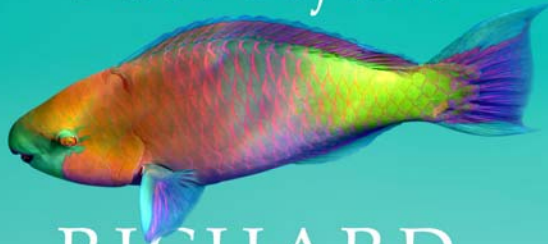


THE ATHEIST and the PARROTFISH

*The Atheist
and the
Parrotfish*



RICHARD
BARAGER

Richard Barager

SPECIAL 3-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW

Copyright



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### THE ATHEIST AND THE PARROTFISH

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ISBN (EPUB Version): 1622530403

ISBN-13 (EPUB Version): 978-1-62253-040-3

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## Books by Richard Barager

*The Atheist and the Parrotfish*  
*Red Clay, Yellow Grass: A Novel of the 1960s* (Coming May 2018)

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[Richard Barager](#)

## **Dedication:**

*To my wife, Gail,  
whose artist's soul inspired this story.*

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Books by Richard Barager](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

**Chapters 4-23 Not Included in this Special Sneak Preview**

[Book Club Guide](#)

[Interview with the Author](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[What's Next from Richard Barager?](#)

[More from Evolved Publishing](#)

**"The supreme function of reason is to show man that some things are beyond  
reason."**

*~ Blaise Pascal*

## Chapter 1

HIS RESENTMENT LAY LIKE a dragon in slumber, a smoldering, glowing thing unextinguished by the wash of time. And now the drone of an ancient chant, in harmony with the rhythmic flash of an overhead heart monitor, had sparked it anew. Yet if the heavysset, white-haired, walleyed man hunched over the bed rail in front of him had not been a Catholic chaplain, Cullen Brodie might not have loathed him so. Might not have seethed at his simpering piety, his handholding, prayer-mongering intrusion into the intensive care unit. Thomas Lawson hovering bedside, reciting the *Pater Noster* with the parents of a young Latino Cullen had saved the night before. Not with prayer, mind you, but with reason and science – and a crash dialysis treatment, administered by an unflappable gem of a nurse.

He brushed by Lawson and stood at the foot of the bed. A distinctive odor of blood and excrement came from the next room over, where an alcoholic bled into his bowel from esophageal veins made plump and oozing by cirrhosis. The weathered mestizo faces of the boy's diminutive parents lit up at the sight of the *médico* who had rescued their son.

"*Buenos días, Doctor!*" Their hands slipped from Lawson's pink-fingered grasp. They eased away from him.

"*Buenos días,*" Cullen responded. He turned to his patient. Coarse black hair plastered the boy's forehead, begrimed and lank. "*Cómo se siente, Miguel?*"

"Better. Way better. I can move again."

He kicked a leg in the air as proof. Good, Cullen thought. The blood washing of the previous night's dialysis session had completely corrected the life-threatening, muscle-paralyzing excess of potassium caused by unrecognized kidney failure.

Cullen nodded his approval. "Nice. Almost ready for soccer."

Miguel gave a pained look and opened his mouth to speak, but Cullen raised a hand and interrupted him. "I know, I know. *Fútbol.*"

Miguel grinned at his parents. Lawson laid a hand on the boy's shoulder and looked at Cullen. "He seems to have responded to your therapy. His parents will be very grateful."

Cullen glared at him. Lawson's eczematous cheeks flushed. "Just doing my job," Cullen said. "The same way I always do." Lawson withdrew his hand from the boy's shoulder and shuffled away from the bed.

An incident barely a month ago had strained their relationship. A patient's husband had complained to the hospital CEO that Cullen refused to acknowledge God's hand in healing his stricken wife. The letter made no mention of his difficult diagnosis that salvaged the woman's kidneys and kept her off dialysis. The CEO turned the matter over to the Quality Assurance Committee, which delegated a hospital chaplain – Lawson – to counsel him about spiritual sensitivity. Cullen's hostile response, telling Lawson to mind his own business and leave the care of ill patients to doctors and

nurses, had prompted Lawson to ask if a priest molested him when he was young.

Cullen tensed at the memory of the accusation. As if being made a cornholed catamite by a pedophile priest was the only possible reason an ex-altar boy could have for being hostile to the Catholic Church. Oh, it was worse than that, Cullen told him. He would rather have been molested.

Even that would have been better than living with the nightmare that haunted him still: a small boy drifting face down, his alabaster body immersed in a timeless sea of blue, an image born of an act that could never be undone. A disgraceful night that could never be atoned for, no matter how many patients he helped. No, he wasn't hostile to religion because a man of God molested him; he was hostile because there *was* no God. No loving and omnipotent God would ever have permitted such a thing.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" Lawson said to Miguel's parents before leaving. That his pronunciation and accent were laughable compared to Cullen's fluent Castilian was cold solace. Lawson had given them the one succor Cullen was incapable of giving.

Cullen saw his last inpatient by eight and headed to the doctors' lounge off ICU for more coffee. He paused before going in and rubbed his gritty, sleep-starved eyes with the heels of hands that could have belonged to a pipe fitter subduing metal tubes for a living or a chiropractor kneading and twisting spines all day. Instead, they were the huge, corded hands of a 54-year-old nephrologist with thinning hair, dyed brown and swept back, the way he had worn it for thirty-five years. Owing to a strong jaw and sharp chin, his deeply rilled face appeared sure and decisive, save for an elusive sadness in his eyes. Six-foot-five when fully extended, his sinewy frame was as yet unbent by time, though his long spindles of muscle had dimpled of late, become pocked by age.

A nagging vibration prodded his hip. He unholstered his cell phone and stared at the string of digits in the window. He went inside the lounge and dialed the number.

"Dr. Brodie? This is Dawn Price, one of the transplant coordinators at St. Barnabas? We have a donor for one of your patients – Ennis Willoughby. I wanted to make sure he's medically stable for transplant before I bring him in."

"A donor for Ennis? He's at dialysis. I'm headed there now. Your transplant team must be jazzed."

"It's causing quite a buzz. Simultaneous heart-kidney transplants are pretty rare, even for a program the size of ours."

He detected a bittersweet tone to her voice, and what was that about? Coordinators were usually ebullient when they called, the Gift of Life in hand, a miracle in the offing. She should have been wetting her pants over a transplant like this, a landmark win for St. Barnabas in its countywide cage match with the university – and for Logan MacGregor, the medical director of St. Barnabas's renal transplant program and of Cullen's nephrology group. Did she resent such a high-profile, prize set of organs going to an erratic, unkempt cross-dresser whom the transplant committee – on which Dawn Price sat – had initially turned down?

"I'll look him over and call you right back," Cullen told her.

"There's one more thing." She hesitated, a brief, disquieting lull. "Dr. MacGregor's



daughter-in-law is the donor. She was in an automobile accident yesterday and was declared brain dead this morning at Bayside Hospital. A procurement team is on standby. He wanted you to know."



Cullen walked unseeing through the hospital lobby and out the front entrance, oblivious to all but the grisly thought of Carla MacGregor being filleted like a pike in the caustic light of an operating room, her heart and liver and kidneys and anything else they could recycle lopped out and plunged into a container of cold saline. Knowing the donor changed things. Especially this donor, the administrative assistant of Nephrology Partners Inc., Cullen's twenty-five-physician medical practice, founded by her father-in-law to provide nephrology services throughout the county, including Beach Park Hospital, where Cullen was based.

He had first met her four years ago, after Cullen fled south from Los Angeles following his divorce – his second failed marriage in as many tries. Carla was at her desk, an elegant swan of a woman with thick brown hair. She glanced up from her pile of papers, small bosomed but full lipped, a minimalist with makeup because she didn't need any. She scanned him from head to toe as if something about him perplexed her.

"I'm Cullen Brodie. I have an interview with Dr. MacGregor."

She rose to her feet and smiled. "I'm Carla MacGregor, his executive assistant. He's been expecting you." She clasped his hand longer than necessary. The gentle pressure of it quivered his shoulders.

He caught her staring at him from time to time thereafter – at office Christmas parties or at social events on the arm of Duncan, MacGregor's underachieving son and their medical group's billing supervisor – with the same quizzical look, the same astonished oval of her mouth. And each time her effect on him was the same. Gooseflesh. An eerie chill fingering his spine. Had she somehow intuited his role in her life, his arrival heralding her fate, the future dispersal of her organs to one of his patients?

He cut across the parking lot to Beach Park Dialysis – thirty yards south of the eight-story main hospital building – and tapped a metal pad that activated a pair of automatic doors leading to a waiting room appointed in mauve and green. An elderly amputee in a wheelchair marked time before the start of his treatment. The floor beneath was tiled instead of carpeted, to accommodate the occasional post-dialysis spill of blood from seeping needle sites of patients in a rush to get home. Cullen entered the code to a keyless lock of a door between the waiting room and treatment area and stepped inside.

Thirty dialysis stations lined the walls of a spacious rectangular room, with a nursing desk in the center. Each station was comprised of an aqua-colored chair resembling a La-Z-Boy and a silver dialysis machine posted next to it. Nurses in blue scrubs moved from station to station, taking blood pressures, responding to machine alarms, and entering vital signs into electronic charts. Patients slept or read or watched flat-screen TVs suspended in front of them by c-arms, paying no mind to the large-bore needles impaled in their arms like harpoons. Given that a patient's entire blood volume

circulated through their machine's dialyzer – artificial kidney – every twelve minutes, it was a wonder they weren't all bolt upright, squeezing finger marks into their armrests.

Cullen looked around the room for Ennis, whom St. Barnabas had at first deemed psychologically unfit for transplant due to unresolved gender conflict. At the age of sixty-three, no less, his whole life spent trying to suppress, rather than express, his inner woman. The psychiatrist he was required to see felt that his fragile psychiatric state put him at risk for post-transplant emotional instability and self-destructive behavior – like neglecting to take his medication, the most common cause of transplant failure. Cullen appealed to MacGregor, arguing that Ennis had no *time* to blossom into a fully self-actualized cross-dresser. Without a heart transplant – and, since his kidneys had failed on account of his heart, a renal transplant as well – he would be dead in months. He was melting away before their eyes, growing more gaunt and feeble by the day. He needed a dual-organ transplant, not a personality transplant. MacGregor agreed and reversed the committee's decision, bringing them all to this moment.

He spotted Ennis in a chair along the north wall of the clinic. He had on a snakeskin-print, short-sleeve duster dress and a shiny blonde wig pulled low on his brow to cover his hairline. Loops of blood-filled tubing festooned his chest. On his feet was a pair of black tennis shoes. Hairless legs latticed by thick veins peeked out between the rims of his white socks and the hem of his dress. With caved-in temples and sunken cheeks, a dusky wattle dangling practically to his chest, broken teeth, sallowness, and a glaze of despair in his eyes, it was hard to imagine a less appealing host for Carla MacGregor's youthful organs. All he lacked was the striped garb of Auschwitz.

Was this really the best they could do for her Gift of Life? A 63-year-old transvestite with gender confusion who bathed once a week? Was this what she envisioned when she signed her donor card? Cullen could stop it, could still prevent the waste of her precious organs. He could call Dawn Price and tell her that Ennis's condition had deteriorated, that he would never survive surgery. No one would question him. Ennis would never know. And the Organ Procurement Agency would reallocate her organs to someone with more potential than an aging, tattered demalion transgender.

Someone with more potential. He grunted and pursed his lips; he sounded like a social engineer calibrating an individual's worth to society. But what of moral worth? Moral worth wasn't dependent on potential. It was dependent on being human. God created humans in his image, the nuns used to say, and bearing the image of God gives human beings intrinsic moral worth. The nuns: their sanctimonious voices pestered him still. He fingered the lapel of his coat – not the short white jacket of students and trainees, but the long white coat of a fully vested physician – and strode over to Ennis and sat on a roller stool beside him.

"I have something to tell you. Something wonderful. St. Barnabas called. They have a donor for you."

## Chapter 2

HIS DOCTOR'S WORDS PINNED him to the back of his chair. He trembled, a fine quiver, then a rampant shaking, what little adrenalin he had left coursing through him like a tonic. His doctor, Dr. Brodie, who hadn't batted an eye the first time Ennis came to dialysis in a dress. A doctor whom, despite his age – not that far behind Ennis – the nurses still had their eyes on, even the young black girl, Sheila. "That man got it goin' on, uh-huh, got it goin' on." The doctor who teased him about getting his nails done at the same Vietnamese place their clinic manager, Toni, went to. "They stock one color, Ennis. Harlot red. Don't do it." His used-past-expiration-date of a heart pounded like it hadn't in months. He lurched forward in his chair and thrust his right arm out. His fistula arm, heedless of the needles embedded there, the bloodlines fastened to the hubs.

*They have a donor for you.*

Transplant was all Ennis Willoughby thought about. At night, when he fell into bed, oxygen prongs stuck up his nose, wondering if he'd last 'til dawn; upon waking, too feeble to shower or shave, no desire to eat, wasting away like a wormy mongrel; throughout the grinding day, a slog just to drive to dialysis or to the store for groceries – let alone slip into a skirt and put a wig and lipstick on, maybe shave his legs and purr like a cat at the silky texture of nylon stockings against his skin.

He came out of the closet in part thanks to the nurses at dialysis and the compliments they gave him, no matter how cheesy he looked, with no strength to gussy up the way he wanted, barely enough to bathe. But now death was bearing down on him like a freight train, and then what? Cross-dresser limbo? Tranny purgatory? He couldn't hold out much longer and had resigned himself to dying without living the life he should have, out of the shadow of shame. The only thing that kept him going was the faint hope of a miracle: a dual-organ transplant, simultaneous heart-kidney, the whole shebang, a brand new pump in his chest and off dialysis in one swoop. If only it could be, he had prayed.

*They have a donor for you.*

The alarm on his machine sounded, and the blood pump shut down. "Bebe! Be careful," the nearest nurse, Rose, scolded. "You tangled your lines." She straightened his arm and placed it back on the armrest. "Why you so fidgety?"

Bebe. That's what the Filipino nurses in the dialysis clinic called each other. *Beh-bay*. He liked it when Rose called him that too. He pictured a factory somewhere in Manila, scores of little brown women rolling off conveyor belts with California stamped on their foreheads. Not that he cared. By and large, they made good nurses, and if it helped fix the nursing shortage Toni was always carping about, then ship them over by the crate was how he saw it. White American girls weren't interested in nursing anymore. Too much lifting and wiping.

Dr. Brodie stood and moved out of the way, his long, athletic body, his striking, sun-creased face. "Go ahead and disconnect him, Rose. He needs to get down to St.

Barnabas. Ennis is getting a transplant!”

Bedlam. Commotion. Nurses clapping, patients cheering. Rose whisked his needles out of his arm and slapped two-by-two gauze pads over his puncture sites. He struggled to his feet and looked Dr. Brodie in the eye but couldn't hold his gaze without tearing up.

“I'm, what you might say, all choked up. Pray for me, Doc.”

His doctor gave him a hug, natural and unforced. “Good luck, Ennis. We'll all be rooting for you.” He caught the scent of cologne, a tinge of lime. Except for his father, Ennis had never hugged a man before. It felt good. Not queer or anything.

Good.



He wheeled hard into the driveway with his hands slick on the wheel and his mind a jumbled mess. He pressed the door opener clipped to the visor of his Impala and pulled inside the garage. He figured he wouldn't be needing his car for quite some time.

Maybe never.

He hit a button on the wall and ducked beneath the heavy wooden door and stumbled back outside as the rollers grated down their rusty tracks. His breath came in staggered gulps, even this a task for his flabby heart. Either that or he was still hyperventilating over getting called for transplant.

He looked across the street, with a stab of regret, at the red brick elementary school his daughter might have attended had his cross-dressing not driven off his pretty young wife, who took their little girl – five at the time – with her. He turned and faced the butter-yellow rambler he'd bought three years later, in 1984, when his painting business finally took off. He'd lived there a quarter-century now, even paid his mortgage off ten years early. Good thing. A year later viral myocarditis got him and he never worked again. Had to hire a Mexican to paint his own home. Did a pretty fair job, though, did young Jesus. Except for the eaves. Peeling already. Probably weren't scraped good enough. That was the problem nowadays. Everybody was in a big damn rush. Not enough pride in the work they did.

He let himself in to gather his things for the hospital but paused in the entryway. He shook his head at the filth and clutter of the kitchen to his left: food-streaked dishes in the sink, Wheaties box on the counter in a sea of crumbs, travertine creased with dirt. Though his home was small – two bedrooms, a bath, a kitchen, and a living room – most days lately he was too weak for even the most basic of chores. He hired a cleaning service, but the young girls they sent out couldn't speak English and annoyed the shit out of him with the slipshod way they did things.

He kept a packed suitcase in the living room, so it didn't take long to get ready. The nurse coordinator at St. Barnabas said they had only four hours to transplant him once they harvested a donor's heart. The clock would start ticking as soon as he had his blood tested one last time for antibodies. Harvested. It sounded, what you might say, ghoulish.

He added a few final items to his bag – a scarred-up Travel Pro that raised a poof of dust from the couch when he cornered too sharply and banged against it – and went

into his bedroom and drew open the closet door. One last decision to make before the cab he had called before leaving dialysis arrived to take him to the hospital.

What to wear?

The psychiatrist the transplant program referred him to – Dr. Rebecca Winthrop; Becky, she said to call her – had told him to concentrate on balancing the masculine and feminine parts of his personality. She made it awfully hard to concentrate on anything the way she crossed her legs and sent her skirt halfway up her thigh. Dr. Winthrop – Becky – gave him a boner. But she wasn't the one doing the transplant today. What if he wore a dress and his transplant surgeon, Dr. Allen, wasn't as open-minded about trannies as Becky was? What if the straitlaced surgeon took one look at him and decided he was too weird to risk a set of organs on after all? He wanted to wear women's clothing to his transplant – the first day of his new life, a second bite at the apple – but it wasn't that easy to hush the persistent voice of reproach murmuring in his ear. Though he had made strides with this self-worth thing Becky was so big on – *There's nothing wrong or perverted about it, Ennis; it's who you are* – the part of him that since age nine had come to expect punishment and rejection for wearing a dress was still a force to be reckoned with.

Guilt and shame were seared into him like a branding iron on a steer's hide that summer in Toledo, where his parents settled after the war. His father had been a sailor aboard the USS *Enterprise* during the Battle of Midway. As far as Denton Willoughby was concerned, Midway began and ended with Wade McClusky, the *Enterprise's* air group commander, whose squadron of scout planes – while running on fumes – located the enemy carrier fleet. Dive-bombers called to the scene by McClusky sank the *Kaga*, *Akagi*, and *Soryu*, breaking the back of the Imperial Navy and turning the tide in the Pacific.

His father had been obsessed with learning to fly ever since. One of Ennis's earliest and fondest memories was of lying side-by-side with him beneath a brown Philco radio – the one with Bakelite casing and an arched front panel resembling the grille of a car – and listening to *Sky King*. His father smelled of beer and cigarettes. With his dark cowl of hair and New York sneer, he looked like a young Robert De Niro. He put his arm around Ennis and told him that once he got a few flights under his belt, he would take Ennis up with him, so his son would grow up to be like the hero of Midway. Ennis vowed that day to become a Navy pilot – not because he wanted to be like Wade McClusky, but because he loved his father more than anyone in the whole world. Except his mother.

His father saved enough money from his job at the Jeep factory to pay for flying lessons at National Aviation Airport, a small municipal airfield flush against the Ohio-Michigan line. It had an east-west cinder runway and a couple of metal hangars southwest of the airstrip. One Saturday afternoon, while his father was at the airport, Ennis's mother took his two sisters, Sarah and Diane, to a neighbor girl's birthday party. Ennis stayed home to listen to the Cleveland Indians on the radio. He didn't much care for baseball, but his father did, and he wanted to surprise him by telling him the score. Like when his father went for a haircut and Hank the barber told him the score. Hank's

face always looked all intense and serious, as if he were reporting something crucial and momentous that no one else knew. But when Ennis saw his sisters in their frilly dresses and patent-leather shoes, something tripped in his brain. He wanted to wear a dress too – the same as when he wanted to play with dolls or have long, girly hair to brush. He never told anyone about these thoughts but having them didn't make him feel bad or ashamed. Only keen to do it, like when you look at a rose and want to sniff it. So he waited until his mother and sisters left, took off his shirt and pants, and slipped into Sarah's yellow smock dress. He daubed on his mother's lipstick in front of the bathroom mirror and puckered and preened like she did, reveling in his reflection – until his father appeared in the doorway, home early from his flying lesson.

His crestfallen look hardened into a gimlet-eyed gaze that nailed Ennis to the wall. "Take the dress off, son. And wipe your lips." His voice was limpid, righteous.

Terrifying.

Ennis did as he was told and stood there in his little green boxer shorts, his heart beating like a snared rabbit's. He snuffled at the sight of his father unfastening his belt and pulling it through the loops of his pants.

"I'm gonna strap your ass, Ennis. You know why?"

"Cause I put Sarah's dress on?"

"That's right, 'cause you put Sarah's dress on. Now turn around and grab your ankles."

He shuffled his feet and bent over and grasped his ankles.

"This is gonna hurt somethin' fierce, but if you cry, I'll have to keep strappin' you. Navy pilots don't act like women. Not ever."

The lashing he endured on the soft pulp of his ass made his knees buckle but he did not cry. He bit his lip and stared at the tile between his straddled, quivering legs.

*Navy pilots don't act like women.*

His father's words had their intended effect, even now, at sixty-three. He reached into the closet for a pair of pants and denim work shirt. He put them on and went into the living room and sat on the couch to wait for his cab. The brightness of a mote-filled shaft of light seemed to mock the lie of his existence.



The ride to St. Barnabas took thirty minutes, darting and swerving amidst the high-speed drone of traffic, a white-knuckled game of chicken with freeway-faces wanting their way, forever seeking the advantage, no matter how small, how meaningless. Over a lane change, for God's sake. A fricking lane change.

His grinning cabbie – Joseph Livingston, the license on the visor said – seemed to relish cutting people off, the nicer the car the better, trailing a wake of blaring horns and middle fingers thrust against windshields. The bunched collar of his sheer red shirt lay against his glossy black nape like a red silk hankie nestled in the pocket of a tuxedo.

Ennis moved to the edge of his seat. "Easy there, Livingston. Be just my luck to die on the way to my heart transplant."

Livingston shot him a look in the mirror, all white eyeballs and teeth, the left front one gold. "Heart transplant, mon? Why didn't you say so?"

“That’s right, heart transplant. Kidney, too,” he added, hoping to knock an additional ten miles an hour off the speedometer. “Where’re you from, anyway?”

“Soufrière, on the island of St. Lucia.” He let up on the gas. “A heart and a kidney, mon? Who’s the donor?”

“Who’s the *donor*? My brother-in-law, that’s who – said he didn’t need his heart any more. How the hell should I know who the donor is? They’re dead.”

Livingston shook his head. “No good, mon. How can you appease the *ti bon ange* of someone you don’t know?”

Appease the T-bone steak of someone he didn’t know? “I don’t have the foggiest idea what you’re talking about. Sounds like voodoo hocus pocus to me.”

Livingston waved a long, bony finger in the air. “Voodoo, mon, but not hocus pocus. The soul consists of two parts: an inner core and an outer rim. The inner core is the *gros bon ange* – the great good angel, the energy of life shared by all living things. The outer rim is the *ti bon ange* – the small good angel, the unique traits of a particular human being. At death, the *ti bon ange* must be properly preserved, so the wisdom and knowledge of previous lives can be passed on. A ceremony must be held one year and a day after a person’s death to peacefully recycle their *ti bon ange* – and return their *gros bon ange* to the Energy Pool that connects all things. Some of the *houngans* say the *ti bon ange* resides in the heart. If you are going to have someone else’s heart inside you, then their *ti bon ange* becomes your responsibility. How can you pay tribute to someone you don’t know?”

“Easy. Ever heard of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier? Tell you what. A year from now, I’ll hoist a flute of champagne and throw the glass against a wall. Maybe that’ll satisfy your angels.”

Livingston gave a look of dismay and fell silent. Soon the steel-and-glass of St. Barnabas Hospital loomed in front of them, the name spelled out in huge orange letters across the top of the seven-story marvel. It had taken Ennis’s breath away the first time he saw it: the grand piano in the lobby, with oil paintings of California beach scenes lining the walls; eucalyptus-scented private rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows, flat screen TVs, iPod docking stations, and sleeper-sofas for families (not that he had a family, but still); and outdoor healing gardens, where you could sun yourself with the sweet scent of jasmine swirling up your nose. And a hospital concierge desk. *For what?* he wondered. Snorkeling trips to Malaga Cove? Group visits to Sea World?

Livingston got off the interstate and turned onto an azalea-studded, palm tree-lined drive that could have been the entrance to a Ritz Carlton. He pulled to the front curb and set Ennis’s bag on the sidewalk. Ennis handed him forty dollars.

“Thank you, mon. And good luck. May God watch over your souls.”

He had already entered the lobby, where a pianist in a lavender dress played *Bolero* – Ennis saw the movie *10* three times, Bo Derek in those cornrow braids; he would have crawled through broken glass for a taste of that – before Livingston’s use of the plural registered with him. Souls. As in two. His and his donor’s: Voodoo loving, hex placing, Third World bastard.

Try as he might, he headed to registration unable to stop wondering who his donor

was.



Things got going once he told the patronizing clerk at admissions – a red-lipped woman wearing a string of pearls – that he was there for a transplant. A kind-faced, overweight nurse with short gray hair and a limp escorted him to a room in ICU, where they fastened an ID bracelet on him, had him sign consent forms, drew half a dozen vials of blood, and had a male orderly shave him from neck to knees. He was then made to shower with PhisoHex soap and shampoo to protect against MRSA, some kind of invasive staph infection from hell. The stall had a sliding glass door – the Ritz Carlton touch again. His nurse started a pair of IVs in his arms and he was put into bed to wait. And wait. And wait.

He tried watching TV, but was too anxious to concentrate. His gaze kept drifting to the empty sleeper-sofa, which should have been packed with family by now. It was his father he most wanted there. His strong, handsome father.

Six weeks after he had licked Ennis for wearing Sarah's dress, he carted their whole family up U.S. 25 in a station wagon to watch his first solo flight at National Aviation Airport. They gathered in front of the nearest hanger, basting in the thick July heat. His father snapped off a salute and climbed into an orange and white Cessna 170 and taxied to the end of the airstrip. After waiting for whatever clearance he needed, he rolled down the cinder runway and took off smooth as could be, like McClusky off the *Enterprise*. Ennis thrilled to the sight of his dad's plane climbing the beryl sky and performing a series of flawless banks and dives before skimming off to the south at a cruising speed of 120 mph. He reappeared fifteen minutes later and maneuvered a mile overhead. At the end of his allotted time, he circled into an easterly approach route with the graceful skill of Sky King.

But something wasn't right. The Cessna's wings wobbled and its nose pitched downward. It yawed into a deadly spin. The bottom fell away from Ennis's stomach and a cold, unseen hand clamped itself around his heart. His mother screamed and his sisters cried and his father's plane whistled into the tarmac and exploded.

He ran behind his mother as fast as he could, yelling out, "Daddy! Daddy!" His lungs burned and his eyes poured as he drew near the plane's fiery carcass, to which a ground crew was frantically attending. The father whose approval he so desperately sought to regain – that very morning at breakfast Ennis had promised anew to become a Navy pilot – was entombed in a billow of smoke. The second it cleared, he bolted toward the largest piece of fuselage – the front half of the plane, minus its wings. His father's charred skeleton was melted onto the console. Smoke wafted from his blackened skull, his mouth agape in a ghastly grimace.

"Why the tears, Ennis? Cheer up. You're about to get a new heart and kidney, my friend."

At the foot of his bed stood Dr. Charles Allen, his transplant surgeon, wearing green scrubs and a white lab coat, bald head glistening, black beard shot with silver. A plain-faced slip of a woman in a baggy blue scrub suit stepped forward, syringe in hand.



“This is Doctor Roberts,” Allen said. “Your anesthesiologist. She’s going to give you something to make you sleep. When you wake up, your new heart will be beating like a drum and you’ll be peeing like a racehorse.”

She gave a perfunctory smile and jabbed the needle of the syringe into the rubber port of his IV. Her petite thumb depressed the barrel. A delicious, golden warmth worked its way inside his brain, like the tequila he drank at the brothel in Tijuana, where the Mexican girls charged only ten dollars extra when he wore a lace teddy.

He remained vaguely aware of his gurney pushing through a set of double doors. The last thought he had was of how alone he felt.

Then the void.



He was sitting alone at a small table set for two on the deck of an aircraft carrier rolling gently at sea. A faint breeze salted his tongue. It was an old carrier, with the number six stamped on its deck fore and aft. The *Enterprise*, his father’s ship! Sailors in service whites lined the deck, standing at ease against a palette of pink and orange, the ocean at sunset.

He was dressed en femme, but with such taste and elegance he passed for a woman, he knew he did. He adjusted his wig, a blonde mane styled and fluffed just so. He hardly recognized himself in the mirror of the compact he pulled from his handbag, the clever application of foundation and concealer, the complex interplay of eye shadow and liner making his eyes wide and mysterious. He fingered a string of pearls at his neck, toyed with a silver earring clipped to his ear, smoothed the long-sleeved, black cashmere turtleneck dress he wore – and checked his L’eggs for runs. Immaculate.

He placed his hands on the table’s white linen and admired the rich red gloss of his nails. A moment later, a sailor stepped from the shadow of the bridge, so raffish-looking in his white bell-bottoms and black leather shoes, his tar-flap collar and black neckerchief. He smiled and removed his white Dixie cup hat.

“Mind if I join you?” It was his father at twenty, Seaman First Class Denton Willoughby.

They sat without tension, some sort of accommodation reached. An officer in a high-collared white tunic with gold buttons and black epaulets appeared, bearing two glasses of wine on a tray. He had a round chin, unwavering eyes, and a broad nose. His father stood and saluted. The same salute he gave before climbing into the Cessna that day, sharp and snappy, confident of his place in the scheme of things.

“This here’s my son, Ennis, Lieutenant. Come to see the Big E in action.”

Why did his father do that, give him away when he was passing for a woman, transgender Nirvana at last?

The officer set the tray on the table, removed his cover, with its black visor and silver eagle in front, and bowed. “Lieutenant Commander C. Wade McClusky, at your service.”

The entire crew clapped and cheered. The significance of it dawned on him. Rather than merely passing for a woman, he had been accepted for what he was: a man who chose to dress like a woman. Accepted by the crew and most decorated hero of the most

decorated ship of World War II. And, best of all, accepted by his father. For the feminine slice of himself that he could no more deny than could Wade McClusky deny the magnificent uniform he wore. He must have gone to Heaven. How else to explain the strange hymn resounding in his head?

*Truth within my conscience reigns*

*Be my king that I may be firmly bound, forever free.*

"Ennis. Open your eyes. Can you hear me? Open your eyes, Ennis." A dream, that's all it had been, a wonderful dream.

A dream dissolved. He tried to move, but couldn't. His hands were lashed to the bed rail. And his chest, oh God, the pain! It felt like he'd been prized apart, crow barred in two. He tried crying out: nothing. Then he remembered. They had warned him not to panic when he came to after surgery, that his hands would be tied to keep him from pulling out a tube in his windpipe to help him breathe. But that meant he was alive! He had made it through surgery. Were his transplants working? Did he even get them?

He opened his eyes. Stabbing white light. Haze. Someone squeezed his hand. He squeezed back. A man bent over him. A man with a beard.

"You did great, Ennis." The man's lips moved in slow motion and his shiny head was the size of a beach ball. Light splattered off the top of it. "Both transplants went off without a hitch. Your kidney is making urine and your heart's pumping like a champ. It fit into your chest with room to spare."

He closed his eyes. He wanted to be back on the *Enterprise*, surrounded by sailors cheering for Denton Willoughby's tranny son. But before he submerged back inside the sheltering chrysalis of his dreams, he grew aware of something inside him. Something foreign. Dwelling there. Inhabiting him.

*Whump... whump... whump.*

He could feel it pulsing, throbbing, beating, a life force all its own, infusing him with vitality, an unaccustomed torrent of blood rushing through him like a swollen river.

*Whump... whump... whump.*

His chest rocked, barely capable of restraining the organic generator inside him. And he knew: he had his second bite at the apple. Never again would he submit to shame, be made to play the freak by society's raised brow. Never again. This time, he would embrace his destiny. Openly, brazenly, proudly transgender, thanks to this wondrous gift inside him, this pounding heart that threatened to lift him off the mattress.

*Whump... whump... whump.*

His donor. Who was she?

## Chapter 3

CULLEN SETTLED INTO A tawny leather swivel chair in front of his office workstation and powered up. A giclée of the Grand Canal at sunset hung on a faux-paper gold wall in front of him. Behind him sat a yellow birch wood desk and matching bureau.

A sentimental, slim-shanked junior associate in the design firm MacGregor hired to decorate all of the group's office locations had conceived the entire, color-coordinated scheme. Cullen wound up sleeping with her, another in a passel of outré entanglements with younger women he had little in common with. Tess, her name was: an interior designer with a tramp stamp on her sacrum and schoolmarm chignon she unfurled before sex. Who made him drink Red Bull and go to Adele concerts and eat truffles in bed while reading passages from *The Time Traveler's Wife* – more cloying than the truffles and Tess combined. Tess of the d'Urbervilles, he called her, a not-so-subtle attempt to upgrade the fiction she read. To no avail; Hardy's *Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* was not for her.

He looked at the roguish biceps of the striped-shirted gondolier in the painting and envied the man his age-appropriate wife. He pictured her waiting for him at night with a plate of warm bread and olive oil, her sultry face and thick, creamy thighs. Lately the warm bread and olive oil appealed to him nearly as much as the imaginary woman's legs.

He clicked open Ennis Willoughby's electronic medical record in anticipation of his office visit the following morning, his first with Cullen since Ennis's transplant three months before. The most recent report from St. Barnabas confirmed what Cullen already knew from Logan MacGregor: both organs were working beautifully. He had spoken a number of times by phone with MacGregor since Ennis's surgery, but saw him only once, at their medical group's quarterly business meeting. He pulled Cullen aside for a word in his office a few minutes before it began.

A gold silk settee and maple wing chair with intricate finials occupied one end of the room, a massive cherry wood desk and pair of Continental chairs the other. MacGregor stood beside the desk, a big, barrel-chested man of sixty-four with dazzling blue eyes and a blowsy face. The shock of silver and gray atop his head called to mind the markings of a silverback gorilla, a dominant male. He raised his head slightly to meet Cullen's gaze.

"I know you know this, but since Willoughby will be back under your care soon, I wanted to remind you that donor and recipient identities are confidential. Even Duncan has no idea who got Carla's heart. I'm bound by law to refuse to tell him. The same applies to you if your patient asks."

"I understand. How's Ennis doing?"

"Incredibly well." MacGregor's eyes shimmered. "It's a remarkable gift she gave him. I hope he makes the most of it."

Cullen detected a whiff of regret, and why not? MacGregor and his son and grandchildren were bereft, and the beneficiary was a troubled cross-dresser in his sixties. It was only natural to have wanted Carla's organs to go to someone younger or with an intact family; Cullen had thought the same himself. He put a hand on MacGregor's shoulder. "I'll do all I can to see he does."

He clicked the Patient Communications tab and reread a letter Ennis had sent him the week before. A remarkable letter, in more ways than one. Sometimes virtue thrived in the harshest of soil.



*Dear Dr. Brodie:*

*Now that I've had some time to cogitate on the miracle of my transplant, I wanted to tell you how thankful I am to you for keeping me alive on dialysis and going to bat for me with the transplant committee. It's up to me to make the most of the second life I've been given. I won't let you – or my donor – down.*

*Having a normal heart and a new kidney is like coming back from the dead. I didn't realize how much of life had been taken from me. Little things people take for granted.*

*Like food.*

*I think I must have had a taste bud transplant, too. Spices and flavors I didn't know existed practically explode in my mouth. I crave things I never even liked before. No more renal diet, either. I ate three bananas one day just to prove I could do it. Sat there afraid to move, half-expecting to keel over from too much potassium. Next I went to the movies and had a tub of salty popcorn and a large drink. Instead of swelling up and getting short of breath like I would have on dialysis, all it did was make me have to pee before the movie was over. (I missed the best part.)*

*Another thing – stairs. Even three of them used to leave me gasping and clinging to the handrail. Now I make a point of taking them. It makes me giggle, like when I was young and got away with something. Energy, that's the difference. Like there's a power plant inside me kicking out kilowatts twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes I'm so charged up it's hard to get to sleep at night.*

*Other things have changed, too. What you might say, personal things.*

*My father wanted me to be a Navy pilot when I grew up, but he died in an airplane crash when I was nine. Right before my eyes. I promised his blackened corpse a Navy pilot was what I'd be. But during my senior year of high school, I took one of those pesky eye exams they make you take. The sneaky ones with the numbers hidden in the colored dots? Discovered I was colorblind – red-green color blindness, they told me. Big deal, right? So I had trouble distinguishing reds and greens. Who cared? The U.S. Navy, that's who. Automatic disqualifier.*

*I was crushed. Felt like I broke my promise to my father. I thought becoming a pilot would show him his little boy had grown up to be a man – not some freak in a dress. Because I loved him and wanted his approval. Even after he was dead.*

*I was so tore up about it I spent the next ten years drinking and fighting and getting tossed in prison. Kept me out of Vietnam, at least. But I felt guilty over it my*

*whole life. Until now. I had a dream right after transplant that made me realize I never really wanted to be a Navy pilot – that’s what he wanted me to be. Just like he wanted me to be all boy and no girl.*

*I know now that I can love my father more in a dress than I could ever love him in a bomber jacket. Because in a dress I’m living the truth, and from truth comes dignity. And from dignity, love. Fathers and sons – it never ends, does it?*

*Some other peculiar things happened since transplant, too, but they can keep until my appointment next week.*

*Your grateful patient,  
Ennis Willoughby*



He closed the file and leaned back in his chair with the phrase pounding in his head like a ball-peen hammer. Fathers and sons – it never ends, does it? The unwitting reference to Turgenev dug in deep. *Fathers and Sons* was a scorpion’s sting of a novel that was Cullen’s story, too: the clash of religion and rationalism, of father and son. He closed his eyes and let it sluice over him, beginning as it always did, with Brodie’s Tirade, and ending in a calamity he could not outrun, even now, thirty-four years removed. The same punishing image visited upon him over and over and over again, always exactly the same: a boy floating in blue – cold, heartless blue. Pitiless, merciless, immutable blue.

Godless blue.

Cullen had been only twenty-one then, trouble-free and on a glide path to med school. His father couldn’t have been prouder of him, but even that gave Cullen no relief from the wrath of Brodie’s Tirade. The Tirade was always at DEFCON I – ready for launch without warning. There was no way to see it coming and no way to escape his father’s wild-eyed dudgeon once it began. He warmed up by rumbling about Vatican II and the death of the Tridentine Mass, then bellowed and spumed his way to *Roe v. Wade* and Edward Nichols, the city’s most prominent abortionist.

Nichols was a charter member of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, an obstetrician who opened the first abortion clinic in Minneapolis. Cullen’s carpenter father, Chaz – an usher at St. Vincent’s, where Cullen had attended grammar school and served as an altar boy – found NARAL and Nichols more repugnant than the Symbionese Liberation Army. It was all Chaz Brodie could do to keep from hurling an ashtray at the screen whenever Nichols appeared on local news.

But on *that* night, the night it all began, the saccharine strains of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* cut Brodie’s Tirade mercifully short. Chaz never missed an episode, not even summer reruns. He claimed the show meant Minneapolis had become an important place.

Cullen bolted out the door of the two-story home Chaz had built twenty years before into a summer downpour to meet Stan Tazinski at Trajan’s Bath, a new nightspot on the corner of Fourth and Hennepin. He felt off balance from the moment they paid the three-dollar cover and stepped inside. A silver ball suspended above a transparent

floor lit from beneath by colored lights turned slowly overhead, throwing splinters of light onto a farrago of sofas and love seats. Piped in music blasted from every angle, no band in sight. Packs of young males with coiffed hair and open-collared shirts roamed the aisles with giddy faces.

Tazinski ordered two Heinekens from a bartender trickling sweat off his forehead. A fogbank of smoke loitered over the bar's curl of dark wood, stinging Cullen's eyes.

"This place is weird," Tazinski said, blond and bushy and sloth-like. "Dudes keep telling me I'm handsome. I know they're queer, but it kind of makes me feel good. Does that make me homo?"

Cullen took a draft of beer. "They're just being polite. Think about something else."

They pounded brew and checked the scene. Couples gay and straight danced to the addicting sound of a sexy merengue beat, powered by a syncopated bass line and orchestral horn arrangements. Cullen held his water to the point of dribbling before making a bathroom run, leery of what might go on in the men's room. He was surprised to discover that there *was* no men's room – the bathroom was unisex, one stall fits all. He shrugged it off, zipped up, and went back to describe the toilet arrangements to Tazinski.

"This place is outta control!" Tazinski said, above the music.

A narrow-hipped man with bloodshot eyes and a receding hairline and trim moustache pranced down the aisle and shouted back at Tazinski over his shoulder.

"It's Amy, man! She makes the party harder."

Cullen looked at Tazinski. "Who's Amy?"

Tazinski shrugged and ordered another round of beers from the beleaguered bartender. The alcohol and sonic energy of the place launched them on a quest for dance partners. Cullen picked out a platinum blonde in a white jumpsuit who insisted on teaching him a dance called the Hustle. Her name was Twyla, and though she was incredibly patient with him, he had trouble catching on to the assortment of turns and twirls that he was supposed to lead, but which Twyla capably steered them through instead. The Hustle smacked too much of ballrooms and Glen Miller for his taste. He still liked the Bump, knocking hips to a live horn section wailing clean funk. Socially sanctioned dry humping, right on the dance floor. The Bump.

Twyla thanked him and moved on after they danced out the set. "How long have you been into transvestites?" a voice at his elbow asked.

He turned and encountered a long-limbed girl with high cheekbones, a finely tapered nose, and arched eyebrows and painted lips. She filled the space beside him as if conjured from the silver ball above, a fey nymph in designer jeans. Lush raven hair spilled over her shoulders from beneath a cap with *Magnifique* written across it in gold letters. Her elegant line flowed from the graceful curve of her neck to the leonine sweep of her haunch. He lingered on the swell of her turquoise halter before willing himself to make eye contact.

"What are you talking about?"

She pointed at Twyla, by then queued up outside the restroom. "Blondie's a she-male. You know, L-O-L-A Lola?"

It took him a moment to comprehend. “No way. Like I can’t tell a dude from a chick.”

She threw her arms in the air. “Fine. Check it out if you don’t believe me.”

He extended his hand in challenge. “Loser buys drinks. You might as well go order now. I’ll have a Heineken.”

She brushed aside a lock of hair and smiled. “We’ll see.”

He rounded up Tazinski and trailed Twyla into the restroom. She stepped inside a stall and clicked the lock. They sidled beside it. Cullen wrapped his arms around Tazinski and hoisted him upward with a giant thrust. He strained mightily while Tazinski took a long look before signaling to come down. Tazinski burst out laughing as they cleared the restroom door.

“She undid her jumpsuit and pulled out a big hairy wanger! She’s chick-with-a-dick, man. A horse dick!”

Mademoiselle Magnifique came down the aisle and confronted them. “Well? Was I right?”

Cullen nodded. “You were right. She needed both hands to hold it.”

She cuffed his shoulder. “I told you! Things aren’t always what they seem. Especially around here.”

“Since you seem to know so much about this place,” Tazinski said, “who’s Amy?”

She regarded him as if he were an endearing pet whose antics amused her. “Amy isn’t a person, dear. Amy’s a drug – amyl nitrate. Gay guys inhale it. It gives a more intense erection.”

Tazinski’s expression soured. “Sorry I asked.”

Cullen flashed a get lost look and he disappeared into the throng, a sloth slinking away to forage. He turned to the girl and offered to pay up on their bet. She waved him off and said she came with a date, but had no idea where he was.

So they kept on talking.

He learned she was an art student named Angie, who, like Cullen, attended the U of M, was twenty-one, and wanted to live somewhere else someday – in her case Paris, to study at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Cullen said nothing about wanting to be a doctor, but admitted to being an English major – something he wished he *hadn’t* told his father, who couldn’t understand why he wanted to study a language he already knew.

She raised her brow. “For real? You look like a jock to me. Phys Ed, I would have guessed. What’s the last novel you read, mister English major?”

“*Gravity’s Rainbow*.”

Her mouth fell open. “You actually read that? I lasted fifty pages. It gave me a headache. I had no idea what it was about.”

“Free will and divine predetermination, best I could tell.”

She leaned into him and murmured in his ear. “Okay, okay, I believe you. You’re an English major.” The brush of her lips against his earlobe showered his brain with tiny sparks of delight. “Take me outside.”

She huddled against him beneath the front canopy and clung to his arm while rain splattered the street and thrummed the canvas above. A whiff of crushed leaves and

leather snaked up his nose, the raunchy scent of her perfume intoxicating him. She talked of *Guernica* and Boo Radley, Monet and Aeschylus, Delacroix and Flaubert, a dark-haired enchantress whose cultured sensibility made him feel like a benighted papist. But the joy cresting inside him from the spell she cast ebbed and died when she reminded him of her date. They went back inside and picked their way through the drunken, milling crowd.

A flailing arm flagged them down. "Angie! I thought you ditched me!"

The black curly hair, cocky grin, and misbegotten swagger of Dempsey Fagan took shape in the aisle – his longtime basketball nemesis. Dempsey jerked to a stop, drunk and wasted and reeking of Pierre Cardin. Cullen felt gut-shot.

"Brodie? I didn't think this was your scene. Missed you at the Attucks yesterday for your weekly ass-kicking."

"In your dreams, Fagan. Can't get over the past, can you?"

Dempsey looked at Angie. "Sorry about disappearing. I got sidetracked. It's like a pharmacy in here." He pointed to a love seat with two tall drinks in front of it. "I got us a spot. I'll meet you there after I take a leak." He gave her a peck on the cheek that might as well have been the *Rape of Lucrece* for the sense of defilement it provoked in Cullen. He would rather have been kicked in the nuts.

"You two know each other?" she asked, after Dempsey headed off to relieve himself.

"We played basketball against each other in high school. He went to Adams and I went to Lourdes. We hated each other from the jump."


She squeezed his arm with more pity than he cared for. "I'm sorry. You must feel awful."

"Well, your phone number *would* keep me from having to commit ritual suicide."

She laughed and fished pen and paper from a small gold purse. She scribbled her name and number and handed it to him. He held it to the light. A cold frisson rattled his spine.

"What's your father's name?" he asked.

"Edward. Edward Nichols. Why?"



The first visit back for a transplant patient was a routinely joyous event, an unrivaled medical happy ending. No less so for Ennis's return. Though the sight of a sixty-three-year-old man in a shoulder-length blonde wig, black capri pants, pink women's Keds, and a pink cotton V-neck framing an angry surgical scar *did* appear to unnerve the patients beside him – a black ex-Marine Cullen saw for hypertension and a senile widow of eighty facing dialysis. Not so much the woman's sympathetic, high school principal daughter, whom he had seen before; her availability to attend her mother's medical appointments seemed unlimited. She smiled and asked Ennis where he bought his capris.

Cullen's redheaded receptionist Bria, her rubicund face bloated by the scourge of youthful obesity, clapped her hands and teared up behind her counter. Ennis beamed and took a bow. Cullen embraced him in the middle of the waiting room – done in



soothing pastel green, Tess of the d'Urbervilles again – and congratulated him for so thoroughly cheating death.

He noticed on the way back to the exam room that Ennis's bearing and gait were different, his posture more erect and the swag of his hips languid and dignified. Cullen seated him on a brown leather exam table and considered him more closely. His color held up even beneath the glare of fluorescent tube lights. He looked flush, healthy. Revivified. Yes, partly from the wonder of rouge, but mostly because his anemia had been corrected by a vital young kidney capable of making erythropoietin and his cardiac output had quadrupled thanks to his robust new heart. The sweet scent of violets fumigated the room, rising off his clean-shaven face. Perfume in place of aftershave.

He gestured to Ennis's *dernier cri* ensemble. "Very happening outfit." *For a college coed*, he could have added. "I never knew you were so style-conscious."

Ennis's face lit up like a jack-o'-lantern. "I never cared a lick about fashion before. And that's not the only new preference I seem to have acquired. Just the *thought* of raw fish used to make me gag. Now I eat sashimi twice a week. I like to dip it in that green paste, that hot stuff that makes your nose burn?"

"Wasabi. Japanese horseradish. The toxins in your system when you were on dialysis affected everything, even your taste buds. Quite a few transplant patients tell me that food tastes better."

"It's not just that it tastes better; I crave different *kinds* of food. Like beets. My mother had to practically cram 'em down my throat when I was young. Now I eat 'em like candy."

Cullen extracted a pair of readers from the front pocket of his lab coat and flipped open a laptop that rested on a chest-high countertop. He clicked Ennis's chart open and read his most recent lab results aloud. "Creatinine 1.1, hemoglobin 13.8, tacrolimus level 8.0. Everything right where we want it. The only one out of range is your cholesterol – 278."

"Guess I need to eat sashimi every day."

Cullen put a hand on his shoulder and smiled, paternalistic despite himself, like a father to... a daughter? "Your cholesterol is high because of the prednisone you're on. That's probably why you're craving unusual foods, too – steroids will do that. I'll increase the dose of anti-lipid you're on so you won't clog up your new coronaries. First I need to examine you, though."

He coaxed Ennis's arm out of his sweater and took his blood pressure – 136/78 – and auscultated his heart and lungs: no murmurs or rales. The skin over his anterior thorax was remarkably smooth, not a bristle of chest hair to be found. At least he hadn't done anything weird to his breasts. Not yet, anyway. He pulled the table extension out to accommodate his legs, eased him supine, then palpated over a second surgical scar – far less dramatic than the one carved down the length of his sternum – that slanted across his right iliac fossa, just above the crease of his groin. He flinched at the touch of Cullen's hand, but the transplanted kidney buried beneath felt perfectly normal, about the size and firmness of a ripe avocado.

Ennis frowned. "Why do they put it there?" he asked.

"Because that's where the most accessible blood vessels are to sew into."

"Is it supposed to bulge like that? Sometimes it feels like it's about to fall onto the floor."

Cullen retracted the table extension and helped him to a sitting position. "It's a tight fit in there. That part of your body wasn't intended to accommodate a kidney."

He pumped a dime-sized squirt of sanitizer into his palm from a dispenser next to the sink and rubbed it into his hands. Ennis put himself back together and watched Cullen e-prescribe a 40 mg dose of Lipitor from his laptop to the pharmacy.

"I have a question about something, Doc." Cullen looked up from his screen and over the top of his lenses. "My donor was female, wasn't she?"

"What makes you say that?"

Ennis shrugged. "Some things you just know. But she *was* a she, right?"

Cullen weighed his response. Ennis had been told nothing about his donor – not even the customary information of age, sex, and home state – due to the circumstances of his transplant, with Carla being MacGregor's daughter-in-law. He had to be careful here. "I'm afraid I can't get into that with you, Ennis. You know how strict the new privacy laws are. There's this thing called HIPPA. They can fine or even imprison doctors who violate it."

Ennis tossed his head and fluffed his wig. "I still don't see what harm it would do. It's not like you'd be telling me something I don't already know."

Cullen sniffed and tossed his reading glasses onto the counter. Maybe he heard something when they put him under. It had been reported that up to one percent of surgical patients experienced "unintended intraoperative awareness," resulting in explicit recall of sensory events during surgery. In other words, they felt and remembered their thoracic surgeons sawing through their breastbones and talking about them. Wonderful. A new cause of post-traumatic stress syndrome: insufficient anesthesia during routine surgery. But what if his hunch that his donor was female indicated deepening psychiatric trouble? Maybe this was gender integration gone awry, a pathologic delusion that a heart and kidney *from* a female might somehow make *him* more female. On the other hand, the new clothes he wore and his belief that his donor was female could be positive signs, an accelerated flowering of his transgender identity rather than dysfunction.

Whatever the case, the science part of the visit was over. Now it was time for the art of medicine, the true measure of a physician. It was why he became a doctor, the gritty human engagement of it, eyeball-to-eyeball, no one else in the room. Informed empathy was the coin of the realm here, in this cramped, hushed space, transacting their ancient ritual in digital, their sacrosanct drama, in its own way no less vital than giving birth or having sex or dying.

"What difference does it make if your donor was a woman? Does it really matter?"

Ennis's painted face hardened into a stubborn moue, a petulant woman determined to have her way. "I think about her all the time. I even know her name. It came to me in a dream. Carla."

The soft croon of her name gave Cullen gooseflesh, like hearing the miller's daughter say Rumpelstiltskin.

"I'd give anything to know more about her, Doc."

A tocsin sounded in his head, a premonition of trouble. "Donor families grieve in different ways. Some of them feel that revisiting their grief to satisfy the curiosity of a recipient is asking too much."

Ennis put his hand against his cheek and pleaded, disturbingly female, submissive, appealing to the man of the house to come to his aid. "Can't you help me? Please?"

Cullen fought to remain impassive, to stifle the roiling in his gut. "I'll see what I can do."

**---END OF SPECIAL 3-CHAPTER PREVIEW---**

**However, special back-of-the-book material is included if you page down.**

## Book Club Guide

1. Cullen Brodie saves the life of his patient, Ennis Willoughby. Does Ennis have an impact on Cullen's life? If so, how?

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2. What is the meaning of the book's epigraph?

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3. Which do you think the story suggests: that the soul of Ennis's organ donor, Carla MacGregor, inhabited him? Or that he confused his emerging transgender personality with Carla's imagined characteristics?

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4. What is the book's cover symbolic of?

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5. Which character do you feel the most sympathy for, and why?

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6. Cullen and Angie react in opposite ways to the same tragic event of their youth. Compare and contrast their reactions and give an opinion as to why each reacted the way they did.

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7. Which character changes most throughout the course of the story?

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8. What did you learn from the story about the doctor-patient relationship?

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9. What did you learn from the story about the nature of serious medical illness?

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10. Discuss the role that art plays in the story. What is the significance in the story of the paintings *Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun* by Van Gogh, and *Le Jeune Martyre* by Delaroche?

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11. Most of the novel is set in the United States, but several chapters take place on the island of Rarotonga in the South Pacific. What is the island's significance to the story?

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12. Discuss the dynamics of the relationship between Cullen and Angie.

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13. The story suggests that cross-dressing and Christianity share a common essential truth. Describe what this might be.

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14. What is the basis of the religious conversion that occurs in the story?

Interview with the Author

Q. Tell us about the unusual title of your story.

A. The protagonist of the story, Cullen Brodie, is a doctor. His most unusual patient, Ennis Willoughby, is a cross-dresser – sometimes male and sometimes female.

Parrotfish are hermaphrodites, spending part of their life cycle as males and part as female – like Ennis. Parrotfish are also brilliantly colored, sometimes in such a way that their color scheme is remarkably similar to the colors of the rainbow flag of the LGBT movement – like the parrotfish on the cover of the book. Cullen is the atheist in the title, and Ennis is the parrotfish.

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**Q. You are a doctor – a kidney specialist – and a writer. What do the art of medicine and the art of fiction have in common?**

**A.** More than you might think. I try to create complex characters that are three dimensional, so that they *seem* like real people. Patients *are* real people who need to be related to in three dimensions: physical, emotional, and spiritual. And each patient's illness is a story in which that patient is the lead character. It is not possible to provide effective care to a patient without knowing their story, and it is not possible to create believable characters without a story for them to act upon. In this way the roles of doctor and writer are the same: each must understand the central character and that character's story.

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Q. What was the most difficult aspect of writing *The Atheist and the Parrotfish*?

A. Writing from the point of view of a cross-dresser. It required a great amount of research to make the character Ennis Willoughby credible to readers. I not only had to understand Ennis's cross-dressing in a practical sense, to know what cross-dressers *do*, but also in an emotional sense, to know how cross-dressing *feels*.

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**Q. Were any of the characters in your story inspired by real people?**

**A.** Yes. The character of Ennis Willoughby is based on a man, long deceased, who was the most unusual patient I ever had. He was a gruff tradesman who came to my office one day wearing a dress and a bra and a female wig, at a time when public cross-dressing was rare. I asked him why he was dressed like a woman. He told me, "Because I like it, and that's all I want to say about it." I wondered ever since what exactly it was that he liked about wearing a dress. And now I finally know.

~~~

Q. Very few readers will come to this story expecting to discover common ground between Christianity and cross-dressing. Explain what this surprising link means to the story.

A. There is an essential truth common to cross-dressing and Christianity – and to parrotfish. A brilliant paradox. Christianity accommodates multiple paradoxes; *both* the Crusades *and* turn-the-other-cheek; *both* the lion *and* the lamb; *both* the sinner *and* the

saint. A cross-dresser accommodates *both* a male *and* a female personality. And the parrotfish, which is a sequential hermaphrodite, changes from female to male during its lifecycle, living as *both* male *and* female, not *either* female *or* male. Christianity, cross-dressing, and parrotfish are all *both/and* rather than *either/or*.

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**Q. Why did you become a doctor, and why a writer?**

**A.** I became a doctor to help other human beings and to engage with them in an intimate and meaningful way. Altruism is a basic human impulse – though often an irrational one: for example, Gentiles who risked their lives to protect Jews in the Holocaust, or soldiers who dive on grenades to protect their platoon mates. Patients allow me to satisfy my need for altruism. It is that way for most doctors that I know. I write for much the same reason; to seek meaning through storytelling and to touch other lives in an intimate way.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all who touched this book during its long journey, notably Mark Spencer and Caroline Upcher, early champions of this project who helped shape it.

I am deeply grateful to my publisher, Dave Lane, who plucked this story from the pile and launched it.

A hat tip to Dale Pease for creating the fabulous cover that captures so much in a single image.

Finally, special thanks to Eric Pinder, my editor at Evolved Pub, for his wisdom and skill. His many reads of the manuscript and careful attention to every detail improved it immeasurably.

## About the Author



By day I'm a nephrologist, treating dialysis patients and kidney transplant recipients. By night I write fiction. I believe the two finest callings in life are doctor and writer, one ministering to the human condition, the other illuminating it, and each capable of transforming it.

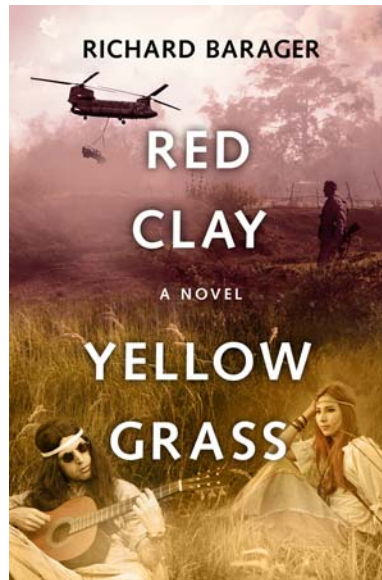
I earned BA and MD degrees at the University of Minnesota and did my postgraduate training at Emory University in Atlanta and the University of California in San Diego. I live now in Orange County, CA.

I am a champion of the healing power of literature, and sometimes prescribe novels or short stories to patients to help them cope with illness. Fiction explores meaning in a way science cannot. Sometimes only fiction tells the truth.

Please stop by and visit me online at my [website](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#). If you have an account there, you'll also find me at [Goodreads](#).



## What's Next?



### **RED CLAY, YELLOW GRASS: A NOVEL OF THE 1960s**

**By Richard Barager**

Watch for this literary/historical glimpse at a critical time in our history to release in March 2018. For more information on this book, please visit [Richard Barager's Page](#) at the Evolved Publishing website.

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Red clay and yellow grass, a battleground and a rock festival... the senseless slaughter of Vietnam and the folly of utopian fantasy.

David Noble is an orphan with a fondness for the novels of Walter Scott; Jackie Lundquist is a child of privilege, partial to J. D. Salinger and the importance of getting real. Their ill-fated college love affair implodes when David enlists to fight a war she opposes.

Angered by his choice – the marines instead of her – Jackie refuses to acknowledge his letters from Vietnam, where David is burrowed into the blood-red clay of Khe Sanh, one of six thousand marines entrapped by an army of North Vietnamese regulars. David survives the brutal siege, but returns home to find Jackie immersed in a counterculture world of drugs and militancy.

The two lovers find themselves fighting on opposite sides of the defining issue of their time, as the New Left and the New Right battle for a generation's political soul. To Jackie, the faltering war in Vietnam is a failure of national conscience; to David it is a failure of national honor. But neither her rise to fame as the antiwar movement's alluring Radical Queen nor David's defiant counter-protest activities in support of the war can extinguish their passion for one another.

Both their conflicted affair and the Age of Aquarius itself careen toward the

mellow-yellow grass of Altamont Speedway, site of the decade's last great rock festival:
Altamont, the metaphoric Death of the Sixties, where honor and shame collide and
tragedy awaits redemption.

[More from Evolved Publishing](#)

We hope you loved *The Atheist and the Parrotfish* as much as we did, and that you'll take a moment to post an honest, heartfelt review at your favorite retailer site online, and/or at Goodreads, if you have an account there.

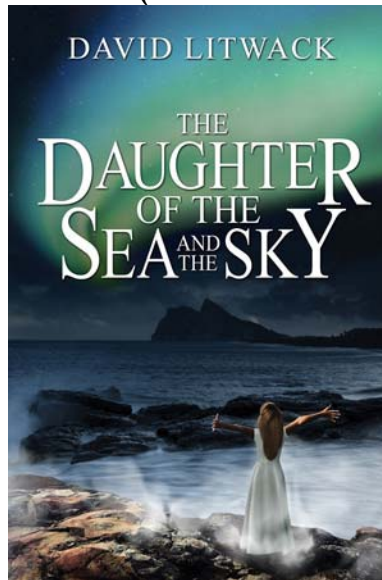
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Reviews are so important to us indie/small press authors. Thank you so much for your support.

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And be sure to scroll down and check out these other amazing, award-winning Literary Fiction pieces, which we feel certain you'll truly enjoy.

For lovers of literary sagas with a fantastical feel, that touch on subjects of a spiritual and philosophical nature (suitable for readers 13 and older):



THE DAUGHTER OF THE SEA AND THE SKY

By David Litwack

This literary journey exploring the clash between reason and faith, and the power of hope and love, is now available. For more information about this book, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](http://www.evolvedpublishing.com) website.



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*After centuries of religiously motivated war, the world has been split in two. Now the Blessed Lands are ruled by pure faith, while in the Republic, reason is the guiding light – two different realms, kept apart and at peace by a treaty and an ocean.*

Children of the Republic, Helena and Jason were inseparable in their youth, until fate sent them down different paths. Grief and duty sidetracked Helena's plans, and Jason came to detest the hollowness of his ambitions.

These two damaged souls are reunited when a tiny boat from the Blessed Lands crashes onto the rocks near Helena's home after an impossible journey across the forbidden ocean. On board is a single passenger, a nine-year-old girl named Kailani, who calls herself "The Daughter of the Sea and the Sky." A new and perilous purpose binds Jason and Helena together again, as they vow to protect the lost innocent from the

wrath of the authorities, no matter the risk to their future and freedom.

But is the mysterious child simply a troubled little girl longing to return home? Or is she a powerful prophet sent to unravel the fabric of a godless Republic, as the outlaw leader of an illegal religious sect would have them believe? Whatever the answer, it will change them all forever... and perhaps their world as well.

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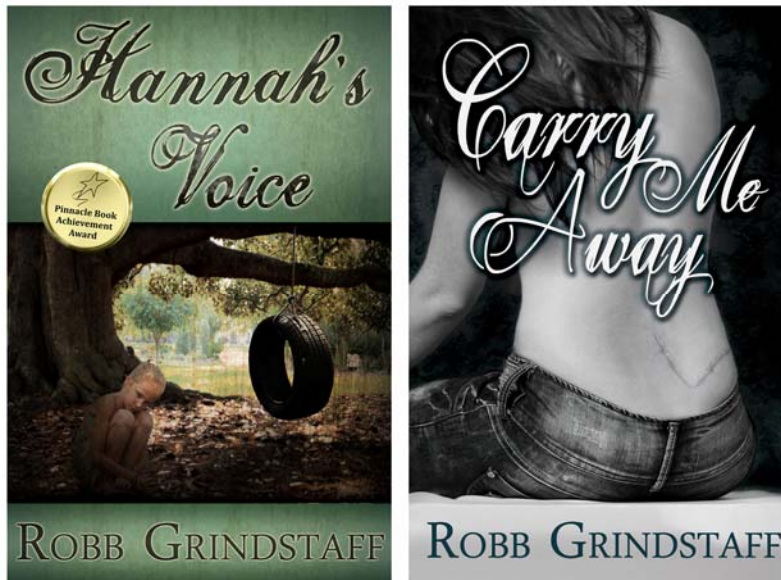
Praise for *The Daughter of the Sea and the Sky*:

"*The Daughter of the Sea and the Sky* by David Litwack is a stunningly constructed story of a young girl who is deeply troubled but goes out of her way to help others. Tender yet tense, it is a story that explores the issue of faith and reason, and the wisdom and discernment to choose between right and wrong. David Litwack's exquisitely crafted story is thoughtful, passionate and simply delightful." ~ *Khamneithang Vaiphei*

"This is a tale of the heart and soul, of the beautiful yearning for meaning, and of how it can be found in the union of faith and reason, as well as in creativity. Everything, Litwack seems to say, points to Spirit. In this novel, nature itself embodies the spiritual world. The farm's overseer, Sebastian, knows this well, for he has been at the farm for many years, and is completely attuned to the rhythm of the seasons. I'm delighted to have truly found nothing negative to say about this book. *The Daughter of the Sea and the Sky* is a beautiful, moving novel, one that I predict will become an instant classic, especially in the literature of spirituality. It is a novel to be treasured and re-read many times, not only for its beauty, but for its thought-provoking treatment of universal themes." ~ *A Night's Dream of Books*

"First off, let me start by saying this book is something special. I don't say that often, but there is something un-pinpoint-able and undefined that is wholly beautiful, endearing and magical about this book and the story. I'm going to lay this at the author's feet. If this author brings out another book, you can bet I'll snap it up as soon as it's in print, because I can tell from this one alone that me and David's books are going to be lifelong friends." ~ *Elle Lainey*

For lovers of traditional literary fiction that touches on the deep cultural aspects of life (suitable for readers 16 and older):



Both Books are Pinnacle Book Achievement Award WINNERS
(Summer 2014 and Fall 2015): BEST FICTION



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**HANNAH'S VOICE**  
By Robb Grindstaff

This up-market literary fiction explores the extraordinary events of one girl's life and struggles to be understood.

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CARRY ME AWAY
By Robb Grindstaff

This literary coming-of-age novel from the author of the critically-acclaimed *Hannah's Voice* features the unique and memorable Carrie Destin.

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For more information on these books, please visit the publisher's website at [Evolved Publishing](http://EvolvedPublishing.com).

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Description of *Hannah's Voice*:

When six-year-old Hannah's brutal honesty is mistaken for lying, she stops

speaking. Her family, her community, and eventually, the entire nation struggle to find meaning in her silence.

School officials suspect abuse. Church members are divided – either she has a message from God or is possessed by a demon. Social workers interrupt an exorcism to wrest Hannah away from her momma, who has a tenuous grip on sanity.

Hidden in protective foster care for twelve years, she loses all contact with her mother and remains mute by choice.

When Hannah leaves foster care at age eighteen to search for Momma, a national debate rages over her silence.

A religious movement awaits her prophecy and celebrates her return. An anarchist group, Voices for the Voiceless, cites Hannah as its inspiration. The nation comes unhinged, and the conflict spills into the streets when presidential candidates chime in with their opinions on Hannah – patriotic visionary or dangerous radical. A remnant still believes she is evil and seeks to dispatch her from this world.

Hannah stands at the intersection of anarchists and fundamentalists, between power politics and an FBI investigation. All she wants is to find her momma, a little peace and quiet, and maybe some pancakes.

One word would put an end to the chaos... if only Hannah can find her voice.

~~~

### **Praise for *Hannah's Voice*:**

"Grindstaff's prose is unadorned, deft, carefully constructed – but I think what sets this novel apart is its humor. Grindstaff has a knack for portraying the drama of Hannah's dilemma in a way that makes you giggle." ~ P.B. "Pete" Morin

"Grindstaff's writing is pure, and free of the hyperbole and love for one's own words that often get in the way of a good story. His deft handling of the character and personality of Hannah at two distinct stages in her life showcases his mastery of language and characterization. He carefully chose each word to show the ten year difference in Hannah's life while staying true to who she really is. That is no small feat." ~ Lanette Kauten, Author of "Cassia" and "Behind the Open Walls"

"This book is so well written and Hannah is so compelling, her voice lingers in my mind long after I have finished reading. If *Hannah's Voice* doesn't end up on the bestseller's list, on every notable list... I will be shocked." – Michelle L. Johnson

"There are books that are interesting, and then there are books that you just can't put down. This is one of those books. Something in Mr. Grindstaff's writing style is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor. He captures the quirks of Southern characters while maintaining their humanity. It would have been easy to write so many of these as stereotypical comical buffoons, but he avoided the easy way out." ~ *The Self-Taught Cook*

"*Hannah's Voice* is a beautiful story, and I'm going to tell you about it, but before I do: seriously, you guys, read it. I'm not kidding. You'll be changed forever, inside... it's not a book with such strong thematic material that it will make anyone cringe, but it will be burned into your brain for eternity in such a delightful way. Touching, moving, funny, awesome. I can't say it enough: this book is revolutionary, and the best thing I've read in years. Awesome. AWESOME." ~ Naomi Sarah



### **Description of *Carry Me Away*:**

Carrie Destin, a biracial military brat, learns the injuries she sustained in a car accident will prove fatal before she reaches adulthood. She accelerates her life and sets aggressive goals: college, connecting with her Japanese roots, and the all-consuming desire to find her soul mate. A kid from nowhere, she travels the world with her Marine father and Japanese mother.

Facing an abbreviated life with a brash attitude and a biting, sometimes morbid sense of humor, Carrie races to graduate high school at age fifteen. College is her marker of adulthood, when she can smoke in public and order dessert before dinner. She tosses out her adolescent wedding scrapbook for a funeral plan. A teenage crush on Paul, a family friend and a widower seventeen years her senior, develops into a fantasy that takes on a life of its own.

As she outlives the original prognosis into her early twenties, her life goals evolve—always short-term. The longing for love stays constant, yet she walls herself off from others. Relationships end in betrayal, abandonment and violence. When love reveals itself, she pulls away, fearing that an early meeting with Death is on the horizon.

Carrie's frantic desire to experience life before it ends spirals out of control, leading to a physical and emotional collapse. Her grandmother's wisdom points her toward acceptance, but first she must break through her walls before she can give the gift of 'til-death-do-us-part.

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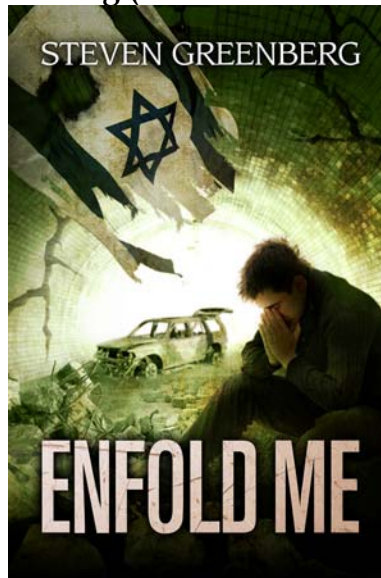
Praise for *Carry Me Away*:

"After the wonderful *Hannah's Voice*, my expectations were pretty high. I was not disappointed. Robb Grindstaff's second book, much like his first, is a grand achievement of literary talent and it should easily cement him on many people's 'can't wait to see what he releases next' lists." ~ Allison M. Dickson

"Grindstaff has produced another masterpiece on par with *Hannah's Voice*! Carrie's life is all about racing forward, while she herself stands internally still, convinced she'll die before she has a chance to live. She tries to experience every aspect of life, but refuses to let the experiences in on a deeper level, and it's heart-wrenching, vivid, and realistic. I feared with Carrie, I cried for her, and I begged her to quit TRYING so hard to live, and just LIVE. Like *Hannah's Voice*, Grindstaff's characters are beyond real. Carrie has a special place in my heart. You'll never meet another character like Carrie, who packs the most life possible into every page of every chapter." ~ Nola Sarina

"I used this book to escape from the business of my everyday life, to allow me to reconsider all the things going on around me, and help me focus and see things in a new light. Most books don't do that. This one did." ~ Naomi Leadbetter

For lovers of powerful, emotional literary fiction that will stay with you long after you've finished reading (suitable for readers 16 and older):



ENFOLD ME

By Steven Greenberg

Don't miss this intriguing, frightening, compelling look inside a post-Israel Middle East, from the award-winning author of the Amazon #1 Bestseller *Galerie*. For more information on these books, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](http://www.evolvedpublishing.com) website.

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*His world is unrecognizable, his journey unimaginable.*

Daniel Blum lost more than he understands when the State of Israel fell. Torn from family and life's work, he is alone and scarred – surviving on ingenuity and dedication alone.

When a figure from his past appears, Daniel must choose between hope and truth. As they journey together through the ruins of his homeland, he confronts a world where nothing is as it seems. Straining the bonds of duty and family, he plumbs the true depths of his loss, and must decide how to face the unintended consequences of his choices.

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Praise for *Enfold Me*:

"I was haunted... had to read this incredible book in short doses... so haunting was the premise." ~ *Jewneric*

"Devastating, stunning, unforgettable... an amazing story, if you dare read it." ~ *Glenda*

"...brutal... shocking.... The book's conclusion will startle...." – *San Diego Jewish Times*

"One of the most thoughtful and disturbing books I have ever read. A riveting novel that takes a hard look at the political, social and economic realities in Israel and asks--what if the unthinkable happens?" ~ *Rebecca Rachmany*

"Highly recommended! I like to read thrillers and spy novels – Grisham, Le Carre,

and even the occasional Kellerman. Once in a while I'll read a more serious novel too—they're good and make me feel like I didn't waste my education. Anyway, "Enfold Me" is all of these put together, and put together well." ~ *Jeremy*

"This is a thrilling and gripping book and quite frightening. I found the basic concept of the book frighteningly plausible. It's an uncomfortable book to read. Certainly it's memorable. Once I got into it, I was gripped." ~ *BookWormNZ*

---THANK YOU---



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