascinating! ... This is one book that will keep you glued to your seat.” —*New York Times bestselling author Lisa Gardner*

http://www.amazon.com/Delilah-Complex-Butterfield-Institute-ebook/dp/B0052ZGF48/ref=pd_sim_kinc_2?ie=UTF8&m=AG56TWVU5XWC2

The Venus Fix

Morgan Snow’s newest patient is a powerful, influential man—secretly addicted to watching Internet Web cam pornography. He’s not alone in his desires. She’s also working with a group of high school teenagers equally and dangerously obsessed with these real-time fantasies.

Fantasies that are all too accessible.
Then the women start dying online, right in front of their eyes.
Now it’s all about murder.

“Rose writes erotic better than just about anyone ... and does thrillers just as well as the big boys.” —*BookBitch.com*

http://www.amazon.com/Venus-Fix-Butterfield-Institute-ebook/dp/B0052ZGG42/ref=pd_sim_kinc_1?ie=UTF8&m=AG56TWVU5XWC2

And for *The Reincarnationist*, *The Memorist* and *The Hypnotist*, as well as other of her novels, please please visit M.J.'s Amazon page here:

<http://www.amazon.com/M.-J.-Rose/e/B001ILFLQS>

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