

STEPHEN
KING



NEVER
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A NOVEL

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For Robin Furth, with love and thanks for all your hard work

Trig

1

March, and the weather's miserable.

The Straight Circle meets in the basement of the Buell Street Methodist Church every weekday from four to five PM. It's technically a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, but plenty of alcoholics also attend; Straight Circle is usually packed. It's calendar spring, has been for almost a week, but in Buckeye City—sometimes known as the Second Mistake on the Lake, Cleveland being the first—actual spring comes late. When the meeting lets out, a fine drizzle is hanging in the air. By nightfall it will thicken and turn to sleet.

Two or three dozen attendees gather near the butt can by the entrance and light up, because freebasing nicotine is one of two addictions left to them, and after an hour in the basement they need that hit. Others, the majority, turn right and head for The Flame, a coffee shop a block down. Coffee is the other addiction they can still indulge.

One man is stopped by Reverend Mike, who also attends this meeting and many others on a regular basis; the Rev is a recovering opioid addict. In meetings (he attends two or three every day, weekends included) he introduces himself by saying, "I love God, but otherwise I'm just another fiend." This always gets nods and murmurs of approval, although some oldtimers find him a bit tiresome. They call him Big Book Mike for his habit of quoting (verbatim) long passages from the AA handbook.

Now the Rev gives the man a soul shake. "Not used to seeing you around these parts, Trig. You must live upstate."

Trig doesn't but doesn't say so. He has his reasons for going to meetings out of the city where recognition is unlikely, but today was an emergency: hit a meeting or drink, and

after taking the first drink, all choices would be gone. He knows this from personal experience.

Mike puts a hand on the other man's shoulder. "In your share, Trig, you sounded upset."

Trig is a childhood nickname. It's how he introduces himself at the start of meetings. Even at out-of-town AA and NA, he rarely speaks other than that initial identification. In tag-team meetings he mostly says, "I just want to listen today," but this afternoon he raised his hand.

"I'm Trig, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Trig," the group responded. They were in the basement instead of the church, but there's still that revival meeting call-and-response. Straight Circle is, in fact, the Church of the Crashed and Burned.

"I just want to say that I'm pretty shaken up today. I don't want to say any more, but I had to share that much. That's all I've got."

There were murmurs of *Thanks, Trig* and *Hang in there* and *Keep coming back*.

Now Trig tells the Rev he's upset because he found out he lost someone he knew. The Rev asks for more details—pries for them, actually—but all Trig will say is that the person he's mourning died in lockup.

"I'll pray for him," the Rev says.

"Thanks, Mike."

Trig starts away, but not toward The Flame; he walks three blocks and climbs the steps to the public library. He needs to sit and think about the man who died on Saturday. Who was murdered on Saturday. Was shanked on Saturday, in a prison shower.

He finds a vacant chair in the Periodicals Room and picks up a copy of the local paper, just to have something to hold. He opens it to a page-four story about a lost dog recovered by Jerome Robinson of the Finders Keepers Agency. There's a picture of a smiling and handsome young Black man with his arm around some kind of big dog, maybe a Labrador Retriever. The headline is one word: **FOUND!**

Trig stares through it, thinking.

His real name was in this same paper three years ago, but no one has made the connection between that man and the one who attends out-of-town recovery meetings. Why would they, even if there had also been a picture of him (which there wasn't)? That

man had a slightly graying beard and wore contacts. This version is clean-shaven, wears glasses, and looks younger (quitting the booze will do that). He likes the idea of being someone new. It also weighs on him. That is the paradox he lives with. That, and thinking about his father, which he does more and more frequently these days.

Let it go, he thinks. Forget it.

That is on March 24th. Forgetting lasts just thirteen days.

2

On April 6th, Trig sits in the same Periodicals Room chair, staring at the feature story in today's Sunday paper. The headline doesn't just speak, it shouts. **BUCKEYE BRANDON: MURDERED PRISON INMATE MAY HAVE BEEN INNOCENT!** Trig has read the feature, and listened to Buckeye Brandon's podcast three times. It was the self-proclaimed "outlaw of the airwaves" who broke the story, and according to Buckeye, there was no "may have been" about it. Is the story true? Trig thinks that, given the source, it must be.

What you're thinking of doing is crazy, he tells himself. Which is true.

If you do it, you can never go back, he tells himself. That's also true.

Once you start, you must keep on, he tells himself, and that's truest of all. His father's mantra: *You have to push through to the bitter end. No flinching, no turning away.*

And... what would it be like? What would it be like for *him* to do such things?

He needs to consider some more. Not just to get clarity on what he's thinking of doing, but to put a space of time between what he found out courtesy of Buckeye Brandon (also this feature article) and the acts—the *horrors*—he may commit, so no one will make the connection.

He finds himself remembering the headline about the young man who recovered the stolen dog. It was simplicity itself: **FOUND!** All Trig can think about is what he's lost, what he did, and the amends he must make.

Chapter 1

1

It's April now. In the Second Mistake on the Lake, the last of the snow is finally melting.

Izzy Jaynes gives a one-knuckle courtesy knock on her lieutenant's door and goes in without waiting. Lewis Warwick is tilted back in his chair, one foot resting on the corner of his desk, hands loosely clasped on his midsection. He looks like he's meditating or dreaming awake. For all Izzy knows, he is. At the sight of her he straightens and puts his foot back on the floor where it belongs.

"Isabelle Jaynes, ace detective. Welcome to my lair."

"At your service."

She doesn't envy him his office, because she's aware of all the bureaucratic bullshit that comes with it, accompanied by a salary bump so small it might be called ceremonial. She's happy enough with her humble cubicle downstairs, where she works with seven other detectives, including her current partner, Tom Atta. It's Warwick's chair that Izzy lusts after. With its high, spine-soothing back and reclining feature, it's meditation-ready.

"What can I do for you, Lewis?"

He takes a business envelope from his desk and hands it to her. "You can give me an opinion on this. No strings attached. Feel free to touch the envelope, everybody from the postman to Evelyn downstairs and who knows who else has had their paws on it, but the note should maybe be fingerprinted. Partly depending on what you say."

The envelope is addressed in capital block letters to DETECTIVE LOUIS WARWICK at 19 COURT PLAZA. Below the city, state, and zip, in even larger capitals: CONFIDENTIAL!

“What *I* say? You’re the boss, boss.”

“I’m not passing the buck, it’s my baby, but I respect your judgement.”

The end of the envelope has been torn open. There’s no return address. She carefully unfolds the single sheet of paper inside, holding it by the edges. The message has been printed, almost certainly on a computer.

To: Lieutenant Louis Warwick

From: Bill Wilson

Cc: Chief Alice Patmore

I think there should be a corollary to the Blackstone Rule. I believe the INNOCENT should be punished for the needless DEATH of an innocent. Should those who caused that death be put to death themselves? I think not, because then they would be gone and the suffering for what they did would be at an end. This is true even if they acted with the best will in the world. They need to think about what they did. They need to “Rue the Day.” Does that make sense to you? It does to me, and that is enough.

I will kill 13 innocents and 1 guilty. Those who caused the innocent to die will therefore suffer.

This is an act of ATONEMENT.

Bill Wilson

“Whoa,” Izzy says. Still being careful, she refolds the note and slips it back into the envelope. “Someone has donned their crazy pants.”

“Yes indeed. I googled the Blackstone Rule. It says—”

“I know what it says.”

Warwick puts his foot up on the desk again, hands this time laced together at the nape of his neck. “Elucidate.”

“Better for ten guilty men to go free rather than for one innocent man to suffer.”

Lewis nods. “Now for Double Jeopardy, where the scores can really change. What innocent man might our crazy-pants correspondent be talking about?”

“At a guess, I’d say Alan Duffrey. Shanked last month at Big Stone. Died in the infirmary. Then that podcaster, Buckeye Brandon, blowing off his bazoo, and the follow-up piece in the paper. Both about the guy who came forward to say he framed Duffrey.”

“Cary Tolliver. Got hit with the cancer stick, late-stage pancreatic, and wanted to clear his conscience. Said he never intended Duffrey to die.”

“So this note isn’t from Tolliver.”

“Not likely. He’s in Kiner Memorial, currently circling the drain.”

“Tolliver making a clean breast was sort of like locking the barn door after the horse was stolen, wouldn’t you say?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. Tolliver claims he fessed up in February, days after he got his terminal diagnosis. Nothing happened. Then, after Duffrey was killed, Tolliver went to Buckeye Brandon, aka the outlaw of the airwaves. ADA Allen says it’s all attention-seeking bullshit.”

“What do you think?”

“I think Tolliver makes a degree of sense. He claims he only wanted Duffrey to do a couple of years. Said Duffrey going on the Registry would be the real punishment.”

Izzy understands. Duffrey would have been forbidden to reside in or near child safety zones—schools, playgrounds, public parks. Forbidden to communicate with minors by text, other than his own children. Forbidden to have pornographic magazines or access porn online. Have to inform his supervising officer of an address change. Being on the National Sex Offender Registry was a life sentence.

If he had lived, that was.

Lewis leans forward. “Blackstone Rule aside, which really doesn’t make much sense, at least to me, do we have to worry about this Wilson guy? Is it a threat or empty bullshit? What do you say?”

“Can I think it over?”

“Of course. Later. What does your gut tell you right now? It stays in this office.”

Izzy considers. She could ask Lew if Chief Patmore has weighed in, but that’s not how Izzy rolls.

“He’s crazy, but he’s not quoting the Bible or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Not suffering Tin Hat Syndrome. Could be a crank. If it isn’t, it’s someone to worry about. Probably someone close to Duffrey. I’d say his wife or kids, but he didn’t have either.”

“A loner,” Lewis says. “Allen made a big deal of that at the trial.”

Izzy and Tom both know Doug Allen, one of the Buckeye County ADAs. Izzy’s partner calls Allen a Hungry Hungry Hippo, after a board game Tom’s children like. Ambitious, in other words. Which also suggests Tolliver may have been telling the truth. Ambitious ADAs don’t like to see convictions overturned.

“Duffrey wasn’t married, but what about a partner?”

“Nope, and if he was gay, he was in the closet. *Deep* in the closet. No rumors. Chief loan officer at First Lake City Bank. And we’re *assuming* it’s Duffrey this guy’s talking about, but without a specific name...”

“It could be someone else.”

“Could be, but unlikely. I want you and Atta to talk to Cary Tolliver, assuming he’s still in the land of the living. Talk to *all* Duffrey’s known associates, at the bank and elsewhere. Talk to the guy who defended Duffrey. Get *his* list of known associates. If he did his job, he’ll know everyone Duffrey knew.”

Izzy smiles. “I suspect you wanted a second opinion that echoes what you already decided.”

“Give yourself some credit. I wanted the second opinion of Isabelle Jaynes, ace detective.”

“If it’s an ace detective you want, you should call Holly Gibney. I can give you her number.”

Lewis lowers his foot to the floor. “We haven’t sunk to the level of outsourcing our investigations yet. Tell me what *you* think.”

Izzy taps the envelope. “I think this guy could be the real deal. ‘The innocent should be punished for the needless death of an innocent’? It might make sense to a nut, but to a sane person? I don’t think so.”

Lewis sighs. “The really dangerous ones, the ones who are crazy and not crazy at the same time, they give me nightmares. Timothy McVeigh killed over a hundred and fifty people in the Murrah Building and was perfectly rational. Called the little kids who died in the daycare collateral damage. Who’s more innocent than a bunch of kids?”

“So you think this is real.”

“*Maybe* real. I want you and Atta to spend some time on it. See if you can find someone so outraged by Duffrey’s death—”

“Or so heartbroken.”

“Sure, that too. Find someone mad enough—I mean it both ways—to make a threat like this.”

“Why thirteen innocent and one guilty, I wonder? Is that a total of fourteen, or is the guilty one of the thirteen?”

Lewis shakes his head. “No idea. He could have picked the number out of a hat.”

“Something else about this letter. You know who Bill Wilson was, right?”

“Rings a faint bell, but why wouldn’t it? Maybe not as common as Joe Smith or Dick Jones, but not exactly Zbigniew Brzezinski, either.”

“The Bill Wilson I’m thinking of was the founder of AA. Maybe this guy goes to AA and he’s tipping us to that.”

“Like he wants to be caught?”

Izzy shrugs, sending him a *no opinion* vibe.

“I’ll send the letter to forensics, much good it’ll do. They’re going to say no fingerprints, computer font, common form of printer paper.”

“Send me a photo of it.”

“I can do that.”

Izzy gets up to go. Lewis asks, “Have you signed up for the game yet?”

“What game?”

“Don’t play dumb. Guns and Hoses. Next month. I’m going to captain the PD team.”

“Gee, I haven’t got around to that, boss.” Nor does she mean to.

“The FD has won three in a row. Going to be a real grudge match this year, after what happened last time. Crutchfield’s broken leg?”

“Who’s Crutchfield?”

“Emil Crutchfield. Motor patrolman, mostly works on the east side.”

“Oh,” Izzy says, thinking, *Boys and their games*.

“Didn’t you used to play? At that college you went to?”

Izzy laughs. “Yeah. Back when dinosaurs walked the earth.”

“You should sign up. Think about it.”

"I will," Izzy says.
She won't.

2

Holly Gibney raises her face into the sun. "T.S. Eliot said April is the cruelest month, but this doesn't seem very cruel to me."

"Poetry," Izzy says dismissively. "What are you having?"

"Fish tacos, I think."

"You *always* have fish tacos."

"Not always, but mostly. I'm a creature of habit."

"No shit, Sherlock."

Soon one of them will get up and join the line at Frankie's Fabulous Fish Wagon, but for the time being they just sit quietly at their picnic table, enjoying the warmth of the sun.

Izzy and Holly have not always been particularly close, but that changed after they had dealings with a pair of elderly academics, Rodney and Emily Harris. The Harrises were insane and extremely dangerous. It could be argued that Holly got the worst of it, having to deal with them face to face, but it was Detective Isabelle Jaynes who had to inform many of the loved ones of those who had been victims of the Harrises. She also had to tell those loved ones what the Harrises had done, and that was no night at the opera, either. Both women bore scars, and when Izzy called Holly after the newspaper coverage (national as well as local) died down, asking if she wanted to do lunch, Holly agreed.

"Doing lunch" became a semi-regular thing, and the two women formed a cautious bond. At first they talked about the Harrises, but less so as time went by. Izzy talked about her job; Holly talked about hers. Because Izzy was police and Holly a private investigator, they had similar, if rarely overlapping, areas of interest.

Nor had Holly entirely given up the idea of luring Izzy over to the dark side, especially since her partner, Pete Huntley, had retired and left Holly to run Finders Keepers singlehanded (with occasional help from Jerome and Barbara Robinson). She was at pains

to tell Izzy that Finders didn't do divorce work. "Keyhole peeping, social media tracking. Text messages and telephoto lenses. Oough."

When Holly brought up the possibility, Izzy always said she'd keep it in mind. Which meant, Holly thought, that Iz would put in her thirty on the city police force and then retire to a golfside condo in Arizona or Florida. Probably on her own. A two-time loser in the marriage sweepstakes, Izzy said she wasn't looking for another hookup, especially of the marital variety. How, she said to Holly during one of their lunches, could she come home and tell her husband about the human remains they had found in the Harrises' refrigerator?

"Please," Holly had said on that occasion, "not while I'm trying to eat."

Today they're doing lunch in Dingley Park. Like Deerfield Park on the other side of the city, Dingley can be a rather sketchy environment after dark (*a fucking drug mart* is how Izzy puts it), but in the daytime it's perfectly pleasant, especially on a day like this. Now that warm weather is on the come, they can eat at one of the picnic tables not far from the firs that circle the old ice rink.

Holly is vaccinated up the ying-yang, but Covid is still killing someone in America every four minutes, and Holly doesn't want to take chances. Pete Huntley is even now suffering the aftereffects of his bout with the bug, and Holly's mother died of it. So she continues to take care, masking up in close indoor situations and carrying a bottle of Purell in her purse. Covid aside, she likes dining *al fresco* when the weather is nice, as it is today, and she's looking forward to her fish tacos. Two, with extra tartar sauce.

"How's Jerome?" Izzy asks. "I saw that book about his hoodlum great-grandfather landed on the bestseller list."

"Only for a couple of weeks," Holly says, "but they'll be able to put *New York Times Bestseller* on the paperback, which will help the sales." She loves Jerome almost as much as she loves his sister, Barbara. "Now that his book tour is over, he's been asking to help me around the shop. He says it's research, that his next book is going to be about a private eye." She grimaces to show how much she dislikes the term.

"And Barbara?"

"Going to Bell, right here in town. Majoring in English, of course." Holly says this with what she believes is justifiable pride. Both Robinson sibs are published authors.

Barbara's book of poems—for which she won the Penley Prize, no small hill of beans—has been out for a couple of years.

“So your kids are doing well.”

Holly doesn't protest this; although Mr. and Mrs. Robinson are alive and perfectly fine, Barb and Jerome sort of are her kids. The three of them have been through the wars together. Brady Hartsfield... Morris Bellamy... Chet Ondowsky... the Harrises. Those were wars, all right.

Holly asks what's new in Blue World. Izzy looks at her thoughtfully, then asks, “Can I show you something on my phone?”

“Is it porno?” Izzy is one of the few people Holly feels comfortable joking with.

“I guess in a way it is.”

“Now I'm curious.”

Izzy takes out her phone. “Lewis Warwick got this letter. So did Chief Patmore. Check it out.”

She passes the phone to Holly, who reads the note. “Bill Wilson. Huh. You know who that is?”

“The founder of AA. Lew called me into his office and asked for my opinion. I told him I'd err on the side of caution. What do you think, Holly?”

“The Blackstone Rule. Which says—”

“Better ten guilty go free rather than one innocent suffer. Blackstone was a lawyer. I know because I took pre-law at Bucknell. Do you think this guy might be in the legal profession?”

“Probably not a good deduction,” Holly says, rather kindly. “I never took a law course in my life, and I knew. I'd put it in the category of semi-common knowledge.”

“You're a sponge for info,” Izzy says, “but point taken. Lew Warwick at first thought it came from the Bible.”

Holly reads the letter again. She says, “I think the man who wrote this could be religious. AA puts a lot of emphasis on God—‘let go and let God’ is one of their sayings—and the alias, plus this thing about atonement... that's a very Catholic concept.”

“That narrows it down to, I'm going to say, half a million,” Izzy says. “Big help, Gibney.”

“Could this person be angry about, just a wild guess, Alan Duffrey?”

Izzy pats her palms together in quiet applause.

“Although he doesn’t specifically mention—”

“I know, I know, our Mr. Wilson doesn’t mention a name, but it seems the most likely. Kiddie fiddler killed in prison, then it comes out he maybe wasn’t a kiddie fiddler after all. The timing fits, more or less. I’m going to buy your tacos for that.”

“It’s your turn, anyway,” Holly says. “Refresh me on the Duffrey case. Can you do that?”

“Sure. Just promise you won’t steal it from me and figure out who Bill Wilson is on your own.”

“Promise.” Holly means it, but she’s engaged. This is the sort of thing she was born to do, and it’s led her down some strange byways. The only problem with her day-to-day workload is that it involves more filling out forms and talking to bail bondsmen than solving mysteries.

“Long story short, Alan Duffrey was the chief loan officer at the First Lake City Bank, but until 2022 he was just another loan department guy in a cubicle. It’s a very big bank.”

“Yes,” Holly says. “I know. It’s my bank.”

“It’s also the Police Department’s bank, and any number of local corporations, but never mind that. The chief loan officer retired, and two men were in competition for the job, which meant a hefty salary bump. Alan Duffrey was one. Cary Tolliver was the other. Duffrey got the job, so Tolliver got him sent to prison for kiddie porn.”

“That seems like an overreaction,” Holly says, then looks surprised when Izzy bursts out laughing. “What? What did I say?”

“Just... that’s you, Holly. I won’t say it’s what I love about you, but I may come to love it, given time.”

Holly is still frowning.

Izzy leans forward, still smiling. “You’re a deductive whiz-kid, Hols, but sometimes I think you lose your grip on what criminal motivation really is, especially criminals with their screws loosened by anger, resentment, paranoia, insecurity, jealousy, whatever. There was a monetary motive for what Cary Tolliver says he did, of course there was, but I’m sure other things played a part.”

“He came forward after Duffrey got killed, didn’t he?” Holly says. “Went to that podcaster who’s always digging dirt.”

“He claims he came forward *before* Duffrey was killed. In February, after getting a terminal cancer diagnosis. Wrote the ADA a confession letter and claims the ADA sat on it. So he eventually spilled everything to Buckeye Brandon.”

“That could be your atonement motive.”

“He didn’t write this,” Izzy says, tapping the screen of her phone. “Cary Tolliver’s dying, and it won’t be long. Tom and I are going to interview him this afternoon. So I better get our lunch.”

“Extra tartar sauce for me,” Holly says as Izzy gets up.

“Holly, you never change.”

Holly looks up at her, a small woman with graying hair and a faint smile. “It’s my superpower.”

3

Holly is in her office that afternoon, filling out insurance forms. She sees the futility of hating big insurance companies, but they are definitely on her Poopy List, and she *loathes* the ads they show on TV. It’s hard to hate Flo, the Progressive Insurance lady—not in the least because Jerome Robinson once said, “She looks a little like you, Holly!”—but it’s easy to hate Doug and his silly Limu Emu, and Allstate’s Mayhem Guy. She detested the Aflac Duck... who has been mercifully retired, along with the GEICO Caveman (although it’s not impossible that both duck and caveman will make a comeback). As an investigator who has worked with adjusters from many companies, she knows their big secret: the fun stops once a claim, especially a big one, is lodged with the company.

This afternoon’s forms are from Global Insurance, whose TV pitchman is Buster the Talking Donkey, with his irritating hee-haw laugh. Buster is on every form, grinning at her with his big (and somehow insolent) teeth. Holly hates the forms but is delighted to know that in this case Global’s Talking Donkey will soon be on the hook to reimburse for a cache of jewelry taken in a home invasion. Sixty or seventy thousand dollars’ worth, minus the deductible. Unless she can locate the missing gems, that is. “So who’s the donkey’s behind today?” Holly says to her empty office, and just has to laugh.

Her phone rings, not the one for business calls but her personal. She sees Barbara Robinson's face on her screen.

"Hello, Barbara, how are you?"

"Great! I'm great!" And she sounds it, absolutely bubbling over. "I've got the most wonderful news!"

"Your book hit the bestseller list?" That would be fine news indeed. Her brother's book peaked at number eleven on the *Times* list, didn't quite make it into the top ten, but still not bad.

Barbara laughs. "With the exception of Amanda Gorman, poetry books don't chart. I'll have to be content with four stars on Goodreads." She pauses. "*Almost* four."

Holly thinks her friend's book should have *five* stars on Goodreads. *She* certainly gave it five. Twice. "So what's your news, Barb?"

"I was caller nineteen on K-POP this morning and scored two tickets to see Sista Bessie! Hasn't even been announced yet!"

"Not sure I know who that is," Holly says... although she *almost* knows. Probably would know if her head wasn't stuffed full of insurance questions, all subtly slanted to favor the company. "Remember, I'm getting on in years. My knowledge and enjoyment of popular music pretty much ended with Hall and Oates. I always liked that blond one."

Also, she has zero interest in rap or hip-hop. She thinks she might like it if her ears were younger and sharper (she misses many of the rhymes) and if she were more attuned to the streetlife serenades of the artists Barbara and Jerome listen to, people with exotic names like Pos' Top, Lil Durk, and—Holly's favorite, although she has no idea what he's rapping about—YoungBoy Never Broke Again.

"You *should* know, she's from your day, Holly."

Ow, Holly thinks. "Soul singer?"

"Yes! That and gospel."

"Okay, I do know," Holly says. "Didn't she cover a song by Al Green? 'Let's Stay Together'?"

"Yes! It was *huge*! I karaoke that one! Sang it live at the Spring Hop when I was a senior."

"I grew up listening to Q102," Holly says. "Lots of Ohio rockers like Devo and Chrissie Hynde and Michael Stanley, but they were white. There wasn't much Black

music on the Q, but that version... I remember that one.”

“Sista Bessie’s kicking off her comeback tour here! At the Mingo Auditorium! Two shows, both sold out, but I have two tickets... *and backstage passes!* Come with me, Holly, please say you will.” Wheedling now: “She does some gospel, too, and I know you like that.”

Holly certainly does. She’s a big fan of the Blind Boys of Alabama, and the Staple Singers, especially Mavis Staples, and although she barely remembers Sista Bessie, or most of the music from the twentieth century’s last decade, she loves that good old solid-gold soul from the 60s, people like Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson. Wilson Pickett, too. She tried to go to one of the Wicked Pickett’s shows once, but her mother forbade it. And now that Mavis Staples has crossed her mind...

“She called herself Little Sister Bessie in the eighties. I used to listen to WGRI back then. Tiny AM station, went off the air at sundown. They played gospel music.” Holly only listened to GRI when her mother wasn’t home, though, because many of those groups, like BeBe & CeCe Winans, were Black. “I remember Little Sister Bessie doing ‘Sit Down, Servant.’”

“That was probably her, before she got like totally famous. The only record she made since retiring was all gospel. *Lord, Take My Hand*. My mother plays that one a lot, but I like the other stuff. Say you’ll come with me, Holly. Please. It’s the very first show, and we’ll have an awesome time.”

Mingo Auditorium has bad associations for Holly, ones having to do with a monster named Brady Hartsfield. Barbara was there, but she wasn’t the one who clobbered Brady; that was Holly herself. Bad associations or not, she can’t refuse Barbara anything. Or Jerome, for that matter. If Barb said she had two tickets to see YoungBoy NBA, she would have said yes. (Probably.)

“When is it?”

“Next month. May thirty-first. Plenty of time to clear your calendar.”

“Will it be late?” Holly hates late evenings.

“No, not late at all!” Barbara is still bubbling, full of happiness, which cheers Holly’s day up considerably. “Starts at seven, it’ll be over by nine, nine-thirty, at the very latest. Sista probably doesn’t want to stay up late, she’s old, got to be pushing sixty-five by now.”

Holly, who no longer thinks of sixty-five as particularly old, offers no comment.

“Will you come?”

“Will you learn ‘Sit Down, Servant’ and sing it to me?”

“Yes. Yes, absolutely! And she’s got a great soul band.” Barbara’s voice drops to what’s almost a whisper. “Some of them are from *Muscle Shoals*!”

Holly doesn’t know Muscle Shoals from a muscle strain, but that’s okay. And she still wants to make Barbara work for it a little. “Will you also sing ‘Let’s Stay Together’?”

“Yes! If it gets you to come, I’ll karaoke the hell out of it!”

“Then okay. It’s a date.”

“Hooray! I’ll pick you up. I’ve got a new car, bought it with my Penley Prize money. A Prius, like yours!”

They talk a little longer. Barbara tells her she hardly sees Jerome since he came back from his tour. He’s either doing research for his new book or hanging around the Finders Keepers office.

“I haven’t seen him the last few days, either,” Holly says, “and when I did, he was kind of mopey.”

Before ending the call, Barbara says (with undisguised satisfaction), “He’ll be mopier than ever when he finds out we’re going to see Sista Bessie. Thanks, Holly! Really! We’re going to have an awesome time!”

“I hope so,” Holly says. She adds, “Don’t forget you promised to sing for me. You’ve got a very good v—”

But Barbara is gone.

Izzy and Tom Atta take the elevator to the fourth floor of Kiner Memorial. When they get out, arrows on the wall offer them either Cardiology (right) or Oncology (left). They turn left. At the nurses’ station, they flash their badges and ask for Cary Tolliver’s room. Izzy is interested to see the momentary flash of distaste on the duty nurse’s face—a pulling-down at the corners of the mouth, there and then gone.