

SPARROW FALLS

By Christopher Bunn

The cell phone rang in Flavin's pocket. He ignored it. Rain fell on his umbrella and dripped off the edge. He stared down at the gravestone, not really seeing the black marble. Instead, he saw his wife's face. He knew her face when she had been a little girl, when they had met in the first grade. And he knew her face all the way through its maturations and refinements, from six years old until the age of thirty-three.

Thirty-three, he thought dully. You would have been thirty-four today, Lynn. I figured we'd have another forty years at least. Happy birthday.

Thank you. You always were good about remembering.

Her voice seemed to whisper in the air. Startled, he turned around, almost sure for a moment that she'd be standing behind him. No one was there. The cemetery stretched away in endless rows of gravestones and grass, blurred in the falling rain and shadowed by the darkness of the brooding sky. He was alone.

Flavin placed the flowers on the gravestone. He walked away, his boots squelching in the mud. The cell phone rang again, right after he shut the door of his truck. The noise was loud in the confines of the cab. He recognized the number on the screen. He turned off the phone. Rain drummed on the roof. He stared blankly out the windshield for several minutes.

Time only goes forward, her voice whispered. I'm sorry.

Reluctantly, he started the engine.

The bar was empty when Flavin walked in except for an old man huddled over his glass at the end of the counter. The after-work crowd wouldn't be in for another hour. He sat down. The place smelled of stale beer and greasy food.

"Scotch," he said to the bartender. The bartender came back with a glass and a bowl of nuts. He drank, felt the whiskey burn down his throat with a sensation that almost felt like pain, a welcome sort of hurt, but even that faded quickly away into nothing. The bartender refilled his glass without a word. He was on his third shot when someone sat down on the stool next to him. The person cleared his throat.

"Flavin."

He ignored the voice and concentrated on the taste of the whiskey. He didn't like it. He never had. People always said the taste will grow on you. Just give it some time. They were wrong. They were wrong about most things. The taste never grew on him. It still tasted like cleaning fluid. But it helped. It helped make things disappear.

"Flavin."

"Go away," he said, not bothering to look up from his glass. He knew the voice. He knew it as well as his own voice. Vernon. His old boss at the agency.

"You never answer your phone," said Vernon.

"No one ever calls," said Flavin.

He took another drink. Maybe if he got drunk, Vernon would disappear. But he knew that wouldn't happen. The old man was a persistent bastard. Besides, things always reappeared in the morning. Things came back into focus. He couldn't hide in the bottom of a bottle. But he could sure try.

“I’ve got a job for you,” said Vernon. “Nothing too serious, but I need it kept quiet and off the books. A favor for an old friend of mine. It would probably only take a couple days at most. Maybe a week.”

“No.”

Vernon sighed. “Look, Flavin. You haven’t paid your rent in months. Your utilities were shut off in December. You’re gonna be out on the streets before you know it. Tell you what, you do this job for me and I’ll take care of your rent, pay off your utilities, plus you’ll have some money in the bank. Lynn would’ve wanted it for you.”

Flavin looked at him for the first time.

“You don’t know what Lynn would’ve wanted.”

“Maybe you’re right,” snapped the older man, “but I know she wouldn’t want you like this. Whisky at three in the afternoon! What are you trying to do, drink yourself to death?”

Flavin glared at him. When he spoke, his voice was rough.

“What do you want?”

“Like I said, it’s for an old friend of mine. We were in the army together, a long time ago. Before your time. I need it off my books, though, due to--well, you know how the government can get about some things.”

“I don’t care about that. Just tell me what the job is.”

The bar was still empty except for the old man in the far corner. The bartender brought Flavin another whiskey. Vernon was silent until the man moved away. Flavin drank, feeling the burn slide down his throat, willing that it would numb everything else.

“I need you to investigate a business in the city,” said Vernon. He paused and looked down at the top of the bar, frowning as if he saw something in the polished wood he didn’t like. “It’s in the Sparrow Falls neighborhood. A medical clinic. It caters to a fairly wealthy clientele. The place specializes in maternity issues. Prevention. In-vitro fertilization. Procedures like that. There’s a certain amount of by-product generated by the clinic. Pretty valuable stuff, from what I can tell. It’s sold to a company in Sweden. A lot of the material’s been going missing lately. Since ten months ago. The buyer’s unhappy and that makes my old friend unhappy. One of his companies brokers the foreign contracts.”

“What’s the by-product?”

Vernon wouldn’t meet his eye. “Human tissue.”

The words drifted through Flavin’s mind without disturbing the numbness inside. Perhaps if he hadn’t been drinking, he would’ve considered what Vernon had just said more carefully. The implications. What it really meant. But he didn’t care. Not now. The glass was hard and cold in his hand. That was more real. That was more important than what Vernon had just said.

“So,” said the old man. “Will you take the job?”

Flavin looked at him, shrugged, and then nodded.

The apartment was cold and dark when Flavin got home. He flicked a switch without thinking, but the electricity was dead. He kicked his shoes off, pulled a blanket over him, and fell asleep. Like every night, he dreamed of Lynn. She was saying something to him, something important, her hand in his, but her touch faded when he woke up.

Flavin drove into the city that morning. The case file Vernon had given him sat on the seat next to him. It was raining again, and the streets and buildings blurred into grey punctuated by blooming spots of green and yellow and red traffic lights.

You seriously would take a job like this?

“It’s a job,” he said, forcing himself to not glance over. He knew no one would be there if he looked. He knew he was only talking to himself. Talking to his memories. That was the only explanation, but he imagined Lynn sitting there, her arm resting on the back of the seat, her fingers inches away from his shoulder.

I never liked Vernon. You know that.

“I know,” he muttered, and then he looked over. He couldn’t help it. But no one was there. He was alone in the truck.

The Sparrow Falls area was west of the financial district. It had been its own town years ago, but had been swallowed up, like so many other places, by the relentless advance of the city. Now it was just a momentary pause in the canyons of steel and glass high-rises, an expensive oasis of quiet residences set back behind their perfectly manicured lawns, hidden by tall trees, sculpted hedges and high stone walls. As an additional defense, a boundary of upscale businesses served to delineate the neighborhood from the rest of the city.

Flavin parked his truck against the curb across the street and halfway down the block from the clinic. He wanted to get a feel for the place. He wanted a mental snapshot of it to file away inside his mind. Without seeing it, the clinic was just words on paper. The building rose up through the rain, dim and slightly blurred through the windshield. It was a large stucco affair with attractive landscaping. The place exuded

respectability and decorum. A sign over the front door read Sparrow Falls Medical Group. Flavin watched for a while as cars pulled into the parking lot beside the clinic and people hurried through the rain to the front door. He opened the case file and began to read. From time to time, he glanced up to look at the clinic. Rain streaked down the windshield. The whole world seemed blurred, grey and vague and out of focus. Sort of like the case file.

The file was not thick. Records of the seven employees – complete with what looked like surveillance photos, printouts of patient statistics for the past year, and a copy of the contract with Nord-Biovica, a biotech firm based in Stockholm. The file also contained a letter from a Mr. Henrik Amdahl, the CEO of Nord-Biovica. It was written in stilted and precise English, and pointed out that the Westover Corporation had failed to send shipments from their Sparrow Falls facility for the months of August through November. This oversight was severely hampering his company's research. Did the Westover Corporation desire Nord-Biovica to file a breach of contract suit in court? Nord-Biovica was some sort of medical research firm.

After about half an hour, he finished reading. It was still raining. The parking lot at the clinic had seven cars parked in it. As he watched, a sedan pulled up to the entrance. Two figures got out and hurried through the front doors. Two women, but he wasn't entirely sure. The rain blurred everything. He started the truck and drove away.

Flavin read through the file again in his apartment. And then again. He read it six times, slower and slower each time through. He studied the employee photos, examining the different faces for any hints. There was something about the photos that made him uneasy, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Each employee file had a

headshot attached to it, presumably taken at the time of employment. All the other photos were surveillance photos taken during the last five or six months.

The electricity and heat were back on in his apartment, but he did not think much of that. He concentrated on the file. It was proving to be a welcome diversion. His mind did not have to think about anything else.

He called Vernon's office. The front desk immediately put him through.

"I'm going to need a few things," he said.

"Anything," said Vernon.

He told him, listing the items in his quiet monotone.

"Got it," said Vernon, when Flavin subsided into silence. "The document boys'll work on this through the night. I'll messenger a package over to you no later than tomorrow afternoon. Down payment on your fee too. What do you think of the clinic? Any initial thoughts?"

"No," said Flavin, and he hung up before Vernon could say anything else.

The package arrived the next day, right before lunch. He inspected the contents carefully. A convincingly tarnished badge for Thomas J. Avery of the Internal Revenue Service. Business cards for the same Avery. A driver's license and IRS identification card in the same name, but with Flavin's face staring out from the photos. A briefcase full of government forms, various notes and papers related to past audits of businesses in the area. A thousand dollars in twenties, tens and fives. And, of course, a Glock with two spare magazines.

He almost hadn't asked for the gun, but the case file bothered him. There was something about it, something odd and undefinable that worried away in the back of his

mind. He was pretty sure it had something to do with the employee records, but he couldn't put his finger on it. And when a case worried him and he didn't know why, then it was best to prepared for everything and anything.

Flavin broke the gun down, his hands moving quickly and surely, his gaze unfocused and not even really seeing the parts. He didn't need to. The gun lay disassembled on the table before him. Rain tapped on the window in a sudden onslaught. Everything past the glass was obscured behind the grey veil of raindrops. But the view would've been the same to him on a sunny day. He didn't see much anymore. Not since Lynn had gone. He didn't want to.

You must keep seeing, whispered her voice inside his mind. *You must.*

No, I don't.

Don't give up.

Why not? It doesn't mean anything anymore.

Flavin wasn't sure if he had spoken the words out loud.

Nonsense.

He almost smiled at that, almost certain he could hear the irritated snap in her tone, that familiar exasperation of hers when she had run out of patience with his stubbornness.

Nonsense. Meaning has nothing to do with what we think.

Moving slower now, his hands reassembled the gun. Each part had its place. He stared down at it when he was finished. Some things were easy to put back together. Other things got broken too badly. It wasn't even worth the effort with them. Some times it was best to just let them fade away into nothing.

Flavin took a shower, shaved, and put on a dark grey suit. The man in the mirror stared back at him. The face was gaunt and expressionless. There was nothing behind the eyes except a weary sort of boredom. Perfect for a government bureaucrat.

He packed his briefcase and drove into the city.

“May I help you, sir?” The receptionist at the front desk of the Sparrow Falls Medical Group took the card he offered her. “You’ll want to speak with Ms. Reilly. One moment, please.” She picked up the phone and dialed. “Ms. Reilly? A Mr. Thomas Avery from the IRS to see you...thank you...if you would take a seat, sir, she’ll be with you shortly.”

Flavin sat down.

The front office was tastefully decorated in soothing green and blue pastels. It didn’t soothe him, but perhaps it worked on expectant mothers or women wanting to be mothers or whatever kind of person came to a place like this.

A door opened across the room. A woman approached him. She had black hair pulled back severely from her face in a bun, but that did nothing to obscure the fact that she was remarkably pretty.

“Mr. Avery? How do you?” She shook his hand. Her grip was cold and firm. “My name is Julia Reilly. I’m the clinic administrator. Please come this way.”

Her voice was placid. It had a faint musical tinge in it, a foreign touch that he could not place. She looked eastern European to him, perhaps from one of the Slavic countries with her coloring and the high cheekbones and the slight slant of her eyes. The only trouble was, her accent and face didn’t match up. Flavin knew all the accents of Europe. He knew them like the sound of his own voice, for he had spent many years

working in the shadows across the continent. Back when he had still been with the government. He listened carefully to her voice, wondering. Something stirred uneasily on the edge his mind.

Flavin followed Julia Reilly down a hall and into an office. She shut the door.

“Please have a seat,” she said, sitting down behind her desk. “Now, Mr. Avery. How may I help you?”

“The Sparrow Falls Medical Group has been flagged for audit,” he said.

“And why is that?” she asked calmly.

“There are any number of reasons. Bear in mind, Ms. Reilly, audits don’t always indicate a serious transgression. Sometimes an entity will be flagged due to a random selection within a given category. Sometimes it’s because of income change that meets certain criteria. An unusual increase in deductions or casualty losses. Or perhaps a legitimate mistake was made in the filing. Issues like that.” He shrugged. “At any rate, it’s agency policy not to specify our reasons. If people, unscrupulous people--and I’m not at all saying you are one, Ms. Reilly--learned the particulars of what triggers an audit, they would be able to craft their returns in order to avoid our scrutiny. Of course, we wouldn’t want that.”

“Of course,” she said, and she smiled a rather cold smile at him.

Ms. Reilly gave him a small, unused office next door to hers. It was furnished with a desk, an uncomfortable chair, and a computer. The computer had access to the business records of the clinic. At one end of the hall was a storage room full of filing cabinets. Flavin spent the afternoon shuttling between the computer and the filing cabinets, dutifully making notes on expenditures, income and liabilities. He acquired a

comprehensive understanding of the clinic – its cash flow, the personalities and duties of the seven employees, the history of the place seen through the tersely written patient reports, the dry reams of forms, and the endless correspondence with insurance companies and countless government bureaucracies.

The Sparrow Falls Medical Group was owned by the Westover Corporation, which was in turn owned by an entity called Century Investments LLC. Neither the computer or the filing cabinets contained any information about Century Investments, other than the fact that the LLC had a bank account in Miami. Vernon had not told him who the client was, but it was obviously Century Investments.

Or perhaps Century Investments was just a front for something else. Shells within shells within shells. Trails of numbers and accounts leading in different directions, veering into accounts that contained other accounts, down obscure rabbit holes dug out of numbers and strings of computer code. Everyone these days had something to hide, or thought they had something to hide. He did not care. Most secrets were not worth knowing.

At the other end of the hall was a green metal door inset with opaque glass. A security camera high on the wall looked down on it. According to the architectural plans he found in the filing cabinets, the green door led to the wing of the clinic that housed the procedural rooms and the laboratory.

Flavin dutifully wrote up an initial report and sent it to Vernon. It detailed the facts of the situation, as he saw them. Just a list of the facts in bland black and white. He wrote a second list but it was only for himself. A short list of questions that refused to be answered in a logical fashion. At least, not any logic he cared to follow. Not just yet.

By noon of the fourth day, neither the computer or the filing cabinets held anything new for him. Vernon's office had supplied the private financial records going back three years for all seven employees, obviously hacked from banks and credit card companies. The boys in the agency's tech department were notoriously amoral in how they operated, which made them a perfect fit for Vernon himself. Nothing in the office records or the individual financial records seemed suspicious. So far, there were only two strange things that he could find. First, the clinic was definitely generating by-product due to the sheer volume of preventative procedures it conducted.

"By-product," mumbled Flavin to himself.

He knew what the phrase meant, but his mind refused to go any further down that road. Lynn had wanted children, had desperately wanted children, but she had proved barren.

Or so we thought.

Flavin turned in his chair. He couldn't help it. His heart stuttered in his chest. He could've sworn Lynn had whispered right in his ear. But no one was there. Dust sparkled and drifted in the sunlight slanting through a window. He was alone in the room.

The by-product was not showing up in Sweden. It wasn't showing up anywhere. It wasn't being shipped anywhere. It wasn't being dumped in the garbage. He had checked with the sanitation company that serviced the clinic. They were more than aware of what kinds of procedures the clinic did and, consequently, they kept a wary eye on what sorts of waste their trucks collected from the Sparrow Falls Medical Group.

Flavin had briefly considered the possibility of on-site destruction, but that was not logical. The evidence wasn't there. Incineration, acid, or any other method, would be

detectable. The by-product, the fetal tissue, was simply disappearing. But things didn't just disappear.

Nothing just disappears. That wasn't the way the universe worked. Matter was finite, but it couldn't disappear. It couldn't vanish into thin air. It couldn't be annihilated.

The second strange thing was the amount of electricity the clinic used. He had gone through the records of payments. The utility bills were staggering. Enough kilowatts to run a large factory around the clock. And the increase coincided exactly with the time the by-product started disappearing. Ten months ago. There had to be an explanation for the change, but he wasn't sure what it was. Not yet.

Flavin leaned back in his chair and stared at the wall in the office. It was blank. Each of the four walls in the office was blank. Blank, like his mind.

Julia Reilly and Dr. Harris were the top suspects. They had to be. Reilly managed all expenditure and income, insurance, hiring and firing. She was the clinic's central nervous system. If anything odd was going on, she would know about it. Dr. Harris was the senior physician. She oversaw the work schedules of the other doctor and the three nurses. Dr. Harris was responsible for everything that went on in procedural wing of the clinic.

Flavin opened the case file and flipped through the employee records. He stopped at Julia Reilly's records and read through them again. Bachelor's degree in economics. Master's in public policy. Unmarried. Financially frugal. A shrewdly diversified investment portfolio. He studied the headshot. She looked back at him from the photo. Shuttered eyes, an uncompromising face. He leafed through her surveillance photos. It was the same face, yet, it wasn't. There was something different. But the

difference was something so minor that he couldn't identify what it was. Something so insignificant that he couldn't figure it out, no matter how long he inspected the photos. The difference was somehow enough to register, however, in his uneasy subconscious. And he trusted his subconscious. He knew it didn't get uneasy without good reason. He had an old scar on his back from the last time he had deliberately ignored his subconscious. He still had nightmares about that snowy February evening in Prague. He could still remember the knife gleaming in the moonlight.

One by one, he compared the headshots of the other six employees with their accompanying surveillance photos. There were dozens of surveillance photos for each employee, all taken within the last ten months. The photos were obviously all the same people, yet...

He sat back, frowning.

Flavin packed up his briefcase, tidied his desk in the lonely little office and went to lunch. He ordered a turkey sandwich at a deli several blocks away and ate, not tasting a bite. As he ate, he stared out the window of the restaurant, part of his mind idly listening to the conversations around him, and part of his mind thinking about the job.

You haven't been this alive in quite a while, whispered Lynn on the edge of his thoughts.

"Look who's talking," he mumbled to himself.

Somehow, he could feel her smiling inside his mind. He finished the sandwich and left a few dollars on the table.

Flavin went back to the clinic and found Julia Reilly in her office. She looked up from her computer. For a brief moment, the green and white of the computer screen

seemed to reflect from her eyes, numbers and letters jumbled into meaningless. Then she blinked and there was only her serene blue gaze.

“I’m finished here,” he said. “Thank you for your cooperation. I doubt you’ll see me again. You should receive a copy of our audit in a minimum of two months.”

“Did you find anything that we should be concerned about?” Her face was as calm as ever.

“Officially, I’m not at liberty to say.” He paused and then said, “Unofficially, no. Nothing at all.”

Flavin drove home in the rain, his mind blank again. It was easier not to think. Simply put the body on autopilot, let instinct take over. There was nothing he really wanted to think about. The case had proven more than interesting, something to think about other than Lynn and the numbness in his mind, but, when he was tired, he wanted only emptiness and silence.

It was raining even harder by the time Flavin got home. Raining hard enough that the whole world turned to grey and disappeared behind the falling water. He stood for a while in the kitchen, staring out the window at nothing. His eyes were unfocused but his mind was starting to turn over, faster and faster. Water streaked down the glass.

A question surfaced in his mind. An obvious question that he should have already asked. He was surprised at himself that he hadn’t thought of it sooner. But now was better than never. He picked up the phone and called Vernon’s office. The secretary put him through right away.

“Got your report,” said Vernon before Flavin had a chance to say anything. “Frankly, I’m disappointed in you. I was expecting more. There’s not much new in this.”

“Oh?” said Flavin. “Nothing new at all?” Something that was almost a smile crossed his face. He paused waited for Vernon say something else. He hadn’t expected the old man to confirm his hunch so quickly.

“Nothing,” growled the voice on the phone. “Nothing to speak of. You’re one of the best. You were one of the best, and this is all you can give me? You better have something new for me, Flavin. I have to tell you, I’ve got a pretty impatient client. He calls me every day on this. When that man gets his teeth into something, he doesn’t let go. That’s how you once were. I remember. First job you ever worked for me, that smuggling ring in Odessa, you were like a pitbull.”

“What happened to the two other investigators you had working on this case?” said Flavin.

There was a long moment of silence on the phone.

“What do you mean?” said Vernon, his voice hesitant. “I didn’t say anything about anybody else. Oh, you referring to the case file? Research put that together. Tapped bank records, some credit companies, did a little cold-calling. Pulled the surveillance photos from security cams.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Vernon. Research didn’t put all this stuff together. And those surveillance photos? Someone with a professional grade camera took those photos. Two someones, because there are two distinct styles, and one of the photographers was a good five inches taller than the other. Angles, Vernon. The angles were consistently different. What happened to those two investigators? Who were they? Anyone I used to work with?”

Vernon was silent again for a long time.

“You don’t need to know,” he said finally.

“Don’t tell me what I need to know. This is my investigation.”

“You don’t need to know! You got that?”

“What happened to them?”

Vernon didn’t answer.

“What happened to them?” repeated Flavin

“They disappeared.”

Flavin hung up the phone. The rain tapped insistently on the window as if it was trying to get his attention. As if it was trying to tell him something. Night had fallen hard, but it was a night without moon or stars, the sky blind behind the lowering storm. He leaned his head against the cool glass and closed his eyes.

People just didn’t disappear. Not these days. And they certainly didn’t disappear with the likes of Vernon and his small army of former special operatives and spooks and information techs on their trail. It was impossible to disappear in this age of ones and zeros and digital footprints that never faded. The grid was everywhere. You couldn’t get off it anymore. Yet the two investigators had disappeared. So Vernon had claimed.

But nothing just disappeared.

Matter didn’t disappear. It just went to a more disorganized state. The second law of thermodynamics. Even the ghost in the system wasn’t allowed to vanish. Entropy.

People die, my love.

He heard the whisper in his mind. Lynn’s voice. He was almost sure he had heard her voice, low and quiet. Maybe it really was her. Maybe it wasn’t his memory somehow talking to himself.

Yes, they die, he thought. But even then they still don't disappear.

You're right, whispered her voice. *They don't. Not if they are still loved.*

Flavin set the alarm for one in the morning and promptly fell asleep. He awoke with the alarm beeping beside the bed. While coffee brewed in the kitchen, he dressed in all black and methodically checked the contents of a small black knapsack. He drank two cups of coffee, black as well, and then left the apartment.

It had stopped raining sometime in the night and the sky was awash in stars, as bright as sparks of fire burning in the dark expanse. The dashboard lights glimmered on his face in faint green. With a shudder, his body properly awoke as the caffeine kicked in, stuttering his heart for a second. For the first time since he could remember--well, since Lynn had died (but his mind shied away from making that connection)--he felt truly alive.

It did not take him long to drive downtown. The streets were quiet. Skyscrapers rose up around him, taller and taller and more and more densely packed, until the sky was gone, replaced by the darkness of concrete and steel, relieved here and there by the occasional office window still shining with light, shining like stars come closer to earth. He parked in an alley, nosed in behind a dumpster, and turned off the engine. The quiet night sounds of the city slowly intruded. A distant siren rising and falling, the occasional swish of a car going by, the whirring noise of a street sweeper down the block.

Flavin pulled on a pair of thin gloves. Then, he got out of the truck, slung the knapsack on his back, and walked to the other end of the alley. It was like being down at the bottom of a deep, narrow chasm. A concrete chasm with perfectly straight walls

towering up on either side. The building on his right was thirty-five stories high. He knew because he had once worked there. Worked there for six years. Vernon's agency. Floors nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one. He had worked here until Lynn died. There had been no point after that.

He could hear Lynn sigh inside his mind.

There's always a point. You know better than that.

"No, I don't," he muttered.

The service door opened with a soft click. He slipped the lock-pick back into his pocket. He stepped inside into darkness. The place smelled of oil and cleaning solvents and the brisk tang of ozone. He let his eyes adjust to the gloom and then he walked across the cavernous basement, his steps silent and quick, toward the bank of service elevators on the far wall. A door suddenly opened on the other side of basement. Light spilled out. He stopped and crouched low, waiting, a dark shape in the darkness.

Someone spoke nearby, a muffled voice responded and then the first person laughed. The door slammed shut. He heard the creak of wheels as a custodial cart rolled across the floor. One of the service elevators chimed. Its door slid open and then shut. The basement subsided back into silence.

Flavin chose one of the other elevators at random. It whisked up in well-oiled speed and smoothness. Up to the twentieth story. Up toward the sky and the stars if it only had a building tall enough. If men could only build a tower high enough. Soaring into the darkness and the thin air, built on ambition and hubris.

And the desire to be as the gods, whispered Lynn. I remember that story. It did not end well.

“Most stories don’t,” he said, frowning.

The numbers on the panel over the door winked at him in response. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. What am I doing? He shook his head in disbelief. I’m talking to myself. I’m talking to a ghost in my memory. Am I going crazy, or are you real?

Perhaps.

He could feel her smiling.

The elevator doors slid open. A faint, blue light shone from the glass at the end of the hall. The polished brass sign beside the door simply read *SSI. Security Services International*, that’s what the acronym stood for. Offices in London, Singapore and Beirut. Unadvertised affiliates in other cities. Cairo, Mombasa, Djakarta, and Bogota. Unadvertised and quiet, the way Vernon and his board of directors preferred. As many of their clients preferred.

The door was three inches of solid oak, sandwiched around steel plating. The glass on either side was bullet-proof and wired with a web of monofilaments that would instantly register the barest touch of a diamond cutter. He knew. He had been one of the lead security designers on the office when Vernon had relocated his headquarters here from Washington. The place was as secure as a bank, but even banks can be robbed. Particularly by someone like Flavin.

It took him less than two minutes to get through the door, and not much more time than that to disable the security panel. He shook his head. He was disappointed in Vernon. At the same time, it was somewhat expected. Vernon was a big picture man. He had been that way ever since Flavin first met him in the military. He left the details to others. But it was always the small things that mattered the most. The seemingly

insignificant details, the tiny electrons drifting in their modest orbits, a rusty nail waiting patiently on the road, a smile or a frown, a single milligram increase in anesthetic, the fluid inching through the tube to its quiet and deadly conclusion. The ones and zeros. The nuts and bolts of life that kept things fastened together, or that allowed them to fall apart.

Fifteen minutes later, Flavin found what he wanted in the senior accountant's office. It was always a good bet to follow the money. He leaned back in the man's leather chair, a frown on his face.

He had the names now. Two men. Two of Vernon's best operatives. Extremely good men. And that was the problem. Either of them should've been able to pull off the Sparrow Falls investigation without any trouble. What had happened? He looked blankly into the shadows.

Maybe they didn't want to finish the job, whispered Lynn's voice in his mind.

"They're professionals," he muttered. "They would've finished. Regardless of what they found."

They were professionals. Were. They're dead, aren't they?

Flavin stared down at the two files open on the desk. The first file was labeled simply S. York. The second file was labeled E. Garrison. Both of them were transfer-of-pension documents. Which meant Tom York and Marcus Garrison were both dead. The first was dated from six months ago. The second was dated from last month.

"Yes," he said softly. "They're dead."

Susan York worked at a restaurant on the south side of the city. Flavin had been there once before, two years ago, when Tom had first started dating her. It was a

steakhouse with a large bar in back. Or maybe it was a bar with a small steakhouse in front. He wasn't sure.

Flavin went there the next evening. He went hesitant, not sure if he wanted to speak with Susan, what do you say to someone who's just lost their husband, their lover, their best friend? He knew he didn't know what he wanted people to say to him. Actually, he didn't want them to say anything at all. He just wanted to be left alone. But he knew had to speak with Susan.

The place was smokey and dark inside, loud with cheerful conversation and the jangle of country music. Flavin made his way to the bar and ordered a drink. The whiskey burned down his throat and disappeared into nothingness. Like always. He motioned one of the bartenders over for another.

"Susan York working tonight?" he said.

"Yeah," said the man. He nodded. "Right over there."

Flavin turned. A slender brunette threaded her way through the tables, coming from the kitchen door with plates of food balanced on her arms. She stopped at a corner booth. Flavin watched her. She looked tired. As she made back toward the kitchen, a roar of laughter went up from a table of men. One of them reached out to her as she passed. She tried to step back, but he grabbed her arm. There was another burst of laughter. Flavin stood up. And walked over. But he was too late.

The brunette grabbed the man's wrist and twisted. He yelped, tried to get up, but couldn't. Another burst of laughter went up, but this time the man's dinner companions were laughing at him. Flavin stopped. The brunette stalked away.

"Susan," he said, as she passed by.

“What?” She turned. Her face was angry, but then she blinked, startled. “Flavin! What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you.” He led her to the bar. “Thought you might need some help there, but I guess not.”

“Just a dumb guy who had a few too many beers. Nothing unusual around here. Tom made sure I knew how to handle myself.”

“You want something to drink?”

She shook her head.

“What happened to Tom?” he said. He didn’t waste time getting to the point. It was almost as if he could hear a clock ticking away in the back of his head. The second hand was spinning faster. The noise of the restaurant blurred around them.

Susan looked away and then back at him, quick and uneasy, as if she was trying to figure out what to say.

“I know he’s gone,” said Flavin.

“They told me not to say anything,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“For not coming to the funeral. I would’ve come if I’d known. Tom was a good man.”

“There wasn’t a funeral,” she said bitterly.

“What do you mean?”

“They didn’t tell me much. Just that something went wrong during...during the job Tom was working. His boss came down and spoke with me when I went to sign the papers.”

“Vernon.”

“Yeah. He said they couldn’t recover his body.” Her face whitened as she spoke, her eyes staring and not seeing him for a moment, seeing something else. “He said there wasn’t anything left to recover.”

“Tom didn’t tell you what the job was?”

“He never told me about any of them. I didn’t mind so much. He said it was better I didn’t know what went on.” A tear trickled down her face. “It was going to be his last job.”

“What?”

“Tom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in July. The doctor gave him a year to live. He was going to quit after this job. We needed the money, I guess, but I wanted him to quit right away. I’ve never minded being poor. He was too stubborn. Always finish what you start, he said. His dad drilled that into him. We wanted to go Fiji. Rent a house on the beach and just be, you know? Get rid of our phones and our watches. I don’t know if he would’ve even been able to go by the time he...he was gone. He lost so much weight, those last two months.”

“A year to live,” said Flavin slowly.

“At most,” said Susan.

I can hear the clock ticking inside you, murmured Lynn's voice in his mind. You can hear it too, can't you? Everyone has one. Most people don't know when their clocks stop. I didn't find out until the last couple of seconds. Tom found out early.

"Stop it," he muttered.

"What?" said Susan, staring at him.

"Sorry. I was just talking to myself. I'm sorry."

He left her standing at the bar. She was full of silence in that noisy place, just beginning to learn and realize what that would mean for her. A silence that would accompany her wherever she went, regardless of crowds or friends or good intentions. Flavin wished her well, but he couldn't say it. He knew it wouldn't help. He could feel her eyes on his back as he walked through the restaurant and it made him want to cringe, to hunch his shoulders.

He pushed through the front door and out into the night. The air was cold and bracingly fresh after the crowded interior of the restaurant. The stars shone bright. He wondered what it was like for them, if there was a silence between them in the vast reaches of space, an immense silence that stretched unbroken across the years, replete with peace and touched only by the quiet passage of light.

Flavin went in search of E. Garrison the next day.

He had never met E. Garrison before. He wasn't sure what the E stood for. Elizabeth, perhaps? Emma? He hadn't even known Marcus was married. Marcus had been a private man, a solitary man, not the sort to have a beer after work with the guys. A professional in every way, yes, but careful and secretive in every other way. Perhaps

he had viewed Flavin in the same way. Flavin wasn't sure. He did not have a clear perspective on himself. He had always depended on Lynn for that.

I always told you the truth, she whispered.

“Even when it hurt,” he said, smiling a bit, remembering her blunt words.

Only because I loved you.

According to the address listed on the pension documents, E. Garrison lived at 2371 Maryknoll Street. Maryknoll was a rundown street, and that was a kind interpretation of its condition. The asphalt was potholed, the sidewalks were cracked and tilted by tree roots. Houses huddled against each other, propping their peers up either out of friendliness or simply weary need. Maybe it once had been a nice neighborhood, but that had been a long time ago. Someone had scrawled a few incomprehensible words of graffiti on a house. The paint was fresh, but the rest of the wall was cracked and peeling, just like all the other houses lining the street. The wind meandered down the street, aimless and cold and shivering with a premonition of the night's weather. A storm was coming.

Flavin knocked on the door of 2371 Maryknoll. He could hear the sound of it echo away inside the house. He waited. An old man shuffling down the sidewalk paused and stared at him for a moment before resuming his glacial progress. Flavin was about to walk away when the door opened an inch, stopped by a stout safety chain.

A pale blue eye inspected him.

“Whatever it is,” said the paper-thin voice of an old woman, “I'm not buying. Get off my porch.”

“I’m not selling, ma’am. My name’s Flavin. I used to work with Marcus Garrison. I’m looking for his wife.”

“A likely story. You don’t know Marcus from the Queen of England.”

“No one who worked with him knew him that well.”

The eye inspected him some more. “Maybe you did know him, then,” said the voice grudgingly. “And maybe you didn’t. Whichever the case, you didn’t even know he was never married.” The door closed.

“Wait!” said Flavin, speaking loudly. “I just need a few minutes of your time, ma’am, and then I’ll be going. Who is E. Garrison?”

“E. Garrison?” The old lady laughed, a dry sound that whispered through the keyhole. There was more weariness in it than humor. “That’s me, sonny. Eighty-seven years of me. Ethyl Garrison. Marcus was my grandson. Now I’m done answering questions for the day.”

“Marcus didn’t have a funeral, did he?”

There was a long pause. The door opened a crack. “No, he didn’t.”

“Why?”

“Maybe you know the answer to that better than me, sonny.”

“He disappeared,” said Flavin, knowing that he was right. He could feel it in the prickle on the back of his neck, in the uneasy ticking of the clock somewhere in his mind. “He disappeared. They couldn’t find his body, but they knew he was dead.”

“Didn’t expect that of my Marcus,” said the old woman, a sob in her voice. “He always made it home. Always did. Even when he was in the Army, he did. Year after year, he was gone. But he always came home. Not this time. I expected to go first.

Didn't hold a funeral for him. Didn't seem to right to sit in church without a body, just me and the preacher. Besides, I wouldn't have expected anyone to come. Not much to live on now, with Marcus gone. Not hardly a reason. Oh, I get a check from the government and his pension from the agency, but that's not much. He tried to get life insurance a while back, he was always worried about me, but they all turned him down."

The wind spattered rain down, slanting across the porch and into Flavin's coat collar. He shivered. The evening was growing colder.

Ask her why the insurance companies turned Marcus down, whispered Lynn inside his mind.

Flavin hesitated. The pain in the old woman's voice was inescapable. He wanted nothing more than to retreat back down the steps, to leave her. He knew loss too well, and there was nothing to be done about it. Nothing at all, except to wake up every morning, stare each dreary day in the face, and try not to wonder why time was running slower and slower.

Ask her, urged Lynn.

"Ma'am, why did they all turn him down?"

"Doctor said he didn't have much time left to live. Something about radiation exposure. I expect it was something from one of those secret trips he took overseas, years ago. Whatever it was, the companies all turned him down because of pre-existing condition. As if that's something unusual. We all have a pre-existing condition, sonny. It's called life."

Flavin drove home under the gathering darkness of the evening. The windshield wipers swished back and forth. He stared blankly past them, not seeing the road, the

passing cars or the city blurring around him. The digital clock in the dashboard read twelve minutes after seven. The green numbers glowed faintly.

Time's running out, said Lynn.

He could hear her as if she was sitting in the truck next to him. The sound of her voice made him hurt. It made him hurt bad. Over the years, he had been shot multiple times, he had been knifed, he'd had a jeep blown up beneath him in Afghanistan. He had broken bones in parachute jumps, shivered nights away in the grips of malaria during an operation in East Africa. He had endured more than most men had ever borne, but none of it had hurt as bad as hearing Lynn's voice at that moment. He forced himself to not glance over this time. He knew she wouldn't be there if he looked. If he didn't look, he could pretend she was actually there. He could pretend he was still married instead of slowly losing his mind, talking to a memory in his head. He could imagine they would drive home, she would get out of the truck, smile at him. Life would be like it once had been.

"Time ran out for Marcus," he said. "Him and Tom."

I don't mean for them.

"Who do you mean?"

I don't know. She sounded frustrated. *I'm not sure.*

"Is it running out for me?"

Flavin glanced over at the passenger side of the truck. She wasn't there. Of course she wasn't there. What had he been expecting? And she had gone silent. He was left alone with his unanswered question, the swish of the windshield wipers and the steady, unblinking green glow of the dashboard lights. The clock was ticking in his head

again. The rain fell fast and close around the truck, the night so dark and thick that it felt as if he were the last man left on the planet, driving home to a place that would never be home again.

He couldn't sleep that night.

The clock on the dresser blinked half an hour past two at him. He stared back at it. Without thinking, he reached out his hand and touched the pillow beside his. She was not there.

Of course.

Get up, she said.

"Am I going crazy?" he said out loud. He sat up, yawning. Something seemed to glimmer in the corner, a slender curve that looked suspiciously like a woman's form, a smooth expanse of skin, a fall of hair over the shoulder, the brown tresses tangled by the night. Flavin blinked, his heart suddenly stuttering, but then it was only the moonlight reaching through the curtains.

Does it matter? He could hear the smile in Lynn's voice.

"No. I guess it doesn't."

So get up. There's one more place that might have some answers. You need to find them.

"And what happens if I don't?" he said softly to himself.

He drove back into the city. Back to the Sparrow Falls district. The roads were almost completely deserted, shining wet-black under the occasional streetlight. He parked the truck several blocks away from the clinic and walked the rest of the way. The air smelled of rain and concrete. He walked past the clinic. There were no lights in the

window, but he continued down the street, turned right at the corner and then cut through the parking lot of an office building. He climbed the chain-link fence in the back and dropped down into an alley. Something stirred in the shadows. A cat. Its eyes caught a stray bit of moonlight and gleamed a wary green at him from beside a garbage can. The alley turned and he was behind the clinic.

Flavin picked the lock of the basement door. It was down a short flight of concrete steps. He had memorized the security system plans. The door had an alarm on it, but the plans had specified the model and maker. It was one he was more than familiar with. He had dealt with them several times before when working with the agency. He knew how to beat it, could beat it easily, as opposed to the front doors with their time lock. The door clicked open and he slipped inside. The panel on the wall beeped quietly, flashing red, and then went dead. He closed the panel and stood for a moment without moving. The building was deathly silent around him at first, but then small, quiet sounds began to assert themselves, slowly fading into perception. The faint ticking of a clock. The sighing of the wind behind a window. The deep, almost imperceptible rumble of the building's furnace down in the basement.

Carefully, his mind sorted through the sounds. He could not detect any danger in them. The air was still around him. The building was empty. He was alone. He was certain of it.

Except for me.

He could not help but smile, but he did not answer her.

Flavin moved cautiously down the hallway. A penlight in his hand sketched light into the darkness. Even though he had never been anywhere in the clinic other than the

reception area and the few front rooms where his office and the records storage were located, he knew the layout of the building. One glance at the architectural plans had been enough for his memory.

His recall was almost photographic. It was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing for his work, of course, but a curse because the faces from the past never disappeared. Some of them he wished to forget, but he could not.

Why would you wish to forget? Lynn's voice whispered inside his mind, curious and quiet and mildly amused.

Because some things are too painful.

Even the painful things are worthwhile.

"Not always," he said out loud, not even realizing he spoke.

Trust me. I'm dead. I should know.

A windowed door revealed a procedural room. His penlight fell on the polished stainless steel stirrup table, the white cabinets and skeletal outlines of the anesthesia rig looming beside the table. The door opened and he stood there for a while, uneasy in the silence. The room smelled of disinfectant and something else. Something slightly out of place. Ozone? Perhaps. Something electrical.

Electrical.

A door on the far side of the procedural room opened into a prep area. It joined the first room with the second procedural room that the clinic operated. The walls were lined with glass cabinets full of neatly labeled pharmaceuticals and the various steel and rubber of equipment. The smell of ozone was much stronger in this room. There were no windows, so he flipped on the light switch. Fluorescents hummed into life. Puzzled,

he looked around. Something was out of place. Something did not fit. Something small and indistinguishable to the eye. But, just like with the photos of the clinic employees, his subconscious was stirring into uneasy life.

Perhaps if he had had another minute to look about and think, he might have noticed what it was. But he did not have another minute.

Quickly, he reached and flipped off the light switch. Flavin stood in silence, listening. There, a sound. A light step somewhere behind the door. He tiptoed away. He slipped through the second procedural room and out into another hall. Starlight shone in through a window, but the light was distant and far and it only served to show how dark the shadows were in that place. He fled through the shadows as facts and numbers from his previous week of investigation turned in his mind like the cogs of a clock. An idea clicked into place. An idea that he could not accept because it was not possible. An idea that his mind kept circling back toward because it was both logical and impossible at the same time.

Flavin stood at the back door, breathing shallowly and listening for one last time to the building. It was silent. No footsteps behind him. He reactivated the alarm and let himself out through the door.

“Mr. Flavin.”

His heart jumped and hammered against his chest. Julia Reilly stood in the middle of the alley. Moonlight slid across her face.

“How do you know my name?” he stammered. The gun felt heavy in the holster under his arm.

She smiled, placid and serene. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“No,” he said.

“Oh, but I think you did. You found the answer in your mind. At least, the beginning of the answer. The beginnings of answers usually find their way to the ends of answers. At least, for honest people they do. You’re both an honest and an intelligent man. I’ve discovered that people often forget to search through their minds. Not that the answers are always there. Invariably, they aren’t, but the shadows of answers often are, and those tend to point in the right direction. It was only a matter of time before we were discovered. By you, by someone else. A certain amount of discovery we could mitigate. More than that?” She shrugged. “It was bound to happen. We factored that into our projections. I’m afraid we were off by only a few days.”

He could not answer, but could only stare at her. Lynn had looked like that. Peaceful. When she was dying, when the baby inside her had been dying too. They slipped away from him. Perhaps some things truly did disappear.

“What happened to Marcus and Tom?”

She smiled, but did not answer his question. “What are you going to do now, Mr. Flavin?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

For the first time, the serenity on Julia Reilly’s face wavered.

“Give us ten hours,” she said. “Ten hours, and we’ll be gone.”

“Ten hours? That’s all you need?”

She smiled again, her eyes gleaming with moonlight, or perhaps it was the even more distant starlight. She took a deep breath and then nodded, as if a question in her

mind had just been answered. Then, she explained. She told him what he had guessed. And she told him much more than that.

Flavin drove home in the remainder of the night and the glow of his dashboard lights. The moon scudded along through the sky overhead. His mind returned again and again to Julia Reilly's explanation. He examined it from every angle he could imagine, shying away from it, approaching it again, retreating in shock and disbelief. It made no sense. It made perfect sense. It was what he had already been starting to think. It was the only possibility he had been left to think.

He let himself into this apartment and sprawled on the bed, asleep before he had even pulled up the blankets.

The phone woke him with its insistent ring. He opened one bleary eye and looked at the clock. Ten am. Ten hours. Ten hours to one pm. She had only three hours left. He picked up the phone.

"Flavin? You there?" Vernon's voice shrilled down the line.

"Yes," he said.

"I need you in my office. Right away!"

"I'm busy," said Flavin, despising Vernon, wondering why he had spent so many years working for the firm. When he had retired from the service, he could have gotten any number of jobs. Instead, some sense of obligation to his old commander had forced him to the firm. Not forced him. It had been his own miserable choice.

"No, you're not," snapped Vernon. "Get down here now. That's an order!"

"I'm busy," repeated Flavin.

And I'll be busy for the rest of my life.

There was a brief scuffle on the other end of the line, and then another voice spoke, deeper and harder. "Get down here, now, Flavin. I'm paying the bills. I read your initial report. The electricity issue was intriguing. It lined up with something an earlier investigator theorized. But he disappeared. And then the second investigator vanished. But you figured that out already, didn't you? What you don't know is that three of my own men disappeared before them. My men. I've had that place watched around the clock, since October. You didn't think you were the only set of eyes there, did you? Nothing ever comes out of that place, except people. Living people. I don't need to hear your conclusions, because I think I'm finally coming up with some of my own. Thanks to your comment about electricity."

"What do you mean?" said Flavin.

The voice chuckled. The sound wasn't pretty. "I didn't like losing all that money, but now I'm thinking it might have been worth it. I might just have something here worth all the money in the world."

Flavin clung to the phone, knowing that what he said wouldn't matter.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "It's just a clinic. There's nothing unusual there."

"I guess it's time to pay a visit to Sparrow Falls," said the voice. "Me and my boys. My patience has run out. Unless you want to tell me what you might be guessing. Eh, Flavin? Patients walk in, and patients walk out. But nothing else ever leaves! What happens to the by-product? What happens to it?!" The voice suddenly roared down the line. "Tell me, dammit!"

"Nothing disappears," said Flavin.

“You’re right about that!” shouted the voice angrily. “Nothing disappears!” And then the line went dead.

Flavin grabbed his gun and his keys and ran out the door. He didn’t even stop to lock it. He drove fast, recklessly fast, running red lights and stop signs, heading straight for the Sparrow Falls district. Lynn was silent in his mind, or maybe it was just his mind that was silent, but he could feel her anxiety, quivering and tense in his thoughts. The roads were slick. Rain misted down. It took him only twenty minutes, much faster than the usual forty, but he knew it wasn’t fast enough. Vernon’s office was in the heart of the downtown and several miles closer to Sparrow Falls than Flavin’s apartment.

The truck skidded to a stop, right in front of the clinic, wheels half on the curb. He jumped out and ran up the steps. Ran up the steps and slammed through the door. Faces turned, startled, at his entrance. Vernon and three other men he did not recognize. But he recognized the authority and arrogance in the face of one of the men. Iron-grey hair and a face shaped like a hatchet. He was dressed in an elegant grey suit. The two other men were just muscle, guns in hand and waiting for that final order that meant death or life. Flavin had dealt with their kind before. Highly skilled killers. He understood them. He was one of them.

Julia Reilly sat in a chair in the waiting area beside the reception desk. Her hands were folded in her lap. The serenity on her face looked fragile and tired.

“Flavin!” said Vernon, his voice sour. “What are you doing here?”

“Just let her go,” said Flavin.

“Not a chance,” said the other man, the man with the iron-grey hair. He sneered at Flavin. “Being around her does something to your mind, doesn’t it?”

“No,” said Flavin. “My mind was already made up.”

It always was, whispered Lynn’s voice in his mind. *One of many things I loved about you.*

Flavin’s gun was out before he even thought about it. He didn’t need to think. The nearest gunman fired and he felt the bullet whip through the cloth of his jacket. The other one’s gun was coming up too, steel and that dark, final hole leveling at him, but then he was firing too, diving for the dubious safety of the reception desk. Bullets slammed into oak. Splinters flew through the air. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Julia Reilly dart through the hallway door. Something hit him in the leg, hard, knocking him to the ground. Vernon was nowhere to be seen. One of the gunmen lay in a silent sprawl of limbs. He shot the other one, a double-tap in his center mass, eyes already tracking away as he fired. He knew the man was dead before he even fell to the floor. He crashed a fresh magazine into the Glock, struggling to stand, but he could not. His leg collapsed under him.

“Poorly chosen, Flavin.”

The man with the iron-grey hair was on the far side of the room, just on the edge of his vision. He could sense, rather than see the gun in the man’s hand. He came about, desperate and fast and too late. The bullets hit him in the chest. Smashed him down hard. A first, a second, and then a final third. They left him breathless with pain. Darkness swam into his eyes. Above him, a face wavered. The man with the iron-grey hair.

“I always get what I want, Flavin. Time’s run out for you.”

“We were right,” said Flavin. He could taste blood in his mouth.

“Right about what?”

“Nothing disappears.” And the gun in his hand hammered bullets up at the ceiling, up toward the sky, up at everything he could still see, which was pretty much nothing except that face fading in his sight.

He came to with the floor hard under the back of his head. A hand touched him.

“Mr. Flavin,” said Julia Reilly. The receptionist and Dr. Harris were standing beside her.

He could barely focus on Julia. He blinked. Something was wrong with his eyes. He was so tired. He blinked again. Julia’s face shifted until he thought Lynn was looking down at him. Lynn. She touched his face and he seemed to feel better, somehow, despite the pain deadening his body.

Oh, my poor love, whispered his dead wife. *The pain is sometimes worth everything, isn’t it?*

Yes.

“Mr. Flavin, would you like to come with us?”

He could not answer. He didn’t have the strength for it. Lynn’s face wavered alongside Julia Reilly’s. They both stared anxiously down at him.

“Don’t close your eyes, Mr. Flavin! Keep them open. Please. Just a little while longer.”

He felt Julia Reilly’s hand on his face. Her fingers were cold. Or maybe it was his face that was cold. He couldn’t tell anymore.

”We came to your world because we wanted the castoffs, the by-products of places like this. We are not thieves. We have only taken what no one else wants. Our

civilization is dying, we've lived for too long, but we hope to preserve the memory of who we are, who we once were, in the little ones brought to die here. We will pass on our knowledge to them. They will carry on, once we are gone. No one wanted them, so we took them. We will give them the stars. We do well with dying people, Mr. Flavin. We know how to heal. We know how to take what is broken and make it whole again. We would be honored to have you."

Flavin blinked, staring past Julia Reilly's shoulder. Lynn's face blurred and then sharpened into focus.

What...? He could not even finish the thought.

Lynn nodded almost imperceptibly. She smiled, that same old smile from when they were young.

Go, she whispered.

What about you?

Nothing disappears. She smiled again, blindingly bright, and then she was gone and there was only Julia Reilly's face hovering above him, anxious and intent.

Flavin still could not speak, but perhaps something in his eyes spoke for him. Gentle hands lifted him. His body was carried down the hallway, into the procedure room, into the pre-op room. Electricity rippled in the air. A great arc of current danced from floor to ceiling. Matter rearranged itself. The ones and zeroes of life. Molecules shimmered and spread from side to side. He thought he could somehow see through into a vast night sky that seemed to stretch on forever. Starlight shone on a strange sea and there were tall, white buildings rising up from the water's edge.

“The others have gone through, Mr. Flavin,” said Julia Reilly. He felt her arms around him, pulling him forward. “We are the last. Quickly, now.”

When the police arrived at the Sparrow Falls clinic six minutes later, they found Vernon hiding in the bushes outside. Inside, they found the dead bodies of three men, riddled with bullets. In another room, in the operating wing of the clinic, the walls of the room were scorched black and a great deal of melted electrical cable sagged from the ruined walls. The strangest thing of all, however, was in the basement of the clinic. An immense walk-in freezer had been built against one wall. To the police’s initial horror, they found seven apparently dead bodies in the freezer. However, while the coroner’s team was transporting the bodies to the city morgue, they began to wake as their flesh warmed. One of them, a pretty but hard-faced woman named Julia Reilly, immediately threatened the police department with a lawsuit. She was later diagnosed as insane and committed to a mental institution.

Flavin was never seen again.

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