

MODEL CHILD

“Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him.”

--Fyodor Dostoyevsky

CHAPTER I

JUNE 1998, CHICAGO

JAMES SHANNON MADE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS as he stood outside the bedroom of his daughter, Christina. In his left hand he held a heavy brass candlestick, brought by his great-grandmother from County Kerry, and a piece of clothesline. Despite the cool of the early summer night, beads of sweat lined his forehead. His undershirt was wet around his neck and below his armpits.

He opened the unlocked door with tiny movements, as careful and deliberate as a safecracker. Moving forward in stocking feet, he made his way to the middle of the room. As he gathered in a deep silent breath, he took a moment to collect himself. He looked around the moonlit room: meticulous as always, not a piece of paper or a hairpin out of place. The room had a certain austerity about it despite its red-and-white-striped wallpaper. Its furnishings consisted of a plain walnut desk with a straight-backed wooden chair, a bookcase, a bureau, a bed, and bedside table. On the back of the door hung a full-length rectangular mirror. A smaller oval mirror sat on the bureau.

Christina was fifteen, but the room held little teenage paraphernalia. No stuffed animals, no bottles or jars of makeup, no posters of rock stars or actors. No souvenirs or knickknacks from trips or parties. Her desk lay bare except for a box of

drawing pencils and her ever-present sketchpad. The surface of the bedside table was bare as well, except for an alarm clock and a box of Kleenex.

A calendar with National Park scenes and a small framed drawing of Christina herself broke up the monotony of the empty walls. This month the calendar featured Oregon's Crater Lake, its brilliant blue water prominent even in the room's dim light. The drawing, done in pencil, was a self-portrait. Christina had always liked to paint and draw, had done so for hours at a stretch from the time she could barely hold a pencil or a brush. The framed drawing showed her head and neck turned slightly to the right. It captured an unsmiling girl of indeterminate age, who could have been eleven or seventeen, a girl who regarded the world with slightly bored indifference or possibly annoyance. Shadows bathed the right side of her face.

Shannon took a step toward his daughter's bed. He tried to find the word that captured her. *Beatific*. That was it, beatific. He drank in the details of her blonde hair splayed against the pillow like a halo, her chiseled features, her ever-so-slightly parted lips. He didn't know much about fine art, had only been to an art museum three or four times in his life, but he always thought his daughter looked like a painting of a Renaissance angel.

She stirred in her sleep. Unlike her, to stir that way. She usually slept like a log. *Please, don't let her wake up*, he prayed to no one in particular. He wasn't sure he could do it if she did.

He put the clothesline on the floor and held the candlestick with both hands, near its top. Lifting it above his head, like an ax, he saw Christina stir again. She opened first one eye, and then the other. Christina, who could sleep through a tornado or a train wreck, was awake now.

She looked up at him. "Daddy?"

He swung the candlestick down with all the strength he could muster. The base struck her left temple with a thud and a crack. Christina made a sound like a wounded animal, a kind of

shrill groan, and tried clumsily to shield her face with her hands. He swung the candlestick again. This time it landed above and behind her left ear. Her second groan sounded lower and more muted, almost whispered. A rivulet of blood began to trickle from her ear. Her eyes, still open, looked towards him, glazed and unseeing. The background music of her shallow breathing was irregular and gasping now.

He dropped the candlestick and bent down to get the clothesline. Encircling her neck with it, he crossed his hands, pulling each end as hard as he could. The gasping turned into choking, and a fine white froth began to form around her mouth. Her arms and legs flailed; her torso buckled. At least the room's darkness kept him from seeing her too clearly. He had an image of her flawless face, purple and distorted now, as his hands held fast to the clothesline.

He'd lost all sense of time. He might have had the rope around her neck for five minutes or fifteen—maybe thirty, or maybe half the night. TV and movies made strangulation look much easier, or at least much faster. His hands burned from the clothesline, with a searing pain that cut across his palm like a hot poker. At the same time a duller pain, more of a deep excruciating ache, began at his wrist and rose almost to his elbow. This was the most physically grueling work he'd ever done.

When the writhing and the choking finally stopped, when her body fell back against the bed as limp as straw, he let go of the clothesline. Feeling along the side of neck for a pulse and finding none, he put his head on her chest and listened for a heartbeat. Nothing. Only then, his last reserves of strength exhausted, did he allow himself to sink to the floor. He lay there, not moving, barely breathing himself, for most of an hour.



It was close to three, according to the clock on Christina's bedside table, when he finally felt steady enough to walk again. He went downstairs, holding on to the banister like a drunk. He made directly for the kitchen phone but checked himself. *No. I can just as well call later.*

Instead, he poured himself a glass of milk and thought he'd try to eat something. Something light and unthreatening, a piece of toast, or a dish of cottage cheese, or a scoop of raspberry sherbet. He hadn't eaten dinner, not more than a few mouthfuls of leftover canned stew. Par for the course, these last several weeks. But even as his stomach growled for food, the thought of eating brought him close to retching.

He picked up the glass of milk and took it to the living room. Setting it on a coffee table, he stepped over to the CD player, his CDs stacked nearby. He regarded the CDs fondly. Mainly easy listening, vocals by Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra, several of the Boston Pops. Shannon, fifty-five, had tastes in music more common to someone half a generation older. He never had much regard for rock and roll, even when still in his teens and twenties; the Doors and the Grateful Dead and their like had never touched him. Most jazz was too unstructured for him, with too many flights of fancy. He liked classical music in a casual way, but he often felt intimidated by it. Easy listening was just right.

The CD player afforded him more pleasure than any other possession. He'd miss it terribly when they locked him up.

He looked through his collection and took out a Sinatra, a collection of duets. Margaret's favorite. On it was a number that Sinatra did with Barbra Streisand, "I've Got a Crush on You." He and Margaret had picked it as their theme song. A line from it summed up their time together perfectly, as far as he was concerned:

I never had the least notion
That I could fall with such emotion.

Margaret had died eighteen months ago. They would have been married twenty years this summer.

He put the CD on, sat back in his easy chair, and drank the milk as he let his mind drift, as Sinatra and his cohorts belted out familiar standards: “Come Rain or Come Shine” . . . “They Can’t Take That Away from Me” . . . “I’ve Got the World on a String.” He noticed that their theme song failed to bring a tear to his eye the way it usually did. It struck him, almost in passing, that he had no feelings of any kind. No grief or fear, no relief or nostalgia, and no regret. The rest of his mind, as best he could tell, was in order. He could remember, he could reason, he could go logically from *A* to *B* to *C*. But it felt as though the part of his brain that housed emotions had been scooped out and filled with sawdust.

He thought about putting on another CD when the Sinatra one was over but decided against it. Instead he went upstairs, where he showered and shaved. Indifferent to his dress, he reached for the first things he found in his closet, a pair of tan slacks and a short-sleeve blue shirt.

He went downstairs again, poured himself another glass of milk, and reached for the phone. The 911 dispatcher answered before the second ring. He identified himself, gave his address, and paused, but only for a fraction of a second. “I’ve just killed my daughter,” he reported, the last words he would say for nearly two weeks.

CHAPTER II

JUST WEST OF DOWNTOWN CHICAGO, in the shadow of the Eisenhower Expressway, almost lost amidst the sprawl of the city's largest medical complex, sits a nondescript grayish building of three stories. If it caught your eye at all, you'd notice it as different from its neighbors: recessed from the street, for the most part lacking windows, surrounded by impenetrable fencing. A forbidding place despite its small size and unassuming presence.

You might think it looked more like a correctional facility than a place of healing, and you'd be right. It's called the Greater Chicago Forensic Institute—more commonly known by its initials, GCFI. Its patients came from the jails and lock-ups of Chicago and its environs, inmates whose disordered mental states made them unfit or unsuitable for routine incarceration.

On the second floor, near the back of the building, was the office of one of the GCFI psychiatrists, Dr. Harold Gottlieb. His official title: Consultant Psychiatrist and Chief of Section. He ran the GCFI admission unit. Despite the tedious yellow-brown paint job, which Gottlieb likened to butterscotch or dog doo, depending on his mood, despite the tiny windows that let in scant light, Gottlieb had imbued his niche with a degree of warmth. Pictures of his wife, son, and daughter sat on his desk, along with two small potted plants. Some framed prints of

dancers hung on the wall, from the 1996 Degas exhibit at the Art Institute. Gottlieb, a large ungraceful man of forty-eight, had always been drawn to dancers. He loved the silky fluidity of their movements, in contrast to his own, which were often jerky and awkward. He loved the way they seemed to revel in their physical being. Gottlieb himself had never felt a high degree of comfort with his body.

Tipped slightly backward in his desk chair, he looked at the charts on his ample lap. Across from him sat Norma Caldwell, the social worker who served as unit administrator, and Dwight Sanderson, the first-shift charge nurse. They were the members of the GCFI staff with whom he worked most closely. It was Monday morning, and they'd convened to go over the weekend admissions.

"Just three of them," Norma opened. A short trim woman in her early forties, she beheld life with bright hazel eyes, perpetually bemused. "The first one came in Friday night, about eleven. Jerry Fouts, eighteen-year-old high school senior. White kid, drunk, sent from the lock-up in one of the Northwest suburbs. Tried to strangle himself."

"Hang himself, you mean?" asked Gottlieb.

"Not quite. See, he got hold of duct tape somehow. Wrapped it around his neck, and then he twisted himself around and around on the floor of his cell."

"Gotta give him points for creativity," grunted Dwight. "Least it's a switch from tryin' to hang his sorry ass with his undershirt." Dwight's voice had a booming resonance, even when he tried to talk quietly, which he rarely did. A dark-skinned black man in his thirties, six two and a solid 230, his face was enlivened with a single earring and a stud through one nostril. Once in a while, he enlivened it further with a *souçon* of dark green eye shadow.

"Well, I guess he came pretty close to succeeding," Norma went on. "That duct tape is strong stuff. He *would* have

succeeded, except one of the cops needed to take a leak, and he had to walk past the kid's cell to get to the john."

Gottlieb glanced through his chart. "Okay. What's he been like since we got him?"

"Sullen," Norma answered. "A bit sheepish. Told the weekend crew he's sorry he didn't make it, but they think he's probably relieved. Thing is, Hal, his situation's not so bad. Assault second, but the guy he assaulted had been drinking too, and there's a question about who started it. He's also a first offender, and the family can afford a private attorney."

"Shee-it," scoffed Dwight, "he'll be bailed out so soon, he still gonna have those tape marks on his neck." Dwight affected a speaking style which Gottlieb characterized as "fake Ebonics." Highly articulate when he chose to be, he was also exceptionally well read, a perpetual student who availed himself of the evening courses offered by Chicago's plethora of colleges and universities. A typical example: *Selected Russian Novels in Translation, from Dostoyevsky to Solzhenitsyn*.

Norma gave a few more particulars about Jerry Fouts, and they put together a plan for his evaluation and treatment. Then she moved on to the second admission, a thirty-six-year-old Hispanic named Hector Morales.

"We got him yesterday from Cook County. They had him for a week, for cellulitis." She put on her reading glasses and scanned his transfer summary. "His whole left arm was a mess. Almost twice its normal size, with swollen lymph nodes all the way up to his axilla. Got it from a self-inflicted puncture wound with a paper clip. They think he dipped it in feces first."

Gottlieb tapped the chart distractedly. "Do we have any idea why he did it?"

Dwight shrugged. "I'm guessin' it's the usual. Wanted to break up the monotony, spend time in a hospital instead of a jail. Or else his voices told him to. Or else he's just the curious type, wanted to see what would happen. Who the fuck knows?"

Gottlieb felt acutely tired. Nothing new; it was a tiredness that waxed and waned but never left him, not fully. A tiredness that had nothing to do with lack of sleep or physical exertion, that went to the core of him. A tiredness born of years of ministering to the lost and feckless, the pointlessly bizarre, the frankly sickening. Of ministering to those who often met his efforts with indifference—more than that—who would have spit in his face in a split second if they had the chance.

He asked a few *pro forma* questions about Hector Morales without the smallest jot of interest. They hashed out another treatment plan as he sipped the remains of tepid coffee.

“I’ve saved the best for last,” said Norma. “James Shannon. They transferred him Saturday, from the Cook County Jail.”

She didn’t have to give particulars. The Shannon case had been front-page news for a week, had been at the top of every local newscast. In a city where violent crime was an intrinsic part of the folklore, from Al Capone to Richard Speck to John Wayne Gacy, the case had seized the public’s interest like few others. It fascinated and mystified. James Patrick Shannon, a devout Irish Catholic, a law-abiding sort who hadn’t so much as gotten a speeding ticket before his arrest, had killed his daughter in her bed without a known reason or provocation. He’d made no effort to conceal his crime. To the contrary. He poured himself a glass of milk, sat down in his living room, and listened to a CD before calling the police. He confessed while his daughter’s body was still warm. And then he turned mute.

Gottlieb looked up sharply. “I assume we have his records from the jail?”

Norma nodded. “They’re much more complete than usual. Every time he passed gas, someone wrote it down.”

“Good. I want to take my time going over them. Now tell me, did he maintain a total silence?”

She nodded. “He talked to no one. Not to his brothers or sister, or his lawyer, or even his priest. The thing is, they’re supposed to be a tight-knit family. His lawyer—that’s

something else, his lawyer's also a close friend. They've known each other forever."

"Maybe he's catatonic," Dwight volunteered. "Or maybe he's puttin' on some kinda catatonic act."

She shook her head again. "They said he paced around the cell, sometimes for hours at a time. When he wasn't pacing, he read or wrote. He keeps a notebook or a journal or something."

Gottlieb brought his fingertips together, like the steeple of a church. "Do we know what he was reading?"

"The Bible."

"Shee-it," muttered Dwight. "Mo'-fo' cracks his kid's skull, chokes her, and then he gets hisself religion."

"Maybe he's a schizophrenic with religious delusions," said Norma. "God told him to do it and so forth."

They fell momentarily silent. Gottlieb had followed the case since the onset, had become as caught up in it as most of the population, and now he was about to meet its central figure. "So they finally sent us the infamous James Shannon. I was wondering when we'd get him."



Gottlieb knocked on the steel door to Shannon's cell before unlocking it with an oversized key. They'd put him in a camera cell, a routine precaution. His every moment, waking and sleeping, reading and writing and pacing, eating and defecating, would remain under scrutiny.

He lay on his bunk, on his back, staring at the ceiling, his arms crossed in front of his chest, as his visitor introduced himself. "Mr. Shannon, my name is Dr. Gottlieb."

Shannon turned his head and glanced at him, but otherwise he gave no acknowledgment of Gottlieb's presence. He resumed his fixed gaze at the ceiling a second later. For want of something else to do, Gottlieb scrutinized his new patient. Of course, he had seen many pictures of him on TV and in the

papers, but he was still ill-prepared for the stark normality of Shannon's appearance. A man of about five ten and 160 pounds, he had dark blue eyes and thinning black hair flecked with gray. A trim mustache, neither thick nor narrow. Apart from a slightly weak chin, his features were blandly regular. He had a face, observed Gottlieb to himself, that was made to be lost in a crowd. If he'd committed a stickup instead of a murder, and ten people witnessed it, they would have described him in ten different ways. The Banality of Evil. If James Shannon had committed the crime of which he stood accused, thought Gottlieb, the notable phrase caught him perfectly.

"How are you feeling?" he began.

No answer.

"Do you know where you are?"

Shannon kept silent, so Gottlieb answered his own question. "It's a place called the Greater Chicago Forensic Institute. A kind of hospital, a psychiatric facility for people in trouble with the law. They transferred you here from jail. Do you know why you were arrested?"

Again, no answer, but he thought he caught the faintest quivering of Shannon's lower lip.

Gottlieb's eyes fell upon the cell's small table, bolted to the floor, which also served as a makeshift desk. Neatly arranged on it were a Bible, a pair of reading glasses, and a Polaroid picture propped against the wall. The picture showed a pleasant-looking woman with warm eyes and reddish-blond hair who appeared to be forty, give or take a few years. The camera caught her smiling, but something in the set of her face suggested wariness and tension.

He picked up the photo carefully by the edges. "Attractive woman. Your wife?"

Shannon shifted on top of his bunk and turned towards him again, acknowledging the question with the briefest nod. His eyes begin to well up. He wiped them brusquely with the sleeve of his tan regulation sweatshirt.

“She passed away, I understand,” he pressed on. “A year and half ago, it was? It must have been a difficult time for you.”

Shannon shifted on the bunk again. This time, he turned on his side and faced the wall. Gottlieb took another step towards the desk and picked up the Bible. It was open to the book of Job. He read to himself:

“And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job . . . A perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?”

“I see you’ve been reading the book of Job,” he noted casually. “I’m no expert on the Bible, but that particular book has always fascinated me. It tackles the basic question, doesn’t it? Why does a benign God allow evil? I think all of us can relate to Job at one point or another in our lives.” He replaced the Bible on the desk. “I’m wondering if you feel like him right now. If you feel as though you’re being tested.”

Still no answer, but Shannon had moved his head on the pillow, as if to cock an ear towards his visitor. Despite the silence, Gottlieb sensed that he paid close attention.

He switched to a different tack. “I’m wondering if you’re afraid to talk to me. If you think it would hurt your case in court.” He shifted his weight from one leg to another. “You should know this, Mr. Shannon. Psychiatric testimony can’t be used against you, not unless it has been obtained with your knowledge and permission. That’s not something I just made up. It’s based on a Supreme Court ruling. If you don’t believe me, ask your lawyer.”

Gottlieb took a step towards the cell door. “I’ll be back to see you tomorrow, Mr. Shannon. If you want to talk to someone before then, there are people available to you. I believe Ms. Caldwell and Mr. Sanderson have already introduced

themselves to you. They're willing to do what they can for you, but you'll have to meet them halfway.”

He closed the door, locked it, and walked slowly back to his office. There, he found himself thinking of Iago. In his view, one of the most intriguing villains in all of literature. Another banal man. Iago, whose motives Shakespeare had left so tantalizingly vague, whose guilt propelled him into lasting silence.

Gottlieb wondered if he'd just crossed paths with a latter-day Iago.

