

Chapter 1  
June, 1986

The conundrum goes like this:

*A man walks into a nondescript restaurant tucked away in an alley. It's taken him years to find such a place, and his agitation is palpable. He orders albatross—broiled. With trembling hands, he picks up his fork and knife and slices off a piece of the seared white flesh. The juices drip onto his plate as he brings the morsel to his mouth. The aroma nauseates him as he squeezes his eyes shut and bites down.*

*The man's weathered face relaxes. He sighs, sets the knife and fork down on the starched linen tablecloth, and places a hand over his heart, as if to calm its beating.*

*He smiles at the waiter, who bows politely and attends to the other diners. Relief washes in absolution. He raises his eyes to heaven and whispers, but no one hears him.*

*"Thank God, I'm free."*

Of all the wacky conundrums Raff piled on us over the years, that was the hardest yet—if I discounted the convoluted story of the surgeon who performed a highly skilled operation, yet who was supposed to be missing an arm. It took Neal and me three days of battering Raff with desperate yes-or-no questions to arrive at the answer. I remembered him gloating, sporting that '60's Beatles' haircut so popular back then, his black straggly bangs falling into his brooding pubescent eyes. He never relinquished hints, even when we begged out of frustration, even when we whacked him with pillows and punched his arms as hard as we could. Raff loved to wield his secret knowledge over us measly peons of his intellectual kingdom, a king with the power to wave his scepter and send dissenters to the gallows of humiliation—something he often did.

And the answer was so simple, as most of those conundrums were.

A group of shipwrecked soldiers during World War II. Starving, they resorted to cannibalism before an unexpected rescue. But to alleviate guilt, one group ate human flesh—the

other, albatross—the only meat they could find on their deserted island. No one knew which they were served; thus, they could assuage their consciences, live in blissful ignorance. But the man in our conundrum had spent his life in anguish, needing to know. Until that question was answered, he would have no peace. He somehow had to find a way to taste albatross before he died. The truth—so late in coming—set him free.

I wondered—as I tromped up the fourth flight of stairs—what would have happened if he had taken that bite and didn't recognize the albatross, recoiling in the realization he had eaten various body parts of his friends? Would he still have felt free? The gist of the conundrum implied no, but that fabricated story begged the question: does freedom lie in the absolving of guilt, or in the liberating wings of truth? Was discovering truth what really set him free?

That's what I needed to know, random musings as I marched up the stairwell of Hillcrest Hospital and Mental Health Clinic on the drab, foggy morning of June sixteenth.

The sixth floor. It could have been worse.

One time I had a podiatrist appointment in the city and forgot to ask. Already out of breath from finding a parking spot seven long blocks away, my heart berated me when I checked in at the lobby reception desk and learned my doctor's office was situated on the seventeenth floor. I nearly turned and headed back out the beckoning glass revolving doors—my right foot coaxing me with unrelenting pain. No way was I going to make it up seventeen flights of stairs in my Hop-Along Cassidy gait.

I had allowed myself only a token glance at the elevator doors. How smoothly they opened, their shushing sound so inviting. But I knew their deceptive appearance wouldn't fool my gut. I'd be clawing the slick metal walls of the elevator by the third floor—it didn't matter how big and roomy the space. I asked the receptionist to let my doctor know I'd be late, then found the stairs and hoofed it to her lofty office that boasted a sweeping view of the Golden Gate

Bridge half buried in a shroud of fog. I arrived sweaty and disheveled, with my foot on fire. I never made that mistake again.

I stopped at the landing to the hospital's fifth floor and caught my breath. Nausea racked my body and a wave of dizziness made me grab the railing. I consciously slowed my breathing and clamped down on all the fears battering the door to my heart, insistent on breaking in and trampling me down. Why, in the midst of my own maelstrom, did Raff have to do this? I had neither the time nor the energy to face him and his demons, when my own were a clamoring mob at the edges of my sanity.

I couldn't get that T. S. Eliot poem out of my head. Prufrock. Raff used to recite it, among hundreds of others. When he wasn't rattling off pi to the hundredth digit—just because he could. Or Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat,"—in French, no less. I still can recall the first few lines from, what, sixth grade? "*Hibou et Minou allèrent à la mer, dans une barque peinte en jaune-canari . . .*" That was during his French phase in junior high school, when he thought the girls would find him hopelessly attractive, fashioned after some nineteenth-century Don Juan, with a swath of hair falling into his mooning eyes, spouting poetry from the Romantic era. Neal and I never thought to ask why. Why in the world memorize everything under the sun?

So, as I pounded one step after another, the phrases tumbled into my brain effortlessly. *And indeed there will be time to wonder, "Do I dare?" and "Do I dare?" Time to turn back and descend the stair . . . with a bald spot in the middle of my hair . . .*

The poem lent itself to a nice cadence as I arrived, finally, to the sixth floor stairwell door, a bit out of breath from my recitation.

*Do I dare disturb the universe? In a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.*

Now was the moment of decision. But no one else in our family dared talk Raff out of his slouch toward destruction. I snorted as I pushed the heavy metal door open to a shiny bright corridor with glossy linoleum floors, so spotlessly clean I saw my scowling face looking up at me in all clarity. What made me think I could help him, where a half dozen doctors and psychiatrists couldn't?

*Streets that follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent. To lead you to an overwhelming question . . . Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" Let us go and make our visit.*

That was all the prompting I needed.

Raff had checked himself into this facility two days ago amid protests from both his wife and therapist. "They tell me it's all in my head," he said from a pay phone near his office, before he drove toward North Beach that morning. "You think? Styron calls it a brainstorm. Of course it's in my friggin' head! Like suicidal depression rages in your big toe?" All I could think of while he ranted in his manic passion was, could he make it to the hospital without smashing his beautiful lipstick orange Ferrari 412? Kendra would throw a hissy fit over that.

He didn't want visitors, but tough, he would see me. I'd play the only role I was good at in this family—caretaker and nurturer. What a joke, I thought, with my life unraveling like a sweater thread caught in a blender.

My mother told me in her typical cryptic manner not to indulge Raff in his misery. That he was only having a temporary breakdown; give him a few days and he'd be back home with his wife and kids, back making loads of money at the bank so he could keep up the payments on his palatial estate in Tiburon. Keep it all hush-hush, no one needed to know. Give him forty-eight hours, a drug cocktail, and this too shall pass.

I could just see my mother restraining her seething with a tight smile. "Get a grip, Raff," she probably said. *For the children's sake.* More like, for her sake. Nothing like a little drama to

put a crimp in her schedule. I mean, those jaunts from Marin into the city to the hospital were such inconveniences.

But, forgive my embellishing. I thought nothing of the kind that day. My whole mind wrapped around only Raff and his pain. Ungrounded, unprovoked, and entirely unacceptable pain.

I heard how he fell apart at work the week before. Kendra had to come get him, in between dropping the twins off at ballet and picking up Kevin from baseball practice. Raff had locked himself in his office and was trying to crawl out the transom window of his ninth-story office, yearning for the ledge and oblivion below. Good thing he was a hefty six foot two and the window was a bit too narrow for his bulk. Good thing Raff had a problem with broken glass—the way I had a problem with balloons. I couldn't even stand in the same room at birthday parties with a clown twisting those skinny balloons into wiener dogs and rubber crowns without going into simulated cardiac arrest. Besides, I imagined those glass panes in Raff's fancy banking center were shatterproof, and possibly even bulletproof. He hadn't gotten very far by the time security had hacksawed through the dead bolt latch and pried him away from the window, where he collapsed in a weepy mess into a guard's arms.

So my mother told me—although Kendra would have denied it. In the thirteen years they'd been married, I'd never seen my brother's wife lift more than an eyebrow in ire. Not an elevated pitch in tone, not a single curse word under her breath. She could win the award for stalwart and unruffled under adversity. What adversity? You couldn't tell me living with my brother was a walk in the park. Or did Raff only dump his histrionics on his blood relatives? Well, he knew how to keep up appearances too.

I found Raff sitting on the edge of his neatly made bed in what could have passed for a rundown Motel 6 room, albeit without windows. The nurse at the entrance station had pointed

me down a hallway, where I marched to the end, trying not to glance at the other “patients” populating the ward. But they sure noticed me. Eyes locked so tightly, I felt my breath squeezed from my ribcage. *I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas . . .*

Raff’s face was pasty and lined. Bits of skin flaked across his forehead and his hands trembled in his lap, as if he had palsy. He looked fifty, not thirty-three. I awkwardly waited for him to stand and embrace me, but he only sat there and lifted his face, his slippered feet dangling slightly off the side of the high bed, making him look even more lost and little. He forced a smile, but I could see in that simple gesture how much it cost him.

“Hey, welcome to the Hotel California. You can check out anytime you like . . .”

“But you can never leave.” I grinned and felt like a gawky high school girl trying to make conversation with the cute boy at the lockers. “Well,” I said, taking in the pukey green walls and drab furniture. “Not five-star accommodations, but . . .” I shrugged. My brother, swimming in wealth, who traveled first class and ordered only the most expensive wines—the cost of one bottle more than Jeremy brought home in a week. I wondered if Kendra had visited yet. If she ever would.

“For twelve hundred a day, at least they could give us better food. If you aren’t sure you want to die before you check in, the green Jell-O and powdered mashed potatoes remove all doubt.” A chuckle escaped his chapped lips, but it was empty of joy. I could tell he shaved, but with the taboo on razors in this place, I guessed he used an electric shaver. I caught him looking longingly at my purse.

“Sorry,” I said. “They went through it at the nurse’s station. Took my gun, switchblade, and my bottle of prescription pills.” I was joking, but Raff’s eyes radiated hunger and disappointment.

He stood and walked over to the doorway and looked toward a lounge area. “I tried to scrounge up some plastic bags out of the trash. They’re thorough here. Years of experience. Hard to suffocate on a Baggie or a candy bar wrapper. Ever try it?” A few patients sat in front of a TV mounted on the wall, looking fairly drugged. But maybe that’s how everyone looked when they watched the soaps for endless hours a day.

“All the windows have bars. No bath tubs. No stoppers in the sinks. You don’t even get plastic knives with dinner. They cut up your food.” I pictured green Jell-O in little cubes; tough, overcooked, and unidentifiable meat in small bite-size squares. Twelve hundred a day. “This is like going through your second childhood—just in case you missed your first. Except this one’s more warped, like something out of Kafka.” Raff recited, “ ‘As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic vermin.’ You know, most translators used the word *insect*, but the German word implies an unclean animal not acceptable for sacrifice. Fitting for this place, wouldn’t you say? One day you’re a normal human being, the next . . . vermin.” His voice sounded hoarse, his throat dry.

“Will they let me bring in Chinese?” I shook the image of Raff as a giant cockroach out of my head.

“And take a chance you’d laced it with arsenic, to speed me on my merry way? Why, you’d deprive them of their joy in handing me my plastic tray full of slop three times a day. Job security.” Raff started shuffling down the hallway and I followed. “Let me give you the five-cent tour.” His voice carried and bounced off the scrubbed and shiny walls. No one noticed.

As Raff ambled, he pointed out the drug station where they handed him a paper cup of water and his meds three times a day. He named the patients we passed, who loitered around or sat with pained expressions on their faces. Pain filled every space of this place, thick and contagious.

“That’s Gladys,” he said, nodding at an older woman in a shabby housedress. “She’s been here for years. Slicing wrists her forte. Whereas Josh over there—” I looked over at a young guy, nearly emaciated, flipping a deck of cards in his hand. “—loves pills. Any shape, any color. The more the merrier. Pops M&Ms just to keep in practice.”

My mind wandered as Raff droned on, growing pleased with his crass humor. And perhaps glad to have a riveted audience giving him undivided attention. Here, he would be listened to. Not like in the real world, where his antics for help fell unnoticed. Or, rather, were squelched in embarrassment. When you made tons of money, had a beautiful wife and three adorable kids, when you were the envy of your community and co-workers, you had no right to behave badly. Stop whining, chin up, take Prozac, and pretend your pain isn’t ravaging your soul. Millions of Americans suffered from depression—and they took pills and were fine, just fine. Except for the ones that did manage to off themselves. But that’s not polite conversation in upscale circles. Designer drugs, yes. Suicidal mania, no.

My heart literally wrenched in pain. Like someone had grabbed it and squeezed hard, forcing tears out my eyes. “Hey,” I said, when we had returned to his room. I sat in the only seat—a stained, heavily upholstered armchair that looked like the ones adorning those old downtown hotel lobbies. Something from a bygone era. “Remember those conundrums you used to tell?”

His eyes brightened. “Yeah, all of them. That was a while back. Let’s see. You remember the guy who takes the elevator down from his apartment to the first floor? By the time the doors open, he knows his wife is dead.”

Oh, that one. Something about a wife hooked up to an iron lung and the power going out. I threw one out that came to mind. “What about the one where the guy gets ready for bed, turns out the light, and in the morning hears something on the radio—then kills himself?”

I immediately cringed. Should I have been talking about people committing suicide?

Raff smiled. “Yeah, the lighthouse keeper. An ocean liner crashes because he turned out the wrong light.” He grunted. “Come to think of it, most of those conundrums are about death.” That cheery thought actually seemed to lighten his mood. His brain started spinning in familiar fashion. My brilliant brother—who had named every plastic dinosaur and army man—even his houseplants and the rocks he collected from Glass Beach. Boxes and albums full of coins and stamps with not a one missing, even if it meant spending six month’s allowance to get that rare mint coin. His an ordered mind and an even more ordered world. Everything accounted for, nothing missing, no puzzles. That as far back as I could remember. Raff expounded a litany.

“There’s the one about the guy lying facedown in the desert with an unopened package. The guy hanging dead in an empty locked room, next to a puddle of water. The guy found drowned in the ocean with a drinking straw clutched in his hand.”

They all came barging back into my head: the parachute, the block of ice, the third man who couldn’t fit into the lifeboat and drew the short straw.

There was always a simple answer, once you figured it out.

Raff stopped talking and tears filled his eyes. The moment hung in the silence, like a sheet flapping on a clothesline. He had run out of steam. I couldn’t begin to imagine the effort it took him to present a normal face to the rest of the world.

He collapsed back on the bed and lay prone, staring at the ceiling.

“All I want to do is die, Lis. And all I keep thinking is how Kevin and Ashley and Brittany will hate me for leaving them—just as I hated Dad for doing this to me.”

My breath caught in my throat. His words were filled with venom. Our father died of leukemia at thirty-three, leaving behind three small children and a bereaved wife. My brother hated him for copping out on life—the coward! We heard the story throughout our lives: how

Dad suffered from depression. How he had later found his real father, a shlub who had abandoned him during the Great Depression. How this shock made him feel unworthy and dirty. He had bad blood, and so gave himself a blood disease—leukemia. So the fairy tale went. Raff was eight when our dad died. I was only four and didn't remember him at all.

But Raff remembered. He remembered everything. I cursed his perfect memory.

"I know this sounds stupid and irrational, but I can't help it. I can't outlive my father. How can I do this to my children, cause them this pain—" Raff moaned with agony. Tears filled the wells of his eyes and spilled onto his cheeks, as if oozing out of his very being. How could I help him? How could anyone help him? Manic depression was not something you could cure with reason. Raff knew he had a great life, that he was supposed to be happy. No one would willingly inflict bereavement on their own children. No doubt, the guilt over his impending appointment with death was almost as debilitating as the pain.

"The doctors will find you the right meds. Something will work . . ." I knew I shouldn't have said that. *I am no prophet—and here's no great matter; I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, and I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, and, in short, I was afraid . . .*

Raff rumbled in fury. "The drugs take weeks to kick in, if they work at all. If they don't, you start all over and you wait. Do you have a clue what this pain is like? How every damn second is like a knife in your heart? You have no idea!"

No, I didn't. I clamped my mouth shut. I had to believe in our age of miracle medicine that a drug was out there, one that would give Raff some semblance of a normal life. If he could hang on that long.

But would that absolve everything? The anger and resentment? The disappointment and feelings of abandonment he'd carried like an albatross around his neck his whole life?

My mind flashed to that conundrum—where the guy in the restaurant ordered albatross. The truth set him free. Was there a truth to be found out there to solve the most perplexing conundrum of all? The one that went like this:

A man, with a happy marriage and three wonderful children, a great job as a mathematician and physicist for an aerospace company, decides one day he does not want to keep living. He wills himself to die and develops leukemia. Nine months later, he is dead.

I suddenly understood Raff's lifetime obsession with categorizing everything neatly in its place. All to make up for the one glaring element that didn't fit in anywhere—our father's inexplicable death.

Was that all there was to the puzzle? *Or was there more?* I sucked in a breath. In all my thirty years of life I never stopped to ask that question. That was the pat answer we were given and so we believed it. Our mother's words played like a broken record in my head, "You're too young to understand. When you grow up, it'll make sense."

But I'd grown up and it didn't make sense.

For the first time in my life, that explanation rang false. Could I write my father's death off as simple manic depression, an illness that obviously ran in the family? A death wish born from a chemical imbalance in the brain?

But, really—could people *will* themselves into developing leukemia? I knew practically nothing about the disease, other than it had to do with blood and bone marrow and white cells. That it wasn't contagious or genetic, so we kids didn't need to worry we'd get it. New-age and holistic medicine might claim you could contract a disease psychosomatically. And I understood that—to a point. You could make yourself sick from stress. But give yourself cancer? My mother always spoke as if it were established medical fact. Want to die? Give yourself the corresponding

disease. Feel unworthy as a woman? Give yourself breast cancer. And so the line of reasoning went.

What if Raff's real problem was not manic depression? What if it stemmed from the years of pain and anger roiling under the surface of his self-esteem? What if abandonment mixed with misunderstanding created a poison just as debilitating as depression? What if the truth could be uncovered? I dared to imagine . . . what if there was some truth out there that could set him free? Was the freedom in the absolution? Or in knowing the truth? Could I single-handedly solve this one conundrum—the only one that really mattered?

Our father's expertise was in something called Boolean algebra. It sounded like some Middle Eastern dance to me. That form of mathematics was a precursor to the developing of computers, something my father worked on in the '50s. A system of logic operators where a question could be answered in one of three ways: and, or, not. Only recently, I had been thumbing through a book of brain teasers and startled at finding a Boolean algebra conundrum, of all things.

Two guards each stand before a door. Only one is the door leading to enlightenment. One of the guards always lies, the other always tells the truth. You want to open the door to enlightenment, yet you can only ask one question, and only of one guard. What is the only question you can ask that will tell you, with certainty, which door you must open?

Well, without going into a lengthy discourse to explain how the algebra figures in, the answer was this: Ask either guard this question: "Will the *other* guard say he is posted at the door that leads to enlightenment?" If the guard you asked answered yes, the door behind him was the correct door. If he said no, it was the other door. It's simple, once you saw how the parts all broke down. Boolean algebra reverted to simplicity. In any problem, there was only AND, OR,

or NOT. Either “this answer AND that answer are both correct,” or “This answer OR that answer is correct,” or “NOT any of the answers is correct.”

As I hugged Raff good-bye, leaving him floundering in his pain, venting his anger at me, I thought about finding that door to enlightenment. I thought about the answers we’d been given for our father dying. Maybe we never asked the right questions that led to the right door. I grunted as I started back down the stairs. We never asked *any* questions, did we? So how did we know whether or not the guard was telling the truth or lying?

My mother’s face came to mind. Every time we had tried to ask her questions about Dad, she changed the subject. Never once in my entire childhood did she talk about him, or her marriage. The facts I had about my father would barely fill half a page.

He grew up in New York. Spent years in one foster home after another, abused, neglected, starving, until that nice family took him in and raised him. Had a brother who was adopted with him into the Sitteroff family. Married our mother, joined the Merchant Marines near the end of the war, came back to work in L.A. for the Penwell Corporation. Spoke seven languages, accepted some award in Belgium for physics, took our mother to Paris for their honeymoon. Twelve gloriously happy years of marriage until the day he decided to die—the truth according to Ruth Sitteroff.

I’d only seen two photographs of him—that’s all our mother had. One of him in his Merchant Marine uniform, and the other a family portrait right after Neal was born. Eight months before our father died. A lot of blanks to fill in. And just what happened to that brother of his—my uncle? Was he still alive, and why had we never seen him while growing up?

Suddenly, I had way too many questions. They overflowed, like lava spewing from a volcano, burning my insides. I rushed out of the hospital into the foggy street, thinking obtusely how the gray swallowing up the streets of San Francisco reflected my mental state. I knew just

where to go first to look for answers, but I doubted they would be readily forthcoming. *And should I then presume? And how should I begin?*

My mind brewed with ideas, and I felt a headache coming on from lack of sleep. After a volatile argument that had dragged on past midnight, I hadn't been able to konk out until after three a.m. Thinking of finding Jeremy waiting at home flared the ache in my sinuses. But where else was I to go? I had a barnyard of orphans waiting to be fed, and a doe about to kid.

*Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?*

I couldn't get the image of the man in the restaurant out of my head.

*I'm free*, he said.

Did the truth really set you free? Or was that just too simple? Maybe there were no answers at all. *And, or, or not?*

I always loved the last lines of Eliot's brilliant poem. *We have lingered in the chambers of the sea . . . by sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown . . .*

Those lines tickled my consciousness the whole drive home, over the Golden Gate Bridge, up the corridor through Marin, even as I bounced along the long rutted dirt road with the brown rolling hills languishing in early summer's heat a backdrop to my small farmhouse in Petaluma. I pulled up in the circular drive and cut the engine. Buster and Angel, my two rescued mutts, galloped from around the side of the house and panted with excitement at my arrival.

My mind fell suddenly quiet.

Jeremy stood by his truck, a bundle of clothes draped over his arm. My eyes took in the load of U-Haul packing boxes neatly stacked in the truck bed. I opened my car door and got out.

"Lisa . . ." His voice sounded like it drifted up from the depths of the sea. Faraway, muted. "I wasn't expecting you back so soon. I thought it would be less painful if—"

He gestured apologetically to the cowardly scene I had stumbled upon. My nausea returned with a vengeance as I looked with confusion at my husband of ten years, Jeremy, the only man I ever loved, oh, so loved. Like waves breaking against a rocky shore, his words slapped me awake from some sleepy stupor I had been lingering in—for the better part of my adult life.

*Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*