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The Twenty-Three

Written by Linwood Barclay

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LINWOOD BARCLAY

THE TWENTY-THREE



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THE TWENTY-THREE

ONE

I know I won't be able to get them all. But I hope I'll be able to get enough.

DAY ONE

TWO

PATRICIA Henderson, forty-one, divorced, employed at the Weston Street Branch of the Promise Falls Public Library system as a computer librarian, was, on that Saturday morning of the long holiday weekend in May, among the first to die.

She was scheduled to work that day. Patricia was annoyed the library board chose to keep all of the town's libraries open. They were slated to close on the Sunday, and on the Monday, Memorial Day. So, if you're going to close Sunday and Monday, why not close for the Saturday, too, and give everyone at the library the weekend off?

But no.

Not that Patricia had anywhere in particular to go.

But still. It seemed ridiculous to her. She knew, given that it was a long weekend, there'd be very few people coming into the library. Wasn't this town supposed to be in the midst of a financial crisis? Why keep the place open? Sure, there was a bit of a rush on Friday as some customers, particularly those who had cottages or other weekend places, took out books to keep them occupied through to Tuesday. The rest of the weekend was guaranteed to be quiet.

Patricia was to be at the library by nine, when it opened, but that really meant she needed to be there by eight forty-five a.m. That would give her time to boot up all the computers, which were shut down every night at closing to save on electricity, even though the amount of power the branch's thirty computers drew overnight was negligible. The library board, however, was on a "green" kick, which meant not only conserving electricity, but making sure recycling stations were set up throughout the library, and signs pinned to the bulletin boards to discourage the use of bottled water. One of the library board members saw the bottled water industry, and the bins of plastic bottles it created, as one of the great evils of the modern world, and didn't want them in any of the Promise Falls branches. "Provide paper cups that can be filled at the facility's water fountains," she said. Which now meant that the recycling stations were overflowing with paper cups instead of water bottles.

And guess who was pissed about that. What's-his-name, that Finley guy who used to be mayor and now ran a water bottling company. Patricia had met him the first—and, she hoped, *last*—time just the other evening at the Constellation Drive-in. She'd taken her niece Kaylie and her little friend Alicia for the drive-in's final night. Kaylie's mom—Patricia's sister, Val—had lent her their minivan, since Patricia's Hyundai was too cramped for such an excursion. God, what a mistake that turned out to be. Not only did the screen come crashing down, scaring the little girls half to death, but then Finley showed up, trying to get his picture taken giving comfort to the wounded.

Politics, Patricia thought. How she hated politics and everything about it.

And thinking of politics, Patricia had found herself staring at the ceiling at four in the morning, worried about next week's public meeting on "Internet filtering." The debate had been going on for years and never seemed settled. Should the library put filters on computers used by patrons that would restrict access to certain Web sites? The idea was to keep youngsters from accessing pornography,

but it was a continuing quagmire. The filters were often ineffective, blocking material that was not adult oriented, and allowing material that was. And aside from that, there were freedom-of-speech and freedom-to-read issues.

Patricia knew the meeting would, as this kind of meeting always did, devolve into a shouting match between ultraconservatives who saw gay subtext in *Teletubbies* and didn't want computers in the library to begin with, and ultra-left-wingers who believed if a kindergartner wanted to read *Portnoy's Complaint*, so be it.

At ten minutes after five, when she knew she wasn't going to get back to sleep, she threw back the covers and decided to move forward with her day.

She walked into the bathroom, flicked on the light, and studied her face in the mirror.

"Ick," she said, rubbing her cheeks with the tips of her fingers. "ABH."

That was the mantra from Charlene, her personal trainer. Always Be Hydrating. Which meant drinking at least seven full glasses of water a day.

Patricia reached for the glass next to the sink, turned on the tap to let the water run until it was cold, filled the glass, and drank it down in one long gulp. She reached into the shower, turned on the taps, held her hand under the spray until it was hot enough, pulled the long white T-shirt she slept in over her head, and stepped in.

She stayed in there until she could sense the hot water starting to run out. Shampooed and lathered up first, then stood under the water, feeling it rain across her face.

Dried off.

Dressed.

Felt—and this was kind of weird—*itchy* all over.

Did her hair and makeup.

By the time she was in her apartment kitchen, it was six thirty. Still plenty of time to kill before driving to the library, a ten-minute commute. Or, if she decided to ride her bike, about twenty-five minutes.

Patricia opened the cupboard, took out a small metal tray with more than a dozen bottles of pills and vitamins. She opened the lids on four, tapped out a calcium tablet, a low-dose aspirin, a vitamin D, and a multivitamin, which, while containing vitamin D, did not, she believed, have enough.

She tossed them all into her mouth at once and washed them down with a small glass of water from the kitchen tap. Moved her upper body all around awkwardly, as though her blouse were made of wool.

Patricia opened the refrigerator and stared. Did she want an egg? Hard-boiled? Fried? It seemed like a lot of work. She closed the door and went back to the cupboard and brought down a box of Special K.

"Whoa," she said.

It was like a wave washing over. Light-headedness. Like she'd been standing outside in a high wind and nearly gotten blown over.

She put both hands on the edge of the counter to steady herself. *Let it pass,* she told herself. *It's probably nothing. Up too early.*

There, she seemed to be okay. She brought down a small bowl, started to pour some cereal into it.

Blinked.

Blinked again.

She could see the "K" on the cereal box clearly enough, but "Special" was fuzzy around the edges. Which was pretty strange, because it was not exactly a tiny font. This was not newspaper type. The letters in "Special" were a good inch tall.

Patricia squinted.

"Special," she said.

She closed her eyes, shook her head, thinking that would set things straight. But when she opened her eyes, she was dizzy.

"What the hell?" she said.

I need to sit down.

She left the cereal where it was and made her way to the table, pulled out the chair. Was the room spinning? Just a little?

She hadn't had the "whirlies" in a very long time. She'd gotten drunk more than a few times over the years with her ex, Stanley. But even then, she'd never had enough to drink that the room spun. She had to go back to her days as a student at Thackeray for a memory like that.

But Patricia hadn't been drinking. And what she was feeling now wasn't the same as what she'd felt back then.

For one thing, her heart was starting to race.

She placed a hand on her chest, just above the swell of her breasts, to see if she could feel what she already knew she was feeling.

Tha-thump. Tha-thump. Tha-tha-thump.

Her heart wasn't just picking up the pace. It was doing so in an irregular fashion.

Patricia moved her hand from her chest to her forehead. Her skin was cold and clammy.

She wondered whether she could be having a heart attack. But she wasn't old enough for one of those, was she? And she was in good shape. She worked out. She often rode her bike to work. She had a personal trainer, for God's sake.

The pills.

Patricia figured she must have taken the wrong pills. But was there anything in that pill container that could do something like this to her?

No.

She stood, felt the floor move beneath her as though Promise Falls were undergoing an earthquake, which was not the sort of thing that happened often in upstate New York.

Maybe, she thought, *I should just get my ass to Promise Falls General.*

Gill Pickens, already in the kitchen, standing at the island, reading the *New York Times* on his laptop while he sipped on his third cup of coffee, was not overly surprised when his daughter, Marla, appeared with his ten-month-old grandson, Matthew, in her arms.

"He wouldn't stop fussing," Marla said. "So I decided to get up and give him something to eat. Oh, thank God, you've already made coffee."

Gill winced. "I just killed off the first pot. I'll make some more."

"That's okay. I can—"

"No, let me. You take care of Matthew."

"You're up early," she said to her father as she got Matthew strapped into his high chair.

"Couldn't sleep," he said.

"Still?"

Gill Pickens shrugged. "Jesus, Marla, it's only been a little over two weeks. I didn't sleep all that well before, anyway. You telling me you've been sleeping okay?"

"Sometimes," Marla said. "They gave me something."

Right. She'd been on a few things to help ease the shock of her mother's death earlier that month, and learning that the baby she'd thought she lost at birth was actually alive.

Matthew.

But even if her prescriptions had allowed her to sleep better than her father some nights, there was still a cloud hanging over the house that showed no signs of moving off soon. Gill had not returned to work, in part because he simply wasn't up to it, but also because child welfare authorities had allowed Marla to take care of Matthew only so long as she was living under the same roof as her father.

Gill had felt a need to be present, although he wondered how much longer that would be necessary. All the evidence suggested Marla was a wonderful, loving mother. And the other good news was her acceptance of reality. In the days immediately following Agnes's jump off Promise Falls, Marla maintained the belief that her mother was actually alive, and would be returning to help her with her child.

Marla now understood that that was not going to happen.

She filled a pot with hot water from the tap, set it on the counter

instead of the stove, then took a bottle of formula she'd made up the day before from the refrigerator and placed it in the pot.

Matthew had twisted himself around in the chair to see what was going on. His eyes landed on the bottle and he pointed.

"Gah," he said.

"It's coming," Marla said. "I'm just letting it warm up some. But I have something else for you in the meantime."

She turned a kitchen chair around so she could sit immediately opposite Matthew. She twisted the lid on a tiny jar of pureed apricots and, with a very small plastic spoon, aimed some at the baby's mouth.

"You like this, don't you?" she said, glancing in her father's direction as he scanned his eyes over the laptop screen. He appeared to be squinting.

"Need glasses, Dad?"

He looked up. Gill suddenly looked very pale to her. "What?"

"You looked like you were having trouble looking at the screen."

"Why are you doing that?" he asked her.

Matthew swatted at the spoon, knocked some apricots onto his chair.

"Why am I doing what?" Marla asked.

"Moving around like that."

"I'm just sitting here," she said, getting more apricot onto the spoon. "You want to bring that bottle over?"

The pot with the bottle in it was sitting immediately to the right of the laptop, but Gill appeared unable to focus on it.

"Is it funny in here?" he asked, setting down his mug of coffee too close to the edge of the island. It tipped, hit the floor, and shattered, but Gill did not look down.

"Dad?"

Marla got out of the chair and moved quickly to her father's side. "Are you okay?"

"Need to get Matthew to the hospital," he said.

"Matthew? Why would Matthew have to go to the hospital?"

Gill looked into his daughter's face. "Is something wrong with Matthew? Do you think he has what I have?"

"Dad?" Marla struggled to keep the panic out of her voice. "What's going on with you? You're breathing really fast. Why are you doing that?"

He put a hand on his chest, felt his heart beating through his robe.

"I think I'm going to throw up," he said.

But he did not. Instead, he dropped to the floor.

Hillary and Josh Lydecker had been frantic for four days.

They had not seen their son, twenty-two-year-old George Lydecker, since late Tuesday. Now here it was Saturday morning, and they still had no idea where he was.

Early Wednesday morning the family was supposed to have flown out to Vancouver to visit Josh's relatives. When George left the house Tuesday evening, he had promised to be home early so that he could get in at least a few hours of sleep before the taxi came for everyone.

His parents were not shocked when he failed to get home at a decent hour, but they were surprised he didn't make it home at all. It would have been just like George to show up at the house as the rest of his family was putting their bags into the cab, grinning stupidly, weaving slightly, saying something like, "Told ya I'd be here."

But that had not happened.

George had always been their wild child—their daughter, Cassandra, sixteen, was a perfect angel, at least so far—with a reputation for getting into trouble, most recently at Thackeray College, where he had, among other things, turned a professor's Smart car onto its roof (no real damage done, but still) and put a baby alligator into Thackeray Pond. He drank too much, even by the standards of college-age boys, and often acted impulsively without considering the consequences. He thrived on risk. Back when he

was in his teens, he was caught twice wandering the halls of his high school in the middle of the night when the facility was supposedly all locked up.

"What has he done?" Hillary kept asking her husband. "What has that damn fool done?"

Josh Lydecker kept shaking his head. For the first two days, he kept saying, "He'll show up. He will. The dumbass is sleeping it off somewhere, that's all."

But by day three, even Josh had come to believe that something serious had happened.

The morning of the first day, Hillary had called all of George's friends, including Derek Cutter, to see if anyone had seen him. She got George's sister, Cassandra, to spread the word via social media so that everyone they knew could be on the lookout for George.

Nothing.

By the afternoon, Hillary wanted to bring in the Promise Falls police. Josh had objected at first, still believing George would turn up. He was also worried that whatever was delaying George's return might not be something they wanted the police to know about. Although he did not share this thought with his wife, it occurred to him that maybe George and his buddies were celebrating the end of the Thackeray school year by engaging the services of prostitutes. Maybe they'd gone to Albany and were doing God knew what.

But Hillary called the police anyway.

They took down all the relevant information. But a young man who liked to party hard, who had a history of mischief, was not exactly a high priority for the local police. And it wasn't as though they had nothing to do. There'd been some crazy shoot-out at a Laundromat the other day, and it hadn't even been a week since some nutcase had blown up the drive-in on the outskirts of Promise Falls and killed four people.

Whoever'd done that was still out there.

The Lydeckers had not just sat around doing nothing the last four days. They'd been out every day, driving around town, going

out to the college, popping into local bars, checking back in with George's friends. They felt they had to be doing something.

They'd been back to the police, too, who were finally starting to take this more seriously. On Thursday, they sent around a detective named Angus Carlson. He sat down with the parents and Cassandra, made notes. He even took Cassandra aside later, said he wondered if she might know anything about her brother that she wouldn't want to say in front of her parents. Something that might help him find George.

"Well," she'd said, "he likes to break into people's garages and look for stuff."

"Do your parents know about that?"

Cassandra had shaken her head no. Said maybe she should tell them.

Carlson had made a note.

And now here it was, Saturday morning. Hillary and Josh in the kitchen, Cassandra upstairs in bed. Hillary had been down here since five, making a pot of tea, and then drawing up a list of things they should do today in their search for George.

The list, so far, read:

- call Detective Carlson, update
- call friends again. D. Cutter
- check places George might explore, abandoned factories, Five Mountains park, drive-in disaster
- make flyers with George picture, put up around town, call printer

When Josh entered the room, Hillary had turned on the kettle to make another pot of tea. She showed her husband the list.

"Okay," he said wearily. "I'd been thinking about Five Mountains. I could imagine him looking around there, now that it's closed down. It'll probably be all locked up. I could call the management, or maybe get the detective to do that."

"George would find a way in, even if it was locked. You know what he's like. He's always sneaking into things."

Josh hesitated. "About that. Cassie told me something, last night."

"Told you what?"

"Sometimes . . . sometimes George breaks into places. Not like a school or something, just goofing around. He looks for unlocked garages, gets in, takes stuff."

"He does not," Hillary said angrily. Her face had become flushed, and beads of sweat had sprouted on her forehead.

"I'm just telling you what she said. I think . . . at first I didn't want the police brought in, in case George had done something stupid, but I'm past that. We should ask them if there have been any break-ins. Of garages. Maybe that would be a lead to finding out what—Hillary, are you okay?"

"Seriously?" Hillary said. "I've had three hours' sleep this week. Now you're saying my son is a thief, and you ask if I'm okay?"

"I'm just saying, you don't look good."

"I can't sleep, I'm worried sick about what's happened to my baby, I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack, and—"

Hillary's cell phone, which was on the table next to her cup of tea, vibrated. A text.

"Oh my God, maybe it's George!" she said, and dived for the phone, snatched it up, looked at it with puzzlement. "It's Cassie."

"Cassie?" Josh said. "She's upstairs." He hesitated. "Isn't she?"

Hillary, her face crumpling, turned the phone to her husband.

The text read:

I think I'm dying

• • •

Ali Brunson said, "Hang in there, Audrey. You're going to be fine. You just have to keep it together a little bit longer."

Of course, Ali had said that many times in his career as a paramedic, and there were many of those times when he hadn't believed

it for a second. This looked as though it was turning into one of those times.

Audrey McMichael, age fifty-three, 173 pounds, black, an insurance adjuster, resident of 21 Forsythe Avenue for the last twenty-two years, where she lived with her husband, Clifford, was showing every indication of giving up the fight.

Ali called up to Tammy Fairweather, who was behind the wheel of the ambulance, and racing it to Promise Falls General. The good news was, it was early Saturday morning and there was hardly anyone on the road. The bad news was, it probably wasn't going to matter. Audrey's blood pressure was plummeting like an elevator with snapped cables. Barely sixty over forty.

When Ali and Tammy had arrived at the McMichael home, Audrey had been vomiting. For the better part of an hour, according to her husband, she had been complaining of nausea, dizziness, a headache. Her breathing had been growing increasingly rapid and shallow. There had been moments when she'd said she could not see.

Her condition continued to deteriorate after they loaded her into the ambulance.

"How we doing back there?" Tammy called.

"Don't worry about me. Just get us to church on time," Ali told her, keeping his voice even.

"I know people," Tammy said over the wail of the siren, trying to lighten the mood. "You need a ticket fixed, I'm the girl to know."

The radio crackled. Their dispatcher.

"Let me know the second you clear PFG," the male voice on the radio said.

"Not even there yet," Tammy radioed back. "Will advise."

"Need you at another location ASAP."

"What's the deal?" Tammy asked. "All the other units take off sick? They go fishing for the weekend?"

"Negative. All engaged."

"What?"

"It's like an instant flu outbreak all over town," the dispatcher

said. "Let me know the second you're available." The connection ended.

"What'd he say?" Ali asked.

Tammy swung the wheel hard. She could see the blue *H* atop Promise Falls General in the distance. No more than a mile away.

"Something going around," Tammy said. "Not the kind of Saturday morning I was expecting."

Whenever Tammy and Ali got the weekend morning shifts, they usually started them with coffee at Dunkin's, chilling out until their first call.

There'd been no coffee today. Audrey McMichael, it turned out, was their second call of the day. The first had been to the Breckonwood Drive home of Terrence Rodd, an eighty-eight-year-old retired statistician who'd called 911 after experiencing dizziness and chest pains. Tammy had pointed out that he lived right next door to where that Gaynor woman had been murdered a few weeks ago.

Terrence never made it alive to the ER.

Hypotension, Ali thought. *Low blood pressure.*

And here they were again, with another patient experiencing, among other things, dangerously low blood pressure.

Ali raised his head far enough to see out the front window just as Tammy slammed on the brakes and screamed, "Jesus!"

There was a man standing in the path of the ambulance, halfway into their lane. "Standing" was not quite accurate. More like stooping, with one hand on his chest, the other raised, palm up, asking the ambulance to stop. Then the man doubled over, and vomited onto the street.

"Goddamn it!" Tammy said. She grabbed her radio. "I need help!"

"Drive around him!" Ali said. "We don't have time to help some geezer cross the road."

"I can't just—he's on his knees, Ali. Jesus fucking Christ!"

Tammy threw the shift lever into park, said, "Be right back!" and jumped out of the ambulance.

The dispatcher said, "What's happening?"

Ali couldn't leave Audrey McMichael to tell him.

"Sir!" Tammy said, striding briskly toward the man, who looked to be in his late fifties, early sixties. "What's wrong, sir?"

"Help me," he whispered.

"What's your name, sir?"

The man mumbled something.

"What's that?"

"Fisher," he said. "Walden Fisher. I don't feel . . . something's . . . not right. My stomach . . . just threw up."

Tammy put a hand on his shoulder. "Talk to me, Mr. Fisher. What other symptoms have you been experiencing?" The man's breaths were rapid and shallow, just like those of Audrey McMichael and Terrence Rodd.

This is one serious clusterfuck. That's what this is, Tammy thought.

"Dizzy. Sick to my stomach. Something's not right." He looked fearfully into the paramedic's face. "My heart. I think there's something wrong with my heart."

"Come with me, sir," she said, leading him to the back of the ambulance. She'd put him in there with Audrey.

The more the merrier, she thought, shaking her head, then wondering, *What next?*

Which was when she heard the explosion.

When Emily Townsend had her first sip of coffee, she thought it tasted just a tiny bit off.

So she dumped out the entire pot—six cups' worth—as well as the filter filled with coffee grounds, and started over.

Ran the water for thirty seconds from the tap to make sure it was fresh before adding it to the machine. Put in a new filter and six scoops of coffee from the tin.

Hit the button.

Waited.

When the machine beeped, she poured the coffee into a cup—a clean one; she'd already put the first one into the dishwasher—added one sugar and just a titch of cream, and gave it a stir.

Brought the warm mug to her lips and tentatively sipped.

Must have been her imagination. This tasted just fine.

Maybe it was her toothpaste. Made that first cup taste funny.

Cal Weaver was having breakfast—if you could call it that—in a room adjacent to the lobby of the BestBet Inn, which sat on Route 9 a quarter mile from the exit off 87, halfway between Promise Falls and Albany.

He'd been here most of the week.

It wasn't a surveillance or any other kind of private detecting gig that had brought him to the lovely accommodations of the Best-Bet (*Free Wi-Fi!*). It was, however, the only affordable hotel close to Promise Falls that had any rooms available. He'd booked himself in here while he looked for a new place to live. Someone had firebombed the bookstore below his apartment and while his place had not burned to the ground, it was not a place where anyone could stay. The smell of smoke was overwhelming, and power had been cut to the building.

Cal was not going to stay with his sister, Celeste, and her husband, Dwayne. His presence would aggravate the tensions that already existed between his sister and his brother-in-law. The man did road repairs for the town, and with all the recent budget cuts, he was getting very little work.

So Cal found a hotel.

The BestBet advertised a free breakfast, and it was true what they said. You get what you pay for. The first day, when Cal came down, he was thinking he'd get a ham and cheddar omelet with home fries and brown toast. So he was dismayed when he found that his breakfast choices consisted of single-serving cereals in

sealed plastic containers, hard-boiled eggs (preshelled, which he supposed was at least something), day-old muffins and donuts, bananas and oranges, containers of yogurt, and—praise the Lord—coffee.

The only time any hotel employee showed up was to make sure there was coffee in the tall, aluminum urn.

Miracle of miracles, it was drinkable.

He'd grabbed a free copy of the Albany paper in the lobby and was leafing through it, sitting at a table by the window so he could watch the traffic go by on 9, washing down a dry blueberry muffin with his paper cup of coffee. He'd already refilled it twice.

He hadn't expected to find any Promise Falls apartment-for-rent listings in the paper, and he was not disappointed. And since there was no longer a *Promise Falls Standard*, he'd turn to the Net after breakfast to see whether any new places had come online.

His cell rang.

He reached into his pocket, checked out the caller.

Lucy Brighton.

It was not the first time she'd tried to reach him since he'd last seen her earlier in the week. He'd taken a couple of her calls, but had ignored the more recent ones. He knew what Lucy was going to say, what she was going to ask him. It would be the same thing she had asked him the time before.

What was he going to do?

He still didn't know.

Should he tell the police what he knew? Should he call up his old friend Promise Falls police detective Barry Duckworth, and tell him he knew who had murdered Miriam Chalmers?

Cal knew he probably should. But he wasn't sure that it was the right thing to do.

Because of Crystal, Lucy's eleven-year-old daughter. The girl Lucy was raising on her own, ever since her husband, Gerald, had skipped off to San Francisco and rarely been seen since.

Cal didn't know what would happen to Crystal if her mother

went to prison. Lucy's father, Adam, had died in that bombing at the drive-in. Her mother had died years ago.

Was justice served if it left a young girl without her mother?

And was that Cal's problem? Wasn't that something Lucy should have thought of before she—

The phone continued to ring.

The so-called dining area of the BestBet was not busy, but the handful of others having breakfast had glanced furtively in Cal's direction, wondering whether he was ever going to answer his damn phone.

He tapped the screen, declined the call.

There.

Cal went back to reading the paper, which had been following the recent events in Promise Falls pretty closely. The police still hadn't made any headway in finding out who'd toppled the drive-in screen. There was a quote from Duckworth, that police were pursuing several leads and hoped to make an arrest shortly.

Which sounded, to Cal, like they were nowhere.

His phone rang. Lucy again.

He couldn't let it ring another dozen times. Either he declined the call right now, or he answered it.

He tapped the screen, put the phone to his ear.

"Hey, Lucy," he said.

"It's not Lucy," a young voice said.

"Crystal?" Cal said.

"Is this Mr. Weaver?"

"Yes. Is that you, Crystal?"

"Yes," she said flatly.

Crystal was, Cal had quickly learned, an odd, but incredibly talented, kid. She was constantly creating her own graphic novels, withdrawing into her own imaginary world. Her interactions with others, beyond her mother, were hesitant and awkward, although she had warmed to Cal after he'd shown an interest in her work.

Was Lucy using her own daughter to ensure that Cal didn't go

to the police? Using her to gain sympathy? Had she put her daughter up to making this call?

"What's up, Crystal?" he asked. "Did your mother ask you to call me?"

"No," she said. "She's sick."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Has she got the flu?"

"I don't know. But I think she's really sick."

"I hope she gets better soon. Why'd you call, Crystal?"

"Because she's sick."

Cal felt a shiver. "How sick is she, Crystal?"

"She's not moving."

Cal stood up abruptly from the table, kept the phone to his ear as he started heading for his car. "Where is she?"

"In the kitchen. On the floor."

"You need to call 911 right now, Crystal. You know how to do that?"

"Yes. Everybody knows how to do that. I did that. Nobody answered. Your number was in her phone, so I called you."

"Did your mother tell you what's wrong?"

"She's not saying anything."

"I'm on my way," he said. "But keep calling 911, okay?"

"Okay," Crystal said. "Good-bye."

Before Patricia Henderson decided to try to get herself to the hospital, she dialed 911.

She figured when you called 911, someone answered right away. First ring. But 911 did not respond on the first ring, nor did it respond on the second.

Or the third.

By four rings, Patricia was thinking maybe this was not the way to go.

But then, an answer.

"Please hold!" someone said hurriedly, and then nothing.

Patricia's symptoms—and there were more than a few—were not subsiding, and she did not believe, even in her increasingly confused state, that she could wait around for some 911 dispatcher to get back to her.

She let go of the receiver, not bothering to place it back in the cradle, and looked for her purse. Was that it, over there, *waaaay* over there, on the small table by the front door?

Patricia squinted, and determined that it was.

She stumbled toward it, reached into the bag for her car keys. After ten seconds of digging around without success, she turned the bag over and dumped the contents onto the table, most of them spilling onto the floor.

She blinked several times, tried to focus. It was as though she'd just stepped out of the shower, was trying to get the water out of her eyes so she could see. She bent over at the waist to grab what appeared to be her keys, but was snatching at air, some three inches above where her keys lay.

"Come on, stop that," Patricia told the keys. "Don't be that way."

She leaned over slightly more, grabbed hold of the keys, but tumbled forward into the hallway. As she struggled to get to her knees, nausea overwhelmed her and she vomited onto the floor.

"Hospital," she whispered.

She struggled to her feet, opened the door, made no effort to lock, or even close, it behind her, and went down the hallway to the elevators, one hand feeling the wall along the way to steady herself. She was only on the third floor, but she still possessed enough smarts to know she could not handle two flights of stairs.

Patricia blinked several times to make sure she hit the down instead of the up button. Ten seconds later, although to Patricia it might as well have been an hour and a half, the doors opened. She stumbled into the elevator, looked for G, hit the button. She leaned forward, rested her head where the doors met, which meant that when they opened on the ground floor a few seconds later, she fell into the lobby.