

4. VAL

There's an element of truth to the imagination. I meet her on the plaza of the John Hancock in Chicago. She waves at me as I take a short cut.

"Do I know you?"

She excuses herself, "I thought that you were someone else." She has made a mistake. But she has halted my progress towards my destination. I see a street vendor.

"Let me buy you an ice cream."

We walk over and get two cones.

"My name is Valerie."

She has big green eyes. She was born in Chicago. She is of Latvian descent.

"Do you work in this building?"

"The Hancock?"

"Yes"

She gives me a wide smile. It is a beautiful day. There is a pleasant breeze coming up from the lake. I can't move. I need to stay here, here with Valerie.

It is years later. I have just been arrested. I live in Roswell, Georgia a suburb of Atlanta. I am being asked questions about a woman that I met in Chicago ten years ago.

"I barely remember meeting her."

"Meeting her? You're married to her. At least you were until she was found dead in your bedroom."

Is this some kind of sick game of Nick's. How did he make this happen?"

"Do you know that you are the prime suspect?"

The plain clothes officer informs me of this fact. How can I be a suspect when I don't even know her?

He shows me a picture from the plaza in Chicago. I am eating ice cream. She is standing next to me.

"Do you recognize this woman?"

"I barely do. I think her name is Valerie. Where did you get that picture?"

This is their evidence. There is something linking us together. I cannot simply deny meeting her.

"What would have happened if I had not stopped for ice cream? Would you have had my picture then?"

He smiles. He doesn't answer. I look at the picture. It is not taken from the vantage point of a security camera. It is taken by an individual. Who was there taking my picture at the Hancock?

"We have millions of pictures. All taken randomly without any apparent connection tying them together. Then something happens. We do a cross-check. It turns up a match. An intersection. A detail which seemed to have no earthly significance suddenly has meaning. These details add up. A life. An action. A motive."

"And now I'm down here at the Roswell police station, and you're trying to explain a life that isn't even mine. Your details don't add up. It's not my life. It's not my actions. I have no motive."

“You had a friend. Ten years ago. You had a conversation with him about a random murder. This is just the thing that we’re talking about. You claim you don’t have a motive. But you said yourself that you didn’t need one. You could just commit the murder. What did you say *for kicks*?”

“Those weren’t my words.”

“We have a transcript of the conversation.”

“Those still aren’t my words.”

“I can show you in the transcript.”

He doesn’t show me anything. I look at the photograph of Valerie. She is beguiling. The photographer has stopped her life in the middle of an excited moment. There is such vibrance in her face. I want to touch her. I want to hold her, just to remember this moment.

“Your transcript’s wrong. Do you have the conversation?”

“*We* don’t have it,” he was very emphatic. “But we could get it.”

“Get it. Even if you get it, it still proves nothing. I didn’t know her. Not since that first time.”

“But why did you stop her in the plaza? Why did you pick her out of the crowd. All those people coming out of the Hancock.”

“She waved. She called to me. She had the most amazing smile. I was on my way. I was rushing for an appointment. I put all that aside.”

“Do you know what the appointment was for?”

“It was such a wonderful moment. But there’s really nothing that I can remember about the appointment. I think that I missed the appointment.”

“Wasn’t that an important meeting to miss?”

“It may have been. It just didn’t seem that way at the time.”

“So you sacrificed your meeting just to say hello to some girl who you didn’t know. This really important meeting.”

“It didn’t start that way.”

“But that’s what you’re asking us to believe. That you talked to this girl, this girl who you claimed that you didn’t know, and you missed your meeting. Your very important meeting.”

“It didn’t start out that way. I was in a hurry. She waved me down. I stopped. In that instant, I put aside the thoughts of my meeting. Just temporarily. I thought that she knew me. I like the fact that she knew me. I would have wanted to say something to her. That would have been too forward. But when she waved at me, I had my opportunity. I acted on it. I stopped. And then she spoke. She apologized. She thought that I was someone else.”

“That should have been your cue. She hadn’t really picked *you* out from the crowd. *You* should have gone on your way,” the detective was being obsequious.

“When she spoke to me, that opportunity became *my* opportunity. I took it.”

“You should have moved on. You wouldn’t be sitting with us right now.”

“Are you trying to say that everything became inevitable after that initial mistake?”

“Maybe it wasn’t a mistake. She really meant to talk to you. She needed an excuse. She waved. Then she claimed that she didn’t know you to see what you would say.”

“But I did say something.”

“Right. You could have moved on, but you gave in to your desires.”

“I just said hello. I asked her if she wanted to get an ice cream.”

“You got involved. You let your passions take over.”

“I just stopped in the plaza for a little while. Fifteen minutes. A half an hour.”

“She had to get back to work?”

“I think so.” He is trying to speed up the pace of the questions. He hopes to catch me in a lie. I am careful with what I say. I am careful how I am acting. My least gestures. Anything could give the false impression. It could tell him something about me that I don’t want him to know. It could deceive him how I actually am. I want everything to be right.

“You just want to make everything right again.”

I interrupt, “I didn’t say that.”

“What did you say?” He is trying to confuse me. I am trying to stay sharp, keep on my toes.

“She had to get back to work. I went on my way.”

“You told me that you had already missed your appointment.”

“I assume that I did. It was ten years ago. I don’t have a very good recollection.”

“Then I can’t really take you at your word.”

“I’m trying to be as accurate as I can. Some things I remember as if it were yesterday. Other details are hazy.”

“But you’re hazy only when it involves something that’s incriminating.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Wallace, it’s a fact.”

“Are you going to keep me here? Am I free to go?”

“Are you asking for your lawyer? That’s not going to help.”

“I just want to go.”

“We have more questions.”

“I could use someone’s help.”

“Do you want a lawyer?”

“I don’t want to answer any more questions.”

“We could stop for a while.”

I am hot. I want to sleep.

“What more do you want to know?”

“Where did you meet your wife?”

“I’m not married.”

“That’s not what it says here.”

“Here is wrong.”

“My records are correct. You’re lying.”

“Whatever you say. I just want to leave.”

It’s coming to a point that I am ready to agree to anything. I don’t want a lawyer. I just want to leave.”

“You can’t leave until I get the go ahead.”

“Are you going to charge me? If you’re not, I’m walking out the door.”

The detective is hesitant. He doesn’t want to see me walk. He doesn’t want to reveal his best cards.

“Hold on a second. I just have a few more questions.”

I am too lethargic to resist.

“What do you want to know?”

“You seem like a cool guy. You like to have fun. I’m sympathetic with all that. I know what it’s like. Sometimes you’re having too much fun, and something happens. An accident. A little mistake. You didn’t mean it to get out of hand.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Admit it. You’re a fun-loving guy.”

“What can I say to that? That I like to go to bed at 8 every night.”

“I’m not trying to put words in your mouth.”

“I try to enjoy life. Don’t you?”

“I’m not sure what else I can tell you.”

“I thought you were asking the questions.”

“You like to push the edge.”

“I’m not into rough trade.”

“You don’t like it just a little daring. Biting.”

“Is this a criminal investigation, or are you a reporter for *Naughty Nights*?”

“I’m just trying to learn your habits.”

“My habits are private.”

“Nothing’s private to the police.”

“There are lines of privacy. Without cause, you are crossing the line.”

“We have a murder.”

“Nothing to connect me to it.”

“But you do like to play. Do new things in bed. Try this and that. Maybe a little pain. Stop when she gives you a signal. But this time you didn’t get a signal. Or you ignored it. It was too late. She couldn’t breathe. You didn’t know your own strength. She tried to make you let go. You wouldn’t let go. It was too late.” He pauses as if he had just made his case.

“That never happened to me.”

“What did happen? You meant to do it. I’m trying to take your side.”

“I’m glad that you have my interest at heart.”

“I’m like a brother to you. I want to learn some things, my brother. How much pain can the body take before it just gives out? You add a little pain to the mix, and you can increase your pleasure. Have one of those mind-blowing orgasms that we always hear about it. You just want it to blow. POW!”

He is right next to me, breathing in my face.

I move my chair back.

“Sorry. I’m getting a little caught up in things. You know what it is like. I do it all the time myself.”

“It never happened that way. I’m not like that.”

I am beginning to understand his strategy. He is telling a story, getting me involved. The more involved that I am, the harder it’s going to be to get back to a life that has nothing to do with these memories that he describes. He is trying to take over my mind. When I look at him, I can only remember the scene as he describes. I don’t know this woman. He has created a history

so that she is part of my life. I am starting to believe him. I need to get out of here.

I stand up with my back to him.

"I would like you to sit down."

"You also asked me to stay so you need to be a little understanding if I am going to agree to your terms."

"OK, you have a point."

What is his point?

"You like little love-making," he continues. "There's all that buildup, the foreplay. That's what you call it. But if you don't have a good take off, you don't get a good flight. You are grasping my drift. You want to fly. You need to have something to hold on to. A reference point. Your floor. The floor of pain. The higher the threshold, the higher the return. Then you just explode. Explode in you orgasm, your rage. You take everything that you want."

"Detective, what are you trying to get me to say?"

"I want you to tell me exactly what happened that night."

"You tell me. You seem to have the story down."

"You went home to her. You had been drinking. You had a bit of an argument. Nothing that unusual. She taunted you. It only seemed to make the sex better. But this time, you were pushing harder than usual. You really couldn't hold back. She never thought that your anger would be that real. It was. You killed her. You realized the accident. You tried to clean up. Make it seem that she had overdosed. Drowned in the bathtub. You didn't mean it to be like that. It just got out of control."

"I wouldn't make a stupid mistake like that. If I was going to act out my emotions, I would do it loud and clear. I'm not a bumbling fool."

"It wasn't an accident."

"I'm not going to make a mistake. I would have planned things."

"You were thinking about killing her."

"Her? I don't know what you're talking about. It's all hypothetical."

"We've established one thing. You had a plan, you acted it out."

"I never said that."

"You never would have killed her out of sheer malice. You had a good reason. She was going to wipe you out. Something. And you thought about how you could get even with her. Nothing in particular. Just a plot that you entertained. And then she finally crossed the line. The point of no return. You couldn't do anything after that. You had to dispose of her."

"You make it sound so cold."

"How do you want me to make it sound, like a labor of love?"

"You're assuming too much."

"That you meant to hurt her."

"You are assuming all of it."

"Hi, honey. I'm home. "

"I didn't expect you so early."

"Am I surprising you in the middle of something."

"I just had some more work to get done here. Wallace, you forgot your wallet this morning."

"Where is it?"

"It's on the stairs."

I walk over and pick it up. It's exactly as I left it. I look at my picture. Then I close the wallet and put it in my pocket.

"I was lucky that I didn't get stopped by the police."

I start to walk up the stairs.

"Hold it a minute. I want to talk to you in the kitchen."

"We could talk upstairs in the bedroom."

"It's better that I tell you downstairs."

I have little recollection of the conversation. But it now seems planted in my brain. How did it get there? I never shared a house with her.

"You didn't finish it in the kitchen. You convinced her to go up to the bedroom."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wallace, she wanted to talk about something in the kitchen. She knew that it would upset you. You decided to go up to the bedroom That made things worse between you."

I remember the bedroom. Screaming. Throwing things. Then just calm. Nothing after that.

"I don't recall her even being there. It might have been someone that I met that evening."

"Is that what the fight was over?"

"What do you mean?"

He makes some notes on a pad.

"She caught you with another woman."

"She is another woman."

You see a woman on the street. And you imagine a whole life with her. You see her in different light. She sees you watching her, and you wonder if she really does think what you are thinking. She does think the same thing.

He is clutching a file.

"The house wasn't community property. It was in her name. It was protected. That was the deal. You found out that she had borrowed heavily against the house. She wanted to talk about it in the kitchen. You didn't want to talk. You just wanted her to come up to the bedroom. That's how it started. The fight. You were pissed at her."

"You're good at making up stuff. I wouldn't have lost a house that easily."

"Exactly. That's why you called her upstairs. You were going to get her to sign some papers. Then you were going to kill her."

"That seems silly. Then her signature would be invalid."

"We have evidence that she signed the papers that night. And there are the records of the bad loans."

"What was she using the money for?"

"That's what you meant to find out?"

"And did I find out?"

"That's what got you mad. Then you strangled her to death."

She is waiting for me in the bedroom. She is sitting on the bed. She is angry. I am giving her time to simmer. I have caught her. But I want my revenge. She has to make the first

move. She has to seal her own fate.

“She was working with your ex-partner. She was going to swindle you of everything. But you caught her.”

“Why are you closing the bedroom door? There is no one here.”

“I don’t want either of us to leave.”

“Are you locking me in?”

“I just don’t want you to get any ideas.”

“You seem to be the one with ideas.”

“You won’t even look at me. Can’t you admit what you’ve done?”

She refuses to get up from the bed. I am blocking the door.

She looks at me, “I could give you the money back. We could start anew.”

“You’re crazier than I thought that you were.”

She is looking at my hands. They are clenched.

“You’re not going to try to hit me, she asks.”

“You’re bugging me. That’s all!”

I need to get out of this room. I am starting to create a story to go along with his questions.

“Maybe we can continue this another time.”

“The trail is still warm. Wallace. I don’t want to give you the chance to make up something new.”

It is one of those truly mortifying moments. I have forgotten my wallet at home. I duck out of the office in the afternoon and head home. When I open the door, I immediately disengage the alarm. My wallet is on the stairs. I instinctively open it up. Everything is inside. I move silently through the house. I can hear noises. It is my wife. She has come home from work. She works real estate. She is with my partner.

“You made sure that the house was in your name.”

“Of course I did. I’m not an idiot.”

“The place must be worth close to a million now. How much do you owe on it still?”

“We bought it before real estate prices went up. It was about a quarter of a million. We’ve sunk fifty thousand in it plus our down payment. That’s around seventy.”

“You should be able to pull quite a bit out of it in equity. I’ve got a contact who can do some wild things.”

I wonder if she is raiding our investments and bank account.

The detective feels like he finally has me cornered.

“You knew that they were going to wipe you out financially. It must have been worse than catching them in bed together. Although I suppose that might have been one of your calamities as well.

I look at him calmly. The longer that I sit here, the more the likelihood that I will remember that night the way that he wants. My independence is vanishing.

“Can you get me some coffee? I’m not doing well trying to stay awake.”

“I’ll get you some in a minute. I just have some more questions.”

“I’m having trouble concentrating.”

I am not sure if I should surprise them now. I wonder why the alarm was on. Perhaps, it

was not. A faulty recollection. If they are planning something, they are going to act quickly. I can say something to her tonight. She will be really taken aback. I need to wait until the right moment.

“When did things begin to sour between you and Val?”

“I guess it was a gradual thing. But I didn’t see it.

“Everything was a surprise that day that you came home to get your wallet.”

I arrive home before her. There are no signs that she has even been here in the daytime.

“Hon, did you leave your wallet here? I came home for lunch and thought that it was on the stairs.”

“No, I had it with me.”

She admits to coming home at lunch. Did she see me here? Is she trying to test me out?’

“Wallace, there’s something that I want to talk over with you.”

“We could discuss it now.”

“I need a drink first.”

She is getting me ready.

“I have to go upstairs. I’ll see you up there.”

I am fatigued. It has been a long day. Too much is going on that I don’t know about. I need to take things back for myself.

I’ve thought about what I need to do. It will be messy. I need an alibi. I need to think this through.

The detective looks up. He is silent for a few minutes.

“Detective, are you going to get me that coffee.”

“You really didn’t have it planned as well as you would have liked. You learn about her scheme. You haven’t figured out all the details. And she’s going to pop something new on you. You’re in a real mess. If you let your anger get the best of you, she is going to break you. You are trying to contain your rage.”

“You have the perfect plan. You’ll create some sex game. Some rough game with a pillow. You’ll keep it going way past the time that she begs you to stop. Then you’ll make it look that she drowned in the bathtub.”

“That doesn’t even seem plausible. I’m not that stupid. A drowning doesn’t look like an asphyxiation.”

I am sure that she suspects me. She is not going to let down her guard. She probably won’t even let me get close to her. I know what is going on. But she is not sure if I know. So she is full of hesitation.

“I’m going to have to go out.”

I need an alibi. I can’t be anywhere near the scene when it happens.

“Detective, you’re trying to place me in Roswell that evening. I have witnesses that I was in downtown Atlanta. How are you going to reconcile those facts?”

“You could have killed her, and then went out.”

I am waiting on the Hancock Plaza. She rushes over to me.

“Wallace Simpson.”

“Do I know you?”

“Yeah, I was your student at George Mason. Val Terry. What are you doing in

Chicago?”

“I’m visiting a friend.”

“I live here. I sell real estate. Commercial property. I loved your class. I still write. I’m trying to do a mystery novel. I don’t really have the concentration with work every night. But I’m doing the best that I can.”

“We should get some coffee.”

“I have a few minutes.”

There is a small shop near by. We sit across from each other.

“That’s exciting that you live here”

“Yeah. I tried to get a job in DC, but it wasn’t happening. I was also with a guy there. It didn’t work out.”

“Are you seeing anyone here?”

“Nothing special. So you’re still blazing a trail with the bachelor life.”

“I wouldn’t call it that. I work all the time. Writing.”

“What are you writing?”

“A novel of betrayal.”

“Maybe we could work together.”

I smile at her. She seems grown up and confident.

Our discussion is polite. She seems extra friendly. I have a conference to attend.

“Do you want to meet for dinner?”

“You’re telling me that you never went to dinner with her in Chicago. We have receipts from the restaurant.”

“I ate with a colleague.”

“You drank that much wine with a business associate.”

“We were celebrating. I gave a stellar paper.”

“We checked. You never actually delivered a paper at the conference.”

“It was over ten years ago. Maybe it was his paper.”

“Or hers. Can you remember the associate’s name.”

“Why is this so important?”

“If you met Valerie in Chicago for dinner, then that was the start of your relationship together.”

“But you have no proof that there was anything more than a random contact. In fact, you don’t even have that evidence.”

“You want us to release you. So that you can go back to the empty house and pretend that she never existed. She was your wife. You killed her. You can’t make her go away like that.”

“I would never do that. I wouldn’t want to be the prime suspect.”

“So you get someone else to do the job.”

“I thought that you said that I strangled her. Now you’ve got someone else doing the job.”

“I’m trying to think this through with you. You saw her in her nightgown. It had always been an invitation to desire for you. But now that desire was feeding your rage. She seemed so tragic. So easy for the taking. You wanted to do it with your own hand. But your restraint held

you back. You knew that you were a suspect. You didn't want to let on to her that you knew. You needed an excuse to get out of the house. To put your alibi into effect."

"Are you changing the story detective until you'll get one that fits?"

"That's what you're doing."

You see her on the plaza of the Hancock. You better think fast. You don't want her to get away.

"I saw you smile at me. I just wanted to say that you have a wonderful smile."

She gives you that look that says she was looking through you to get to someone else.

"Professor Simpson, I remember you. What are you doing now? Trying to pick up pretty girls on Hancock Plaza."

She is giving me an in. Acknowledging my attraction for her. I have always thought about being with her. But my thoughts would resolve in an ultimate incompatibility. She just seemed too vivacious.

"Do I know you?"

She seems hurt. I am losing my chance. I should have played along.

"Val Terry. I was in your creative writing class at American University. I don't think that I was one of your favorite students."

She is slipping away.

"Do you want to get some coffee?"

"I'd love to. But I was just on break. I need to get back to work. All the best to you. I really liked the class."

It has been a long day at work. I am home alone. I want to get some dinner ready. I am sitting on the couch. I am dozing off.

"We may have to kill him."

"An accident would be better. Do you know anything about cars?"

"I can buy them. I can turn them on. That's all."

"I could poison his breakfast."

I turn off the TV. I decide to go out to eat.

"He's not even back."

"You're going to have to kill him."

"Why? You already have all his money."

"I think that he suspects me. He's never going to rest until he catches the both of us."

My food has little taste. I am eating alone. I am too tired this evening. I pay the check and head home.

"Can't you just put that in the past?"

"I caught you trying to take our money. It's not the past."

"It was five years ago. I put it all back before you found out."

"But just the fact that you thought about it."

"Don't you remember how bad things were then? I've been in therapy. You can't keep bringing this up every time that we get in a fight."

"It's still not resolved."

I am able to work my way out of this. Piece together detail after detail until I have stepped back to a time where none of these terrible consequences have occurred. If I can do this I

can get back to myself.

This is not a dream. It is something else much worse. At various moments I wake up with hours, days, months, even years unaccounted for. I have to live in these puzzles unless I can figure out the paradox that made my world the way it has become. It is like a game between Nick and me. But it is more than that. Part of this game is real. I am just trying to figure out which part.

“Do you want to get some ice cream.”

“I’m allergic to ice cream.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Really.”

“You won’t die if you eat. It’s not the ice cream poison.”

“I just get terrible stomach cramps.”

“Let’s get some coffee.”

“I don’t really have time to get away.”

“We could get some dinner. What time do you get off for dinner.”

“Wallace, she is perfect. You have no connection to her. She doesn’t even live in the same city. If it doesn’t work out, there’s no chance of running into her.”

“That’s why people move away. To start a new life. To put all the bad stuff behind them.”

“But it comes up again. You meet a new Valerie somewhere else.”

“Or the same Valerie shows up unexpectedly.”

“I’m here for my money!”