

# **14 Degrees Below Zero**

**Quinton Skinner**



**VILLARD**

# 14

DEGREES BELOW

# ZERO

A NOVEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE

QUINTON SKINNER



VILLARD NEW YORK

## CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[INTRO. PEOPLE LIKE THIS MUST HAVE THEIR SHARE OF PROBLEMS](#)

[Chapter 1. ALL HER FEARS DISSOLVING FOR A SECOND OR TWO](#)

[Chapter 2. MAYBE HE NEEDED TO HAVE A WORD WITH STEPHEN](#)

[Chapter 3. IT WAS KIND OF AN UGLY THING](#)

[INTERLUDE. IN THE CAR, THERE WAS NO WIND](#)

[Chapter 4. A SINGLE MOTHER COLLEGE DROPOUT WITH RAVEN BLACK HAIR](#)

[Chapter 5. HIS CONTINUED WILLINGNESS TO WEAR THE MASK OF LEWIS](#)

[Chapter 6. IT WAS ALL WELL AND GOOD FOR A DEAD BEARDED GUY](#)

[Chapter 7. THE POINT OF FEAR, BEYOND ITS UTILITY AS A WARNING](#)

[INTERLUDE. SHE WOULD MAKE HERSELF DUMB AND SLEEPY FOREVER](#)

[Chapter 8. OF ALL THE THINGS HE NEEDED AT THIS STAGE OF HIS LIFE](#)

[Chapter 9. THE DENUDED TREES, THE BARREN FLOWER BEDS, THE STILLNESS](#)

[Chapter 10. HE HAD DEALT WITH HIS SHARE OF JEALOUS FATHERS](#)

[Chapter 11. HE WAS THE CENTER OF HIS OWN TRAGIC OPERA](#)

[INTERLUDE. NO ONE GOES AWAY, SHE SAID](#)

[Chapter 12. THEY HAD LEARNED TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM DISAPPOINTMENT](#)

[Chapter 13. THEY HAD RIDDEN THE SWEET WAVE OF LUST; NOW IT WAS OVER](#)

[Chapter 14. HIDEBOUND, EARTH-LADEN, AND FINALLY FREE](#)

[INTERLUDE. FEEDING THE PENGUINS AND MAKING SURE THEIR BABIES WERE SAFE](#)

[Chapter 15. EITHER EMBRACE HIM OR THROW HIM OUT IN THE SNOW](#)

[Chapter 16. BECAUSE SHE WAS A LOT LIKE HER FATHER](#)

[Chapter 17. THE VOID WAS REACHING OUT AND CREATING A MONUMENT](#)

[Chapter 18. EVERY FEW YEARS A REAL CLIMATOLOGICAL HORROR CAME ALONG](#)

[Chapter 19. IT FELT LIKE A VISIT TO A CHAPEL OF HELPLESSNESS](#)

[Chapter 20. TRANSMITTING WHAT SHE TOOK TO BE PERTINENT FACTS](#)

[INTERLUDE. HE REALLY NEEDED SOMEONE TO TAKE CARE OF HIM](#)

[Chapter 21. NOTHING BUT THE CRYSTALLINE FORBIDDANCE OF THE BAY](#)

[Chapter 22. THE RUSH OF RUNNING TO SAVE HIS OWN SKIN](#)

[Chapter 23. YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT PEOPLE LIKE THAT](#)

[Chapter 24. LIKE BEING ANYBODY ELSE, MAYBE A LITTLE MORE \*INTENSE\*](#)

[Chapter 25. HAPPY TO HAVE EVEN TRANSITORY COMPANY](#)

[EPILOGUE. HIS LOVE FOR HER TRANSPARENT AND SHINING](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Quinton Skinner](#)

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*I have placed my happiness on seeing you good and accomplished, and no distress which this world can now bring on me could equal that of your disappointing my hopes.*

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, in a letter to his daughter

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## **INTRO. PEOPLE LIKE THIS MUST HAVE THEIR SHARE OF PROBLEMS.**

**T**he ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu once enjoyed a vivid dream of being a butterfly—swooping, beating his wings, riding the currents of the most minute disturbances in the atmosphere.

When he awoke, he was forever troubled. He could never answer, to his satisfaction, whether he had been a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or whether he was now a butterfly dreaming he was a man.

When he went down the slope in the snow, his mind was in a riot. He tried to overcome gravity and deposit himself unharmed at the top of the tree-lined trail. It was no good, of course. He was unable to out-will reality, to bend time and happenstance, to reverse the sixty seconds that had seen him battered, his consciousness fractured. He knew that he might never recover from this.

His eyes sent to his brain a series of snapshots: the denuded trees, the whiteness of the snowstorm broken by black spots of rock, his own breath forming trails in the winter air as he fell.

He slid and tumbled, his rage unfolding. Big clumps of snow fell from the sky and landed in his eyes. He craved revenge for what had just happened, but his body ignored his commands, sending back spiky blasts of pain from his extremities and a blast of panic from his chest as his wind was knocked out.

Gravity continued to do its thing and he fell. He began to roll, and then remembered what was at the bottom of the slope.

The river was partially frozen and covered with floating snow. From the top of the hill it had been a thing of beauty, winding in serenity through the city. Down here it was noisy, its currents sounding like a long exhaled breath. He looked up and caught a glimpse of the bridge, with cars going past, and wondered if anyone could see him.

The thin ice snapped like a glass tabletop. The sound was muffled by the snow and cold; it was as though the elements had conspired to make his death as quiet and uneventful as possible. He tried to grab hold of something, anything, and gasped when

the freezing water enveloped his shoulders and legs.

*Get up. Just stand up. Don't let him get away with this.*

He was in the water now. A deep part of his mind urged him to stay alive, but he couldn't get his arms and legs to work. His cold-weather gear started soaking up water, and he felt himself begin to sink.

Up above, in the snowstorm, an airplane passed. Inside they would be worried about their landing. But they would be warm.

Then the water was up around his face. It was black and too cold to be believed. His eyes and mouth remained above the surface, and he sucked in air in panicked gasps. Water filled his ears.

*Get up get up get up get up get—*

The air was . . . no, that wasn't air. Was he breathing water? He wasn't breathing. He was *drowning*. Pain seethed through his arms and legs, into his chest. He couldn't feel his hands and feet.

*This isn't good. I don't want this.*

He could hear the river singing a sleepy song. He tried to remember where he was. He had fallen. He was in the river. He could still see the sun but it was filtered through an aqueous gauze.

*Someone get me out of here. Please.*

He was on the bottom of the shallow water. The sun had gone out. He tried to remember the sound of his own name. He—

—remembered holding a photograph. It showed a man in his forties, with thick dark hair and upright posture. Next to him was a younger woman, obviously his daughter—the resemblance between them was striking. In between, holding both their hands, was a beautiful little girl in a flower-print dress, her bangs hanging over her forehead, caught in mid-sentence, talking to her mother and grandfather. To one side was a handsome man of about thirty, in a blazer and open-necked shirt; he stood just apart, as though not sure whether he was allowed to get too close to the family—or if he wanted to.

It was a sunny spring afternoon at the farmers' market. In a second photo, the young woman turned to the handsome man and kissed him on the lips. The older man made a point of diverting his granddaughter's attention. They were good-looking, well-dressed people. They seemed comfortable and happy together. They were worthy of envy. They showed little sign of what they had just been through.

The father and the boyfriend shared a glance. In a third photo we might try to

discern what passed between them, but the image revealed little. They smiled with their mouths and not their eyes. They looked through each other, rather than allowing their gazes to meet.

People like this must have their share of problems. Everyone does. At the market they smelled the hay, the flowers, the cotton candy. Each in their various ways tried not to think about sickness, loss, resentment, and the shadowed corners of the will that had to be checked. They appeared a picture of happiness. He remembered that day. He

—

—he was trying to talk, but the freezing water burned his throat and the centers of his eyes clouded over with the awful whiteness of the void.

# 1. ALL HER FEARS DISSOLVING FOR A SECOND OR TWO.

Even in her sleep she could taste her mother's grilled-cheese sandwiches: crackling on the outside but rescued from dryness by a fatty residue of butter coating her tongue, the cheddar inside melted perfectly and peeking innocently around the bread crust. It smelled of calmness, security, and warmth.

"Something to drink, Jay?" her mother asked.

"Milk," Jay mumbled through the first mouthful of the sandwich.

"Excuse me?" Jay's mother said; she was beautiful but looked tired, with her long hair tied back and a suggestion of shadow around her eyes.

"Milk," Jay said more clearly.

"Is that how we ask for something?"

"Can I have some milk, please?" Jay blurted out.

Her mother nodded with satisfaction and went to the kitchen. Jay heard the sound of the refrigerator opening and the milk being poured. She had another bite of her sandwich.

The light streaming in through the dining-room windows cast pools of reflection on the wooden tabletop. Jay made sure not to leave crumbs. Her father wasn't home—he was at work—but she had trained herself to avoid the looks of irritation her carelessness provoked. He made Jay tense and worried. She loved him so much that she grabbed hold of him whenever he was near, pressing herself to his leg or arm, her thumb making for her mouth, all her fears dissolving for a second or two.

The milk was in front of her. Jay couldn't remember her mother bringing it. Somehow she knew none of this was real, but it felt so good she didn't want it to stop.

She lived in a place called Minnesota. It was a very cold place where people knew how to behave themselves. It was actually only cold for part of the year, but that cold was so profound, so shocking and even terrifying at times, that it cast a shadow over

even the hottest and sunniest days of summer.

Jay's mother was gone. She had left. That's right, she had left.

The house was quiet. It was three stories including the spacious attic, full of comfortable furniture and a kitchen always stocked with food. Though she was in a little girl's body, Jay could remember growing to adulthood there. She'd snuck cigarettes by the big elm in the backyard, and lost her virginity in her room one afternoon when she was supposed to be at school. She loved the house, for all its residue of pain and disappointment.

Another bite of the sandwich. The crispy pan-fried bread gave way to the hot, liquid core. The place was entirely quiet, the way it had often been when she was a teenager, with her father off somewhere and her mother silently painting in the sunporch—no music, no talk radio, nothing but Anna's endless meditation on the back garden. It had grown increasingly quiet during dinnertime as well, the laughter and storytelling between Jay's parents having shifted to a more muted song of things unsaid that Jay could never entirely penetrate.

She got up from the table. Strange, she was so short. The top of the table was at about shoulder level. How old was she? Five? Six? She reached up and felt the soft outlines of her cheeks, the feathery wisps of her shoulder-length hair.

The living room was as she remembered (when *was it?*), with stacks of magazines and books everywhere, her own and her parents', with Anna's gardenscapes on all four walls.

Anna. Jay's mother's name was Anna. And now she was gone. She had died.

Jay sat on the worn-out sofa under the room's largest window, raising a small nimbus of dust that dispersed around her. From there she could see the open door to the sunroom, and make out the workbench where Anna kept her paints, rags, and brushes. Jay tongued out a stubborn bit of her sandwich from the back of her teeth, enjoying the flash of a flavor she hadn't tasted in . . .

She was never going to see her mother again.

With an emotion resembling panic Jay thought of the closet upstairs where Anna kept her clothes. She knew everything was just as Anna had left it; Jay's father, Lewis, was too benumbed by grief to get rid of them. Jay had an urge to go up there and lose herself in the smell of her mother's stale perfume and the feel of the dresses Jay used to press her face against.

But she couldn't. She willed herself to stand, but it was impossible. She might as well have been cemented to the couch.

The room began to break apart as though it wasn't real. Of *course* it wasn't real.

Her bedroom was suffused with the morning chill. Weak light insinuated its way through a crack in the curtains. Jay stretched her body and remembered where she was, and when it was.

Next to her slept a man. Stephen. That was Stephen. He slept with his arms folded, his chest rising and falling, his handsome face tense as though he was working out some unsolvable problem. Somehow he sensed Jay waking up and shifted toward her a couple of inches.

Jay was twenty-three. She wasn't a little girl any longer, though she could taste the grilled-cheese sandwich of her dream and, almost gasping, remembered that she had been in the presence of her mother just moments before. She had asked for the milk correctly, after some prompting. She had pleased her mother one more time.

She shook her head because it wouldn't do to start the morning crying. There was a *real* little girl down the hall, after all, and Jay had to be strong for her. She had to be strong in spite of how certain she was of her own weakness.

It wouldn't be irresponsible to doze for ten more minutes. Ten more minutes, and then Jay would launch herself out of bed and transform into a domestic whirlwind effortlessly getting Ramona ready for school and then heading to work. It would be easy. It would be simple, in a way that it never was before.

## 2. MAYBE HE NEEDED TO HAVE A WORD WITH STEPHEN.

Now he had to walk the dog every morning before work—the beast had needs. Lewis had named it Carew, after the baseball player, and had regretted the decision ever since. Rod Carew, in his playing days with the Minnesota Twins, had exemplified subtlety and finicky precision. Carew the dog, in the prime of his canine days, was the polar opposite. Carew the dog was spastic, perpetually overexcited, and utterly oblivious to the finer points of his master's moods.

Lewis Ingraham held Carew's leash in the chill air, the breath of man and beast condensing in the gray morning, with the leafless trees and dim blues and whites of the autumn morning. And a thought occurred to Lewis.

He had come to realize—or at least believe, with the heartfelt conviction of a man uncovering an essential truth until then hidden beneath the mundane surface of things—that Carew had single-handedly (granting the beast, for the moment, the symbolic gift of hands) tipped Lewis's life from stoically bearable to entirely unpalatable. Oh, the fucking *dog*. The walking, the feeding, the constant emotional thirst for attention—they all entailed an added level of obligation and toil, and had transformed an otherwise flat but satisfyingly habit-ridden stage in a man's life into a hectic, fecal-tinged routine of unrewarding strife.

Not that it was all Carew's fault, to be fair.

It was acceptable to Lewis to admit that he didn't like his dog, and never really had—he was a man untroubled by some of the more unseemly aspects of his personality. The dog had been a gift from his daughter Jay, and as such was laden with so much symbolism and implicit significance that it was nearly unthinkable for Lewis to, say, simply unleash the animal and encourage it to amble from sight and disappear forever. Actually, no, he had tried that. The dog always came back.

The day they went to get the dog had been a scorcher, burning with heat and humidity. Lewis had been hungover and numb with grief. They'd gone together to Animal Control with Jay's daughter Ramona—Lewis's granddaughter, his consolation prize for continuing to exist. The thought of Ramona enlivened Lewis's step and robbed the sting from the morning air. He remembered going that day to the derelict

city facility near downtown, nestled near the steel prison of the automotive impound lot, on a mission to get a dog for himself. It was understood that the dog would also be Ramona's—that Lewis would care for it, and that it would provide him with a supplemental reason for continuing to live, but that Ramona was also gaining a dog-by-proxy, saving Jay the trouble of adding more direct responsibility to her aimless and fairly feckless young womanhood.

Funny, he hadn't thought about that day in a while. The dog was also Ramona's. And Ramona *loved* Carew.

"You might not realize it," Lewis said to the dog, who looked up with perked ears. "But you just earned a reprieve. Again. You fucking mutt."

*Yeah yeah yeah, Lewis, the dog said. You're the man.*

Ramona had selected the spotty, shaggy thing—it had the wild-eyed look of the career convict who had come to enjoy prison. Jay had paid the adoption fee (still more symbolism) that sprang Carew from his death sentence—it was just a few days from euthanasia, according to the tag on its cage. Then she paid for the veterinarian visit, a one-stop extravaganza including Carew's neutering, delousing, and treatment for kennel cough. Jay had granted Lewis the gift of a living being, a companion, an entity to dilute his solitude.

How long had it been since Anna died, anyway? Soon it would be closer to seven months than six. Her clothes still hung in the walk-in closet in their bedroom—*his* bedroom, where he rarely slept now. His shirts, suits, and shoes were all in the guest room, Jay's former bedroom, to which he'd transferred many of his things after his only child left for college. He used it as a dressing room, and he liked to see himself in the full-length mirror hanging on the closet door. He liked to inspect his naked body, proud of his flat belly and strong thighs—he still ran at least three times a week around Lake of the Isles, no matter the weather. He took care of himself, and had a better physique than a lot of the soft, doughy twenty-somethings he saw padding around his neighborhood. But he didn't make a point of it. No one needed to know he was vain about his body, or his full head of hair, or the way time had carved his features into a mask of masculine solidity.

Anna had been attacked by pancreatic cancer, and it rotted her out from the inside. She was like waterlogged wood at the end, soft and porous. In the last couple of weeks she smelled terribly. Lewis had burned incense constantly. He had camped out on the sofa downstairs in a mess of pillows and blankets and books. He slept only a couple of hours at a time, vigilant for the sound of her coughing or moaning in a semiconscious stupor of pain and narcotics.

"Sit, Carew," he said to the dog, who had spotted another canine on the other side of the street. A female, Lewis thought, but his assessment was certainly clouded by the creature holding its leash—a girl of about twenty-five in those hip-hugger pants and spaghetti-strap top that was apparently handed out as a uniform these days. *She* didn't

seem cold, but Lewis's hands were shaking.

Lewis, at forty-seven, prided himself on not being the sort of man who took untoward notice of girls almost half his age—girls, he reminded himself with a wince, who were essentially the same age as his daughter.

“I said *sit*,” he growled, more loudly. Carew did not comply. Carew had gotten a taste for chaos during his wild, predomestication days, and ran wild through the house and slept on the sofas. He was most definitely not getting with the program. The dog *knew* that Lewis was in no condition to train it.

In a full-fledged pique, Lewis jerked on Carew's leash—all right, granted, probably *too* hard, but how else was he to get his message across? The girl across the street looked up, and a flash of concerned consternation played across her admittedly pretty face. Lewis imagined himself through her eyes: an old guy, bundled up though it wasn't really that cold, losing his shit and committing borderline animal abuse.

Lewis smiled and gave her a *what're-you-gonna-do* shrug. She would have been in his range, back when he was young. Now it was out of the question. It was unsavory to even think about it. But he thought about it.

The girl gave Lewis a little half-smile, noncommittal, and went on her way. Her ponytail bounced on her shoulder blades as she walked.

Now why the hell had she given him a look like that? All right, he was dressed far too warm in his hooded sweatshirt and black burglar's cap. The girl was sleeveless, her arms fetchingly lithe and tanned. It wasn't his fault he was bundled like an old man—the goddammed antidepressant his doctor had forced on him made him feel high and giddy in the morning, his face and fingers borderline numb, and random pains and chills flitted through his chest cavity. Maybe the girl wouldn't have been so standoffish if she'd known that he'd just lost his wife. The pretty ones always thought they were above you—and all because of a chance genetic fluke that inspired behavior in men that was, in the end, little more than a complicated mask over extremely simple desires.

He could have had that girl when he was younger. He was sure of it.

He'd been married to Anna for twenty-five years when she died. He couldn't say they were all good years, especially when he was younger, more angry. The last years, before she got sick, were also no picnic. But time had passed, they had stayed together. Sometimes he thought they shouldn't have. But there was no point thinking about it now.

Lewis and Carew reached the empty park. It was silent and still, too early for the children to be out.

“Here we are, boy,” Lewis said, his voice morning-hoarse. “Your earthly paradise—

Dogshit Park.”

Lewis walked gingerly through the grass, fastidiously avoiding the plethora of turds that decorated the turf. They were like synesthetic land mines, their sight and smell permeating his oversensitized consciousness and senses in a way that had been the norm for the past year, since Anna had learned she was sick.

Taking in a measured breath, Lewis massaged his chest. He was light-headed, and everything seemed unreal. He tried to will the world back into focus, to make everything take on the somber tones of reality. He sent out internal feelers for the catastrophic explosion of pain behind his sternum that would be the last thing he ever felt.

It didn't happen. He didn't die. He came back to himself.

There was a big sign posted: CLEAN UP AFTER YOUR DOG. Someone had painted over some of the letters, and now it read: LEAN AFT YO DOG. Everyone apparently felt they had a special dispensation from the rules, anyway, because there was shit everywhere. Lewis counted a half-dozen mounds before he found a clear patch of grass and unclipped Carew's leash. He wasn't supposed to let the dog run free in the city, but fuck it. He felt a certain sympathy for Carew's plight—it couldn't be easy, living with Lewis.

Carew took off and ran a big circle in the grass. He looked back with undisguised doggy affection, his big tongue hanging out.

*Yeah yeah, Lewis. OK OK yeah.*

“Yeah, OK to you, too,” Lewis called to him. “Now go play. We have to get home soon.”

There was another sign in the neighborhood that read: BEGIN ONE WAY. Someone had obscured two letters to make it read: GIN ONE WAY. The gag rankled him every time he saw it. The better joke, obviously, was to erase the GIN and make the sign read BE ONE WAY. Wasn't that apparent to everyone?

Lewis took his cell phone out of his pocket and, with surprise, realized that he was smiling. He was too emotional these days; it was as though some defensive barrier inside him had been breached and couldn't be put in place again. For the moment it was working in his favor, though, because the sight of Carew's mottled brown pelt gave him pleasure. He thought of the animal's not-disagreeable smell, and the satisfying clack of his claws on the hardwood floors at home, and the feeling of Carew's body against his when they watched TV on the sofa together. And Lewis felt all right.

After dialing a familiar number Lewis pressed the phone against his ear and, with his free hand, fished for a cigarette in the pocket of his sweatshirt. He managed to get

the thing lit before Jay picked up.

“Hello, what?” she mumbled. “Dad?”

For the moment he had no aches, no chills, no heaviness of heart and mind. The sound of his daughter’s voice was a warm fire on a winter day—he could melt, he could die. He lived to hear her call him Dad. He loved her like music, like light. She and Ramona were all that he lived for, and he knew how much they needed him.

“How did you know it was me?” he asked, watching Carew digging in the grass.

“Who else would call so early?” she said.

“Early?” he repeated, an unintentional note of mockery in his voice. “It’s almost seven-thirty. I’m out with Carew. Isn’t Ramona out of bed yet?”

A moment of silence.

“Dad, it’s more like ten after seven,” Jay moaned. “Ramona’s asleep. I need to rest, Dad. You’re twenty-five years ahead of me in melatonin depletion. Is there something important you want to talk about?”

“What do you mean, you need to rest?” Lewis asked her. “What time did you get to bed last night?”

Another pause. Lewis had miscalculated. He shouldn’t have asked her that, at least not in that *tone*. Jay and Anna had always been major sticklers in the matter of Lewis’s *tone*—he was too cutting, too acerbic, too *something*. He wasn’t sufficiently empathetic. He had been made to understand that sometimes he *came on too strong*. He lacked warmth. The criticisms of the mother had been passed on to the daughter. At least some part of her still lived.

“Stephen was here last night, if that’s what you mean,” Jay said. She was waking up, her voice turning sharp.

Lewis took a drag on his cigarette. He needed to be alert. He was entering a conversational wilderness.

“Honey, you know I didn’t mean anything,” he told her. “Did Ramona at least get to sleep at a decent hour?”

Jay let out a long breath. “Yeah, Dad, she *did*. She’s *fine*.”

“You make it sound like I’m giving you a hard time,” Lewis said. “Truce, all right? I just called to talk to you. It’s a beautiful morning—cloudy, but the sun’s coming out like a big bald head. You remember that song?”

“Yeah, Dad, I do.” Softer now.

“You should get up,” Lewis told her. “Get your day started.”

Carew was fussily smelling trees, the grass, turds. His back twitched with the olfactory explosion of the park. Lewis winced as a plume of cigarette smoke found his eye.

“So you’re walking the dog?” Lewis heard the sound of his daughter adjusting herself in bed.

“I already told you that,” he said. “Hey, did I hear Ramona? Does she want to talk to Grandpa?”

“Ramona isn’t up yet.”

Lewis realized, all at once, that Stephen was in bed with Jay. He had spent the night there, in Jay’s little two-bedroom apartment on the far side of Hennepin Avenue, about six blocks from Lewis’s house. Lewis had suspected Stephen of sleeping over before, but it was an apprehension he’d never had confirmed.

She wasn’t required to live like this. Jay had an open invitation to come home, to bring Ramona, to unite what was left of the family. Of course, should that happen, Lewis knew he wouldn’t approve of allowing Stephen to spend the night.

What was this doing to Ramona’s psyche? He was no kinky Freudian, but things were hard enough for the little girl—she was growing up with a single mother, and she almost never saw her father. And now the confusion of seeing a boyfriend parading in and out of her mother’s room, the sleepy male face at the breakfast table, Stephen half-clothed and giving her mother confidential caresses to commemorate the erotic adventures of the night before.

It had to be harmful to Ramona. It pained Lewis to think it, but the girl wasn’t being given an optimal upbringing. Of course, raising concern of any kind would only serve to cleave a yawning chasm of enmity between himself and Jay. She was stubborn, proud. She might move away. She might disappear.

Lewis took a jagged breath and caressed his breastbone. *Not yet, can’t die yet.* His head swam with fear. He calculated his chances of surviving the morning at ninety-six, maybe ninety-seven percent. Very good odds, but he felt his world narrowing.

What made it all the more unbearable was Stephen himself. Stephen was a tenure-track professor at the university, in the graduate program that Jay herself might have been starting this fall—if she hadn’t gotten pregnant at nineteen and dropped out after her second year of college. Now Jay was twenty-three. Stephen was nine years older. Stephen: Mister Perfect, Mister Intellectual. He hadn’t fooled Lewis for an instant, not from the moment—the very *millisecond*—they first met.

“Dad?” Jay said. “You still there?”

“Yes, honey,” Lewis said, trying to remember how he talked when he sounded normal. “Can I please say good morning to Ramona?”

“She isn’t up, Dad,” Jay said again. “And there isn’t time. We’re going to have to hurry to get her to day care on time.”

So Lewis was to believe that Ramona wasn’t awake yet, although in the same breath Jay was talking about rushing her to day care—a day care that, not insignificantly, Lewis paid for. Precisely when had his discourse with his daughter devolved into worthless half-truths and arm’s-length parrying?

“When you were Ramona’s age, your mother and I always got you into bed by eight o’clock,” Lewis said. “That way, you were nice and rested in the morning. We didn’t have to drag you out of bed.”

Indistinct sounds on the phone.

“Jay, did you—”

“What did you say, Dad? Sorry.”

“Is someone there?” Lewis asked, the words escaping him despite his best intentions. “Did Stephen spend the night?”

Lewis briefly considered walking home, getting into his car, and driving the short distance to Jay’s apartment. Perhaps this was a conversation best conducted in person. Maybe he needed to have a word with Stephen.

“Dad, don’t take this the wrong way,” Jay said. “But it’s just not your business.”

*Zing.* In a heartbeat, Jay had turned cold and disapproving—an elegant diversionary strategy, something else she had learned from her mother.

“I could consider it my business, since it pertains to the general welfare of my granddaughter.”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this,” said Jay. “I’ll call you later, Dad. I’m glad you’re enjoying the morning. I really am.”

“Don’t get offended. Please,” Lewis rushed to say. “You know I’m always thinking about Ramona. She’s only four years old.”

“I know how old my daughter is.”

“Then you also know that at her age—”

“Good-bye, Dad.”

“Jay?”

“*What?*”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

A big sigh, the biggest of the morning, then the longest gulf of silence.

“I know, Dad.”

Lewis’s daughter hung up on him.

Carew squeezed out a magnificent shit just then, three logs’ worth. Lewis leashed up the dog and pondered the crap as though it were an abstract sculpture at the Walker museum. He took a look around.

*Fuck it.* If no one else cared, why should he? Let someone else clean it up—or, better still, step in it.