

SERIAL

INTENT

STEVE BRADSHAW

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“The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is a duty of the living to do so for them.”

Lois McMaster Bujold

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Primary Characters

Babcock, Eldon	Defense Attorney
Crowley, Ben	Homicide Detective
Dario	Patient
Day, Sally	Newspaper Columnist
Dunn, Charlie	Survivor
Fetter, Lindsey	Victim, Survivor
Foster, Winston	ME Field Agent
Hutson, Joe	Homicide Detective
Landers, Louie	Homicide Commander
Marcantonio, William T.	Crime Family Patriarch
Mason, Robert	Survivor
Provost, Leonard, MD	Medical Examiner
Sorensen, Margaret	Wife of Jacques
Sorensen, Jacques, MD	Psychiatrist
Wolfe, Aaron	Homicide Detective
Woods, Barry	Estate Attorney

ONE

“I am going to count to three. When I say three, you will be in your safe place. As always nobody can hurt you, and nobody will judge you. One—”

Dr. Jacques Sorensen had rules. He never met clients outside the office, or after hours, or alone. But this was very different. It was about family. Everything was changing.

Ice crystals peppered the window panes in steady threatening waves, the cold wind found all the imperfections of the tattered shack—whining and humming in each crevice and crack like a brood of taunting night creatures dying to get inside. “Two—”

Now he was having second thoughts. After the change in the weather, he should have insisted on the South Side site—the abandoned Masonic Lodge on 64th Street. It held many fond memories from decades ago. Now it was just another broken-down edifice on an overgrown corner lot invisible to the world, but that made it the perfect place for the prior sessions. It was a place forgotten, convenient, and much safer than the old cabin in the woods.

The accumulation was becoming a problem. The rutted dirt road to the cabin snaked through miles of empty

treacherous terrain few traveled, especially in the winter. Tonight, one mistake could be a death sentence.

“—Three,” he said with the same authoritative tone he used hundreds of times before. Now all that was left to do was wait. It usually took ten minutes. He had things to say.

“I’m not happy here.” The raspy whisper crawled through the room on schedule. It was as if the words came inside through the cracks with the wind.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Sorensen said with a slight smile. The complaint was predictable and a good sign—he was coming.

“Don’t patronize me!” This time the words climbed the dark walls like a swarm of angry spiders taking over the room.

The fire did little to light the small cabin, but Sorensen would not be sidetracked. Coughing through the arduous process he checked each rope with a smoking lantern. Sorensen did not know if his nausea came from inhaling kerosene or failing health coupled with the cold, late hour. Either way it did not matter anymore.

“You always say that,” Sorensen said with an impatient tone. He knew the buttons.

“Yeah, well, this time I mean it.”

Sorensen circled a second time for a closer inspection of the blindfold and knots—nothing could be loose. “Who am I speaking to now?” he asked when he finished and walked through his breath back to the window. He set down the lantern and opened the tattered burlap curtain with a shaking finger. Sorensen had stopped watching the transformation years ago. It too made him nauseous. *I should have thought this through better*, he sighed.

“That question only irritates him! He knows you only want him. He knows you don’t care about me. I’ve never meant anything to you.” The anger percolated in each word. Sorensen knew the steps. Dario would be arriving soon.

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“I’m sorry you feel that way. My intentions were never to hurt you. I care about you,” Sorensen said in a casual and disconnected voice. He would control the process as long as possible. It was shorter every time. “Now who am I speaking to . . . ?”

After a few minutes of cold silence, the words that filled the room were very different. It was as if another person had entered the cabin. “What time is it?”

Sorensen slid on his glasses and found his watch. His answer had to be precise. If not, it would delay everything. “It is 12:47 a.m.” His cuff slid down his arm as he reached up to touch the cold window pane he had been studying. The ice crystals were sticking, building. Soon there would be more ice than glass. He had to push forward. “It is late. If Dario is not coming, I need to go home. We all need to go home.” *That should be enough.*

He did not turn when the chair legs creaked and wobbled on the wood floor behind him, or when the gurgling and gasps mixed with the whine of ropes stretching to their limits. Dr. Sorensen knew exactly what was happening—although he could not explain it. His eyes dropped to the weathered wood windowsill—the syringe barrel was full and cap off the needle.

“You impatient bastard,” Dario boomed. “Afraid of a little frozen water? Untie me, at once,” he demanded as if fully expecting his order to be carried out immediately.

Sorensen stayed at the window with his back to his life’s mystery. The first time he had witnessed it, he almost died. Then, on a cold December night in a dark alley, the man he had denied came back home.

“I will not untie you,” Sorensen said with the same calm and steady voice.

The night he almost died a second time, Dr. Sorensen heard the same gurgling and gasping for air, but it was in the alley by his brownstone. He entered the shadows knowing what he would find. If he had not broken the

hypnotic-like trance, Sorensen would have lost his life at the hands of a monster out of control. The mystery had returned and wanted to be called Dario.

Dr. Sorensen understood the psychological aberrations, but he could not explain the physical changes. Unlike Robert Louis Stevenson's fictional character—Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—the twisted and contorted manifestations he observed seemed to grow muscle mass in minutes. Physical identity transformed beyond what Sorensen had ever thought was humanly possible. His early hypothesis was the change was accomplished with the redistribution of blood and excessive hormonal secretions. It was the only way to explain the bulking-up of muscle tissue and the changes in strength, agility, and cognitive powers.

When Sorensen returned to the dark alley that night, Dario had gone away. Sorensen knew the man lying there. Over the next several years he would watch Dario return at will and gain even more strength. The host had no chance. Dr. Sorensen rationalized his lack of medical skills and failing health had left him no choice. He had to change his whole strategy.

“I’m not talking to you anymore,” Dario growled.

Can you read my mind? Is that what I’ve been missing all these years? Sorensen wondered. Do you know my new plan, what I’m about to do? Is that why you now threaten me? Telepathy is another area I’m not equipped to evaluate. It is another reason you must not be permitted to continue like this. I always dealt with the tip of the iceberg. I can’t do this anymore. I don’t care what Margaret believes. I don’t care about any mission. God! Why didn’t I just let you kill yourself years ago?

“Okay, tell me why you’ve decided not to talk to me anymore, Dario.” Sorensen still could not help himself. He had to know. That kept him coming back.

“You’re useless to me, Jocko. You waste my time.” Dario tugged at his ropes and bit at his blindfold. His chair

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creaked as he flexed and struggled to break loose—as always. “I demand you take these ropes off me. I’m not an animal. Do as I say.” The struggle stopped. Another minute passed. Then Dario said under his breath, “I never liked you either.”

Multiple personalities were not new. Over forty-six years at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Dr. Sorensen had treated dozens with dissociative identity disorders. The day he retired, he quietly moved his files to a small rented office in the city a few blocks from his brownstone and Margaret’s relentless needs—the mission. Now, Dr. Sorensen was having his own thoughts. He had his own plan.

The office was his excuse to get out of the house and away from everyone’s expectations. He said he was working on a medical paper, researching patient files. He said he would publish in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. But Dr. Sorensen did not have anything unusual or new to write about. He used his small office to drink scotch, smoke his pipe, and his other lifelong interest. Sorensen should have been a lawyer. Instead of medical books, he preferred to read about criminal law and reformation of the American justice system. He followed homicide cases. Many of the outcomes were detestable. The night Dario came back into his life, he made the biggest mistake of his life.

The time to fix everything had come. Sorensen would use Dario in a much different way. He would present Dario in a controlled state at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Research Society scheduled for Chicago in six days.

The “Dario Complex” would rock the psychiatric community, and Dr. Jacques Sorensen would be a medical icon. Acute psychophysiological metamorphic phenomena were limited to horror movies, up until Dario. Sorensen’s discovery would be the most significant human

metamorphic condition ever observed and documented. Sorensen would introduce Dario to the medical community. His work would become the foundation of new psychiatric research for decades to come. Dario would be Sorensen's crowning achievement—his true mission.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Dario. Do you want to waste more time complaining and berating me, or shall we get on with things? We both have prepared for this moment."

"I feel as bad as the night I was born." Dario tugged at his ropes.

"You were not born. We've been over this ground," Sorensen said. "You are not an entity. You are a figment of an imagination. You do not exist on your own. You are a compilation of confused emotions housed inside a weak man. The pain and confusion gave rise to an anger so intense that your manifestation was made possible. You have always been a misplaced emotion. You have always been a temporary visitor. It is time."

"He looks nothing like me," Dario muttered. "He does not have my strength. He is not as intelligent as me. You like me more than him. You always have."

"You're out of control. I cannot allow it anymore."

"No," Dario barked. "I have thought about this. I'm not cooperating. I hate you! You don't really know me! *He* is always the victim, the loser. *He* cannot change anything that matters. You've tried to help him, but he has failed to respond every time. He's only jeopardized your mission. That's why I am here."

Sorensen stared into the cold night. Dario told the truth, but it did not matter anymore.

"I'm a part of your mission, the one you don't talk about," Dario said. "You're not stopping me. I won't let you turn me into some sort of circus sideshow to be studied."

"So you can read my mind," Sorensen said. "It does

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not matter. You're not on any mission," he said as if he were sending back a sour glass of wine. "You do not understand the big picture. And now you are too dangerous to walk free, Dario."

"We need to talk more," he pushed. "You cannot give up on me, again."

"Talk is over," Sorensen said, his eyes moving to the syringe that would disable Dario.

"I was born to do what no one can or will do. I am needed by you more than ever."

"No, Dario. I don't need you. Joseph does not want you. Margaret will understand. And the group, you terrify them."

A blast of sleet washed over the cabin. The fire popped and the lantern flickered. "I changed my mind, Jocko. I'm not allowing you to put me away again."

Sorensen had crossed more lines in his life than he wanted to think about. He was drowning in the carnage and deception. "You need to sleep now," he whispered into the cold window pane. *You have no missions, and neither do I.* Sorensen reached for the syringe.

"Who will kill all the monsters, Jocko?" This time Dario's words tickled Sorensen's ear. Hot breath lifted Sorensen's sparse, white hair. In the frozen pane Sorensen saw the empty chair and the ropes on the floor. He blinked and Dario's evil eye came into focus above his ear.

Sorensen muttered, "What are you—"

Dario's arm snaked around the doctor's frail torso and tightened like a python. Before Sorensen could finish, the air squeezed from his lungs and his spine snapped like a rotten limb on an old tree. The doctor's paralyzed body slumped to the floor. His cheek pressed onto the cold wood. Unable to move he watched the cabin door open and a black coat lift in the sleet and fade into the night.

In five minutes Dr. Sorensen's eyeballs would be frozen stones.

TWO

“What does Wolfe say about the Fetter shooting?” The commander asked as he poured a cup and walked to the window where he took in the only city he ever knew, but never understood.

“Wolfe’s on his way back,” Hutson said as he rocked back in the swivel chair. Hutson was built exactly like Wolfe, even had the thick wavy brown hair. But that was where the resemblances stopped. Hutson did not possess Wolfe’s savvy intellect, initiative, machoism, or basic physical strength.

“He’s not talking,” Hutson said under his breath. “You know Wolfe. But if you ask me, I think it’s great the Fetter woman killed the bastard. She’s been living in hell long enough.”

“That’s right. I gotta agree. Maybe now her nightmare can be over,” Crowley said from his favorite place, the door jamb where he was half in and half out of the boss’s office. Like most things in his life, he was not fully committed. Crowley’s personality was somewhere between Hutson and Wolfe. He was the glue that held the threesome together. He forced Wolfe to be human and he often stopped Hutson from being an idiot.

“We all knew Ramsey would go after her if he ever got out,” Crowley said. “And, in all fairness, we knew we couldn’t stop him—too many things in our way.”

“That’s right,” Hutson chimed. “Not a thing we could

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have done to stop the man. There's just no rehabilitation for some of these sick people. Ramsey's a monster, mean all his life. He hurt a lot more people than we'll ever know. Now the world's a safer place."

"We're losing the war," Crowley added. "And we're losing damn near all the battles, too. We are overrun by crazies and tied up by laws and rules. We can't get the bad guys off the damn streets fast enough. It feels kinda good when one goes down. But honestly, I never expected the Fetter woman to come out on top of that one."

"Explain yourself," Commander Landers demanded as he kept looking out the window with his nose above his steaming cup of coffee. "What about Mrs. Fetter?"

"I don't have the details. I'm just reacting to Ramsey being shot and Fetter surviving the whole damn experience. I know the guy was in her bedroom when he got nailed."

What you don't know is Ramsey got shot by an unknown assailant, not Fetter, Landers thought. He had other sources at the crime scene. Now he had to wait for Wolfe.

"Okay. I got your input. If you two got nothing to do, I could—" He turned to the swivel chair spinning and door easing closed. Staring at the swinging door blinds his thoughts moved back to Aaron Wolfe—his top homicide detective. Landers knew the city ate up and spit out the good ones. Somehow Wolfe had survived.

Less than five-hundred homicides in Chicago was considered a good year. Crowley was right; the good guys were losing the war in all the major cities. Seemed like more and more of the battles were won by armed citizens desperate to protect themselves. The system no longer kept them safe enough. Something broke.

Another hour passed before the knuckle-rap jerked Landers eyes from his pile to the door. The rangy man with the bushy mustache, heavy overcoat, and gold badge swinging from his neck walked in without a word. The

unshaven, rugged face and thick brown hair hung over Lander's desk with an empty stare. Wolfe stood there like a lion looking for raw meat.

"Have a seat," Landers ordered. He could read Wolfe's face. He carried the unbridled contempt in his dark eyes. But this time that was missing. This time Landers saw something new—uncertainty. If Wolfe was confused, it meant he would be talking even less than usual.

Wolfe did not allow distractions to get in the way of his investigations, especially the premature and speculative banter with authority figures. Landers knew the routine. For the next twenty-four hours Wolfe would digest his crime scene, consider the physical and circumstantial evidence, and weigh the truths and lies. Landers usually gave him plenty of room, but this time had to be different. This time the kill was not a routine homicide. This time Landers felt the kill could have far reaching implications.

"This one we're talking about," Landers said in his official voice. He pointed to the swivel chair in front of his messy desk.

Wolfe sat. His .45 long barrel gun pushed up his coat and his knees touched the desk overhang. "I don't have much to say," he huffed as he pushed his gun down and scanned the room like he was looking for something to shoot.

Landers flashed a smile and his eyes got serious on the battle-scarred face beneath salt-and-pepper hair. "Last time I checked, you worked for me Detective Wolfe." Landers sipped his coffee and set his cup down with a deliberate thud. "Tell me what you have."

"Not much more than you already got from your eyes at the crime scene and office scuttlebutt." Wolfe looked at his wrist even though he didn't own a watch anymore. He never replaced the one that stopped a bullet.

"You haven't had a watch for three years, Wolfe. I'm not doing this. You're gonna talk to me." The commander's

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eyes sharpened as he leaned back in his chair and made a triangle with his hands, the top point touching his nose.

“Not much new here. We have a known felon beating the goddamn system and returning to the scene of the crime six years later. Scumbag Ramsey killed Fetter’s husband and raped her. I assume he wanted to violate her once again and kill her this time. Guess we’ll never know.”

“Keep going,” Landers pushed.

“Eric Ramsey was shot between the eyes—back of his head blown off.”

“Mrs. Fetter had a gun, didn’t she?” Landers asked.

“She did. A Glock 9MM,” Wolfe said as he looked away avoiding dialogue.

“Had it been fired?”

“Yes, but missed the target.”

“Then who shot Eric Ramsey, Wolfe?”

“That’s what I need to figure out.” He turned back to Landers with eyes burning. “Our sniper’s back. Ramsey was hit with a lot more than a 9MM hollow-point.”

“Does that explain a face shot while between Mrs. Fetter’s legs?”

“It could. CSI has bullet fragments. Could be a match to the .50 Barrett. They’re working on trajectory analysis and blood spatter. There was an open window. CSI will have more for me tomorrow.”

“We have enough of the bullet to—”

“—connect with the others? Yes.”

Wolfe looked down at his gun. *You don’t need to know now that Ramsey was not between Lindsey Fetter’s legs when he got shot. I don’t even know what she was doing when Ramsey was executed—I sure as hell don’t need another thought process screwing up mine.*

But why did she deny the rape kit? And why did she lie about using the gun—her bullet missed by a few feet? All she kept saying was that she was in fear for her life. Lindsey Fetter shot an intruder in her bedroom. She had

acted well within her rights. Seemed over rehearsed.

“The Glock, does it belong to Fetter?” Commander Landers asked.

“She says it’s hers. We’re looking into it. After being brutalized, watching her husband die, and living alone in fear for six years, I expect it to be her gun.”

“Where’d she keep it?” Landers asked. Wolfe had the same suspicions.

“Under her pillow, loaded, she said.” He eyed the pot. A diversion about now would be good. Their talk had gone way too long. “You mind if I get a coffee?”

“You don’t drink coffee, remember?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” *Damn. I gotta do better than that.*

“Did Mrs. Fetter know Eric Ramsey got out on parole last week?”

“She got the courtesy call from the prosecutor’s office—Hello, Mrs. Fetter. Your convicted husband killer and rapist paid his debt to society in just six years. Isn’t that wonderful? Eric Ramsey is a new man. Oh yeah, he is also a free man capable of coming to see you. This call is just another service provided by your Chicago area justice system. Have a nice life.”

Landers stared at Wolfe, his ire understandable. Regardless, the CPD had a job to do. Landers got all he was going to get from Wolfe, for now.

“Find the shooter, Wolfe. When you do, you may solve the other sniper cold cases. And find out how Mrs. Fetter fits into all this. Something stinks.”

Wolfe got up and headed to the door reading a new text on his cell. It was from Lindsey Fetter. She had his personal number. The message was short—“WE NEED TO TALK.”