

*The* GREATEST  
DISCOVERY

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POND  
PUBLISHING

## Chapter 1

I swore I would never end up in the South again—at least not alive.

Even though no one considered Virginia to be in the deep South, it was far enough down that having a pick-up truck was a semi-implicit requirement. I didn't even know who won the Civil War until I was in the eleventh grade, and I think that was by accident. Word must have reached the principal because the teacher mysteriously disappeared before the next school year started.

I didn't have anything against Virginia as a state, per se; it's just that I had lived there my whole life. Both my mom and dad's side of the family lived within twenty square miles of each other. I think we arrived somewhere around the time of the Pilgrims, and none had left since—except me. My family thought I was joking when I told them I was going to college in the West.

Getting my bachelor's degree in Colorado helped me realize that the world was larger than the south side of Richmond. When I finally did finish college and moved back home to start graduate school, I didn't think people would believe that I was born and raised in Virginia. What little accent I did have before I left was lost during my four years in the Rocky Mountains.

With my bachelors behind me, I had to keep reminding myself that my master's would only take a year. At first, I was a little nervous about locking myself into a certain field; wondering if there was something else I would rather do than social work, but up to that point, everything seemed to be going okay. Sure, it had its downfalls, just like any profession, but I was pushing forward knowing that at least I wouldn't detest my job. As long as I didn't mind my work and could provide for my family, I couldn't ask for more, right?

The university in Richmond had an accelerated graduate program, which is why it would take one year instead of two. I was looking forward to only having to complete one year of coursework for my masters, but a break would have been nice. I had finished my bachelors in

May, and after tying up loose ends and trucking across the country in June, my classes started the middle of July. Required courses were among the few reasons I would have voluntarily returned to the mid-Atlantic during the middle of summer.

In case you have never been to the great commonwealth of Virginia in July, it's hot. Not just "I think I need to mop my brow" hot, but "why did I bother to wear clothes out today?" hot. And driving in an old Accord with no air conditioning in the middle of lunch hour traffic didn't help, either. But my registration materials were due by the end of the week and I had to get them in because when Amanda started her job, I would be without a car.

While getting my master's degree she was the one who would be bringing in the family income. She was an art major in school that found her niche in stained glass. After applying to a few places in Richmond, her talent caught the eye of one of the local shops. The job was waiting for her when we got there. With a baby on the way, her goal was to eventually be able to do freelance work from home.

We had tried for a while to get pregnant and wasn't sure if it would ever happen, but we finally did earlier that year. She sent me some flowers at work with a little note, "We can't wait to see you when you get home," signed, "Mom and Baby." I was so excited I rushed home from work and we must have danced around the apartment for a full hour. It helped put life into perspective for both of us.

The baby was due the first week of November. We were looking forward to a remarkable Thanksgiving with plenty to be thankful for. But that was still four months away, and even though I was excited, graduate school was in the forefront of my mind.

As I pulled onto the campus, I kept wondering just how different my life was going to be. In Colorado, the college was in the middle of nowhere on a huge piece of beautifully landscaped

property that sat right up against the mountains—absolute peace and quiet. All I saw in Richmond was back-to-back old buildings, cars, and fast food restaurants—very downtown. The simple task of trying to find a parking space was a stressful event. Something inside told me that life was going to be extremely different.

Luckily, my stress paid off with a spot close to the administration building. For that stint of good luck, I didn't even mind feeding the meter some change. Grabbing my paperwork, I headed for the office to voluntarily register for one more year of "higher education."

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"May I help you, dear?" asked the woman behind the front desk. She was your typical white-haired, nice-as-pie southern grandmother working part time so she didn't have to sit at home.

That's one thing I could attest to without reservation: people in the South were a lot friendlier. Everyone I talked to—the secretary at the graduate office, my course advisor, and even the janitor I asked for directions—was polite and helpful.

After registration was taken care of, I wanted to check out the library to see what it had to offer. With all the time I would be spending there, I wanted to at least give it a once over, but I had to get home and begin the process of finding an internship. That was the main reason why the degree would only take one year; instead of taking the internship after completing my coursework, I would take them together.

I would take the bus to the social work building in the morning and then home from my internship at night, with studying at the library in between. I wasn't looking forward to such a hectic schedule, especially working at night, but that's what my career choice required.

My program's emphasis was rehabilitation counseling, which was the only area I really had any interest in. I worked at a drug and alcohol center in Colorado, which helped me gain a fundamental understanding of the field. There was still plenty I needed to learn, though.

As I made my way back to the car, the hustle and bustle from miles around kept ringing in my ears. I wasn't sure how quickly I could get used to being in a large city again. I was excited for the new start, but still nervous. New school, new job, different type of education—there were a lot of things to adjust to.

One of which, as mentioned, was dealing with big city parking. From thirty feet away I could see the bright green envelope neatly placed under my wiper blade. I looked at the meter and saw the red flag, then hesitantly glanced down at the ticket: *Richmond City Police, Traffic Division, July 6, \$20, four minutes over.*

“Great,” I said bluntly as I opened the door, frustrated. I removed my cell phone from its clip, changed the ringer from silent to normal, and tossed it onto the passenger seat. As I turned the ignition key, I noticed that the screen on the cell phone was blinking. There were four messages waiting.

After I safely got through the rush of traffic and onto the bridge I checked my voice mail. As soon as I crossed the bridge, my reception would cut out briefly while making the exchange on to the toll road.

One from my friend Bobby asking for help with his deck. Save. A hang up. Delete. Another hang up. Delete. One from Mom. She was shaken.

“Chris, this is mom. I've been trying to call you. I'm at the Women's Clinic with Amanda, the one across from Commonwealth Hospital. We came as soon as Amanda noticed she was bleeding. The number is . . . hold up . . . the number is . . .”

I frantically grabbed for a pen, but before she finished the first three digits, my reception died.

Panicked, I quickly got off at the next exit, crossed the overpass, and entered the freeway going the opposite direction. As soon as I got back on the bridge and picked up reception again I called my voice mailbox, put in my pass code, and waited for the messages to play. Before it got back to my mom's message, the phone beeped. There was another call coming in.

“Hello.”

“Where are you?” my mother asked impatiently.

## Chapter 2

I remember being scared.

Horrible scenes and scenarios played over in my mind. Was my wife okay? Was our baby okay?

We had gone to the doctor before we left Colorado and he said that the pregnancy was going according to schedule and the baby was healthy. We could have found out the sex of the baby, but decided against it. From our point of view, there were very few happy surprises in life, and whether we were going to have a boy or girl was one of them. Regardless of gender, we got to see the tiny hands and feet, and the small heart pumping furiously. It was like watching a dream.

Even after seeing the baby during the ultra sound, the transformation to fatherhood was only slowly taking place. My paternal instincts were in me somewhere; they were just slowly seeping out. But after that call from my mother, my fatherly emotions came out full force. I finally understood, even if on a small scale, what it meant to be a dad. And only because for a moment, there was a thought that maybe I wouldn't be.

Thankfully, the news wasn't fatal, and my worry short lived. The experience was still eye opening, but it wasn't fatal. Amanda had been spotting, which I came to find out was not exactly serious, but something that did call for extra monitoring. The doctor said that if the bleeding stopped after a day or two and didn't come back immediately then everything would be okay.

There were still a few days before school started and I had no work responsibilities, so I waited on Amanda hand and foot. It was my way of making it up to her for not being there.

Being on bed rest for three days just about drove her crazy, but thankfully the bleeding did stop. After the doctor said everything was fine, she was back to her normal self—sort of.

She was quickly back to work and on the go again, but there was something different in the way she talked about the baby. There was a stronger bond than before, but there was also a nervousness that had appeared.

I wish she would have talked about it more, but Amanda always had a tendency to just mull things over for a while, alone, and then move on. So I didn't push the topic, and left the ball in her court. If, and when, she wanted to talk, she knew I would be there—at least periodically. School was about to start and the schedule was going to be an adjustment for both of us. The last thing either one of us needed was to be worried about the baby.

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How was campus? Did you get everything straight? I sure did miss you today!

I was looking forward to coming home from my first day of school and hearing any one of those statements, but Amanda wasn't home from work yet. To keep her mind occupied she seemed to find any excuse possible to not be at home alone. So either she was working late, or out seeing more of what her new hometown had to offer.

I could tell she felt more at home in Richmond than in Colorado. Being raised in suburbia Chicago, she had a lot more “on-the-run” in her than me. She was like that from the start.

We met on a blind date in Colorado. When my friend Gabe told me he was setting me up on one, I told him I wasn't *that* desperate. Then he showed me a picture and my attitude changed.

I had never seen anybody more gorgeous in my life. She was blonde, and I tended to date brunettes, but that was beside the point. Any stereotypes I had placed on blondes before were quickly erased from memory.

In no way was she typical. I had never met a more straight-headed, independent person in my life. She wasn't giggly, but she wasn't stuffy. She knew how to have fun, but wasn't into partying all the time. Nothing seemed to get her really excited or really depressed. Steady would be a good way to describe her—which was the complete opposite of me.

My brain was always twitching with activity, which would cause a spectrum of emotion from extremely excited to being down in the dumps. I wasn't spastic or anything, maybe just a little more unpredictable than the normal human being. But somehow, she fell in love with me anyway, and it's been smooth sailing since. I made her laugh and she kept me out of trouble. It worked out pretty good. We honestly had the best relationship of any couple I knew.

Unfortunately, our having a good relationship did not change the fact that I couldn't cook. Coming home and not finding her there meant that my hunger pains would have to rely solely on me. Desperate, I finally placed a frozen lasagna in the oven and sat down at the kitchen table to munch on some chips and finally look over the internship list.

There were about fifty agencies to choose from: some small, some large, some private, mostly government, all scattered around the city.

“Did you miss me?”

I leaned back in the chair to look down the hallway. Amanda was coming through the door.

“I didn't think you would ever come home.”

She made her way into the kitchen, plopped down in my lap, and put her arms around my neck. “I wanted to come home to see how your first day on campus went.”

I started to give her a hug, but had to retract when the smell of glass cement hit me. The stuff must have done wonders with glass, because it didn’t do much for people.

She leaned in closer, and in her best French accent asked, “What, you don’t like my new perfume?”

I pinched my nose and replied in a squeaky voice, “I probably would, if I was used to living on a farm.”

She jumped from my lap and hit me on the shoulder. I laughed.

As she opened the oven door I heard her let out a sigh. One of the reasons I think she didn’t cook more often was because she was the pickiest eater I had ever met—and it wasn’t because she was pregnant. By the time she tried to decide what she actually wanted to eat, she was so hungry that the first thing edible was sufficient.

I leaned over the table to turn my attention back to the internship list.

“What are you working on?”

“I’m trying to find an internship from the list the school gave me.”

“Any of them look good?” she asked as she started massaging my shoulders. I closed my eyes and let my head drop.

“You’re the best wife ever,” I said softly, ignoring her question.

There was no response, but I know she was smiling to herself.

“Well I’ll let you get back to you work. Do you need anything?”

“I’ll be fine. I promise it won’t take me long.” She kissed me on the top of the head, made her way to the couch, picked up a magazine, and relaxed.

Normally, I would have crossed out the agencies that did not look interesting, but I had to keep all of them in consideration in case I got desperate.

From what my advisor said, having as much previous experience as I did, I wouldn't have too much trouble finding something. Most agencies were open in the evening to accommodate client's work schedules, so I was hoping to find the directors in and set up some interviews. With my eyes closed, I spun the paper around a few times, plopped my finger down, and dialed the lucky number.

### Chapter 3

A twenty-five-page paper.

I tried to look on the bright side of the situation, but it was kind of hard as I pounded my forehead against the desk. The title of the book to my side, *Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, kept coming in and out of focus. It wasn't the paper that was so hard to deal with, although it was by far the largest paper I had ever been assigned to write. The fact that it was the only grade for the class made it difficult to swallow. Writing papers had never been my strong point, but I was able to keep my grades up by doing well on the other assignments. But for that class it was one chance, one grade.

The class coincided with my internship, which was to start the next day. I eventually found an agency not too far from campus, which was good news. From what I could tell, it was similar to the rehabilitation center I worked at in Colorado. My assignment was to work with the adults in the late afternoon and evening. It included group sessions as well as individual meetings.

The agency also had adolescent groups, but I had never worked with teenagers before. I always thought it would be a nice change of pace working with kids, but the chance had never presented itself. Nothing against the adults, it was just hard to relate to them sometimes; especially if they were older than me. They were almost always older than me.

As far as school went, other than the shock of the gargantuan paper I had to write, all my other classes seemed manageable. I knew they would consist of theories, studies, research, opinionated professors, and tons of rationalizing. Not that I had a hundred years of experience behind me, but from what I had gathered, the social service field was about having a caring heart

and a listening ear. During the few years I did have behind me, I had met some fellow counselors who had the heart of a refrigerator.

Anyway, everything looked like it was going to be what I expected. No surprises were good surprises. But even though school and work seemed predictable, I found that the city transit system was going to hold some unique surprises of its own.

I had taken a couple practice trips, and it wasn't pretty. My choices came down to sitting next to a good-looking sorority member majoring in pre-med or early childhood education; or an old, scraggly wino at the back of the bus. Although either would offer conversation, the drunks tended to use simpler, though slurred, statements—which offered a bit of mental relief at the end of the day. I figured Amanda would agree with my seating choice, but not for the same reason.

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My first day of training at the agency ended early, so they let me go for the day. With a few minutes of free time, I decided to finally check out the library. As I crossed Cary Street, the big marble plaque above the front doors came into view:

*The L. J. Anderson Library*

All that kept running through my mind was how enormous it was—lots of glass and marble with fancy artwork and landscaping around the outside. I overheard one of the students say that it had been remodeled only five years earlier.

I walked through the rotating doors, into a huge vaulted foyer. A water fountain was positioned directly underneath a large skylight. Every five minutes blasts of water shot out from the fountain and sparkled off the sunlight.

The student worker at the information desk informed me that the social science references were on the second floor in the northeast corner. I made my way quickly up the steps, determined to stake my claim.

I was picky about where I studied. It had to be private and away from everyone, but still have a nice view so that when I got bored I'd have something to turn my attention to.

Students were spread out everywhere—some on the floor, some on the computers, while others were fast asleep. The library was different from the one in Colorado, but it was comforting to know that at least the students were the same.

An old card catalog box behind the computers caught my eye and so I walked over to it. It had been quite a long time since I'd seen one; probably not since middle school. I pulled the drawers out one by one, surprised to find that most were empty, except for a few that had Braille cards in them.

Turning my head to the right to look up at the clock, I noticed a small hallway about twenty feet long with a set of spiral stairs at the end that led upward. I looked around for a sign prohibiting me to go down the hall, but not noticing one, I headed for the stairs.

I expected to see some offices tucked out of the way, but there wasn't anything; just some random pictures hanging on the walls and the staircase.

I rearranged my backpack and looked over my shoulder. Not seeing anyone to stop me, I carefully made my way up the steps, which compared to the rest of the library, did not look, or sound, new. They groaned and creaked loudly with each step I took.

At the top of the stairs was a platform that led to an empty doorway. Three faint indentations along the frame showed where the hinges used to be. Through the doorway was a small room, maybe thirty feet wide by forty feet long. A few small, old wooden desks lined the wall on the

right side of the room. The desks were spaced equally apart, each positioned directly beneath a small window.

The rest of the room consisted of chairs lining the bare left wall, and some wooden bookshelves lined up in the center. A musty smell lingered throughout.

I walked over to the right side of the room to peek out of one of the windows. The mezzanine overlooked the entrance of the library; the fountain, rotating doors, and information desk were in plain view. I turned around to get a better look.

It had all the makings of a perfect, secluded study area. The only thing that appeared out of place was that there were no books on the bookshelves; at least not the first few that I saw. But that didn't matter; there could not have been a more ideal spot anywhere in the library.

Everything seemed fine, until after a few minutes it hit me—where was everybody else? I would have thought that someplace like that, amidst thousands of other students, would have been a cherished sanctuary. They probably felt more comfortable next to the computers and leather couches, but I was more than willing to trade a little bit of comfort for peace and solitude. All I could do was hope that it was still empty the next time I came. That is, if I was allowed to be up there in the first place, which I still didn't know for sure.

Even though it was out of the way, the room appeared to be regularly visited by someone, who at least kept it dusted and organized.

“The library is closing soon.”

“What?” I mumbled, turning around, my heart beating fast from the startle. Maybe I wasn't supposed to be up there after all.

An older, short, stout black man, wearing overalls, and a long-sleeved flannel shirt, was standing before me. My eyes involuntarily focused directly on his head, and the small layer of

curly hairs that sat upon it. I stood there, completely still, staring. He had the whitest hair I had ever seen. It was the color of pure snow.

“The library is closing soon. It’s Friday, and the library closes at seven o’clock on Fridays.”

I finally took my eyes off his hair.

“Thanks,” I replied, picking up my bag and heading for the door, embarrassed for staring.

“You’re more than welcome to come back,” he said as I passed him and made my way down the steps.

“Thanks,” I said again. I was going to ask him if it was all right for me to be up there, but his invitation put my mind to rest.

On the way out, I noticed the hours on the front of the library door: Monday through Thursday 8a.m. to 11p.m., and on Friday and Saturday it closed at 7p.m. The hours made sense. Why would anyone want to hang around a library on a Friday or Saturday night?

I had called Amanda earlier to tell her to pick me up at the library, instead of at work. My cousin’s birthday party was that night and it was the first time I would get to see all the family together since coming back to Richmond. I had lost track of time and we were running a little late.

Luckily, Amanda was still waiting for me outside the library. The last thing I wanted to do on a Friday night was take the bus. As I said, my options were interesting enough most nights, but add payday and a couple of extra cold ones and who knows what would have been waiting for me on the public transit system.

“Did you miss me, my dear, loving wife?” I said with all the pathetic mush I could gather. I knew it wouldn’t work, it never did, but at least it would soften the moment a little.

She hadn't said anything directly, but I knew she was nervous about meeting the rest of the family. Most of them she had only met once, at our wedding reception, and some she had never met at all. In order to fit in, she was worried she might have to join a bowling league or start listening to country music.

“Are we going to get there on time?”

“Oh don't worry about it; everything's going to be fine.” I could tell she was really nervous. I, on the other hand, could not have cared less what time we arrived. When we got there, we got there—everyone would be waiting for us.

“Well, maybe you should drive. That way, at least we have a chance of getting there on time.”

“Either way you'll get to meet everybody. I promise it will be fine. Look on the bright side,” I paused for affect, and then continued, “bowling and country music have their downfalls, but at least none of us are inbred. At least none of the family we'll see tonight . . . I think.”

She did not find it amusing.

## Chapter 4

Either all of the students that studied on the second floor were blind—which would have explained the Braille catalog—or they didn't care to risk breaking any bones climbing the old staircase. At least that's what I surmised after finding the mezzanine empty again on my next visit. Empty, except for the old furniture, the bookshelves, and the books.

If there were any books on the first set of shelves the spines would have been facing me when I entered the room. But there were only books on the very last shelf in the room, which had one side pinned up against the back wall. I didn't notice the books before because I had not walked far enough back to see them. The last shelf had only enough books to fill it halfway.

The rest of the shelves were centered in the middle of the room with a three-foot space in between each one that served as an aisle.

I walked to one of the desks and put my book bag on the chair that was going to bear the imprint of my backside for the next eleven and a half months. I got everything situated: my laptop, textbooks, water bottle, and my favorite pen. With it all spread out on the table in front of me in neat, orderly piles, I sat, staring, waiting for them to put together a masterpiece.

They stared right back.

Assignments had already begun piling up. My orientation for work got in the way of studying the week before, so I had to hit the books hard. Only one week into school and I was already behind. Luckily, my monstrous paper was not due until the end of the semester. But that didn't stop me from shivering every time I thought about it.

I plugged in my laptop, hoping the outlet still had an electric current in it. Ding! The monitor brightened up and I clicked into the word processor. Before anything else, I wanted to

type up a quick outline of all the assignments and their due dates. Waiting for the file to open, I pulled out my notebooks and class schedules.

As soon as my fingers hit the keys the fountain below burst with energy and shot multiple water sprays into the air. Whether coincidence or timing, it lifted my spirits, as if the library itself was letting me know it was rooting for me. It was a stupid thought, but mentally it helped.

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I awoke to the sound of a bell faintly ringing throughout the library. It went off every hour on the forty-five minute mark to let students know it was time to head to their next class. It was loud enough to be noticed, but soft enough not to put everyone into a panic.

I had only dozed off for fifteen minutes, but it was not a good sign. I was hoping to make it at least a couple of hours before feeling drowsy.

Standing, while stretching what seemed to be every muscle in my body, I glanced around the room as the blood rushed to my head. The books on the back shelf caught my eye.

As I walked down the aisle, I ran my fingers along their spines—some with titles, some without, some old, some new, some paperback, and some hardcover. They all had call numbers on them, but they were not in any particular order, at least not like the other books in the library.

I cocked my head sideways to see if any of the titles looked familiar. The thought was doubtful, seeing as how I never took the time to read for pleasure. It's not that I didn't enjoy reading; I just never had the time.

Some of the names I recognized: Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin and others. Some were biographies of famous people: Washington, Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, and even Bill Cosby.

“Way to go, Bill,” I said, eyebrows raised, thinking of the honor that came from being placed among former respected leaders of nations. Bill probably didn’t even know.

Still others, and mostly the good majority, I did not recognize: Horatio Alger, Og Mandino, Sterling W. Sills, John Steinbeck, S. E. Hinton, Napoleon Hill, Lois Lowry, and the list went on and on. There was everything from fiction, to nonfiction, short stories, long novels, poetry, business, and even a few children's books. There were some Bibles at the end of the row; or at least one Bible and other various texts, which appeared to be of a religious nature. On that small bookshelf were quite a variety of interests.

I wondered, though, why they were all sitting up there, completely cut off from the rest of the library. Except for some that looked really old, most of them seemed to be in okay condition.

“A great collection, isn’t it?”

I looked through the gaps in the shelves to see the black man from the other night coming through the door. He made his way in, turned to the right, and stopped. Grabbing a handle on the wall, he gave it a turn, and then with a lift, two panels separated, one going up and the other down. It looked like an elevator of some sort.

From what I could see, there was hardly any room inside; just enough to fit the book cart it contained. There was no other way to get books up there unless they were carried up the steps, which seemed impossible. The mezzanine must have been the only part of the library that was not remodeled, as if someone high up said not to touch it.

As he pulled the book cart, which only had a few books on it, he kept talking. “It would be hard to find a better collection of books anywhere, if I do say so myself.”

Again, I did not respond, but continued to watch him pull the cart while walking backwards, as if he’d done it a million times.

As he got closer, I noticed the cart had six books on it, along with a brown lunch bag.

“Do you read much?”

“Not too much,” I responded. “I really don’t have a lot of extra time.”

He shook his head. “That’s too bad.” A long pause ensued as he made his way down the aisle.

“I’ve never seen a book cart elevator like that. Do they even still make those?” I felt I needed to say something, which would be the only reason for asking such a stupid question.

“With all the remodeling, I asked them to at least spare the stairs, the elevator, and this room.” He shook his head thoughtfully, “I couldn’t bear to see them go.”

Almost laughing out loud, I thought of how funny it would be seeing a volunteer, which is what I imagined he was, asking the library to do anything. I could tell he had a bit of sarcasm in him.

“Kind of like you asking them to keep all these books up here, right?”

“No,” he responded, still sorting through the books, not looking at me, “that’s different.”

I gazed at him, puzzled, not sure what judgment call to make.

He finished his statement. “I didn’t *ask* them if I could bring the books up here.”

I tried to figure out why he would have wanted to bring them up there in the first place.

“These happen to be some of my favorite books. Being able to thumb through their pages any time I want is a nice luxury,” he answered, as if he had read my mind.

“I’ve never heard of most of them.”

Shocked, as if I had spoken blaspheme, he sized me up and down. Then he shrugged his shoulders and looked at me as if not surprised.

I took that a little personally, but brushed it off, not deeming it of importance. “If you’re bringing all these books up here, out of the way, how would anybody expect to ever find them. Especially since you *took* them from the library?”

He laughed a little. “I did not *take* them from the library. They are still in the library, just . . . relocated.”

I laughed back. “Someone would have to want them pretty bad to venture up here.” Having never heard of the books myself, I couldn’t see why anyone would want to make the trek up some dangerous stairs to find them.

“There’s no real point in reading them unless someone really wants to. If people work for them a bit in order to find them, if they even care in the first place, the information they receive is of far more importance and much more substantial than a few rickety stairs. Besides, you found your way up here, didn’t you? Maybe you’ll find something up here worthwhile.”

All I wanted to find was some time alone.

Part of me was trying to figure out what he was talking about, while the other part was trying to figure out why I was standing there listening to him to begin with.

Breaking the silence and changing the subject, he introduced himself, “My name is Lewis.”

“Mine’s Chris,” I said, extending my hand.

He stepped back and retracted his hands. “It’s nice to meet you, Chris, but I better not. My hands are extremely dirty,” he said as he turned his palms over. I didn’t see anything, but taking him at his word I smiled and lowered my hand.

“I’d better get back to what I was doing and let you get back to your studying.”

I gave him a nod and left him standing in the aisle as I walked back over to my table. He did not say anything else as he finished fidgeting with the books and then rolled the cart back in front of the elevator.

Carrying his lunch bag and a book to the opposite side of the room, he sat down, took out his sandwich, and started reading. He was totally oblivious to everything else around him.

I glanced at my watch and shook my head, wondering where the time had gone. Work was expecting me soon.

I packed up my bag, grabbed my laptop case, pushed in my chair, and headed for the door. I wasn't planning to say anything to him, but I couldn't leave without asking, "How long have you worked here, Lewis?"

"Well," he said, closing his book, making sure his finger stayed in to keep his place, "I don't exactly work here."

I had already determined he was a volunteer, but I remained silent and allowed him to finish.

"I'm what you would call a . . ."

"Volunteer," I said, interrupting his sudden lapse of memory.

He rubbed his chin. "Yeah, a volunteer. You could say I have a vested interest."

I didn't have any idea what he was talking about. I really didn't care. "Okay, have a good one."

"I always do," he replied.

As I walked down the steps, I couldn't help but think that he seemed a little odd. He didn't seem mental or anything, there was just something about him—something different.

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