

## 45. A FATAL ERROR

We were nearing the end of the semester. Donna and I had been having a great time together. She felt that I was helping her with her courses. Surprisingly, I taught her a few things about statistics.

When exam time rolled around, she felt pretty confident. I had nothing to do. There were no more classes. I was walking on campus when I noticed Dr. Coleman, she seemed to motion to me.

“I was really fascinated with your course.”

I remember seeing you in there. You sat in the back of the class. Sorry, if I don’t remember your name.”

“Chloe.”

I didn’t give her my last name.

I added “I wasn’t actually enrolled. I was just auditing.”

“I’m glad that you were inspired. I’m giving another course next semester that might interest you as well.

“You talk knowingly of these groups who are trying to subvert our democratic institutions. Have you ever actually come in contact with any of these organizations?”

She seemed genuinely interested in my question. “What are you talking about exactly?”

“You know. Political groups that are based on a strict ideology. They have a messianic message.”

“Do you mean terrorists?”

“Not exactly. The kind of ideas that you talked about in your lectures. People who espouse radical ideas. They organize around conspiracy theories.”

She again questioned me. For a moment, I thought that she understood what I was talking about. Then it seemed as if her defenses went up. She was playing the part of a helpless academic. “Are you talking about a terrorist cell?”

“Not really. You’ve never had any personal contact with these groups. You talk about them as if it’s all first hand knowledge.”

“Chloe. What was your last name?”

I hadn’t told her. She seemed to be becoming impatient with me.

“I know some people that you might want to talk to. If you could give me a phone number.”

I wanted to talk to Sharon Coleman. I felt as if she was reporting me to the secret police. What had made her so suspicious of me. This was totally freaking me out. I had to get out of here.

“Well, you might see me in class next semester. I’m going to look up the info about your class. It sounds informative.”

I was confusing her even more. She was trying to react. She wanted to get down my info. She didn’t want to let me get away. And I was leaving before she could do a thing.

I had really let down my guard to Dr. Coleman. There was no way that she could be in touch with Lee Tate. And her whole philosophy seemed so diametrically opposed to his. But when I tried to make things personal, she went crazy on me.

How did Doctor Coleman think that her ideas were going to have any effect on the world if she couldn't deal with my questions? I didn't want to believe that she was as paranoid as the subjects of her study. And if she was, how was she ever able to gain any critical distance. I had been conned by her intelligence. She really sounded as if she knew what she was talking about. Perhaps, she was only expressing her own fears. When she was finally confronted by the reality, it only made her more afraid. She was willing to admit to her nightmares. But if they came to life, she'd have no idea what to do. That was why she became an academic. She could fit everything into neat little files and hide them away. When the monsters became big and bad, she just wanted to run away. She had no problem with editors and tenure committees. Even angry students could be dealt with. But she didn't want to come outside of the protection of academics.

I wanted to talk about what had happened with Dr. Coleman. I thought Donna would understand.

Donna freaked out on me: "You told her that you were a member of a terrorist cell. Of course, you were going to scare her."

"That isn't what I said at all. I wanted to know if she had actually observed groups who manifested the kinds of behavior that she described in her lecture."

"That was a weird question."

"Why? I wanted to know what evidence she used to develop her theories."

"She probably read articles. And she watched some TV."

"She's a sociologist. I figured that she had done some field work."

"She may have gone to some political meetings. But you asked her if she knew any terrorists. She probably thought you were trying to recruit her to join some group."

"I was trying to ask her about her experience."

"I like Dr. Coleman. Why did you even do such a thing?"

"They were intelligent questions."

"You had no business doing that. You weren't even enrolled in the class."

"I was interested as a citizen of this country. Don't you want to know what going on?"

"I know enough already."

"If you knew more, you wouldn't be calling them terrorist cells." I hoped that I wasn't insulting Donna. But I needed to show her the truth.

"What do you call them?"

"I don't know anymore. I think that they're part of mainstream America."

"That sounds ridiculous. Who are you really? Are you some kind of terrorist?"

"We've been hanging around for months. How could you say that about me."

This was so overwhelming for her. She was battling me at every step of the way.

"You talk about trust. I don't even know who you are. You could be some kind of enemy agent."

"How could I be an enemy agent?"

"I've told you everything about my life. And you've told me nothing. I don't even know if Chloe Donzenac is your real name. It sounds made up."

"You're getting all carried away. I asked a reasonable question of Dr. Coleman. And she went ballistic on me."

"She had reason to. You're nuts!"

“I’m only curious. I’ve seen thing that you wouldn’t believe.”

“Exactly. Because you made them up in your head. You’re a mental case.”

“Sometimes I wonder for my sanity. But things are a lot more complex than you realize.”

I was afraid of really hurting her. But I also wanted her to trust me. I needed to tell her my whole story.

“My name really is Chloe Donzenac. My parents are Bill and June. I have one brother Joah. But my parents were nothing like yours. You have to understand that. They weren’t encouraing of my interests. Far from it. My mother was like the head of the secret police. I went over to this guys house, he tried to drug me and attack me.”

“My mother was already crazy. She’d snoop in my stuff. I didn’t dare writing anything down just in case that she would use it as evidence against me. So when she heard that I had been at a boy’s place, she accused me of sleeping with him. And they locked me down completely. The only time that I could leave the house was to go to school.”

“I decided that I wasn’t going to take their bull shit. So I used to sneak out on my own with friend Rose. We would go to these parties where there were all kinds of drugs. And I got into all that stuff. I wasn’t a heavy user. But I played around.”

And there were a lot of older guys there. I was in all kinds of scary situations. One time I passed out, and when I woke up this guy was raping me. I lost it completely. I just went mental.”

“Then my parents started accusing me of stealing things. Things that they misplaced. I couldn’t take it any longer. My father started to scare me. Not only that, but he tried to nail me inside the house. Before I left, it was almost impossible to even escape. I couldn’t wait around to see what was next. They were both insane.”

Donna asked, “What happened next?”

“I ran away from home.”

“Just like that?”

“I had no choice. They kept accusing me of doing things that I didn’t do. And those things that I did weren’t that much fun.”

“Weren’t you afraid that someone was going to try to kill you?”

“I was in fear for my life. The I got picked up by some Amazon trucker who really was some kind of killer.”

“How did you get away from her?”

“I hid in this sandwich shop. When I came out of my hiding place, she had gone. And this guy saw me in there. He offered me a job.

“What kind of job?”

“I was supposed to read to this comatose patient.”

“Just like in your story.”

“Just like my story. Except. I wasn’t able to communicate with Cody.”

“You read to him like in the story?”

“Yeah, everyday. It was like teaching school. Only he never really answered back to me.”

She asked me, “How did it end up?”

“He woke up!”

“What? “Did he recognize you?”

“Not really. Then this Lee Tate guy, the one who hired me, made this plan to kill me.”

“Obviously, he didn’t succeed.”

“I got away.”

“Wow! That was scary.”

“I took a bus to Saint Louis. Then I took the train to Chicago. Another train to Omaha. And then I ended up in Lincoln.”

“Why here?”

“I thought that it would be a good place to hang out. I could blend in with the other students. It almost worked. I just liked my life too much.”

“That’s a strange way of putting it.”

I was still frightening her.

“How old are you? Are you even old enough to drive? Do you have a licence?”

“I don’t have a licence. But I know how to drive. My father ran a car repair place. I probably knew everything there was to know about cars by the time that I was ten.”

“You probably shouldn’t even be walking around on your own at night.”

“I’m not that sheltered. Besides, all that was a while ago.”

“How long? Ten years?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I’ve grown up a lot since then.”

“So you’re trying to involve me in your delinquency.”

I couldn’t tell if she was mad at me or just teasing me.

“Are we still friends?”

“Barely. I don’t know. You’ve lied to me over and over again.”

“I didn’t really like. I just didn’t tell you the whole story.”

“That’s a little too devious for me.”

“We could give it some time.”

She sounded harsh, “I’m not sure if I have that kind of time in my life.”

“You have the right to your own opinion.”

“You’re damn right I do.”

I wonder if she had ever fought for anything this hard in her life. I felt as if I needed to create some distance between us. It was just that she had never been through this kind of situation in her life. I wasn’t going to claim that her existence was charmed. She needed to understand my world a little better.

I headed back to my room. I had more than enough to work through. In a sense, I had taken Donna for granted. Either way, she was going to have to face the truth. I had done my best to sugar-coat things. I only wanted to fit into her world. And it all back-fired. I had never had a friend like her. More than that, I had never been able to survive in her kind of world. Everything had a place. Even Donna. When I admitted who I truly was, I had to take my leave. Much of Lincoln was probably worse than this. They weren’t to blame. They just hadn’t seen the things that I had.

Some of the sorority girls spent their days dazzled by their own wonder. They couldn’t imagine an existence without a minimum of attention and a maximum of self-admiration.

They'd be out in force at Cornhusker games. In another world, I could have made my way alongside them. I hardly fit their rigid definition of popularity. But I might have been able to learn the code.

As it was, I couldn't even measure up to Donna's expectations. I loved her independence. She appreciated other people. But she didn't need anyone to tell her that was special. She gave each day her all.

I rode in there to tell her that nothing was as it seemed. Even the daytime was night. How else did expect her to react when it all shook out?

Maybe this was the time to leave Lincoln. I still had some loose ends to tie up. Maybe I could get back to visit Donna. I just needed to give it some time.

After my run in with Dr. Coleman, I had been avoiding campus. I needed to check on something at the union. So I stealthily made my trek over there. All of a sudden I saw Donna standing right in front of me. I was the first to speak.

"Is everything forgiven between us?"

Tears were filling her eyes. "I'm not sure. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"You could go back to how you were."

"You've opened my eyes. I can't very well close them."

"Did you talk to Dr. Coleman?"

"I did. But not about you. I said some general things to her. I wanted to learn how I did in the class. I wanted to know how I did on my project."

"How did it turn out?"

Donna continued with story, "She agreed to write me a letter of recommendation if I needed one in the future."

"Did she say anything else to you?"

"Just school stuff."

"What about the things that she told us in class?"

"I think that you were right. She has no idea what really is going on. Almost nobody does."

"Do you believe me?"

"I don't want to. I just feel that I can't help myself. It's a little upsetting when everything that you've believed all your life turns out to be false."

"You still have your accomplishments. You've done well in school."

"I just don't know about the world. Why is it this way?"

"Only part of it is that way. That's why we have to do something to change it."

Donna summarized the challenge: "Dr. Coleman introduced us to all these deep concepts. But she had no idea what was really going on."

"At least, she opened your eyes."

"If you hadn't told me what happened to you, I wouldn't have taken Dr. Coleman's ideas that seriously."

"Do you think that I have anything to worry about from her?"

"I'd try to avoid her if I could. You don't know who she's talked to. She may have reported you to the campus police. I can't say."

"I have been maintaining a low profile. But you never know."

“You’ve been lucky so far.”

“I know.”

I thought that I had escaped Lee Tate completely. But I may have exposed myself too much already.

“Are you going to be around for the summer semester?”

“I don’t know. I might go back home and work. I’ll figure it out.”

I wanted to say more to her.

“I wish that I could have told you everything.”

“I expected you to be honest with me.”

“It’s not that easy. I have trouble accepting everything that has happened. I can’t be honest with myself.”

Donna was just beginning to understand a lesson that I had learned long ago. Knowledge means something. It doesn’t simply exist in books.

She gave me a big hug. She didn’t want to let go.

It couldn’t have been any other way. I couldn’t have started out with the story of my life. It had to come out the hard way. It might have been different if Donna had been more hard-edged. But the world was so overwhelming to her. And she had to take it in small bites.

I could feel that I was sinking back into my old ways. I did what I could to hold myself together.

Dr. Briggs called me in to talk about my story.

“Chloe. I don’t think that I can pass you unless you’re more honest about yourself.”

“You told me that I was writing a work of fiction.”

“You still have to be faithful to a basic reality.”

He wasn’t making sense,

“You need to name your attacker!”

“I’ve done what I could.”

“Is it Bill, or Lee, or Cody, or Adam, or David, or Ted? Tell me who is behind the attacks?”

“I don’t know. What do you want me to say?”

“You have to be able to describe every characteristic of your attacker. Otherwise, the police won’t be able to apprehend him.”

“I don’t really care about punishment. I really can’t trust the police.

He was rattling my pages in front of me.

“You have to bear witness against him. Otherwise, he’ll do it again.”

“No matter what my testimony is, he’s going to do it again.”

“You’re telling him that it’s all right. Next time, the whole thing is going to escalate. Someone could get killed.”

“It’s fiction. A short story. I made it up.”

He corrected me, “But behind the pretense is something real. You can’t escape that fact.”

“Who cares?”

“You do. You need to see his face to remind you of what happened. And you need to describe every detail of your assault.”

“It’s not like you think.”

“You’re glossing over everything that happens in your life. You’re involved in the worst possible disaster. Then you brush it off just to have it happen all over again. You’re giving yourself no leeway.”

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

He was firm, “You wanted help.”

“Why are you torturing me? What do you want?”

“I want you to ask forgiveness.”

“I don’t want to be forgiven.”

He offered me a strange bargain, “Then the same thing is going to keep happening over and over again.”

“What am I supposed to do about it?”

“Say that you’re sorry.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“You can’t be a real writer without experience. Do something unimaginable. Then come back to me and confess.”

“Do you want my confession. I can make something up.”

“I want you to come back with grime all over your face. I want you to show me the evidence that you’ve been degraded.

“Why don’t you just do it yourself if that’s what you’re looking for?”

“I’m your teacher. That would be wrong. I want you to commit the most unimaginable crime.”

“Like murder. Like Lee Tate.

“Who is Lee Tate? Another character that you made up so that you would never have to face the tawdry nature of your own being.”

“Do you want me to admit that I enjoy being degraded? Is that the lesson that you have for me, Dr. Briggs?”

He acted stumped. I wasn’t sure how he could follow my last comments.

“Where did we get started?”

“I gave you a story to read. And then you became involved in my life. And it went downhill from there.”

“I want you to tell me what really happened to you. I’m tired of your contrivance. The made up characters. The refusal to see your father for who he really was.”

“Are we finally getting to the heart of the matter.? Do you want me to admit things that never happened?”

“There are loads of things that I need from you. Honesty is the primary one.”

“What comes after that?”

I didn’t mind playing along with Dr. Briggs. He was teaching me things. But I didn’t want to give in to his fantasies.

I was doing my best to strip away all these layers of contrivance. Why did I resent my parents? More particularly, why was I afraid of Bill? I reviewed examples when he got angry at me. His anger knew no bounds. He would come out of himself. He was unhinged. He no longer saw me as human. I was a machine part. He wanted to carve me up with sharp screw driver. More than that, he wanted to feel pleasure.

“Dr. Briggs, does my confession make you feel pleasure? Or are you saving up for some moment in the future where you can combine my image in suffering with that of some other penitent at your knees? Do you want me to beg for forgiveness? What more do you have in store for me?”

“You’re a writer. You need to answer your own damn questions.”

“But it’s you. You’re teasing me. You’re leading me on, and not answering my questions.”

“Here’s a piece of paper. Write down what you want to know. Then answer your questions. You can make the world follow your dictates.”

I started to understand Lee’s morality much better. When he viewed himself as a spy, it was OK to lie and cheat. He was doing anything that he could to maintain the honor of the state.

“I need your help.”

“Look at you, my poor child. With your ruby red cheeks and your insanely cute little lips. What do you want me to say to you?”

“I want you to give me an A.”

“And what are you willing to give me in exchange?”

“The truth. That you are one useless son of a bitch.”

“You are trying to bring undue influence on my decision.”

“I want you to teach me something.”

“When you cry, make sure that they’re real tears. Not the crocodile sort.”

“What do I have to be sorry about?”

“You tell me. What did your attacker do to you?”

“He made me read my story over and over again. He made me act out the most cruel part.”

“Now, we are getting somewhere. So what was cruel about his actions?”

“He took pleasure in hurting me.”

“How did he hurt you?”

“I’m not making this up.”

“What did you do that made you need to get punished?”

“I had impure thoughts.”

“Did you touch yourself?”

“No!”

“Did you let him touch you?”

I started at Dr. Briggs, “What is your interest in this.”

“I’m trying to prepare your complaint to the police.”

“This is art. It’s not a police matter.”

“Are you telling me that you condone anything that is done to you?”

“What’s done is the past. I wrote my story so that it wouldn’t happen again.”

“What’s the shit about the coma? Was it your way at getting back at your attacker? You rendered him paralyzed.”

“It was a story.”

The two sides of the same coin. Lee and Cody. So what would you do to me if you had the chance?”



“What do you want me to do? How could I stop you without granting you some form of pleasure?”

He wondered, “Is that the paradox? You need a teacher to help your reason through the paradox.”

I faced him down, “You really are a reprehensible creature.”

Why were all these characters moving around in my story? Why couldn't I get any of them to stand still?

“You're not finished with me.”

“I wasn't sure that I ever needed you at all.”

“You were the one who wanted to be a writer. That's why you came to my class.”

“I came there because a friend brought me.”

“Is she still a friend?”

“I'm not sure.”

“I guess that you did something really stupid!”

“As usual, you're a sensitive guy. How long is this going to take? I have a lot of other things to do.”

“You told me that you wanted to pass the class. You're not even close to that point yet.”

Dr. Briggs ministered to an orderly world where everyone earned a living wage, everyone paid their mortgage, and everyone got their kids to swimming practice on time. And when they got older their children signed up for his creative writing classes to complete the cycle. Behind it all, all the men lusted after some celluloid princess. And when even she didn't meet their expectations, they sought refuge in the latest pharmaceutical relief. They would have been the perfect audience for my castigation. The good doctor could anoint me with holy oil before committing me to the flame.

“Witch!”

If only Donna had been nicer to me, I wouldn't be going through this. Wasn't there a true believer in Lincoln who could exchange her holy soul for my tarnished one? I so wanted to pass through heaven's gate. At least, I could get an A from Dr. Feelnothing!

Indeed, if my trials were a little more protracted, someone else could buy my place just to entertain herself. After all, wasn't that Dr. Briggs's intent. This was meant to be enjoyable.

How could I ever convince my audience that I was being tortured for their sins? It all depended on my ability to demonstrate that my vision of the world was infinitely more perceptive than everyone else's. I had suffered so that you could see with more clarity. But Dr. Briggs suggested that I had barely endured enough pain to put together a convincing story that would pass his class. My home life hardly attained the level of anguish that was experienced by Rose. This may have been the rub. My elevated level of consciousness meant that I was more successful at limiting the damage to my psyche. Under those terms, the original hurt must have been of a less serious nature. On the other hand, I may have simply been more adept at hiding my own travails. Behind the witty commentary, my tale may have been weighted down with a lifetime of woe. And nothing would be able to redeem me from the black hole to which I had been sentenced.

All in all, Dr. Briggs's method suggested an unusual political dilemma. Those who had sustained the most severe blows of injustice were the least able to plead their case. In fact, this

may not have actually been the true. But the dominant characters, like Dr. Briggs, found particular enjoyment in the fact that his victims appeared unable to answer him back. If there ever was a time to turn history on its head, now seemed to be that moment. But the weak had truly been run through and through with the barbs of their torturers.

My tale was all the more urgent under these conditions. I was ready to rise to the occasion. I may not have been able to win Donna over to my side. But that did not diminish the seriousness of my challenge. I had seen a reality that needed to be shared with the world. This was the news for modern man. When the time came, I would make the bells peal and send all the noble Reveres out on another run.

I had already attempted just such a rescue when I served my time with Cody Brainerd. I could not have been aware how devious was my opponent. That hardly diminished the importance of my endeavor. What I learned from that endeavor was an excellent foundation for what was to come.

Dr. Briggs continued to rest on his laurels. He had won over more worthy candidates than myself. I hardly had the facility of letters as my predecessors. And my own experience had not been sufficiently understood for me to mount a serious campaign to unseat the noble doctor. Besides, he had the final say so. So I was more than a little helpless in the whole affair. I could let my grade go by the wayside and resign this face off here and now. Or I could attempt to play my final card.

What did I have left? I had shuffled through all these variations of my executioner. Each one was able to inflict a little damage. I found myself hobbling around without much recourse. Briggs reveled in the present outcome. How could I beat down his attacks?

Donna could have been a most constant ally. But I had alienated her with my subterfuge. I was not making it any easier for others to rally to my side. I could sense that I was being beat down for good. How had Dr. Briggs succeeded where Lee Tate had failed. Tate was a sorry character who felt no mercy for anyone else. His own vanity did him in? Couldn't I just as easily appeal to Briggs?

In the forgiveness department, Briggs had me outflanked. He was already crying the quality of mercy before I made my case. Where could I initiate my appeal while this learned prosecutor had me on the ropes. He had quashed all my complaints against Bill and June. Childish exaggeration! He had defended Lee Tate by accusing me of meddling in Cody's recovery. And he was using my betrayal of Donna as the basis for supporting his own case against me. My goose was cooked.

Even standing my ground against Dr. Coleman was a strike against me. I had impugned her methodology. Did no one want to hear the please of a girl in distress?

If I was lucky, I would be able to sneak out of Lincoln with my life. But I didn't want to leave here downtrodden. I needed a victory to give me the confidence that I needed. I had lived my life in proximity to danger. This academic imposter was trying to bring me down. How cowardly! Who would come to my defense?

Cody had definitively sided with his master, Lee. My great oeuvre had been all for naught. I needed freedom to ring out!

In retrospect, Donna might look back and realize I had done her right. But for the time being, the wounds were too fresh. Could she make the connection? Only a committed

assertiveness could end the kind of suffering that she had tasted. Her lack of awareness was not a defense. So it was a blessing that she had been able to emerge from the darkness. Nevertheless, I was still on my own.

Dr. Briggs had an audience among the vain. This was the same approach that had succeeded for June. She may have never become the revered society matron. But she had her supporters who swooned as she struck her blow for the fair set. This hardly meant that I was going to the dark side. Both Briggs and June were mining that same refuge in illusion. All that glittered was not gold.

Armed with a battery of facts and figures, I felt that I could take down Dr. Briggs. It had been the same thing with Dr. Coleman. Both hid behind their professional uncertainty. But Lee Tate wasn't playing war games down the quad from these characters. It may have been premature for me to focus on his present misdeeds. His plans were still in their infancy. But Dr. Briggs had thrown in his lot with this sort of nefariousness. History was replete with these villains. Could Briggs and his ilk survive under the bright light of the sun?

I had come out of another nightmare with flying colors. But that hardly endeared me to Lincoln. I was sure that the real Dr. Briggs was not so evil as my hastily drawn caricature. But I could hardly rely on him for support. And Dr. Coleman had shied away from her test of character. I couldn't trawl the rest of the faculty looking for boosters. I wasn't ready to say good bye. Did I have a choice? Things had progressed too far for me to pull them back. And Donna would need a lot of time to put all the pieces in place.