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**JONATHAN
KELLERMAN**

BREAKDOWN

AN ALEX DELAWARE NOVEL

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Noise was everywhere. To avoid it, Tina figured you had to die.

When she and Harry lived in Manhattan, the nerve-scraping clangor of garbage trucks and delivery vans had served as early-morning alarm clocks. Waking up to the din was jarring and souring for Tina but useful for Harry because he slept like a drunk and had to be on the subway by seven.

Here in L.A., nestled in the alleged luxe of upper Bel Air, mornings were quiet. Until the weren't: the house groaning and creaking randomly, scolding reminders that they'd traded New York bedrock for the traitorous sand of earthquake country.

Of *course*, Harry barely noticed. The jolts to Tina's nervous system made her feel like shedding her skin.

L.A. evenings were "left-coast mellow" for him, *crushingly* still for her. She yearned for the rumble of a late-night bus, the drone of human voices rendered unintelligible at the seventeenth floor, the farting aggression of taxi-horns.

Anything to remind her that other people existed beyond the confines of her personal space. After two months of living on a ridge of soft dirt straddling L.A. the thick, almost slimy stillness was threatening to smother her.

When the creaks and groans weren't freaking her out.

Officially, neighbors existed. The place Harry's firm had leased for them ("midcentury delight" in reality a bland ranch house) was bordered by similar structures. But each was vacant due to traveling owners: a wire service editor currently working in Greece, a merry widow enjoying a round-the-world cruise.

Tina knew those details because the rental agent had informed her how lucky she was to have peace and quiet.

Quiet could only be peaceful if it wasn't polluted by loneliness and unpredictability.

Evenings when Harry worked late proved unnerving.

Even when he was home for dinner, there was bedtime to deal with, the dreaded moment when bedroom lamps were switched off and Harry was snoozing within seconds. Leaving Tina flat on her back, wondering if tonight she'd finally be able to get some rest.

It wasn't only the groans and creaks. There was the matter of the animals.

If she didn't set her white noise machine loud enough, scurries and rustles from the vest-pocket backyard dried her mouth, chilled her skin, and revved up her heart.

If she set the machine whooshing too fiercely, she veered into migraine territory.

Harry, sprawled across the mattress and sawing wood, remained oblivious to her stress. Tina figured he could snore through Armageddon.

Mr. Mellow and High-Strung Babe.

He called her that, good-naturedly. Insisted her overactive nervous system made her hot in bed. Tina had her doubts about that but why argue? She knew she was high-maintenance, it was all a matter of wiring.

More than once, startled awake by what *had* to be a wild beast or a serial killer out in the garden.

she'd elbowed the poor guy awake and insisted he check. Drowsy but chuckling, he always complied finding nothing. One night, especially weary, he said maybe she should try meditation. Or medication. Tina's reaction to that wisdom disabused him of further advice.

Then came *that* night, when even Harry's eyes widened as he heard the chittering. Parting the bedroom drapes, he watched, astonished, as a family of raccoons enjoyed the lap pool.

Mommy, Daddy, and three babies. Diving in gleefully, scampering out to shake off their fur, hurrying back for repeat plunges.

Five of them! Polluting the water with rabies germs and God knew what.

Harry had been fascinated by the spectacle; grinning, he watched. Tina, repelled, had insisted he pound the glass until the intruders fled. Which took a while; the raccoons, cheeky bastards, showed no fear, only sullen resentment.

The following morning Tina phoned Animal Control and received a lecture about human invasion of habitat; apparently raccoons had inalienable rights, too.

So four nights later when she heard sounds from the garden, she gritted her teeth and let Harry sleep through it. But after he left for work, she checked and found trampled vegetation and a pile of grape-sized pellets, a production she Internet-identified as deer scat.

She supposed Bambi foraging out back wasn't terrible...but what if a mountain lion or a coyote had a yen for venison and came back to...OMG, who knew Bel Air meant Wild Kingdom?

From that point on, Tina began using earplugs in addition to the white noise machine and though they caused her to wake up with a sore jaw, she figured she'd finally happened upon an optimal solution.

Wrong, again.

—

This was a new level of noise, way louder and weirder than the raccoons. An agitated creature? Or worse: angry.

Definitely *something* out there, thrashing. Now moaning. Now what sounded like the impact of a paw or a claw on hardscape. An animal tantrum, loud enough to pierce the machine and the plugs. How could Harry sleep through it?

Tina wished she had the courage to have a look herself. Inform him, over breakfast, that she made a breakthrough, no need to baby her anymore, she was adapting.

Maybe she'd even start looking for a job soon.

But not tonight, this—horrid symphony—and there it was again, the bumping.

Something injured? Or out to injure? Did coyotes sound like this? She had no idea...she nudged Harry with her little toe. He gulped air, turned over, yanked the covers over his head.

To hell with it, she *would* see for herself.

Bump. Wail. Now a high-pitched cry. Heart racing, chest hurting, but feeling oddly purposeful. Tina bounded out of bed, not even trying to be subtle or quiet because down deep she hoped Harry *would* wake up and come to her rescue.

But he just rolled over again, snored louder.

Not loud enough to blot out the terrible noise outside.

Scratch scratch scratch. What sounded like slithering. Then a...whimper? Two creatures? A victim and a predator?

Dreading what she'd see, Tina forced herself to fold back the drapes and squint.

~~No need to focus, there it was, obvious and horrifying, crouched in the left-hand corner of the~~
garden.

Head down, gasping and crying out as it pawed soil, spewing clumps and leaves and dust.

No way it could've spotted Tina but suddenly its head rose and it locked eyes with her.

A glint of madness—a terrible meld of terror and rage.

It screamed.

A duet; Tina was screaming, too.

Psychologists and psychiatrists often rely on voicemail for receiving messages. I use an answering service because if anyone should be offering a live human voice to someone in need, it's a therapist.

On a cloudy morning at ten a.m., I got a call from one of the service operators, a new one named Bradley.

"Dr. Delaware, I've got Doyle Maslow on the line."

"Don't know him."

"Her, sir, and sounds as if *she* knows *you*. She said it's a mental health crisis type of thing."

"Is she the one in crisis?"

"She didn't say, Doctor."

"Put her on."

"Good, sir."

A husky young female voice said, "Dr. Alexander Delaware? This is Kristin Doyle-Maslow, a mental health specialist with the Los Angeles County Behavioral and Affective Re-Integration and Services Project."

New one on me but the county sprouts programs like a hydra grows heads.

I said, "I'm not familiar—"

"You wouldn't be. We're funded by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, learn about us on our website. LACBAR-I-SP.net. I'm calling about a patient of yours. Zelda Chase."

"She's not my patient."

"Five years ago she was, according to the records, Dr. Delaware."

"Five years ago I evaluated her son—"

"Ovid Chase. There is no record of official termination."

"I consulted at the request of Ms. Chase's psychiatrist, Dr. Louis Sherman—"

"Who is deceased?"

"I'm aware of that—"

"Sherman released the file to Ravenswood University Hospital twenty-seven months ago. You are named in that document as therapist of record."

"She was treated at Ravenswood?"

"Not at that time, but all this is irrelevant, Doctor. The important fact is Sherman *did* terminate and you didn't."

Two years and some months ago, Lou had died of cancer, lending cruelty to her wording.

I said, "What exactly would you like me to do?"

"See your patient, Doctor. Who did end up at Ravenswood, a couple of days ago, on a 5150 b has been transferred to us."

Seventy-two-hour involuntary hold.

"What got her committed?"

“She was arrested for trespassing in someone’s backyard.”

“Where?”

“Bel Air. Why would that matter?”

“Trespassing earned her a 5150?”

“She had an overt psychotic episode and was judged threatening to the safety of others.”

Why explain when you can redefine? I said, “Sorry to hear that, but I treat children.”

“Dr. Delaware,” said Kristin Doyle-Maslow, as if my name were a diagnosis. “The patient has requested you. Would you prefer I tell her you’re not the least bit interested in her?”

“Are you a psychotherapist?”

“Pardon?”

I repeated the question. She huffed. “Why is that relevant?”

Because you sure as hell don’t have people skills. I said, “What kind of care will Ms. Chase be receiving from your agency?”

“We’re not an agency, we’re an exploratory program mandated to evaluate and fact-find. That includes the authorization to carry out 5150s because 5150s are evaluative.”

“And fact-finding.”

“All right, then, Dr. Delaware, I’ll tell her you have no desire to—”

“Where are you located?”

“Wilshire near Western. I suggest you come sooner rather than later. She is not a happy camper.”

Thumb through a five-year-old trash-magazine and you might come across a photo of Zelda Chase in a sexy outfit, a member of a rarefied species: *Actressa gorgeousa*.

Leggy, shapely, blond, perfectly styled and buffed, camera-ready as she flashed a smile ripe with genetic privilege.

Spend some time with Zelda Chase and all that flecked away like emotional dandruff.

Add a vulnerable child and it got complicated.

I'd done custody consults for years and lots of judges trusted me, but this referral came from Zelda Chase's psychiatrist.

Lou Sherman and I had cross-referred for years—parents sent to him, offspring to me. When Lou called me one evening in June, I was expecting more of the same. He said, "This is a little different. Alex."

"How so?"

"It's involved. Can we have lunch?"

Lou's office was in Encino but he invited me to Musso & Frank on Hollywood Boulevard, a shopworn ode to Hollywood glamour fighting to assert itself amid the tackiness, dinginess, and danger of what used to be Cinema City.

I arrived on time as I always do, found Lou in a corner booth at the north end of the big, mural-lined dining room, well into an example of the best Martini in L.A.

A small man, he'd enlarged himself in customary fashion: sitting up expressionless and ramrod straight, head fixed in a slight upward tilt. Maybe a souvenir of years spent in the military. Maybe he just got tired of being pushed around on the schoolyard.

His cinnamon-brown face was round and seamed, assembled around a serious nose. His sunbaked skull was crowned by a few remaining wisps of white hair.

New Mexico-born, half Jewish, half Acoma Indian, Lou was the first in his family to go to college. After three stints in the marines, he'd entered Columbia at thirty-five, stayed for medical school, completed a neurology-psychiatry residency at Langley Porter in San Francisco. I interned there and we attended the same seminars, saw each other at social events and traded jokes. Years later we found ourselves at the venerable med school crosstown where Lou was already tenured and I was a young assistant prof. There, the rapport between us deepened as we came to respect each other's clinical skills.

Lou had always come across imperturbable and quietly confident—what you want in a psychiatrist. But the day he told me about Zelda Chase, he seemed edgy. I ordered a Chivas and waited for him to tell me why.

That was delayed until his second Martini arrived with my scotch, followed by Caesar salad delivered ceremoniously by one of Musso's cranky geriatric waiters.

Finally, crunching a crouton to dust and dabbing his mouth, Lou said, "Five-year-old boy for you

psychotic mother for me. I say you get the better deal.”

He seemed to be contemplating a third cocktail but pushed away his glass.

“Making matters worse,” he said, “she’s an actress. I don’t mean because that makes her histrionic, which it probably would if she wasn’t well past that psychologically. I mean literally, she’s currently working on a TV series and the studio’s concerned. So a lot is at stake.”

I said, “Psychotic but employable. She keeps it under control?”

“Like I said, Alex, it’s complicated. But yeah, so far she has maintained. And who knows, maybe in that business a little looseness is an asset. Zelda Chase. Heard of her?”

I shook my head.

He said, “I figured you weren’t much for sitcoms. Hers is called *SubUrban*. Two complete seasons shot with a third planned, meaning halfway to syndication and the potential for big bucks. In the interest of clinical dedication, I endured one episode, here’s the gist: Hollywood’s notion of comedic family life, meaning a tossed salad of borderlines, narcissists, and undiagnosables living together for no apparent reason. Along with perverse, poorly trained pets and a laugh-track for moral support.”

“Sounds like the makings of a classic.”

“Shakespeare’s writhing in envy.” Lou twirled the stem of his glass. “You treat a lot of showbiz people, Alex? Or in your case, their kids?”

“I’ve had my share.”

“Care to generalize?”

I smiled.

He said, “Admirable restraint, young Alexander, but I’ll dive right in because I’ve seen lots of them—have insurance contracts with the studios, the reimbursement’s excellent—and the patterns are undeniable. New patient comes in and tells me they write comedy or do stand-up, I can put money on their being profoundly depressed. Sometimes there’s a bipolar element, but it’s always the depressive side that predominates in clowns. With that, of course, comes the self-medication and the addiction and all the shit that brings. The so-called *dramatic* performers are just that: immature, insecure, look-at-me-Mommy types with blurry identity boundaries. A more mixed bag diagnostically, but if you have to wager, go for Axis 2 issues, I’m talking deeply rooted personality disorders.”

That sounded uncharacteristically pat and cruel for Lou and I wondered if he realized it because he frowned and looked into his glass.

“Maybe I’ve been at it too long, Alex...anyway, Ms. Zelda’s a little more interesting. Signs of mood *and* thinking issues. But despite that, she’s maintained for forty-plus episodes.”

“Something changed to bring her to you.”

“Her agent called me,” he said. “Don’t ask for a name or what the connection is, it’s sensitive. The presenting problem is a few nights ago Zelda ended up at the door of an old boyfriend, making a holy ruckus and terrorizing his family. He hadn’t seen her in years, is happily married with kids.”

“Also an actor?”

“Nope, a cameraman she dated back when she was doing bit parts. You treat any kids or ancillaries—grips, stuntmen, lens guys?”

“I have.”

“Solid, working-class types, right? They get a big check, it’s three Harleys, not a Mercedes. That’s what this fellow is like. I called him and he was a nice guy, no genius but salt of the earth, ha-

himself a nice little spread in Sunland, horses, dogs. Apparently not guard dogs, because in the two hours, our Ms. Zelda climbed a fence and started pounding on his kitchen door, shrieking for him to stop being a coward, come outside, she knew he still loved her, it was time to reconnect.”

“That makes her psychotic?”

“You’re thinking I’ve missed the mark and it’s erotomania or some other stalker-type syndrome. And if that’s all that happened, you’d be right. Unfortunately she also displayed post-event stereotypical body movements—rocking, blinking—and stretches of elective muteness followed by some of the most intense flights of ideas I’ve ever heard. Including the unshakable delusion that said boyfriend had been creeping into her bedroom every night for years to have sex with her, after which he brutally rape her anally then pour champagne and propose marriage and the two of them would jet off to Europe. So I have no reservations calling her crazy—oh, yeah, there are command hallucinations as well: When the cops busted her, she told them her mother’s voice had ordered her to ‘finally make an honest woman out of herself.’ A mother she won’t identify other than to call her a movie star, which is obviously delusional. After that she tried to bite one of the officers on the hand.”

“I see what you mean, Lou.”

“Whether all that’s schizophrenia or a severe manic phase, I’m still not sure. Could even be both, you know how fuzzy diagnosis can get. Meanwhile, there’s pressure on me to come up with the right meds because she’s under contract for a third season and they can’t write her out without ‘messing up the story arcs.’ Reason I’ve called you in, is her son. Who, unbelievably, she’s managed to raise alone, daddy unknown. Now, obviously, something needs to be done for the poor kid while I evaluate Mommy and hopefully come up with the right serotonin-boosting cocktail. Another issue is her fitness as a parent. If you could have a look at the boy and make some recommendations—do a bit of social work if placement’s called for—I’d be eternally grateful. Compensation’s no issue, production company’s insurance is paying me portal-to-portal at a *very* generous level and I’ll make sure you get the same.”

“Okay.”

“Just like that,” he said. “You’ve always been an agreeable type, I knew I could count on you. Okay, how about another mood-glossing cocktail?”

—

Later, walking to the parking lot where his white ’61 Jaguar XK150 was protected by cones in the VIP section, he handed the valet a twenty and said, “Thanks again, Alex, we’re not talking cure, just management, but maybe we can do some good. I’ll call you tomorrow and give you the details, meanwhile here’s another tidbit: Her given name’s not Zelda, it’s Jane. She won’t say why she changed it but I’m wondering if she admires F. Scott Fitzgerald’s wife. And you know about her.”

“She went crazy,” I said.

“Oh, yeah.”

I had my first look at Zelda Chase two days later in Lou Sherman's cushy, paneled office, sitting next to him in a sensible chair as both of us faced her. Lou and I had decades of experience between us and we did our best to come across relaxed and warm. But if she figured us for a tribunal, that wouldn't have been crazy at all.

Not that she'd noticed me; the scant eye contact she'd yielded so far had been reserved for Lou. Fixed on him the way you look at your father when trying to explain a dent in the car.

He said, "Dr. Delaware is a child psychologist—"

"He's going to help me keep Ovid."

"No one's suggesting you shouldn't keep Ovid, Zelda."

"Well," she said. "You know..."

Lou turned to me. I said, "Dr. Sherman has asked me to get to know Ovid so if you need help with him, I can provide it."

Still avoiding me, Zelda Chase said, "Ovid is perfect."

Lou said, "And you, dear? How're you doing?"

"Ovid is perfect."

"I'm sure he is but we need to document that, so Dr. Delaware will be spending time with Ovid and reporting to me."

Zelda Chase studied me for the first time since I'd entered the office. My smile elicited a blink and a tremble. "He seems...you seem okay, Dr. Delaware...thank you, Dr. Lou. I know I messed up with Lowell but he asked for it, don't forget that—anyway, my baby deserves to be taken care of by his mom and he will be, no matter what."

"That's what we're all here to accomplish, Zelda. Meanwhile, of course, you'll stay away from Lowell."

"Oh, yes, that's all past." She sucked in breath. "I'm a good mom, Dr. Lou, you know that. But maybe I'm also a bad mom." Hugging herself, she threw up her arms and let them drop hard. "I don't deserve the messiah." Crooked smile. "I don't mean Jesus, don't worry, I'm not that nuts. I mean my personal savior. He saved me from loneliness."

I said, "Ovid."

"Ovie saved me by making me a mom." Her face crumpled. "But maybe not such a good mom. Oh, wow, I screwed up!"

Lou took her hands. "Zelda, this isn't the time for negative thinking."

"No? Then when is the time? I screwed *up*! They're going to take him *from* me!"

She began crying. Lou patted her shoulder and handed her a tissue. The same quick-draw sequence I'd performed so many times.

Zelda Chase's hand faltered around the gauzy paper and it floated to the carpet. Lou retrieved it and tossed it in the trash, handed her a replacement, pressed her fingers around it, made sure she held on. Her hand clenched, wadding the tissue but not releasing as she dabbed her eyes. Lou selected a third tissue and wiped away tears she'd missed.

Her free hand took hold of his wrist. Bending low, she rested her head on his forearm. Hair streamed, blocking her face. The sound of her breathing was slow and steady. “Don’t let them take him, Dr. Lou.”

“Of course not, Zelda.” Lou let her remain that way for a moment before easing away. Placed his finger under her chin and gently raised her face so that their eyes met.

Like a plastic doll, she allowed herself to be molded. A stream of fresh drool trailed down her chin. Tissue number four.

Lou said, “Zelda, I want you to concentrate on getting better without having to worry about Ovid. That’s why Dr. Delaware’s here. He’s the premier child psychologist in town. You’ll be able to rest assured and take care of yourself and you and Ovid will stay together.”

Zelda Chase said, “If you say so, Dr. Lou...you’re always right...but I’ll worry, anyway, you know me, I worry, I always do.” Another wry smile. “Immaculate conception has its own challenges, right, Dr. Lou?”

He stared at her.

Zelda Chase laughed. “Just *kid*-ding, guys. I’m not *crazy* or anything!”

Lou’s smile was tight. “Zelda, I’m glad you’re able to joke but it’s important that you take this seriously—”

“Oh, you...so *see*-rious.” Wink. Tongue flick. Bosom-heaving sigh. Hair flip.

Lou didn’t respond.

Zelda Chase laughed. “Fine, I get it, be normal.” Then she cried some more, accepted tissue number five with a steady hand and wiped enthusiastically. But frowned as she inspected the paper. “I put crud on it.”

Lou and I peered. Nothing visible.

“Crud,” she repeated. “You can’t see it but it’s there, toxic waste, I’m probably leaking poison from that fucked-up hospital food—Dr. Lou, I was so, so, so sick-feeling in there. Like you fly twelve red-eyes in a row and then you have to recite your lines. So thank you so much for rescuing me.”

She turned to me. “He’s the best—hey, but *you’re* a cutie. If Ovie was a girl, he’d probably develop a big-time crush on you.”

Lou said, “Zelda—”

“I understand, I understand,” she said, still studying me. “I’m messed up in the bean but I’m a good person and you’re trying to help me and I love you for it, Dr. Lou, but what I’m trying to tell you is Dr....what’s his name?”

“Delaware, Zelda. Like the state.”

“Like the state,” she parroted, nailing Lou’s inflection perfectly. “My state’s the state of confusion...what I’m trying to *state* to you, Dr. *Delaware*, really *express*, really *get across*, what you need to *know*, is that no matter what *I* am, Ovid is normal in the bean, he’s a totally normal boy. Okay?”

I said, “Got it.”

“Even if you’re just saying that and don’t mean it, you will mean it after you meet Ovie and you’ll say, wow, what a great boy, totally together and well balanced and so happy, too, so she must’ve done a good job, she should definitely have him, they can’t take him away, he’s hers, no one else gets to keep him—here’s an example for my psychology files of the way a mom should be—I’m being your mom now, Dr. Delaware.”

She mimed turning pages. “Even when patient Zelda went out to just have a discussion with Lowell, because they had a thing and she got blamed for it, she deserves compassion and understanding because look, even *then* she made sure Ovie was taken care of on all levels, he had total babysitter the total time and he was sleeping, anyway, when she went out. *That’s* why she went out real *late*, not to wake him, to be a good mom. *That’s* why she had to do it when Ovie was sleeping. So there was no abandonment or negligence, Dr....State of Delaware—and you know that, too, Dr. Lou, because you’re a wise man, maybe a magi—magus—whatever, you get me, I’m not stupid or neglectful. Delightfully odd, yes. Quirky, yes. But not stupid and neglectful and anyone else is going to be worse for my baby, okay? I ask that to both of you.” Raising her voice: “*Okay?* Am I making myself *clear* on a medical level?”

Lou inhaled. “We’ll do everything we can for you, Zelda.”

“I need more than that, I need promises.”

He took hold of both her hands again. She grunted and tried to twist away but he held fast. “Listen to me, Zelda: You can help yourself by focusing. Got it?”

Hesitation. Slow nod.

“Focus on the here and now, Zelda. Nothing else.”

She bit her lip. Turned away. Lou placed a finger below her chin, gently rotated her to force eye contact.

Risky gesture, I thought, given her instability. But maybe he knew something I didn’t because the face she showed him was lamb-like. Then: serene.

“All right, Dr. Lou, you’re wise beyond the ages, you always are, a real father figure. I just needed to know everything will be good. Corinna feels that way, when I’m on the set being Corinna feel that way. She needs the world to be right.”

Her shoulders heaved. “*I* need to know there’ll be a happy ending.”

“God willing,” said Lou.

I’d never known him to be a religious man.

—

Both of us walked her to the parking lot at the rear of Lou’s small building on Ventura near Balboa. Courteous gesture but the real reason was we both wanted to observe her.

Her gait began unsteady but improved with each step as she headed for a black Lincoln Town Car, courtesy of *SubUrban’s* producers, idling in a handicapped space. The uniformed driver jumped out, helped her into the backseat, got back behind the wheel, and rolled toward the driveway. A rear window lowered and Zelda Chase blew us a kiss.

When the limo was out of view, Lou sighed. “And that is the designated patient, Alex.”

I said, “How long have you been treating her?”

“Got the call from the agent, went to get the 5150 terminated, spent maybe half an hour with her trying to take a coherent history.”

“She made it sound as if you two go back.”

“And notice my imperturbable psychiatric wisdom not debating her.”

We headed back inside. He said, “Now you understand what I’m dealing with, young Alex. She can come across okay for short periods but nothing really works the way it should, cognitively or affectively. She denies knowing her father and there hasn’t been any male in her life for years. So I’

figuring the same kind of pseudo-attachment that led to her freaking out on the ex might be redirected to me. Difference is, I'm ready for it." He grinned. "And professionally trained."

I said, "A magus, to boot. Ergo her glomming onto you."

"Glomming. I like that. We should teach it to the residents, patient exhibits inappropriate glomming. And notice how she did the seductive thing with you, Mr., ahem, Cutie."

"That's *Dr.* Cutie to you."

He squinted. "Yeah, you ain't ugly. So maybe there's some reality testing going on, huh?"

He pulled a bottle of single malt out of a desk drawer, along with two glasses. "Care to join me for some heart-healthy vasodilation?"

"No, thanks."

"Too early in the day? Under normal circumstances, same for me. But being in the presence of a that thespian drama has parched me."

He poured and sipped. "Any diagnostic guesses?"

I shook my head.

"What about prognosis?"

"She's managed to work steadily for two years in a high-pressure business and the boy is important to her. If she stays well groomed and keeps her thoughts to herself, I can see her getting by."

"Exactly," said Lou. "They give her lines, she'll perform. You hear how she got my vocal inflections? It's a gift, no question. But get her off script and keep her talking long enough and it gets curiouser and curiouser. So maybe my treatment plan will minimize chatter and I'll concentrate on chemistry."

I said, "The nature of her job probably also helps. A certain amount of 'individualism' is expected."

"Translate: nuttiness. Speaking of which, I suggest you watch her show long enough to observe her doing her thing. Her character—Corinna—is a ditzy airhead blabbermouth and the writers stick all sorts of non sequiturs and other vocabulary mishaps into her mouth. I wonder if they conceived that before she was cast or if they built it around her."

He finished his scotch. "My goal right now is to rank her deficits. If her primary deal's schizoid I'll try Haldol. If it's mood, I'll lithium her until the mania fades, or at least as close as I can get."

"You're figuring she'll fight a therapeutic dose?"

"To lithium, I am. You know how it is, a lot of manics end up hating the stuff, numbs them up, life turns gray and boring. And this is a possible manic who gets to act hyper and goofy for a living. In a bizarre way, she'd have logic on her side."

He bumped his glass on the desktop. "I can just see it: She turns sane but can't pull off Corinna anymore and I've got the agent, producers, and network suits surrounding my house with torches and pitchforks. Or she noncomplies well before that and implodes and I stop getting referrals from the industry. That's why I appreciate your seeing the boy, Alex. Something I don't have to deal with. Even if I had kiddie-skills I wouldn't have time."

I said, "So are we looking at alternative placement for the boy or is the emphasis on helping her take care of him?"

"Do your thing, then tell me."

Consulting a thin chart atop his desk, he said, "One thing in our favor: The show's on hiatus for

couple of weeks, though they will be reading potential scripts. Meaning Zelda will be occupied full time but under less pressure and living away from the kid until I titrate her dose.”

“She knows that?”

“She does and she knows she needs to comply or everything falls apart. The deal is I get her evened out and once you give the okay, it’s home sweet home.”

“Where’s she staying?”

“Where else? Bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel under a fake name, babysat by a nurse practitioner I respect. Two grand a night but the network’s paying because they want her situation kept under wraps so as not to jeopardize the show’s third season.”

“The boy’s at home?”

“With a production assistant from the show...” He opened the chart. “Karen Gallardo. Here, this is your copy. My preliminary notes, the address, Gallardo’s cell. Everything you need to get started but batteries not included.”

I laughed and took the chart and he walked me to the door, refilled glass in hand. Maybe he always drank this much, or maybe something about this case had gotten to him.

“Again, thanks, Alex.”

“Happy to help,” I said. “It actually sounds interesting.”

“Does it?” He clicked his tongue twice. “Like that Chinese curse? May you live in interesting times?”

During the time I'd spent in Lou's office, San Fernando Valley dust had coated my old Seville. I headed east on Ventura Boulevard, hoping for a breeze to blow it away but got none. At an Italian place just past Sepulveda, I ate some pasta, drank some iced tea, and read Lou's notes.

Like me, he kept his charting spare and there was little to learn beyond what he'd told me other than the bare details of Zelda Chase's arrest. Charges dropped when the complainants, unnamed, agreed not to press, provided the offender received "counseling."

From the justice system's perspective, a happy ending. But "counseling" is meaningless, vulgarized by talk-show hucksters and encompassing everything from intense psychiatric treatment to the murmurings of nonlicensed "life coaches."

What "counseling" meant in this case was the system was happy to shift responsibility for Zelda Chase's disruptive behavior to Lou Sherman, M.D.

Lou had taken the job but he was smart enough and experienced enough to know a panacea was unlikely. Because psychosis, even clearly diagnosed, is a challenge to treat due to the fact that no one really understands what it is. Or why anti-psychotic drugs work, beyond a hazy notion of manipulating neurotransmitters—brain chemicals like serotonin and dopamine that keep the mental highway buzzing along smoothly.

Compounding the puzzle, many seriously disturbed people don't fit into diagnostic cubbyholes as neatly as big pharma and their science-writer flunkies would have you believe.

If the brain's Mount Everest, the plane hasn't even landed in Nepal.

So good luck to Lou...meanwhile, there was a five-year-old child to meet.

—

I worked on my fusilli and downed a glass and a half of iced tea before phoning Karen Gallardo. No answer, no voicemail. Finishing my meal, I got back in the Seville, took Van Nuys to the merger with Beverly Glen, climbed up to Mulholland, and began the quick drop to my house in the foothills on the Glen's western edge.

I was home by three, found the house sunlit and silent. Robin had left a note on my desk, plying her calligraphic artist's hand on a scrap of my stationery.

"Darling, out with Julie for lunch, back by 2:30 or so. B's with me."

Julie was Juliette Charmley, a high school friend, attending a dental hygienist seminar near LA. B and B was Blanche, our little blond French bulldog. That meant an animal-friendly lunch spot, maybe a café on Old Topanga overlooking a sparkling creek. The last time Robin and I had been there a mama coyote had been teaching two pups how to swim and the smaller sib had flashed us a death stare.

Blanche is a mellow little thing, at first glance more monkey than wolf. But she's still a dog and she's grown territorial about critters in our garden and her presence could prove interesting if the coyotes showed up again.

If I was right, Robin had risked an eventful lunch. Interesting.

I cleared some mail, checked for messages, gave Karen Gallardo another try. Ten rings with no voicemail and I was about to click off when a young voice came on, breathless.

“Chase residence.”

“Ms. Gallardo?”

“Who’s this?”

I explained

She said, “Okay, yeah, they warned me you’d be calling.”

“Warned?”

“Sorry. I meant I was expecting you. Sir.”

“I promise I won’t bite,” I said.

“Pardon—oh, sure. So you’re going to want an appointment with Ovie? He’s in preschool until three-thirty, I’ll be picking him up soon, he can be pretty tired when he gets home.”

“How about tomorrow, say four p.m.?”

“Sure. But he could get more tired if it’s a long drive to your office. Where are you?”

“Let’s do it at four-thirty, to give Ovid a chance to unwind. And I’ll come to you.”

“You’ll analyze him here?” she said.

“That seems like the easiest way.”

“Um...okay, sure. What do I tell Ovie?”

“Today, don’t tell him anything. Tomorrow, after he gets home—does he usually have a snack?”

“Healthy snack,” said Karen Gallardo. “Organic crunch bar and grapes if he wants them, sometimes orange slices.”

“Give him his snack first, let him settle down, then tell him a doctor who doesn’t give shots and is a friend of his mother will be dropping by to talk to him. I’ll take it from there.”

“What if he gets upset?”

“Is he a high-strung boy?”

“No, not really.”

“If you’re relaxed, he should be fine.”

“All right...”

“How’s he doing without his mom?”

“Actually,” said Karen Gallardo, “he seems okay. Today he did say he was a little worried about her, but he didn’t cry or anything and I told him she’d be all better soon. Was that wrong? I mean saying that? This really isn’t my thing, I studied film, not psychology.”

“Sounds like you’re doing fine, Karen.”

“I hope...do I need to be here when you analyze him?”

“In the house, yes. In the room, no.”

“What room do you want to use?”

“How about we figure that out when I get there?”

“So I don’t need to set up anything.”

“Nothing, Karen. Just be there with Ovid.”

“Do you need directions?”

I’d already mapped it: Hollywood Hills, above Sunset, east of Laurel Canyon. “Got it, Karen. S

you tomorrow at four-thirty.”

“He’s a nice boy—any idea when Zelda will be coming home? Ovie did ask about that.”

“Not sure yet, I’ll do my best to explain things to him.”

“Okay...will you be needing a room with a couch?”

“No, Karen.”

“And your name again, sir?”

—

I was in my office, thinking about what approach to take with Ovid Chase, when I heard the front door open and the voice I love proclaim, “We’re here!”

I walked to the living room where Robin, small and sleek and curvy in black jeans and charcoal T-shirt, waved and came over and kissed me. Blanche waited patiently, panting, front paws on my shins. Behind both of them, Julie Charmley, a tall freckled redhead, stood motionless and silent.

Every time I’d seen Julie, she’d been diffident, but this seemed beyond that. Distracted. Not wanting to be here.

“Good to see you, Julie.”

“Likewise. Guess I’d better be going.”

Robin walked her out and when she returned we went out to the garden and sat on the teak bench facing the koi pond. Within seconds, Blanche was enjoying the slumber of the just.

Robin said, “They’re getting divorced. Five kids and Bryce wants full custody.”

“What happened?”

“She cheated, he found out. Will that make a difference?”

Julie’s husband was a periodontist I’d always found icy and remote. Neither of them would win Parent of the Year but both seemed competent.

I said, “Depends on who’s judging. Long affair or one-night stand?”

“Two years long, another dentist in Bryce’s practice. Even if Bryce was the forgiving type, Julie doesn’t think she deserves forgiveness. I tried to buck her up but it just got her more upset so I kept my mouth shut.”

“Fun lunch,” I said. “Café Solar?”

“How’d you know?”

“Animal tolerance. Any coyotes show up?”

“I wish,” she said. “Anything to distract. That’s why I took Blanche, when Julie came in looking the way she did, I figured I needed someone who knows how to smile. What do psychologists call that?”

“Being smart.”

—

The following afternoon I pulled up to the house rented by Zelda Chase, a dirt-brown stucco building perched half a mile above the Chateau Marmont.

The hotel’s known to cater to celebrity excess. In return, it gets away with aesthetic touches like selected rooms carpeted in AstroTurf. Or maybe that’s just practicality: When the man/woman of the hour is reacting to last night’s partying, pull out a garden hose.

From the Marmont bar to Zelda's front door was a brief stroll and I wondered if Zelda had taken advantage. The door in question was a plywood slab in need of refinishing. No lawn out front, just cracked cement. Address numerals hung askew. A VW Bug took up the narrow driveway.

Not the kind of digs that gets readers of *People* and *Us* fantasizing, but that's the thing about Hollywood: It doesn't really exist. Sure, A-list stars smart enough to bank their earnings can live like potentates until they die, but most of the pretty faces who "make it" enjoy careers as brief as mayfly's ecstasy.

The brown box was what Zelda Chase had achieved at her apex. What would happen to a seriously troubled woman when her agent stopped taking her calls?

How would her son fare?

Lou Sherman had said Ovid was five years old but the DOB in his chart put him a month from six. Would a birthday party with Mom be in the cards?

The child who answered my knock looked barely five, until you saw the clarity in his eyes. In one hand was a glass of milk.

He said, "You're the doctor who doesn't give shots." Nasal voice, clear enunciation. Close your eyes and you'd guess seven or eight.

My mind camera-clicked details.

Small for his age, thin, short legs, low center of gravity. Long, dark hair draping most of his forehead and fringing skinny shoulders. Possible Latino cast to his features.

He wore a black T-shirt with the logo of a band I'd never heard of, olive-drab cargo pants, high-top Keds loosely laced. Owl-like, black-framed eyeglasses were moored to his head by an orange elastic band. The eyes behind the lenses were darker than Zelda's, almost black, wide with curiosity.

I said, "You're Ovid."

He laughed. "I'm Ovid." Aping my words and my inflection with the same uncanny accuracy his mother had displayed. What else had he picked up from her?

"Alex Delaware." I extended my hand. Fine-boned fingers grabbed it, squeezed once, let go. Five-year-old version of a corporate power shake.

He said, "No shots, really?"

"Really."

"Cooool." His posture was relaxed but he made no move to let me in.

"Anyway, Ovid—"

"I said what kind of doctor and she said psych—lotrist?"

"Psychologist."

He mouthed the word but didn't speak it. "She said she didn't know what that means."

"She being..."

"Karen. She works with my mom. Do you know my mom?"

"I just met her."

"Where?"

"At her doctor's office."

"She was in the hospital. She'll get better."

I said, "Can I come in?"

He moved aside. "She's having a sad time. Not from me. Her own sad."

That's the kind of thing kids are taught by sensitive adults. This kid sounded as if he meant it.

I was about to respond when shouting from the rear of the house raised my head.

"Omigod—Ovie, you can't answer the door, I told you not to answer!"

"He's the psy-kol-gist, Karen."

The woman who skidded to a halt behind him was late twenties to early thirties, heavysset with full pallid face that would've gotten her cast as an Irish scullery maid in one of those period PE shows. The rest of her was twenty-first century: barely enough flat-black hair to pull back in a bristly pony, seven pierces in two ears, a tiny rhinestone above one nostril, the requisite tattoos.

"I was in the bathroom," she gasped. "I told him just wait until I get out—Ovie!"

The boy shrugged.

I said, "Karen, Alex Delaware."

Ovid said, "*Doctor Alex Delaware.*"

Karen Gallardo said, "I promise, sir. He's never done this before—Ovid, when I'm in charge, need you to listen to me."

The boy chugged milk, got some on his chin, wiped it with a bare arm.

"Now you need a napkin."

Ovid used his arm again. "I don't. He's here to talk to me."

Karen Gallardo looked at me. I nodded and she left and Ovid said, "Over here."

—

He led me past a tiny entry hall into a living room that elevated the house from dump to dump with view. Of sorts.

In places like Tuscany and Santa Fe, where architectural restraint is linked to good judgment born of tradition, houses blend smoothly into hillsides. In L.A., it's all about asserting your individuality. The panorama outside Zelda Chase's floor-to-ceiling western window was a haze-capped jumble of swimming pools, drought-challenged gardens, and way too much structure on far too little soil.

Still, the eyeful probably trebled the rent, despite cheap brown carpeting, goosebump ceiling, and by-the-month furniture.

Neat and clean, though, with the sparse furnishings arranged as cleverly as possible and vacuum tracks striping the carpet. A bowl of apples and pears sat at the center of a small dining table, the fruit freshly washed, condensation bubbles freckling the skin.

The handiwork of a maid? Or perhaps Karen Gallardo had been ordered by the studio to make good impression.

If so, Ovid Chase answering the door during her bathroom break had blown that, if I was inclined to condemnation. So far I wasn't, just wanted to learn as much as I could about the boy.

He said, "I did this," and settled on the floor behind an elaborate construction of multicolored translucent tiles. What looked to be a postmodern version of a medieval compound, with a multi-spired castle, smaller outbuildings, proportional doorways and windows, and a horizontal stretch of tiles extending from the front that was probably intended as a bridge over an unseen moat.

The project took up the bulk of the room's central space. Child-oriented environment? If so, the child had made good use of it.

"Nice," I said.

Without comment, he reached for a box of unused tiles, grabbed a handful, and began adding and subtracting, pausing only to regard his work.

I said, "This really is impressive, Ovid."

"Magna-tiles," he said. "It's easy-peasy, you just stick them and unstick them." Plucking off pointed roof, he demonstrated, transforming a double-spined area to something that resembled Gothic arch.

"Easy for you," I said.

Another shrug as he fought not to smile, finally allowed himself the merest upturn of lips.

"You spend a lot of time building, Ovid?"

"It's all I like," he said. "Except for food." Laughter, sudden and burp-like, as if inner he needed to be released. Then he clipped it off and turned serious.

A restrained boy...As I watched him create, I took in more details: spotless clothing, clean nails. Even the loose laces of his high-tops had been knotted carefully. Identically.

Maybe Karen Gallardo had sorted him out carefully for the last couple of days, but my gut told me he was used to taking care of himself. Had an instinct for it.

He began humming as he worked, nothing hurried, everything thought out.

Mentally disorganized mom, buttoned-down kid?

I said, "What kind of food do you like?"

"Tacos, burritos, pho."

"Mexican and Vietnamese, huh?"

He looked up. "Pardon?"

"Pho's a soup from Vietnam."

"I don't know where it's from. We get takeout. It's my favorite."

"Pho?"

"Takeout. It's like...it's here and you get to eat it." A tongue tip materialized between the lips as he reached for more tiles.

"Barn," he muttered. "For the animals." Frowning. "Pretend there's animals."

I said, "What kind?"

He looked up, frowned. "What do you like?"

"I like dogs."

"Uh-uh. Dogs don't live in barns."

"Good point," I said. "How about horses?"

"Maybe a camel," he said. "They spit and they're mean." Slowly spreading smile. "If they spit they need to be kept in a barn."

For the next half hour, I sat and he built. Terrific attention span, increasing need for order and detail. And complexity.

He removed all the unused tiles from the box and created three piles, organized by shape. When he'd used them up, he said, "Should I knock it down or just stop?"

"Up to you, Ovid."

"That's what she says."

"Karen?"

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