

MANNER
OF
DEATH



ALSO BY ROBIN COOK

Night Shift

Viral

Genesis

Pandemic

Charlatans

Host

Cell

Nano

Death Benefi

Cure

Intervention

Foreign Body

Critical

Crisis

Marker

Seizure

Shock

Abduction

Vector

Toxin

Invasion

Chromosome 6

Contagion

Acceptable Risk

Fatal Cure

Terminal

Blindsight

Vital Signs

Harmful Intent

Mutation

Mortal Fear

Outbreak

Mindbend

Godplayer

Fever

Brain

Sphinx

Coma

The Year of the Intern





MANNER OF DEATH

A NOVEL

ROBIN COOK

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cook, Robin, author.

Title: Manner of death : a novel / Robin Cook.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023040174 (print) | LCCN 2023040175 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593713891 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593713907 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Medical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3553.O5545 M36 2023 (print) |

LCC PS3553.O5545 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20230905

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023040174>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023040175>

p. cm.

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

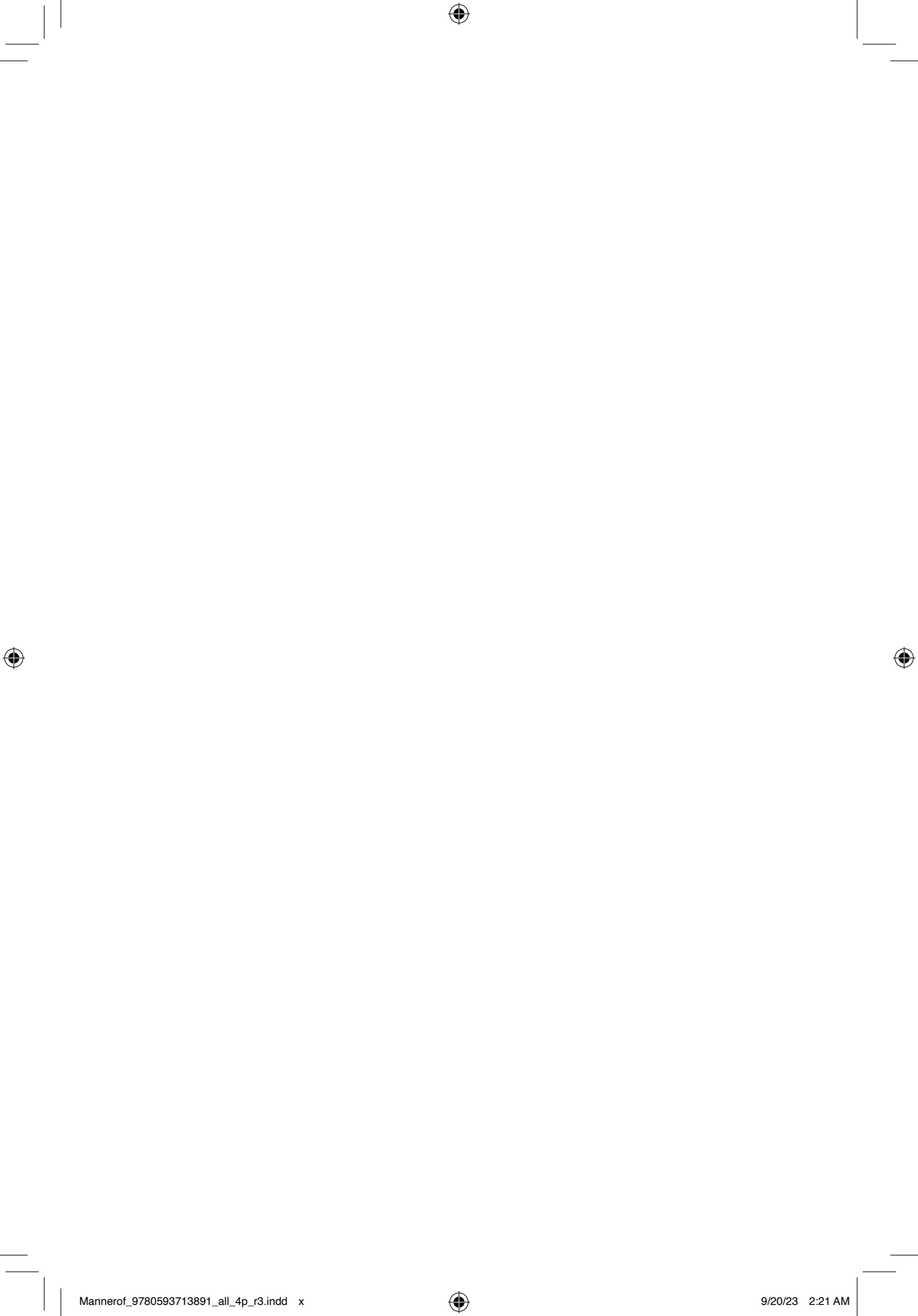
Book design by Ashley Tucker

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*For Jean,
My partner*



MANNER
OF
DEATH



PROLOGUE

Wednesday, December 6, 9:30 pm

Hank Roberts walked with a definite spring to his step and a whistle under his breath as he headed east on West 46th Street in New York's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. Until the late '70s and early '80s it was an Irish American working-class neighborhood with a plethora of seedy bars among its warehouses and tenements and boasted an impressive crime rate. Calling it *gritty* back then was a euphemism despite it housing the acclaimed Actors Studio and serving as the temporary home to many ultimately famous actors and actresses. Hank was aware of the area's history because he'd been inappropriately brought there on a handful of occasions by his ne'er-do-well older brother from their home in Weehawken, New Jersey, when Hank was a skinny pre-teen in middle school and his brother was toying with the idea of an acting career.

To get to Hell's Kitchen, Hank had taken a rideshare from the Upper West Side where he was presently residing, and he'd had the driver drop him off on the corner of Twelfth Avenue and 46th Street in the literal

shadow of the WWII aircraft carrier *Intrepid*, which was now a museum permanently anchored in one of the Hudson River berths. The weather was clear and seasonably chilly, which justified his dark peacoat and a wool Navy watch cap. Dangling from his shoulder by a leather strap was a Gucci satchel that contained a Glock 19 fitted with a silencer as well as a few other tools and cleaning materials he thought he might need, including a second, ghost Glock, which he planned to leave at the scene.

With a sense of excitement, Hank had to cool his heels while waiting for the traffic light to change so he could cross the busy avenue. Once he had, he found himself passing a collection of upscale bars, nightclubs, and multiethnic restaurants nestled between the few original businesses remaining in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Despite it being a midweek Wednesday night, the area was hopping with smart-looking people and was generally far different from the place he'd visited as a youngster with his brother. Like the environment, he was a different person, no longer a seventy-five-pound slip of a boy, but a heavily muscled, six-foot-three, two-hundred-and-ten-pound, forty-eight-year-old ex-Navy SEAL who still worked out every day.

The reason Hank was feeling chipper yet anxious was because he was totally caught up, heart and soul, in a *mission*. He had been tasked by his current employer, Action Security, to carry out a job in a fashion that had required significant planning over the previous twenty-four hours, for which he was to be paid a sizable fee on top of his normal salary. As with his other Action Security missions, of which there had been almost a dozen, tonight's was going to require him to utilize his extensive military experience as well as all the hands-on instruction he'd had in Naval Special Warfare and SEAL Qualification Training.

What all that schooling had accomplished was to transform a twentysomething Hank Roberts from a relatively normal, empathetic, athletic, and competitive college graduate into a highly trained killer. That

had been all well and good until his fourth mission, which took place in Idlib, Syria. That mission's goal was to take out Abu Rahim al-Afri, a deputy leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The goal had been achieved, but it also left a lasting effect on him. Six years later, he could recall details of that ill-fated operation as if it had happened the previous week. Back then, Hank had been a member of SEAL Team Five, deployed to Iraq, where he had participated in four successful operations against ISIL, all of which had gone off without a hitch thanks to superb intelligence gathering, extensive planning, full-scale mock-up rehearsals, and flawless execution.

Even now, as he neared the location of the evening's mission, he could remember as if it were yesterday, sitting in the Black Hawk helicopter with six of his fellow SEAL Team Five comrades in the blackness of the wee hours of the morning, closing in on their objective and experiencing the invariable rush of adrenaline. Because of the noise of the copter's engine and the characteristic thump of its rotors there'd been no conversation, nor was there any reason to think that this mission was going to be any different than the previous four, as they had made equivalent preparations, complete with exhaustive rehearsals.

Once over the target, which was a two-story concrete block structure with a flat roof, Hank had been the second on the Fast Rope, mere seconds behind Lieutenant Commander Miller as had been planned. As he slid down the rope, he was shocked to hear the characteristic *rat-a-tat-tat* of a Kalashnikov despite the copter's deafening racket and wind. For nearly a month of nightly surveillance of the terrorist leader's home, there had never been a rooftop guard, but it was painfully obvious to him that that wasn't the situation on this fateful night.

Reacting by instinct, Hank immediately let go of the Fast Rope and dropped the last four or five feet rather than waiting for his boots to touch the ground. As a consequence, he landed full force on Lieutenant

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Commander Miller's corpse. Rolling off onto the concrete roof, he managed to extract his P266 sidearm because his MI6A2 assault rifle was slung over his shoulder on a snug sling for the descent from the helicopter. In the next instant, Chief Petty Officer Nakayama landed on top of Miller and Hank. From his agonized breathing and reflexive twitching, he knew Nakayama, too, had taken some rounds from the ISIL guard, but the man's labored breathing ended when Hank felt him absorb several more rounds that were being sprayed in their direction.

With some effort, because Nakayama's body was partially on top of him, Hank rolled over onto his belly and looked over the top edge of Miller's torso. In the eerie green light of his night vision goggles, he sighted the ISIL fighter in the shadow of the building's bulkhead, which was slated to provide SEAL Team Five access to the building's interior. Holding his weapon upward at waist level, and lit up by muzzle flashes from the Kalashnikov's barrel, the terrorist was now firing at the armored belly of the Black Hawk. Without a second's hesitation, Hank used the laser night sight of his SIG Sauer pistol to pinpoint the guard and pulled off several rounds. He was rewarded by seeing the man drop his weapon, stagger a few steps backward, then fall to the roof's surface.

In the next instant, Hank was joined by three more of his teammates as they reached the roof unscathed while the Black Hawk peeled away to wait to be summoned for the extraction. All three SEALs already had their assault rifles in their hands. Hank faced Lieutenant D'Agostino and made a motion across his throat as he pointed to Miller and Nakayama. The lieutenant nodded and then waved for what was left of the team to rush over to the bulkhead, where they made short work of the door.

The rest of the ill-fated mission was equally as bad, although there was no more loss of any members of SEAL Team Five. The helicopter

and firefight on the roof had alerted the building's occupants, particularly the target, whose response was to leave his bedroom on the second floor and find refuge among his mini harem on the ground floor.

Armed with an intricate knowledge of the sizable home's floor plans, the SEAL team had no trouble finding Abu Rahim al-Afri and dispatching him, but not before a number of other ISIL fighters had roused themselves from nearby homes to join what became a serious firefight. In sharp contrast to the other missions Hank had been on, this one resulted in a horrendous loss of life, even of women and children. On top of that, the extraction was delayed and rather difficult because an Airborne Tactical Extraction Platform had to be brought to the scene to get Miller's and Nakayama's bodies back to base. SEALs never left any of their comrades behind.

As Hank approached his current objective, now less than a half block away, he felt a welcome rush of adrenaline, wonderfully reminiscent of when he'd been on active duty. For him it was like an addict's fix, something he desperately needed. At the same time, on the flip side of the coin, the welcome euphoria also reminded him about how much that fateful Idlib mission had affected his life. Although he was lucky to have survived, what he didn't expect was that from that day on, he would progressively struggle in his private life. Even prior to Idlib, his calm and contented demeanor had been changing over the years to one characterized by sudden and confusing mood swings with mission flashbacks and difficulty sleeping, primarily when he was at home on leave and away from his team. He strenuously denied it when confronted by his wife. In contrast, she had no problem pointing out that his unpredictable behavior was negatively affecting the family, particularly their two young daughters. The problem was that as a SEAL he'd been conditioned, almost brainwashed, not to admit to such human weaknesses.

The result was that within six or seven months after the Idlib

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disaster, his private life quickly imploded, ultimately leading to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite his futile attempts to deny its reality, he found himself having to deal with a contentious divorce, discharge from the Navy, and loss of custody of and even visitation rights to his daughters.

What followed was a year's descent into hell of unsuccessful PTSD treatments involving various methods of psychotherapy and drug trials, all of which had minimal or no effect. Falling further into alcohol and drug abuse and near to giving up hope, Hank became desperate. Then, as if in answer to a prayer, he got a call a year and a half ago from Chuck Barton, a fellow ex-Navy SEAL, a bit older than he whom he'd met briefly when Hank was near the end of his SEAL training. Following his own discharge from the military, Chuck had started a highly successful company called Action Security, which was staffed largely by ex-military special forces personnel. After several meetings, during which Chuck scoffed at Hank's purported psychological issues, which Hank did not try to hide, Chuck offered Hank a job that he assured him would be perfect for his training and experience. Sensing manna from heaven, Hank accepted the position. What followed for him was an almost magical reboot of his self-esteem as well as some welcome relief of his incapacitating PTSD, especially after he had been sent on a few missions along with another Action Security employee, David Mach, an ex-Army Ranger. Those missions involved traveling to Mexico at the behest of a drug cartel to eliminate individuals who had fallen from favor either within their organization or in a rival's.

From then on, as long as he was kept somewhat busy with such missions, which he recognized as a kind of real immersion therapy in contrast to those psychological ones he'd tried, he continued to improve symptomatically. Soon he was back to sleeping reasonably well without horrific nightmares, able to focus, and even able to see his daughters again.

Then, six months later, things began to improve even more when Action Security signed on a new account called Oncology Diagnostics. This client became a particular boost to Hank. He wasn't sure exactly what the healthcare company did, but he didn't care or bother to find out. What he cared about was that they had already provided him with six missions right there in New York City, which obviated the need for international travel and avoided the associated complicated logistics. All of these missions Hank had carried out himself, although David Mach was available if he'd been needed. The current mission was for the same client, and Hank was confident he didn't need assistance, saving the client considerable expense.

As he got closer to his objective, he found himself once again wondering why a medical organization needed to eliminate people—and it mystified him. Yet as thankful as he was for rebooting his life, he was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. What made these NYC missions particularly challenging was that the client insisted they be accomplished in a fashion that would avoid any potential homicide investigations. This demanded extra planning on Action Security and particularly Hank's part, and a solution that had been decided from the get-go was to make these hits appear as suicides. So far as Hank or Action Security knew, it had worked fine. The important thing was that the client was pleased. As for the current mission, a thirty-year-old male, Hank was planning on the same format, which was why he was packing a ghost gun.

He passed a Salvation Army thrift store, which was shuttered for the night, and several doors down, he stopped in front of a five-story brick building with a large decorative cornice. From all his preparation and research done over the last twenty-four hours, he knew that the mark, Sean O'Brien, lived alone on the third floor in the rear apartment. Sean had been living in Manhattan for three years and worked in the financial

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industry. He had a girlfriend, but conveniently only saw her on weekends, meaning that the chances he was alone on a Monday night were near to a hundred percent. Although he had passed some revelers on the previous block, between Twelfth and Eleventh Avenue, where he was now standing was devoid of people despite Manhattan being home to more than a million and a half people. The circumstances were nearly perfect.

With a welcome upsurge of adrenaline, he pulled out an empty envelope from his satchel addressed to Sean O'Brien with a return address of Oncology Diagnostics. He then quickly mounted the three-stepped stoop to face the building's buzzer to the right of the front door. After pressing the button for apartment 3B, he waited, his body trained to project calm and ease. With consultation with the client and discussion with the Action Security operations team, Hank had already planned on what to say. Finally, with a bit of static he heard a questioning "Yes?" come out of the intercom.

"Mr. O'Brien," Hank said, leaning close to the microphone. "I have a letter for you from Oncology Diagnostics that they felt you would want to see immediately."

"Really?" Sean questioned.

"Really," Hank responded.

After a brief pause, which Hank expected, since it had happened on all six of his missions for Oncology Diagnostics, the door's buzzer loudly sounded. Quickly, he pushed open the door and entered the building. As with all those other missions, he thought with satisfaction, this one was progressing flawlessly.

CHAPTER 1

Thursday, December 7, 5:45 am

Laurie Montgomery woke up with a start at the sound of her smartphone's alarm. It was the default radar sound and wasn't terribly loud, but as if in a panic, she snatched the phone up from the bedside table to turn it off as if her life depended on it. Ever since she was a teenager, wake-up alarms had triggered a kind of fight-or-flight reaction that she'd never been able to control. Back then she'd been fearful that she'd be late to school and suffer the consequences even though she'd never been tardy. Eventually, when she had developed more insight into herself, she had an inkling the habit stemmed from conditioned fear of authority figures like the school principal and a concern of evoking their ire, which she attributed to her authoritarian and emotionally distant cardiac surgeon father.

After turning off the blasted alarm, she allowed herself to sink back under the covers for a few moments to calm down and prepare herself for the busy day ahead. She also glanced over at Jack to give him the first

of several anticipated nudges. The result was the second shock of the young day: He was not there!

Sitting back up again in the early-morning darkness with just a hint of the coming dawn seeping through the two windows that overlooked 106th Street in Manhattan's Upper West Side, she strained her ears to pick up any unusual sounds in the morning stillness. As a mother her first thought was always about her children, Jack Jr.—JJ—who was thirteen, and Emma, seven, wondering if one of them had awakened and aroused Jack. The other possibility was that something was amiss with Dorothy, her mother, who was still living with them following the death of Laurie's father. With a bit of relief, she quickly became aware of the distant but reassuring sound of the shower. Obviously, Jack had just gotten up without disturbing her and was already showering.

Allowing herself to sink back once again into the warmth of the bed, Laurie vaguely wondered what had awakened Jack. Since his scary bike incident a year ago when he'd been targeted by a murderous driver, necessitating a lengthy recovery from the hip and fibula fractures of his right leg, she'd been the one to wake him in the morning rather than vice versa, despite her always having had trouble waking up in the morning. The reason was simple: She was a night person who liked to unwind by reading in bed—usually longer than she should—before turning out the light. Back in the good old days of college, medical school, and even after becoming a medical examiner, she'd usually read nineteenth-century British novels. But once she'd agreed to take on the role of chief medical examiner of the City of New York, all that changed.

Now Laurie's nighttime, in-bed reading was all work-related, as she felt there was always some additional details she desperately needed to review despite her having invariably spent ten and occasionally twelve busy hours in her office. When she'd accepted the chief's position five years ago, she'd had no idea it was going to require such a commitment

of time and attention, and it had been a rude awakening. Now, when she thought about it, she was the first one to admit that she should have guessed. After all, she knew that the NYC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, or OCME, had to oversee some seventy thousand deaths per year and do it twenty-four hours, seven days a week, 365 days a year. She also knew that to accomplish this Herculean task required more than six hundred dedicated city employees, including nearly forty board-certified medical examiners, an equivalent number of medical legal investigators, and a budget of more than seventy-five million dollars. Being the chief medical examiner of the City of New York, the largest such institution in the world, was the opposite of a sinecure.

When Jack had first come home from the hospital after his accident and resultant surgery, he'd been bedridden for almost a week, which meant Laurie had to use an alarm to wake up in the morning, as he was sleeping later than usual. Then, a month later, when he insisted on returning to work even though he wasn't all that mobile, she had finally agreed to accept a perk her position as chief provided, namely work-related transportation. But being painfully cognizant of budgetary pressures, Laurie chose not to requisition a new vehicle nor create a new job as her driver but rather to rely on the existing OCME Transport Department personnel and equipment to ferry her and Jack to and from the morgue. The only problem was that the team's change from the night shift to the morning shift occurred at 7:00, which meant that she and Jack had to be picked up well before the night-shift drivers' shift ended, meaning at 6:30, or 6:40 the latest. Since it took her a bit longer than him to get ready, she had to wake herself. Prior to Jack's incident, he'd get up way before Laurie and wake her before he left for work on his bike. Such had been their morning *modus operandi* for more than ten years.

With a sigh and the realization she couldn't delay any longer, Laurie reluctantly tossed back the covers, stood up, wiggled her toes into her

slippers, and donned her robe. Thus prepared, she headed into the bathroom. The warm humidity was welcome. As she approached her sink—the bathroom had two, side by side—Jack was turning off the shower. He then stepped out of the spacious stall. The healed surgical incisions on his hip and calf were bright red from the hot water.

“Top of the morning to you,” he said cheerfully, imitating a heavy, cultured English accent as he pulled his towel from the heated rack.

“Good morning yourself,” she said as she looked at her image in the mirror to survey what she called *the damage* after a night’s sleep. “What are you so chipper about?”

“Today’s the day!” Jack exclaimed enthusiastically, covering his head with the towel to vigorously dry his hair. “I’m psyched!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Laurie questioned. “What’s so special about today?” Jack’s usual morning levity never ceased to amaze her, yet his attitude on this particular morning seemed exceptionally effervescent.

“Today is the day I’m finally getting that new Trek bike that I had to order four freaking months ago,” Jack said as he hung up his towel. He glanced in the mirror, and with a couple of simple pats nudged his Caesar hairstyle into position. He then headed for the door leading into what they called their changing room, which connected to the bedroom and the hallway. “I still can’t believe it’s taken so long to get the damn thing,” he said over his shoulder before disappearing from view. Raising his voice to be heard, he added: “If I had had any inkling about how long it was going to take thanks to the pandemic-induced supply chain issues, I would have ordered the damn thing the moment I got out of the hospital.”

“Good lord,” Laurie managed softly. She continued to stare at her image in the mirror. She’d forgotten about the bike and had secretly hoped Jack had as well. She’d never liked that biking was his preferred

mode of transportation in the city, and after his accident, she'd hoped that he'd gotten the message and finally come to share her position. Even though biking was becoming dramatically more popular with all the additional bike rental stations sprinkled about the city and all the new bike lanes, she still thought biking in NYC was only for people with a death wish. The OCME regularly saw thirty to forty bike deaths per year, and it was on the upswing, especially because people on the rental bikes rarely used helmets and electric bikes were available that went far too fast.

She leaned on the edge of the sink, recognizing she didn't want to get into a heated discussion of why she thought that, as a father and husband, Jack's biking and the risks involved was irresponsible, even selfish on his part. Laurie long ago had accepted she wasn't going to win the old argument, since his biking and even his intense pickup basketball on the neighborhood's outdoor court served a lot more than mere transportation or exercise for him. Both were a way for him to deal with his demons associated with the loss of his first family, which he still blamed on himself. From her perspective, it wasn't all bad. The suppressed anxiety involved was also responsible for the intensity he directed to being a medical examiner. At the OCME, he was by far the most productive of all the MEs, always looking for a forensic challenge to occupy his mind.

Laurie sighed. It was an ongoing battle, so to avoid conflict, she just changed the subject. "I'm looking forward to the day as well," she called out.

"Really?" Jack questioned with interest. He reappeared at the door to the changing room in the process of pulling on his undershirt. "What's up for you today?"

"It's Thursday," she said, trying to come up with something believable. A year ago she had instituted the rule that every Thursday she

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would do an autopsy with one of the forensic fellows who were training at the OCME to become eligible for board certification as a forensic pathologist or with one of the two New York University pathology residents who spent a month in their fourth year of pathology training. As a consequent, she truly looked forward to Thursdays as her favorite day of the week.

Besides the long hours and the frustrating politics of being the chief medical examiner, the other thing Laurie disliked about the position was that she seriously missed being a medical examiner and the challenge of doing the autopsies to determine the cause and manner of death. For her the field was a true calling to speak for the dead. Although she did make what she called chief rounds every morning, meaning she'd go down to the autopsy room and briefly go from table to table to listen to each case being presented and offer suggestions and advice based on her extensive knowledge and experience in the field, it wasn't the same as being personally involved in a case.

"Oh, right!" Jack called out even though he was again out of sight. "Are you doing an autopsy this morning?"

"Absolutely!" Laurie yelled. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. It's what keeps me sane."

"Who are you doing it with today?" Jack yelled back.

"Interesting that you should ask. I'm doing it with one of the new pathology residents who started on Friday. His name is Ryan Sullivan. Have you met him?"

Jack reappeared in the bathroom doorway. He was now buttoning one of his chambray shirts, which, along with his corduroy jacket, was his signature attire. "No, I haven't formally met him, but I've seen him and his fellow resident in the autopsy room. I haven't worked with either or spoken with them yet." Jack wasn't completely up to speed with the number of autopsies he normally did as he still found standing for long

periods at the autopsy table bothersome for his hip, despite his being back to all other activities, including half-court basketball. Dr. Chet McGovern, who was responsible for the residents as the director of education, had avoided including either of the new residents on Jack's cases for fear doing so would extend how long the case took.

"Have you heard anything from any of the other MEs who have worked with him?"

Jack shook his head. "Not a word. Why do you ask?"

"Because Chet made it a point to ask me to work with him today. According to Chet, Ryan has a bad attitude. He's not a fan of forensic pathology and is resentful of having to spend a month here. As a result, he's been shirking some of his assigned autopsies, particularly in the afternoons when he sneaks back to the Hassenfeld Children's Hospital to go over the day's pediatric pathology cases."

"Uh-oh," Jack said. "That's starting to sound like a disturbing *déjà vu*."

"You got that right," she agreed. Several years ago there had been a similar problem with one of the NYU pathology residents, Aria Nichols, who also evaded some of her responsibilities during her OCME rotation. Back then, Chet had asked Laurie to do a case with the woman to see if Laurie could help the situation by fostering her interest in forensics, something Laurie had accomplished to great success with at least one other woman in the past. Unfortunately, although she again succeeded with Aria, there'd been a sad and tragic outcome. Awakenning the woman's interest in forensics led to a series of events that ultimately resulted in her murder and Jack's having to sorrowfully autopsy the youthful resident. The case Laurie did with Aria was a suspected overdose that Aria ended up proving was a homicide, and as Aria closed in on discovering the perpetrator, he killed her.

"Don't tell me this Ryan Sullivan is another Aria Nichols," Jack said with a roll of his eyes.

“That fear occurred to me, too,” Laurie said. “But without me even raising the issue, Chet put my mind to rest straight out by saying Ryan doesn’t share Nichols’s in-your-face antisocial aggressiveness. In fact, it sounds like Ryan is quite the contrary. Chet described him as passive-aggressive. On the plus side, he’s reportedly just as smart as Ms. Nichols was. To prove it, according to Chet, he’s already been offered a pediatric pathology fellowship at NYU. That’s obviously a big feather in his cap, so he otherwise must be an exceptional pathology resident.”

“Good grief! Having a second troublesome resident calls out that the OCME should be an elective, rather than a requirement for NYU anatomical pathology residency. Since that’s not going to happen, it seems to me that we should at least be warned of a resident’s negative mindset, so we can be prepared.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Laurie said. “That’s an interesting suggestion. I’ve wanted an excuse to go over to the NYU Pathology Department to meet the new chief, and this could be it. Maybe early this afternoon I can find the time. If nothing else, it would be an opportunity for me to let the department know that after the Aria Nichols tragedy, we’ve encouraged our MEs to give the NYU residents more of a sense of participation, particularly after our general counsel put the kibosh on our giving them more actual responsibility.”

“Uh-oh!” Jack voiced as he buckled his watch on his wrist and glanced at its dial. “You’d better get a move on and jump in the shower. It’s already after six.”

“Yikes!” Laurie said. In response, she peeled off her robe and kicked free of her slippers. Stepping into the shower she yelled: “Since you’re already dressed, how about making us some coffee?”

“You got it,” Jack said.