

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# JEFFERY DEAVER

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# THE PAIN HUNTER

THE BROKEN DOLL

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**JEFFERY  
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

*The Broken Doll* is a collection of four short stories that recount a harrowing few weeks in the lives of a half dozen characters in the rural Midwest. The stories can be read individually—each has a beginning, middle and end—but they also interlock; some plotlines jump from one story to another, and so do some of the characters (to the extent they survive, of course!). Because the narrative moves back and forth in time, I thought it might be helpful to show at the beginning of each story where it falls on the calendar, and its duration.

APRIL						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
			Dodge			
		Excursion Day				
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
				The Pain Hunter		
				Sixty-One Seconds		
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

***Thursday, April 20, 6:52 p.m.***

“Find the nearest hospital,” Dr. Stuart Collier called out. “Now. If you don’t, he’s going to die.”

The driver of the van, in his midthirties, with a mass of impossibly thick black hair, glanced toward the stalk-mounted GPS. The man in the passenger seat, slimmer and with trim blond hair, typed in a search.

A moment later a selection came up. The driver glanced at the screen. “Seven minutes.”

“Go” was Collier’s response.

The driver punched the accelerator and the cumbersome vehicle sped up. He was hunched over the wheel. In their haste to get on the road, he had not put his belt on. The van dated to an earlier era and while a light glowed out the infraction there was no mosquito-itch of a repeating beep.

Different hair, different builds, the men wore related clothing. The driver was in jeans and a faded gray tee. The passenger—who *was* clipped in—was in a blue work shirt and gray dungarees, stained. Maybe grease, Collier guessed; his rugged hands and prominent knuckles gave the impression he could be an automotive mechanic. Both of the men in the front wore black jackets.

The doctor glanced at the aftermarket navigation system. Five minutes.

In the back, where a dozen backpacks and gym bags rested, were Collier and the injured man. There were no seats—the van was a delivery model—and the kneeling doctor was gripping a tie-down bar with one hand and keeping pressure on the impromptu dressing of a wad of paper towels halfway between groin and knee. A tourniquet on the man’s thigh was also slowing the ooze.

At one sharp turn, Collier nearly fell backward, though he managed to remain upright. Then they were on a winding and badly maintained southern Wisconsin rural road going double the limit.

The MD wore after-work casual—dark-brown slacks and a tan polo shirt under a navy-blue windbreaker.

The patient, a fortyish-year-old named Paul Offenbach, wiped his forehead sweat with his shirtsleeve. He was handsome, with a well-proportioned face, presently paler than it had been earlier in the day. The thick beard, also dark, accentuated the ashen shade. He'd discarded his jacket, and Collier had removed the man's shoes, socks and slacks.

His head pressed back, and a grimace of pain washed over his face. A deep inhalation. Then he looked once more at Collier.

“And this?” Offenbach pointed to his cheek, where there was a deep, jagged cut. Had he turned his head just a few inches to the right when the injury was sustained, he'd be blind in that eye.

“We won't worry about it for now.” Collier's response was assured.

At the GPS's female monotone of directions, the driver made a turn onto an even rougher road. The vehicle bounced. Offenbach moaned, closed his eyes.

The hump of wide sun was melting into the horizon, igniting low clouds, orange above the van. They paced the vehicle in the streaming breeze. Leaves tumbled and danced in the wake and in the wind.

The doctor released the tourniquet. He had never used the device in his practice. But like many physicians summoned by fate to treat an unexpected patient, he could draw on training from a distant past. He recalled that the tension had to be released every so often to allow blood to flow, despite the wound, to keep the limb vital.

The coursing blood brought with it more pain to the man's leg. Offenbach gasped and stretched his head back once more, unsuccessfully dodging the agony.

Now, for the first time, Collier noted two other injuries. The little and ring fingers of his patient's left hand were taped

together and swollen. And there was a dark bruise on his jaw. Neither of these had happened during the incident today.

The man was in fit shape. This would work to his advantage. Trim, athletic people, Collier recalled a professor in medical school telling the class, were easier to treat, had a better chance of survival and a faster recovery.

Collier himself was slim as well. His six-foot, three-inch frame bordered on gangly. He had a long face in a head crowned with straight, sandy hair, a comma of which dipped toward his right eye. He too was fit; after work every day he bicycled five miles home and on weekends might pedal twenty miles through the countryside.

“What’s your . . .” Offenbach’s jaw clamped shut. A deep breath. He tried again: “What’s your thing, your specialty?”

“Emergency room.”

Offenbach said nothing, not registering his good fortune that an ER doctor was present in a situation like this. His dark, still eyes looked over his unexpected clinician.

“We’re here,” the driver said, at the same time the GPS lady said essentially the same, though in the second person voice. He pulled into the entryway of the hospital, which was deep in the hinterland of Harbinger County.

They rolled into the back parking lot, where five cars—a Mercedes and four low-end sedans—sat, beside two ambulances. Here, the building was windowless for three stories; patients’ rooms began above that.

The engine shut off. Offenbach struggled to sit up. He gasped from the effort and the pain and he blotted sweat. With a grunt, he pulled his large silver pistol from beneath him, where he’d stashed it after they’d gotten into the van.

He aimed at Collier’s chest.

“Back there in Upper Falls? You saw what I did to that woman.”

A nod.

“What did I do?”

Collier swallowed and inhaled deeply. He controlled himself. “You shot her in the neck. You killed her.”

The scene reeled through the doctor’s mind for the tenth time since it had unfolded.

He was seeing the bullet from Offenbach’s pistol, this same pistol, ripping open the jugular, spraying blood into the air, like the turquoise water reaching for the sky from the fountain at Maple Street Park, the site of many a family Sunday afternoon.

Seeing blood on the long blonde strands of hair, splayed out in a soft disk on the sidewalk.

Hearing the scream, piercingly loud, though it was coming from the throat of a young girl.

“So you understand the stakes for you.”

Collier’s stare was the acknowledgment.

Offenbach managed to find breath. “Go. He’ll”—he pointed to the slim, somber passenger in the front—“be right beside you every step of the way.”



Lucky.

Harbinger County Sheriff’s Office deputy Peter Jacobson was in a profession where superstitions abounded. Not unusual when you considered that on any particular day you could be run off the road, punched, knifed, shot.

And so the solid man, 210 pounds and six two, believed that there existed certain forces—God, whoever or whatever—that were looking out for you.

This might just be one of those situations.

*Lucky . . .*

He was at a gas station on Sycamore Valley Highway, sitting in the back office, scrubbing through security video that



had been shot over the past half hour. The small room smelled of cigarette smoke, despite the big sign of prohibition above the computer.

“Anything, Deputy?”

“May . . . be.” The word stretched out as he concentrated. He was speaking to Derek, who managed the station. His uniform offered ample evidence as to who the tobacco violator was.

Jacobson was interested in one particular two-second clip. He scrubbed once more, back and forth.

The entire county was electric, after the nightmare in Upper Falls just thirty minutes ago, a daring jailbreak that had spilled into the middle of a street fair, resulting in a bloody, fatal shooting and a kidnapping. Dozens of bullets fired.

“Carnage” reported the crawl on the WRTD breaking newscast.

Now everybody—from the town PD to the Sheriff’s Office to the Wisconsin State Police—was looking for the delivery van in which the killers were escaping. No one was making headway. One reason was the circle of hundreds of square miles they could be within, the circumference expanding exponentially with every passing minute. And this part of the state—and adjoining Illinois—were home to an untold number of small roads, many of them dirt, that Google Earth hadn’t bothered with.

But Jacobson, who regularly patrolled this southeast quadrant of Harbinger County, was practicing a technique he’d come up with years ago. There were four major roads bisecting his territory and on each one you’d find at least one service station equipped with a security cam. He’d talked to the owners and asked if they’d adjust the aim a bit to catch not only the pumps but some of the road beyond.

If a be-on-the-lookout call came in, the first thing Jacobson did was to hit each station and review the vids for the time in question. Sitting on your butt, sipping coffee and scrubbing through the images was easier than zipping this way

and that, in hopes of stumbling on the offender. This year alone he'd snagged two carjackers, a hit and run driver and a fleeing abusive husband.

After the report of the Upper Falls incident went out, he'd sped to the gas station closest to him and fast-forwarded through the security system, looking for the black delivery van.

No such vehicle.

The same with the second service station, the one on Esther Hills Road.

But here . . .

*Lucky . . .*

His heart had started thudding when he saw a dark van coming toward the camera and then disappearing. Disappointment had struck a moment later when he noted that the name of the company and logo on the side weren't the same as the one involved in the shootout.

But hold on, he'd told himself and was now studying the vid in earnest.

*Back and forth . . .*

Yes! To Jacobson it looked like the name and logo might not be painted on the truck itself but printed on a plastic sheet that had been glued to the vehicle. Camouflage. The sheen of the sign's black background was just slightly brighter than that of the paint on the truck.

The man at the center of the terrible incident was a notorious professional criminal from Chicago, Paul Offenbach, whose specialties were high-end robbery, drugs, and arms and human trafficking. He'd evaded capture throughout his career, it was reported, because of his skills at sniffing out police and politicians and cops who could be bribed, and because of his brilliant strategies—he'd put himself through college playing chess (and supplementing that income by running numbers for various Chicago mob bosses—now, *there* was a combination of after-class jobs for you).

Plastering on fake signage was just the sort of trick for a man like him.

Jacobson couldn't make out anything about the people inside—too much glare. And the camera wasn't high tech enough to pick up the tag number. The plate, though, was Minnesota—the same as that on the one used in the shootout.

What were the odds he was right?

Not 100 percent but good enough. He wasn't going to spend time trying the fourth station.

Sometimes you had to gamble. And Jacobson grimaced as the unintended word popped into his mind; it reminded him of an incident he would just as soon forget.

He rose, thanked Derek, and ran outside to his cruiser, his cop accessories bouncing and jingling.

A half hour head start.

But of course they didn't want to risk a traffic stop so they had to stick close to the speed limit. He did not.

Jacobson opened the trunk and removed his stubby black M4A1 and three twenty-round magazines. This dependable workhorse of a weapon could fire full auto—machine gun—style—or three-round burst or single shot.

He turned the side selector to full auto. Offenbach and his two grunts were all armed and, after Upper Falls, it was clear they'd try to shoot their way out of a confrontation. He chambered a round and flipped the safety on. Climbing behind the wheel, he set the gun on the passenger side, butt in the well, and the magazines on the seat.

Firing up the big engine, he skidded onto Sycamore Valley, scattering gravel and raising yellowish dust.

The twelve-year veteran of the HCSO instinctively ran through procedure at a time like this: notify all relevant law enforcement agencies of the sighting, advise the likely direction of travel, follow at a secure, unobservable distance.

And do not attempt apprehension alone.

Now, however, all that went out the window. Peter Jacobson, by himself, would take on Offenbach and his two men and would rescue the hostage.

It was foolish, if not suicidal.

In the end, though, there hadn't been much debate.

The deputy had no other choice. Besides, luck was with him tonight.



Passenger Seat Man turned and lifted from the van floor a gym bag.

As he did, Collier noted a tattoo of a rattlesnake on the side of his neck. It wasn't his only inking; earlier this evening Collier had noted a bold Nazi swastika, in blue and black, on his left forearm.

Snake—as good a nickname as any—opened the bag and took out a small leather case. This he slipped into his left jacket pocket. From the right he pulled out a silver pistol, checked it and put it back.

Offenbach asked him, “Blade?”

“Have it.” Snake tapped his pants pocket.

Collier said sternly, “Nobody’s getting hurt. Understand me?”

Offenbach turned those flat pits of eyes on the doctor briefly, as if noting a fly on a tabletop. He would be a classic sociopath. According to the news stories, in the crime down in Illinois several weeks ago, the one he'd been arrested for, the mobster had tortured his victim for ten or fifteen minutes before killing her. He had probably, the talking head had said, wanted to keep the torture up for longer but was concerned the police might be on their way to the location.

Snake climbed out and walked to the van's back double doors, pulled them open.

Ducking, Collier walked to the rear and stepped out, and the two men started over the wet, gritty asphalt. The greenish overhead lights made Snake appear gaunt, an impression bolstered by prominent tendons rising from his neck. The head of the reptile lifted, as if the creature were about to strike.

They stepped onto the walk and moved toward the nearest door.

Snake pointed to a patch of concrete a few feet away. "On your knees."

"What?"

"Knees."

Oh, so I don't attack him.

Collier did as told, thinking involuntarily of a similar patch of walk he had been scrabbling over just a half hour earlier: the bloody hair, the dead body, the high-pitched scream, a child's voice.

His gut twisted at the memory and he was consumed with anger and dismay.

Focus, he told himself. To survive he needed to focus.

Snake opened the leather case. He removed some metal instruments. Lockpicking tools. Collier had seen them on any number of TV shows.

The man glanced back, then inserted one thin instrument into the lock. A second followed. In a minute or so he was done. He put the tools away and took hold of the latch. He hesitated, probably wondering about alarms, then pulled the door open.

Silence, other than the faint hinge squeak.

Collier rose and the men entered a large storeroom. The doctor flipped the lights on and gazed about. He found a plastic bin, three by two by two feet, dumped out the packages of toilet paper and began filling it with items from the shelves:

gauze, various medical instruments and devices, soap, bandages, latex gloves, blankets, a surgical suite tray and blue cloth coverings for it, disinfectants.

Apparently this was the room that the med techs used to store supplies for the ambulances. Against the outside wall were red EMT kits, like workmen's toolboxes. Collier opened one and noted a stethoscope, oximeter, thermometer, needles and tubes for running IV lines, a sphygmomanometer. He closed it up. "We'll take one of these."

He set the kit beside the bin, along with three one-gallon jugs of distilled water and a stretcher with three-inch rubber tipped legs.

"What else I need is inside." Leaving the bin and the other supplies near the exit, Collier walked toward the internal door that led to the hospital proper.

*Click . . .*

Snake had opened a locking blade knife. This he slipped, point down, into his left slacks pocket.

Collier turned on him. "No one gets hurt. Didn't you hear me?"

The man gave him a dead-eye glance similar to that of Offenbach.

Was he about to get slugged?

But, no, Snake merely nodded and Collier opened the door slowly, then looked left and right. No one.

He followed the scent of heated cloth and the no-nonsense detergent that hospitals use. In a few minutes they were at the laundry room. Two women stood at the end of the large, noisy space, folding sheets. Chatting and preoccupied, they didn't see Collier snag two white jackets from a rack near the door.

The men donned them; they fit well enough.

As Snake put his on, Collier noted he wore a wedding ring. Somehow the concepts of criminal violence and romantic relationships seemed incompatible. But then he decided that that view was naive. Bonnie and Clyde. Adolf and Eva.

“Maybe . . . your collar? Pull it up. Higher.”

“What?” Snake frowned at the order.

“If doctors have tats, they’re out of sight. And they aren’t poisonous snakes.”

With a resentful glance, he followed Collier’s suggestion.

The top of the reptile’s head was visible but just barely.

He transferred his gun from his black jacket to the right-hand pocket of the white coat.

Collier’s face tightened but he said nothing.

The shopping trip continued to the autoclave room—where surgical instruments were sterilized and stored. The door was unlocked. This was typical; theft of instruments was rare. Why risk prison by stealing what you could buy from a medical supply house for a few dollars? Amazon had good sales too.

Inside he surveyed the racks. Scalpel handles typically were reused and after being sterilized were sealed in plastic bags. The blades mounted to them were for one-time use and came in small plastic boxes. He took three of each, along with clamps, hemostats, tweezers, needles and suturing thread. Some of this would be in the EMT box but he needed to make sure their impromptu surgical suite was well equipped.

“Is that it?” Snake asked. “You said fast.”

“Almost. One more thing.”

The two men started up the corridor once again, Collier looking through the windows in the doors and testing the knobs of the ones they couldn’t see into. The room he was looking for would be locked. People might not steal scalpels and plasma but they would love to help themselves to OxyContin, propofol, ketamine and the other pharmaceutical delicacies that spun the world away.

“Look,” Snake whispered.

A stocky man, fifties, in a dark-gray uniform was walking their way. He was armed only with a Motorola radio. Not

police. A private guard.

He didn't seem suspicious of them but he was still some distance away and hadn't noted yet that neither wore an ID badge.

Collier walked to a page phone mounted to the wall. He lifted the receiver and held it to his ear but didn't punch in a number.

Snake's right hand went into the knife pocket.

The doctor whispered, "If he suspects us, threaten him, tie him up, gag him or whatever. But you kill him, your boss can operate on his goddamn leg himself."

Snake fired yet another stony gaze his way, glanced at the guard and turned his back to him, while Collier pretended to have a conversation.

As the guard approached, Collier lifted his head, smiling, a distracted greeting. The guard nodded back.

He then turned toward the men. "Excuse me, Doctors."

Collier felt his heart rate skyrocket.

What would he do if the guard were attacked?

An unbearably tense moment followed.

Then the uniformed man explained, "I need to get in there." He pointed to a white box that would send a message to security, reporting that he'd hit this station on his nightly rounds. He touched an RFID card to it.

"Take care," he told them both and ambled on.

Collier found his hands shaking.

They continued their search and finally came on the drug storeroom. The door was secured with two locks. Through the window Collier could see shelves brimming with boxes and bottles, and—in a corner—a large cage, containing the same. Inside would be the Schedule II and III drugs, the serious stuff.

"In here."



With a look up and down the corridor, Snake removed his burglar tools. These locks were trickier than the first. It took several minutes to crack them both. Finally they stepped inside.

“That too?” he asked, pointing to the locked door of the cage that held the Schedule IV drugs.

“No.” From an unlocked refrigerator Collier took a bottle of lidocaine and from a shelf a bottle of Tylenol with codeine.

They walked to the door to return to the corridor. Snake pushed through first but before Collier could exit, he was startled by a voice behind him.

“Evening, Doctor.”

He turned.

There was a door on the opposite side of the room, leading to another corridor. A short, balding man had just entered. He wore the light-blue scrubs of a nurse.

Startled, Snake turned and the door separating him from his captive slipped from his grip and clicked shut.

“Evening,” Collier said to the nurse, who collected a box from a shelf and left via the door through which he’d entered.

Collier turned back and saw Snake, staring at him through the door’s window. The man reached for the doorknob and tried it but it had relocked on closing.

The man’s cold facade had given way to concern. Collier could be out the opposite door and calling 911 well before Snake could crack the locks again.

Or the doctor could just flee to safety. The hospital was small. A cyclist like Collier, with solidly toned thighs and calves, could simply sprint through the front or a side door and, in no time at all, vanish in the surrounding brush and forest.

Collier looked back to Snake, whose lips tightened even harder. He seemed to sigh. Was he wondering if Offenbach would order the driver to kill him for the lapse?

Stuart Collier turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Snake was likely not a man to be astonished but the surprise on his face was considerable.

He was about to say something, it seemed, but Collier cut him off with: “That’s all we need. We can’t wait any longer. Let’s move.”

It was time for doctor to tend to patient.



The two men loaded their loot into the van.

Leaving Collier to climb in the back and close the door, Snake walked around to the passenger side, apparently thinking that if the doctor hadn’t escaped in the hospital when he had the chance, he wasn’t going to run now.

Hunched over, Collier walked forward and pushed the stretcher next to Offenbach.

Snake pulled his white jacket off and tossed it to the van’s floor. Collier kept his on over his windbreaker.

Offenbach, holding his gun, rolled onto the stretcher. The killer waved a hand when Collier tried to help him—probably from fear the doctor would grab the pistol, though he had no idea how guns worked, especially not one like this, bristling with levers and button.

The killer slipped the gun to where it had rested before—under him in the small of his back.

“You don’t need that.”

Offenbach flipped another chill, emotionless glance his way.

Well, if he wanted a hunk of metal pressing on his spine, that was his business.

As soon as the killer was settled and had wadded up his suit jacket for a pillow, he barked, “Let’s move.”

The driver put the van in gear and they left the way they'd arrived. Snake typed the original destination into the GPS and they were directed back to the main road and a route east.

Collier, on his knees again, urgently spread out a blanket and dumped the contents of the bin and his pockets onto it. He moved a pack of twenty-four plastic water bottles out of the way to the back of the van, pulled two out and returned to Offenbach, to whom he handed one.

Lifting a bottle, he said, "Pain meds."

The killer said, "The label."

Collier held it up, not adding: "It wouldn't really be in my self-interest to poison you, now would it? Not with your two armed thugs aboard."

A nod. Offenbach verified the medicine and swallowed down the two pills that Collier handed to him.

Collier pulled the red gear box toward him and opened it, then inverted the plastic bin and used it as a chair.

He quickly ran the man's vitals: temperature, pulse, oxygen level and blood pressure, as Offenbach looked on dispassionately.

"And?"

"Not terrible. Temperature's up. Means there's some infection already. Here." He gave him two more pills.

"These are what?"

Collier displayed the bottle.

Offenbach said, "Suffix is -cin. Antibiotic."

"Right."

Offenbach swallowed them.

"That." The killer pointed to the stack of blue cloth tray coverings. Collier handed one to him and with it the man wiped his face. He then dabbed at the gash under his eye and examined the cloth, probably for blood. There was none. Coagulation. The body is a true miracle of healing.

Glancing forward, Offenbach told the driver, “Only five over the limit.”

“I’ll be sure.”

Collier released the tourniquet and after a minute retightened it. “I need to get started. We have to pull over.”

“No.”

“It’s not an option.”

“Another twenty miles.”

The doctor risked being tough once again. His words were harsh: “You want me to save you? Let me do my job.”

Offenbach called, “How much farther?”

A glance at the GPS and Snake said, “We have time. He won’t be there till eleven.”

The hour was now just before seven thirty.

“Find someplace,” the killer ordered.

“All right,” the driver said.

“What happened there?” Collier nodded to two taped fingers on his left hand. “And the bruise?”

It was on the left jaw, peeking above the beard.

Offenbach regarded the digits. “A fight.”

“Let me see,” Collier said.

He held it up. The fingers were broken, not sprained. “Run in with a nemesis. *Mano a mano.*”

Collier was familiar with this metacarpal break; you saw it often when abusive husbands (usually that gender of the couple) beat their wives or children.

“It’s healing well.” Collier also noted small cuts and puncture wounds in the palm and on the inside of the fingers. The bruise on his face was the eggplant-and-yellow combination that meant a serious blow. What had been the point of the fight?

Had he killed the person who’d dared to swing at him?

“There,” Snake said, pointing outside.

With a squeal of brakes, the vehicle slowed and then turned to the right. It moved at a crawl; the drive or road they were now on was pocked with potholes and covered with branches.

Stopping, the driver shut off the headlights.

Offenbach said, “Leave the engine running.”

Collier poured distilled water into a steel bowl and scrubbed his hands, rinsed and dried them, and then pulled on gloves.

He walked to the back of the van, opened the door a crack and poured out the water. He returned to the stretcher, filled the bowl again and, lifting the paper towel that had been an improvised dressing, washed away the blood around the bullet hole.

He swabbed spots around the wound with alcohol and prepared two injections.

“This is lidocaine.” He displayed the bottle. “If you’ve been to the dentist you’ve had it. I need to numb the site.”

Offenbach nodded.

Collier released the tourniquet and blood oozed out of the hole more quickly. He twisted it again.

“Prognosis?” The word was a whisper.

“Bleeding’s worse than I thought.”

“Make it less worse.” A growl.

Collier put on a pair of illuminated magnifying goggles. He firmly pinched the skin near the wounds. “Feel anything?”

“No.”

“I always explain to my patients what I’m going to be doing. No surprises. I’ll clean away a little of the scabbed tissue around the hole. Pour in some antibiotic powder. That’ll slow the infection. Then I’m going to cauterize the vessels, seal them. With this.”

He held up the cautery device, which resembled a large writing pen, ending in a thin, pointed loop of wire. It was battery operated.

“It get hot enough to do anything?” His dark eyes were skeptical.

“Twenty-two hundred degrees.”

Offenbach stared as if he were memorizing the brand name of the device. Collier felt a chill, wondering if he was thinking of buying one himself.

*Torture . . .*

Collier assembled a scalpel and, with it, carefully scraped around the wound.

“Feeling anything?”

“No.”

He did this for a moment more, then set the instrument down, ripped open a small packet and sprinkled white powder into and around the hole. Then he picked up the cauterizer. “This is going to smell bad.”

Offenbach asked, “What about the bullet?”

“It’ll have to come out eventually but that’s surgery I can’t perform here, not without a nurse.” He eyed the man with a dark, wry gaze. “You people have doctors you use, don’t you? Who won’t report anything?”

He’d learned this too from TV.

Offenbach scoffed. “Us people.” Like he’d been insulted.

Collier said, “Don’t watch.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t want patients watching the procedures. Even if they can’t feel anything they tend to flinch.”

“I don’t flinch.”

“It’s automatic. Just lie back and close your eyes.”

Offenbach did. He wiped his face and beard once more.

Collier flooded the wound with sweet-smelling orange Betadine. He turned on the cautery pen. After it had warmed up, he touched the wire to the tissue just inside the hole. A faint hiss. Smoke rose.

The driver scoffed. “Smell *bad*? I may puke.”

“Then go outside.” Offenbach’s flat announcement.

The man climbed from the van, which, relieved of his weight, rocked. The wind had grown gustier and whistled sharply when he opened the door.

Offenbach said to Snake, “You stay.”

The unflappable man nodded. He didn’t seem bothered by the scent of burning flesh. He was continuing his surveillance for threats and occasionally reading the screen of his phone.

Offenbach said to him, “Your wife. She can’t be late. At eleven we’re gone.”

“I told her.”

Streams of smoke wafted up.

The stench was overwhelming. Like Snake, Offenbach seemed not to mind. Was it possible he was enjoying the smell?

Another touch of the pen. “Okay. I’ve got the biggest vessel. We can lose this.” Collier undid the tourniquet and set it aside. “But we’ve got a long way to go.”

And bent to his task once more.

After a few minutes, Offenbach wiped more sweat and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Collier. Stuart. Stu.”

“I saw a movie one time, Stu, a crime movie.” His voice was uneven. The pain meds had taken effect. “A bank robber’s got a hostage. Only the two of them in the bank. They’re bantering—like you see in movies, even though people don’t really talk like that. It distracts the robber and the hostage gets the gun away. And he shoots the crook. But on purpose it doesn’t kill him, the way he aims. The police call and want to

know what's going on, and the hostage says that the gun went off accidentally. He's still being held by the robber."

Collier said, "He told them that so he could sit back and watched the man who kidnapped him die."

Offenbach said, "Slowly."

"Is this about you thinking I'm somehow planning to kill you?"

The criminal was silent.

Collier scoffed. "Why would I do that? I came back to save your life."

The blue cloth, halfway through a wipe of his face, stopped. Offenbach set it down.

"I had a chance to escape. In the hospital. I didn't."

Offenbach looked toward Snake, who said, "True."

"You didn't run . . . even after you saw what I did in Upper Falls?"

A high-definition replay once again.

Seeing Offenbach fire the silver gun.

Seeing the bullet strike the pale neck.

Seeing the long blonde hair arranged like a halo on the sidewalk, the hair covered with blood and tissue.

The hair of Stuart Collier's wife, Eleanor.

Seeing beside her the screaming girl, also flecked with blood.

Their ten-year-old daughter, Chloe.

He said to Paul Offenbach, "Yes. Even then."





Deputy Pete Jacobson had now been on the killer's trail for twenty miles, skidding through turns, punching the accelerator so hard the engine snarled and the tach needle nosed to the red.

Where the hell are you, Offenbach?

He doubted they'd turned down one of the crossroads along the highway; those were small arteries and went nowhere except to residences—hovels owned by the marginal, and opulent homes of doctors and attorneys, sometimes on contiguous property.

No, the van would continue east. Maybe eventually cutting south to Chicago, where Offenbach had his main base of operation. Though, for his money, Jacobson believed the men would avoid that too obvious choice and were heading to a dock on Lake Michigan or a small airport, from which they could escape to Canada.

Speeding through the night, kneading the wheel, Pete Jacobson suddenly heard once again the conversation from two weeks ago, words that were seared into his mind like a cattle brand.

*"Pete, I need you in the Falls tomorrow," Sheriff Louie Braddock is saying.*

*Standing in his front yard, Jacobson is on his cell phone. After a moment: "The thing is, Sheriff . . . I was going to call. Need to take the day off." His gut is churning. He thinks a headache is about to appear. It's not that he hates himself for lying; it's that he believes he's not very good at it and will get called out . Okay, maybe some of the former too.*

*Silence. Sheriff Braddock's silences could be loud.*

*Then: "Everything all right?"*

*"Hope it will be. My mother, don't know if you know but she's had some troubles. Maybe I never mentioned it. A scan of hers didn't turn out too good and there's a specialist in Hanover I was going to take her to."*

*"I'm sorry to hear that, Pete." A heartbeat or two. "Jill's busy, I guess."*

*“She’s got something going on I don’t think she can get out of.”*

*This lie hurt more than the first.*

*“All right. Good luck to her.”*

*“Thanks, Sheriff, I’ll tell her.”*

*After disconnecting, he lowers the phone. He gazes up at his split-level, light green with white trim. The air is fragrant with lilacs.*

*Goddamn it. Why did it have to be tomorrow, of all days?*

*The one day this month he has to take off.*

*It’s the Top Gun poker tourney at the Spinning Wheel. Everything has come together for him. There’ll be ten players and a \$5,000 entry. The payout schedule is good. If he’s first, which he’s confident he will be, the prize is \$25K, minus the rake. That will let him pay back the loan of the \$5K and give him most of what they need to finish the addition for the baby.*

*He hates to lie but there is no other option.*

*Now his thoughts turn to self-preservation.*

*Are there any holes in his story?*

*Jacobson doesn’t think so. The sheriff doesn’t even know his mother and there’s no way he’d talk to Jill. He’s never called her in all Jacobson’s years at the Sheriff’s Office.*

*He’ll get away with it.*

*It’s dinnertime. Jill’s made roast chicken. He tucks away his guilt and heads into the house.*

*He’ll spend the evening brushing up on his game.*

*Good.*

*It’ll all be good.*

*Except it hadn’t been good at all.*

*Jacobson was a fine player but the luck just hadn’t been with him that day.*

*But winning less than he’d hoped wasn’t the disaster.*

As he'd walked outside the Spinning Wheel and turned on his cell phone, he saw fourteen texts, the last four from the sheriff, who, it seemed, had called Jill after all. A terrible crime had gone down in the Falls—a shootout nearly as bad as the jailbreak today—and all his deputies were supposed to come in. The sheriff *had* called Jacobson's wife to see if Jill could take over for her husband with his mother and the doctor.

The resulting train wreck was no surprise.

And the worst part—well, almost the worst part—was that Sheriff Braddock, a large man, had not yelled, or looked angry. He was disappointed, almost embarrassed for his deputy's lapse. Technically he'd taken the day off, so he wasn't guilty of gambling on duty—a fireable offense. And Braddock didn't want him gone anyway. With the meth and human trafficking problems in Harbinger County, he needed personnel and couldn't afford to lose anyone.

So Jacobson had kept his job. But the attitude toward him in the office changed. The attitude of the sheriff and other brass, of course, but also that of the deputies and secretaries.

That coolness was something he was struggling to live with.

The burning guilt too—given the horrific consequences of his having played hooky. A particular guilt far worse than what he'd felt when the first lie trickled from his lips.

But all that was going to change.

Sometimes you get a second chance.

You can't make up for all your sins from birth to now; who has the time and fortitude? No, it's a few select transgressions we target and we whittle away at, even if we can't make them vanish entirely.

He couldn't reverse all the harm he'd caused that day. But he could make a start by capturing or killing Paul Offenbach and his thugs and rescuing the hostage.

It would be a redemption of sorts.

But that required just a little more fabrication. He rehearsed some lines now.

“I know I should’ve called it in the minute I saw them, Sheriff. But I got a look inside and my sense was that the hostage was about to be killed. I had to act. Immediately . . . There was no time for backup.”

Now, speeding east, in pursuit of the monstrous Paul Offenbach and his thugs, he noted a sign flash in his headlights. He lifted his foot off the gas.

## HOSPITAL

1 MILE



The report was that Offenbach had been wounded in the shootout. But they wouldn’t stop there. By law, gunshot wounds had to be reported, and none had been.

He accelerated back to eighty.

Jacobson covered another ten miles, slowing when he saw ahead of him a blinking yellow light in the now-dark sky.

Route 99, which he was presently on, continued straight as a ruler east, all the way to Lake Michigan. At the light, Southern Lake Road veered right. It would take Offenbach and the others to roughly the same places that 99 would but at a much slower pace, given the reduced speed limits.

Had they continued straight, or gone southeast on Southern Lake?

Smart. The man was smart.

A master of rapid chess . . . That’s what the TV reporters had said.

Offenbach, he decided, would have taken the smaller road—because it was logical to pick the other, the faster one.

Jacobson swung right onto Southern Lake and hit the gas once more.

Just a few miles later he braked his cruiser to a stop and cut the lights.

He had found the black van.

It was sitting off the road to the right. A couple hundred yards. The head- and taillights were off, though there was faint illumination in the front—through the windshield, which was facing east, away from Jacobson.

He turned his Motorola radio to mute and climbed out—not closing the door, for the silence of it. It would be impossible to hear a door close from this distance if Offenbach and his boys were inside the van but maybe one or more of them weren't.

From the trunk he collected body armor and strapped it on, then retrieved the rifle and magazines from the front seat.

He let his eyes adjust to the night and, like the hunter that he was, studied the ground between him and the van, planning out a route that would guarantee he could approach undetected.

Thanking God or whoever or whatever for the luck.



“Even then,” Dr. Stuart Collier repeated.

He continued, “Is seeing you murder somebody supposed to make me an avenging angel? I’ll take the law into my own hands? Cut your femoral artery?” He lifted the goggles—they swiveled—and wiped his face, drank some water. The air in the van was close and hot and aromatic of sweat and metallic blood and burnt skin.

Collier was once again seized by rage and part of him did want to do just that. Cut the artery, grab the gun, compress the man’s throat until the brain ceased to work.

Then as if tapping his soul with icy anesthetic, he found control. The same way he’d steadied himself at the sight of his

first cadaver in medical school.

*Focus . . .*

Because he had to.

Collier said calmly, “First, do no harm.”

Offenbach’s face registered familiarity. “Hippocratic oath.”

“Part of it. The whole thing’s a page long. Doing no harm is the sound bite. Without sealing these vessels, yes, you’d die. I couldn’t let that happen. Whatever justice is in your future—and I pray there will be—that’s not my issue.”

Offenbach took this in. “How can you reconcile saving someone like me?”

“Let me put it this way: I see a distinction between mind and body. Your mind is reprehensible. Your body is innocent. Like your movie, the bank robbery? Your body’s a hostage.”

“Do no harm.” Offenbach was whispering. For the first time a flicker of emotion appeared in his eyes.

Goggles back on, Collier went to work with the pen once more.

Offenbach said, “Question. Let’s say you’re a doctor in a prison.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m giving you a hypothetical. Okay? Doctor on the prison staff. Did you ever do that?”

“No.”

“There’s a prisoner who’s going to be executed at midnight. It’s ten p.m. He has a heart attack. Would you save him?”

“Of course.”

“Even though he’s going to die anyway?”

“What happens in two hours or two years or fifty is irrelevant.”

“Let’s say this prisoner hurt somebody close to you.”

Collier hesitated, then touched the hot coils to his target.

Offenbach added, “He killed your brother.”

“I wouldn’t be an attending doctor for my brother’s murderer.”

“Hypothetical.”

“The same. I’d save him.”

The killer considered this, seemed to be looking the answer up and down. Then: “You’re on the battlefield. Two wounded men. An enemy soldier—a Taliban—and one of ours. The Taliban just threw a grenade into a barracks and killed a dozen of our soldiers. They’re both going to die if they don’t get help. You’re the only doctor. You can save one or the other. You’d save the American?”

“Of course.”

“But then you *are* doing harm. To the enemy.”

“I’m not actively hurting anyone.”

“But you’re letting him die. You’ve done harm.”

“There’s a distinction. If I do an act that causes pain or death, that’s breaking the oath. If I don’t act when I can and that results in pain or death, I’m breaking the oath. In your hypothetical, I’ve chosen to treat one patient over another. That’s just triage. We do it all the time.”

Offenbach’s eyes narrowed. He seemed skeptically amused. “Ah, here’s another one.”

Collier looked up.

Offenbach wiped sweat once more. “There’s this prosecutor in Illinois. Name’s Quill. Evan Quill.”

Snake had overheard. “He’s an asshole.”

“Wants to put me away forever.” An icy chuckle. “Can’t imagine why . . .”

Collier’s heart ratcheted up a pace as he recalled from the news what Offenbach had done to that poor young woman.

He'd used a razor knife and a torch or cigarette lighter. It had taken her some time to die. Appallingly he'd recorded her death. At one point, she'd begged him to kill her. Collier's jaw tightened with disgust and horror.

*Focus . . .*

"You've been an expert witness for the prosecution at trials? I know doctors do that."

"Sometimes."

"Let's say this Quill . . ." A nod toward Snake. "*Asshole* Quill calls you to the stand because you know something that'll help convict me."

"How could I—"

"Hy-po-thet-i-cal." He sounded like a teacher miffed that a student hadn't been paying attention. "Something that'll convict me. You get up and testify. Isn't that doing me harm?"

"I wouldn't be there as a *doctor*. I'd be a witness."

Another impatient squint.

Collier now glared back. "No. It's an important distinction. See, *you* wouldn't be the patient. That case, the patient is the court system, it's justice itself. If I didn't testify against you, I'd be doing *that* patient harm."

Offenbach stared. "So you're saying that I'm like an infection?" His voice a soft growl.

After a moment Collier answered in an uncertain voice. "Well, I . . . I guess I am."

The killer's glare continued for a moment. Then he broke into laughter. "Love it! I . . . love . . . it! You should've gone to law school, not medicine!"

The doctor gave a smile too, a doubtful one. He turned back to the wound. "The pain, how is it?"

"Hardly anything. That lidocaine. It's good."

"It's also because of where I'm working. There's a different kind of pain there."



“Different?”

“I’m working *inside* your body. There are fewer pain receptors. The pain from surface trauma is more severe.”

“Tell me more.”

“Most of my patients don’t want to talk about pain at a time like this.”

“I’m not like most patients.”

“Won’t argue there,” he said, his eyes briefly on Offenbach’s. “All right. Pain on the outside of your body, an injury, is called somatic. A burn.” Collier offered a nod to his slashed cheek. “A cut. Abrasion. Pain *inside* your body is called visceral. Like from nerve damage.”

“Two types of pain.” His attention focused. “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Three actually. There’s also psychogenic pain.”

“Like you’re imagining it?”

“No, the pain’s real. It just doesn’t come from tissue or nerve damage. It’s caused by depression, anger, fear. Usually it presents as headaches, backaches and stomachaches. And if you’re in pain from an actual trauma, then depression or fear can intensify and prolong it.”

This interested him. “Someone’s hurt and they’re afraid you’re going to hurt them some more, that makes the pain worse?”

“I suppose it could.” Collier touched the pen to the wound several more times. “There are other ways to classify pain. Chronic or acute. Nociceptive or neuropathic.” He looked up. “If I told this to some people, their eyes would glaze over. You . . . you have any medical background?”

“Me? No. I’m just a real estate developer.”

“Real estate?” Collier risked a give-me-a-break scoff. He knew from those same news stories about the horrific torture/murder that Offenbach was a habitual criminal, drug dealer, human trafficker and a remorseless killer. Being a

sociopath, though, wasn't incompatible with intelligence. He clearly wasn't a dockside thug out of a Mafia movie.

The doctor washed some blood from around the wound. "Pain's my specialty. At the hospital, I've got a nickname. The Pain Hunter."

"Really?" Offenbach's brow was furrowed.

"Pain's the most common reason people come into the ER. Bone breaks, burns, gunshot wounds, blunt trauma." He sat back, drank more water. Offenbach drank too. The doctor continued, "Pain is a fascinating phenomenon. It exists to be a messenger—to let us know something's wrong that needs to get fixed. But why doesn't it shut off the minute we *do* fix it? And why, with some visceral pain, does it hurt when there's nothing *to* fix? It's just there, ruining your life. That backache that won't go away. That migraine so bad you hallucinate. These are the questions that I'm trying to answer."

"The Pain Hunter." Offenbach whispered this. "Who's winning? You or the pain?"

"So far, it's pretty much a draw."

"So you have a nemesis too."

"I guess I do." Collier returned to his work. "Something I've been looking into lately. There's a part of the brain that's called the basolateral complex. It handles emotional responses, negative ones mostly."

"Like anger, fear?"

"Exactly. It decides whether a threat is immediate and makes you act automatically, like running from a mugger. Or whether it's a potential threat that needs to be analyzed. A dog up the street that's acting strange. Maybe it's rabid. Maybe it's not. So you debate about taking a different route.

"The basolateral also processes pain. I've been working with geneticists on a way to modify it so that we still have that instant reaction to dangerous stimulus—the handle of a hot pan—but after it's gone, the sensation of pain diminishes right away."

“Basolateral.” Offenbach seemed to memorize the word. As if to read up on it later.

“If a patient presents with really extreme pain—beyond ten on that scale you’ve seen? I’m hoping to find a way to turn it down. Not numb it but have the brain itself actually dial it back. Had a burn patient once, car crash. Third degree, sixty percent of his body. The painkillers just couldn’t keep up. If I’d been able to adjust his basolateral, I could’ve stabilized him.”

“What happened.”

A pause. “He expired.”

Offenbach’s somewhat bleary eyes looked at the doctor closely. “How did you get into pain work?”

Collier tapped the cauterizing tool to the wound again. He wished he had some Vicks VapoRub smeared under his nostrils; the powerful camphor scent covered up such disgusting bodily smells as gangrene and decomposition. He wasn’t going to be sick but he was not as immune to the stench as Snake and Offenbach were.

The killer seemed aware that Collier was not answering. He repeated the question. “Why pain work?”

After a moment: “My father.”

“Following in his footsteps?”

Collier now gave a laugh, a harsh one. “No, following Sam-Henry is the last thing I’d want to do.”

“That was your father?”

A nod. “He hyphenated his first name. Not legally changed. He just called himself that. And made everybody else do it too.”

“Never heard of that.”

“Who has? He thought it made him sound important.”

“Was he?”

Collier took a blue cloth and wiped his own brow. “No. My father did two things. Ran a car and truck parts company. And his second? He beat my mother. He wasn’t good at the first one but he was really skilled at the second.”

“You got smacked too?”

“Until I was face-to-face with him—six feet. At age fifteen.”

“Yeah, I learned early, to stop shit, you give back shit.”

“He was afraid of me. But my mother . . . If I wasn’t home, he kept on her. One night he pushed her, she fell and hurt her back. The pain never went away. Doped up the rest of her life. Which wasn’t long. Liver. She and Dad had at least one thing in common. So pain became my specialty.”

Offenbach asked, “And your father? Is he still alive?”

“Died in a boating accident a year after she was gone. And yours? You have to live with any crap growing up?”

The man’s head tilted back. After a moment he said, “He didn’t hit. What he did to us, my mother and brother and me, it was psychological. Ground us down. We were never good enough. Sarcasm, insults. A bully.” He gave a nod of acknowledging Collier’s earlier allusion. “A *drunk* bully. When I hit eighteen I couldn’t take it anymore. Here’s what happened. See, he was connected.”

“*The Sopranos.*”

Offenbach scoffed. “Ah, the show didn’t come close. I worked for a crew too. One day I’m in Cicero dropping off numbers winnings and I see him. Going into a motel with a woman. We knew he was cheating. But this was Hank Doyle’s wife.” Offenbach absently touched the cut on his face. “He was a capo in one of the South Side crews. Crazy guy. Dead crazy.”

“What happened?”

“That was before phones that took pictures but I bought a camera in a drugstore and waited for them to leave. If I’d showed the shots to Doyle, my father would be in the bottom

of Lake Michigan an hour after. Dad thought it was about scaring him into being faithful. Not at all. Bullshit. I wanted something.”

“You blackmailed him.”

“Did indeed.” Offenbach’s face flipped suddenly to beaming pride.

*Sociopath . . .*

“Twenty-five K. A lot at the time. He had to borrow it to pay me. Tough luck, Dad. The money got me started on my empire.”

“Real estate.”

Another manic, edgy laugh.

Collier asked, “And what happened to him?”

“Moved out west, got Jesus and remarried.” He shifted slightly, the expression on his face changing. It was clear he suddenly was tired of talking about family. “Let me ask you another question.”

A nod.

“You ever killed a patient?”



Deputy Peter Jacobson was twenty feet from the black van.

He heard the occasional snap of a branch, the shuffle of leaves. The wind was strong and playful and persistent tonight. It had a Halloween smell, decaying leaves, chill, despite the spring season.

Looking around, the deputy could see no one nearby; the darkness was as dense as the underbrush.

The only windows were those in the front doors and the windshield—the back ones were painted over. As he got closer, voices were evident from inside. He wondered why

Offenbach had wanted to stop. Lying low maybe, until the search slowed down.

Maybe meeting somebody here.

Looking closely at the side of the van . . . Yes, signage was a plastic sheet. He pried up the corner. It was not glued on but was magnetic. Damn smart. Underneath the false sign was the logo that had been spotted at the shootout in the Falls. A florist. The logo that every other cop in Wisconsin was looking for.

Jacobson lifted his phone and through Safari looked up a local news station. It took only seconds to find a picture of Dr. Stuart Collier, the man Offenbach had kidnapped. He memorized the features.

He looked down at the assault rifle, aware that he'd never fired one in the line of duty. And he'd only been on the range a few times but he recalled the recoil, the urge of the muzzle to climb, the deafening explosions.

All right.

It's time.

A bullet in the chamber and twenty-nine right behind it. He double-checked that it was on full auto, then flicked the safety off.

Holding the gun by its pistol grip in his right hand, he walked to the back of the van and bent down and picked up a rock, about the size of an orange.

Inhale, exhale . . .

You ready?

The doctor's face.

Offenbach's face.

With his left hand he tossed the rock over the van to the ground beyond. It landed ten feet in front of the vehicle with a thud.

No reaction from inside.

He tried again with a second rock, smaller. This hit the van roof just above the driver's seat.

There was a startled voice from inside. And someone did what he'd been hoping for—unlocked the doors, to step out and see what the noise was.

Peter Jacobson ripped open one of the back doors with his left hand, raising the gun with his right.

But as his hand tightened around the pistol grip to lift the heavy weapon, one digit that also compressed was his index finger—which was curled around the trigger.

With a deafening chain-saw roar, a dozen slugs streaked inside before he gasped in horror and let go.

“Oh, Jesus. No!”

He stared in shock. What . . . what was this?

No Dr. Collier.

No Paul Offenbach.

It was a family.

A husband and wife, two teenage children, a boy and girl. All with black hair, they were Latino in appearance and wearing casual clothing.

He could only stare at the wife and the son, both lying motionless on the floor. The other two were sitting back, cowering, hands held high. They were shouting. Half deafened, he couldn't make out their words.

How stupid!

Briefly he thought: The lie about the poker tournament, the gambling, the addiction, and now *this* . . . just put a bullet in your own goddamn head.

Then he saw the two on the floor stir.

Please, I'll do anything you ask of me, Lord . . .

He flicked the M4's safety back on.

The mother and her skinny teenage boy rose and held their hands up too. The father's face turned from dread to a

frown of confusion. Anger would not be far behind.

Even in his own shock, Jacobson said to himself: Don't admit anything. Don't apologize.

And don't assume they're as innocent as they look.

He gazed about him quickly. No one else was in the field.

Back to the family.

"Is anybody hurt?"

No one was.

"Come on out." They climbed to the ground, the mother with her arms around the children. They stood behind the father, huddled together. There were red stains on the boy's shirt.

Christ . . .

Then the deputy saw what it was.

Ketchup.

They'd been eating dinner. Burger King.

The bullets had gone high, mostly into the roof. Some had penetrated the windshield. Who knew where they had ended up. Were there houses, shops, restaurants within range?

"ID. Identification." He set the rifle at his feet. He could use his sidearm if he needed to. Though the likelihood that these people were wholly innocent was skyrocketing.

The father handed over his license. "Why you do that? Why you shoot at us?"

Don't say it was an accident. Don't say anything.

Jacobson took another look around, verifying that they were alone and Paul Offenbach and his thugs weren't sneaking up and this wasn't some kind of weird trap—a thought so ridiculous he forgot it completely three seconds later.

Staring at the man's license held in trembling hands, he understood what had happened. Offenbach and his men had switched to a second vehicle probably fifteen minutes after speeding away from the shootout in the Falls.



Offenbach had been damn smart about the trick. He'd made sure that the van used in the shootout had a distinctive logo—a big bouquet of flowers. That was the vehicle the police were looking for. Not this one, emblazoned with an image of a cartoon face on a wrench and a promise of the lowest prices in the area for YOUR EVERY PLUMBING NEED. FROM DRIPS TO FLOODS.

And he was doubly smart by making sure the color of the paint and the poster were just a hair different. So a thoughtful cop, like Pete Jacobson, might think, Nice try but I'm onto you.

And would follow them.

Giving the killer, in a very different vehicle and headed in a different direction, an uncatchable lead.

Okay, he'd screwed up but he forced himself back to thinking like a law enforcer. "This van was involved in a crime today."

"We didn't do anything!"

The wife furrowed her brow and was gesturing madly with her hands. "Why you shoot at us? My children! You could kill them! Why you shoot?"

And now that the confusion was gone came the burn within them. Both husband and wife. He knew from his job that anger was exponentially greater among parents when their children were imperiled.

But now there were questions *he* needed answered. He repeated, "It was involved in a crime. How did you come to have it?"

"I do landscape and carting. I was in Eddleston, trenching, and this man came up."

"What was his name?"

"No name. He say he needed a van driven to Marsden. He'd pay me. I was supposed to leave it in a garage there for somebody who was buying it. He told me where it was and where he left the keys. I picked it up and decided we all go

there, spend the night. There's that water park there. For the kids. Take the bus back."

"Describe this man."

"Anglo. Short, heavy. Dark hair."

Matching one of Offenbach's men; the ski mask had not covered his head entirely.

"What was he driving?"

"Motorcycle."

"You see the plate?"

"They so small. No. And who looks anyway?"

Which is why perps often used cycles.

"How much did he pay you?"

A shrug. It meant a lot.

"Didn't it seem funny to you, what he was asking?"

Another shrug. So, a *very* lot.

"Did he say anything about where he was going?"

"No."

Of course not. Why would he?

Marsden was east. Offenbach would know somebody would make the van eventually and learn that the driver was headed in that direction.

Which meant that the killer definitely *wasn't* going that way.

His hands shaking a bit less, he picked his microphone off the shoulder mount, turned the volume up and radioed in the man's name and driver's license number.

Soon the answer came back: Clean. No record. And he was a citizen.

"I have that van involved in the shootout in Upper Falls this afternoon."

A pause. "Roger, one four two. Is suspect in custody?"

Grimacing, he replied, “Negative. He switched vehicles. I’ll need a CS team here. A mile south of 99 on Southern Lake.”

“Roger, one four two.”

“And a supervisor. There was a firearm discharge.”

Another of those damn thick pauses. “Roger. You want a bus?”

“Negative. No injuries. And tell the task force I don’t think Offenbach’s going east.”

“K.”

They ended the call. Peter Jacobson carefully hefted the stubby black assault rifle and dropped the mag, then ejected the chambered round. He bent down and collected it. He put the weapon and ammo in the trunk, closed it.

The family was huddled together. Cell phone calls were being made as all four regarded him darkly.

Jacobson leaned against the van and lit a forbidden-on-duty cigarette, which took a few tries, given the wind—and his trembling hand.

Luck, my ass.



“Killed a patient?” Collier asked Offenbach, his face distorted to a frown. “Of course not.”

Again the stern teacher, the man said, “Stu, deception isn’t just lying. It can be omission too.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I’ve been interrogated by some of the best cops in the business. I know what they’re looking for. Body language. Eyes, posture, voice. You didn’t tell me the whole truth.”

Collier sat back, tilted the goggles up.

Offenbach continued, “That burn patient? You told me he expired. That part was true. Now, what kills you with bad burns?”

Collier looked down at the wound. Slowly: “Shock, sepsis, blood loss.”

“What was his name?”

“Carl.”

“How old?”

“Twenty.”

“You said a crash. What happened?”

“Hydroplaned. Hit a bridge support. Tore open a fuel line. He was trapped. Took them a while to get him out. Had to use all sorts of tools, saws, jacks, Jaws of Life. There were—”

“‘Hydroplaned’ would’ve done, Stu. You’re giving me a laundry list. That’s what people do when they want to avoid a subject.”

Silence descended between the men.

“What kills patients in burn cases?” Collier echoed softly. “Shock, sepsis, blood loss . . . and an overdose of propofol.”

He finished the bottle of water. “The Hippocratic oath? The do-no-harm is only part of it.”

Offenbach offered, “The sound bite.”

“The other sections? One is ‘do good.’ Carl would’ve had no life to speak of. Blind. Couldn’t ever walk. He’d lost his left arm. And the pain.”

“Somatic.”

“Sometimes you have to think about the bigger harm. The sepsis and shock might have killed him eventually. But I didn’t want him waking up to what he’d have to look forward to. The horror. The agony. I marked in his chart: ‘Morphine ineffective. Adding propofol.’ And that was it. I was doing good.”

The killer whispered, “It wasn’t the first time, was it?”

Collier shifted. His legs had started to ache from being in the same position for so long. He stretched them out in front of him. The relief was immediate and he realized how uncomfortable he'd been.

*Pain . . .*

"You have to understand, Paul, sometimes you'd see a patient . . . Near the end. Their bodies're gone, their dignity, their minds."

"How many?"

Another hesitation. "Thirteen."

"You know the exact number."

Collier gave a bitter laugh. "Of course I do. Don't you know how many people you've murdered?"

"No. But it's about the same." Offenbach grew thoughtful. "You ever tell anybody, Stu? You have a wife." He glanced at Collier's left hand, the ring.

So did the doctor, who, as he stared at the gold band, said in a whisper, "I did. She passed away."

"And you never told her."

"No."

"Anyone?"

"It *is* murder, you know." Collier examined the wound, then removed the goggles altogether. He shut the cauterizer off and set it aside. He poured distilled water into a pan and cleaned the wound with soap and rinsed the site.

"What did you feel?" Offenbach asked.

"Feel? I knew it was wrong—intellectually, I mean. But I also felt it was the right thing to do. No doubt in my mind."

The killer nodded. "The right thing, sure. Same for me."

"You?" Collier's head eased back, his expression suggesting he was trying to understand what the man had just said. "Taking a life is the *right* thing?"

“Of course. I’m the hero of *my* world, Stu. I take a life because it’s the right thing for *me* to do. What’s right for me may be the opposite of what’s right for you, but that doesn’t mean they both aren’t valid.” He frowned. “But I’m not talking about that.” His eyes peered into Collier’s. “What did you *feel*? In your gut?”

“Feel?” The doctor snatched a blue cloth tray cover and wiped his forehead. “Relieved.” He cleared his throat. “That I wouldn’t have to worry about them anymore. That was selfish. But I felt it anyway.”

Again, what might have been a smile arose in the otherwise emotionless face. “Wasn’t there anything else, Stu?”

Collier inhaled deeply, now immune to the scent of burnt flesh. “I felt powerful.” He’d spoken so softly that Offenbach hadn’t heard. He frowned and shook his head.

The doctor repeated, “I felt powerful.”

A broad smile now bloomed on the killer’s face. “There’s nothing like it, is there? Hunters feel it. Soldiers feel it. You and I feel it. We all have different reasons to end a life. But the final result’s the same. Someone is dead because of us. And *we* feel just a little more alive.” Offenbach drank from his water bottle.

“I’d tell myself I wouldn’t do it again. But it’s . . .”

When the doctor didn’t finish, Offenbach said, “Addictive.”

Collier looked into those dots of eyes, then away, without speaking. He placed a dressing on the wound and taped it in place.

“I want to ask you something else, Stu.”

A nod.

“Your father.”

“Yes?”

“That boating accident. What happened?”

“We were fishing, Minnesota. Our boat got caught on a sunken tree. He tried to get us free and fell in. He hit his head. Drowned before I could get to him.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Just us.”

“I see.” Offenbach looked at the doctor for a long moment. Then down to the wound. “We done here?”

“A few minutes. Just need to see about the infection.”

“No more cutting or burning?”

“No.”

The man called to Snake, “Get him back in here. We have to move.”

Snake tapped the horn and a moment later the driver got into the van and started the engine. He wrinkled his nose and rolled down the window.

Soon they were back on Route 99, speeding east once more, being guided to the original destination by the GPS.

“How long?” Offenbach asked the driver.

“Hour, eleven minutes.”

The half-hearted—and eerie—smile reappeared. Offenbach said to Collier, “You used to say we’ll be there in about an hour. Now, it’s specific. A digital world. The chips run your life down to the second . . . More stressful, don’t you think?”

The doctor said, “We traded up, to precision. And what did we get for it? More worry.”

“Yessir, yessir.”

As if from habit, Collier ordered the instruments and medicine on the blanket beside the stretcher. He replaced what he’d taken from the EMT box. He pulled off the lab coat, folded it and set it on the tray.

There was silence between the men.

The van slowed as it climbed a hill. The engine strained.

Collier rose and, stooped over, made his way to the pack of water bottles. He opened another one. He drank several gulps. “I’m not getting out of this alive, am I?”

Offenbach studied the bandage on his leg. Then he looked up and lifted his arms, palms up. “It’s the way I am, Stu. You can’t do harm. I can’t stop myself from doing it. You thought that saving my life, I’d change my mind?”

“No, all I was thinking was mechanics: the cautery, the infection, the pain management. Nothing more than that. I really do believe in the oath.”

“What I’ll say is, it’ll be fast. Not like what I’d usually do.”

“No pain, then.”

“No pain.”

Eyes on the GPS map, Snake said, “There’s a lake a half mile up the road. A big one.”

What was the plan? Shoot him, then stuff rocks into his pockets? Of course they’d done this before and would have the routine down. Just like a surgeon’s procedures.

Offenbach reached underneath him and withdrew the pistol.

Each man held the other’s eyes.

The killer lifted the gun. With the muzzle halfway to its target, his lips tightened and he paused.

Which was when Stuart Collier shoved open the rear door and, as Offenbach aimed and pulled the trigger, leapt out into the dark, windswept evening.



The van skidded onto the shoulder.

By the time it stopped, Collier was already on his feet and hobbling fast into a field of tall grass, zipping up his navy-blue



windbreaker to make himself less visible.

He heard the punchy cracks of gunshots but with the foliage and only a crescent of a moon for illumination, the shooter wouldn't have a target. He heard no hiss of bullets nearby—if in fact bullets hissed when they passed.

Collier stumbled as far as he could before the pain in his ankle took over and brought him to a stop. He sank down into the tall beige grass and peered back the way he had come.

One of the men held a flashlight—Snake, he believed—whose beam he played over the ground and then aimed toward the endless fields and forest lining this side of the highway. Collier had to duck only one time to avoid the beam.

Yes, Snake was the one with the flashlight. He focused it on a spot where the doctor had entered the field.

They started after him, following the trail of bent grass he'd just left.

In three minutes they'd be on him.

Collier extracted from his windbreaker pocket a triangular shard of ceramic about four inches long and ending in a point. The edges were sharp as knives. It was two-tone: glossy black and flesh colored.

He now inhaled deeply and, with one of the broken edges, cut through a vein on the back of his left hand. For as long as he dared, he let the crimson flow trickle onto the ground and flicked it onto the grass around him. He then sandwiched his hand in his right armpit and squeezed to stanch the ooze and to keep from leaving a blood trail. Keeping low, he made his way toward the forest behind him. He entered and took cover behind a mass of ivy being strangled by a parasitic vine.

The driver and Snake followed the trail to the clearing Collier had just decorated with his blood. The somber man shone the light on the ground. It was clear they'd seen the blood and would be wondering if Offenbach had delivered a fatal wound with his shot.

They looked around them.

Should they continue after him or, assuming he'd be dead soon, get back on the road?

They chose to continue the hunt.

Collier sighed.

Guns in their hands, they pushed forward. There was no blood to follow, and here the ground was mostly leaves and brush—no bent grass to give away his route.

But they were getting closer. He gripped the shard like a knife.

Thirty feet away.

Twenty . . .

Then they both froze.

Collier heard the sound too.

It was the faint wail of a siren, coming from the east. Seconds later a pulse of red and blue lights shone on the crest of the hill the van had been laboring up.

The men turned and sprinted back to the road. Doors slammed. The vehicle pulled away from the shoulder, accelerating fast. The police car shot over the hill, just as the van disappeared from sight in the opposite direction.

The squad car kept going.

Apparently its mission did not involve Snake's gunshots.

At an intersection, about two hundred yards west, the cruiser skidded left and continued its urgent transit. Collier squinted as he gazed into the distance. There were more flashing lights from other emergency vehicles parked a mile or so away. They would be on Southern Lake Road, the highway that led to Marsden.

An accident maybe. A DUI stop?

Whatever it was, the incident had just saved his life.

He assessed his injuries: Damaged rotator cuff. A sprained metacarpal—left ring finger, ironically one of the two Offenbach had injured in the fight with his nemesis. There

were bad abrasions on his forehead and palms from asphalt burn. Some splinters and pieces of glass under the skin. Infection risk there but he'd get them cleaned soon enough. The twisted ankle. Sprained, not broken. The shoulder was the only harm that would likely require surgery. Steroids probably wouldn't be enough.

And pain everywhere.

Somatic and visceral . . .

But a small price to pay for escape.

From the minute he'd been kidnapped, Stuart Collier had begun formulating a plan to save himself, using the weapons he had at his disposal.

Not guns and knives.

Words.

The main instruments of his medical practice.

Stuart Collier was indeed a physician, published and acclaimed in his field. But he was not an ER doctor or pain specialist. He hadn't physically examined a patient or treated an injury in twenty years, and that had been during his rounds as an intern.

Collier was a psychiatrist.

No other specialty had interested him, and his sizeable practice in Upper Falls was devoted to the treatment of depression and anxiety, maladies he considered as destructive to human beings as cancer and heart disease (and which could lead to the psychogenic pain Offenbach had seemed so delighted to learn of).

In considering how to save himself from Offenbach, he had thought of a psychiatric technique he was quite familiar with: transference. (Thank you, Sigmund Freud.)

In this form of treatment, the patient redirects emotions—good and bad—from past and present real-life trauma to the therapist, who then sees firsthand the genesis of the patient's troubles and how he or she copes with them. A similar process

occurs from the other direction—countertransference—as the therapist aims his emotions at the patient.

A bond is formed between them, and from that bond comes healing.

A bond that might, just might, mean that Paul Offenbach would let his treating physician go free.

Collier couldn't create true transference—it was a long-term process—but an abbreviated version of it might be possible, he figured. To make it work he would need at least an hour or so.

How to buy that time?

A simple solution occurred to him: he lied.

He offered a dire prognosis—that Offenbach would soon die from the gunshot—unless Collier treated him. Certain medicines and instruments were necessary for that.

The reality? The bullet wound was minor. It had caused some muscle damage and severed a handful of small vessels. The actual treatment had taken all of sixty seconds: pouring into the wound the white powder, which was not an antibiotic as he'd told Offenbach but Celox, a highly effective coagulant.

The blood loss stopped, the pain controlled, Collier would spend an hour or so performing the pointless cautery, an antiquated technique used primarily for treating nosebleeds.

He'd bought time. Now, how to conjure transference?

It required mutual connections between the two. What did he know about Paul Offenbach?

Well, clearly the man loved inflicting pain; Collier recalled the news story about his torturing and killing a police officer a month ago in northern Illinois.

So Dr. Stuart Collier, MD, ABPN, had become the Pain Hunter, which had instantly snagged the man's interest. He had seduced him further with his description of the basolateral complex—the center of pain in the body. Everything he'd said to Offenbach was accurate, though he couldn't have told him much more, since his only familiarity with the subject came

from an article in *Popular Science* magazine he'd read on a family vacation to Florida.

Pain emerged as a bond between them.

What else could he use to shore up the bond? Collier had picked a topic that was the backbone of mental health: family.

Fathers, in particular.

Collier had done considerable improv in drafting the tale of a dreadful childhood, dominated by a drunk, brutal father (his own was very much alive, a renowned neurosurgeon and a loving family man).

Pain and father issues solidified their link.

But Collier wanted one last fundamental interest to seal the transference between doctor and patient.

And what better than the subject of death?

Collier had created the fictional Carl, a driver badly burned in a car crash, and left a hint or two that he might have put the man out of his misery. Offenbach snagged the bait and it didn't take long for him to draw out the doctor's confession of a body count totaling a baker's dozen. And a further confession—at Offenbach's thoughtful prompting—that the doctor felt some kind of psychic power when taking those lives. A thought as nonsensical as it was horrific.

Then a grace note: Collier let linger the idea he might actually have murdered his own father, a crime not intended to release someone from pain but simply to satisfy the doctor's own dark wish for revenge on the abusive man.

Was the micro-transference enough for Offenbach to let him go?

Collier had decided that it wasn't. What he'd learned was that Offenbach was a narcissistic sociopath for whom killing was simply the "right thing to do."

But perhaps the connection might make Offenbach hesitate just a second or so before pulling the trigger. Which would give the doctor a chance to leap from the van when it slowed for a curve or on a hill.

He'd moved to the back for a bottle of water. And waited for his chance.

Finally it had arrived. He'd caught Offenbach's eye and the big silver gun slowed as the man had started to aim.

A matter of seconds.

But enough.

He had hit the asphalt just as the bullet streaked over his head.

Now, Stuart Collier tested his leg.

Not great but it could have been much worse. He found a branch, about six feet long. It would work as an improvised crutch. He hobbled toward the highway.

At last he made it to the shoulder of Route 99.

There was no way he could make it back to the last cluster of civilization they'd passed or to the cluster of flashing emergency vehicle lights. He'd have to wait for a Good Samaritan.

And one that was coming from the *west*—the opposite direction of where the trio was heading. Collier doubted Offenbach and the others would return. The police cruiser would have scared them off and they'd be content that he was bleeding to death; the men would continue east to safety. But he wouldn't take the chance.

The night was veiled with near complete blackness, the moon taken by a huge sickle of cloud. Wind swayed the grass and hissed through leaf-free branches. There was no human-made illumination in the vast dome around him, other than the festive pulsing of police lights on Southern Lake Road.

Suddenly Stuart Collier dropped the branch, fell to his knees and sobbed, his breath coming fast as he took great gulps of damp, grass-scented air. At last the abject horror in his soul he'd struggled so hard to keep hidden behind the calm facade—focus, focus!—burst out and gripped his soul. Never had anything in his life been so difficult.

After some minutes he gathered himself, wiped the tears and rose.

He thought about them now, Eleanor and Chloe.

And wondered how they were doing.

He knew they had survived the incident; the news story about the breakout the men had listened to in the van reported only one fatality—a policewoman from Illinois.

Though there'd be psychic damage. He pictured the sidewalk yet again, for the dozenth time that evening: the blood from the torn neck of the officer flowing onto Eleanor's blonde hair, which was spread out around her face as she lay stunned. Heard Chloe screaming at the man who was kidnapping her father. The do-no-harm story he'd told Offenbach was certainly true; like all doctors, Collier embraced the oath. But what the killer didn't know, of course, was that it was not Offenbach, but his family he was intent on not harming. He would not leave his wife a widow and his daughter fatherless.

His sole mission this evening had been to return to them.

He was thinking once more of the poor police officer who died when he noted lights from an approaching vehicle, heading from the Falls, west.

Gripping his Moses staff once more, he moved to the highway.

If the driver wouldn't take him to get help, at least Collier could borrow a cell phone. He'd have to report Offenbach's location.

The approaching car slowed. The woman behind the wheel, visible only in silhouette as he squinted into the beams, tilted her head in surprise, understandable given his condition.

Dr. Stuart Collier sighed, expecting her to accelerate away.

Who got involved nowadays?

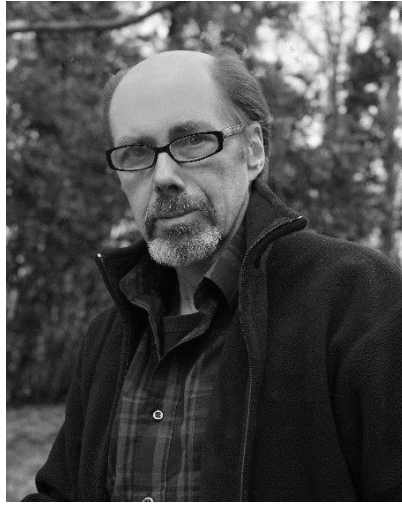
But she didn't. She braked to a stop.

The window came down.

He limped slowly forward.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Jeffery Deaver is the *New York Times* bestselling author of forty-five novels and eighty short stories. His books are sold in 150 countries; have been translated into twenty-five languages; and have received or been short-listed for dozens of awards, including the Edgar, Anthony and Shamus.