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IT
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POCKET BOOKS

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and
IF ONLY IT WERE TRUE

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For Louis

PART ONE

JUNE

One

THE NOVELTY CLOCK SITTING ON THE UNPAINTED WOODEN nightstand sounded at five-thirty. Curled under a light down comforter in the middle of her large iron bed, Lauren opened her eyes to the clear golden light of dawn unique to a rare nonfoggy San Francisco summer morning.

Half-asleep, she fumbled for the button to turn off the alarm. She rubbed her eyes and looked down at her dog, Kali, who sat up eagerly, expectantly, on the heavy-knit rug beside her.

"Don't look at me like that, I don't even feel human yet!"

At the sound of her voice, the dog leaped onto the bed and rested her head on her owner's belly. Lauren stroked her and yawned. Then she remembered what day it was. "Move, sweetie! I have to get up and make us both some breakfast."

It had been another too short night's rest. Lauren was a resident at San Francisco Memorial Hospital, and yesterday's tour of duty had lasted well beyond the usual twenty-

four hours because of a last-minute influx of burn victims from a major fire. The first ambulances had roared into the emergency entrance ten minutes before she was due to finish. Without waiting for the relief team, Lauren began evaluating the injured. With the swift, practiced moves of an experienced emergency-room doctor, she checked the vital signs of each patient, stuck a colored label on each chart indicating the seriousness of the victim's condition, assigned a preliminary diagnosis, gave orders for the first lab tests, and directed the orderlies to the appropriate areas. Screening the sixteen victims was complete by 12:30 A.M., and at a quarter to one, the surgeons, recalled for the emergency, began the first operations of this long night.

Lauren had assisted her supervisor, Dr. Fernstein, through two successive operations. She had not left until well after two, when Fernstein ordered her home, warning her that if fatigue got the better of her vigilance, she could be putting the lives of her patients in danger.

She had driven through the deserted city streets at the wheel of her now antique Triumph Herald convertible. "I'm too tired and I'm driving too fast," she had repeated to herself like a mantra, fighting the urge to sleep. Every time she left the hospital this late, she reminded herself that she had to get the Triumph fitted with seat belts. The idea of returning to the emergency room under the spotlights, rather than backstage, was enough to keep her awake.

She activated the remote control to the garage door and parked the old car. Taking the inside hallway, she climbed the stairs four at a time, relieved to be home. Blearily entering her apartment, she headed toward the kitchen to make some herbal tea. The jars brightening the shelf held every type and flavor, as though there were a special aroma for

each moment of the day. In her bedroom she set her cup on the nightstand, dropped her clothes to the floor, climbed into bed, and almost immediately fell asleep.

The day just past had been much too long, and the day soon to begin required an early start. Taking advantage of two days off, which for once coincided with the weekend, she had accepted an invitation to stay with friends in Carmel. Although her accumulated fatigue certainly justified sleeping in, nothing was going to make her waste the rare beauty of an early-morning drive down Route 1. Lauren loved the Pacific Coast Highway between San Francisco and Monterey, loved seeing the sun crest the high coastal hills and sparkle on the cold Pacific below.

Lauren stretched her arms and legs, yawned enormously, jumped out of bed, and shrugged into the big cotton T-shirt hanging on the bedpost. Kali at her heels, she went into the living room, stopping briefly to enjoy the warm shaft of sunlight streaming through the window. Lauren reveled in the cozy charm of her apartment. Set on the top floor of a well-kept Victorian house on Green Street, it had a small kitchen-dining area; a living room complete with fireplace, leaded cabinets, and intact period detail; a spacious bedroom; and a vast bathroom with a walk-in closet and a window overlooking the Bay set just over the bathtub. The bathroom floor was painted white with a black-stenciled-checkerboard pattern Lauren had designed herself. The living room's white walls sported old drawings of San Francisco Lauren had hunted down in the galleries on Union Street. The ceiling was edged with a hand-carved, turn-of-the-century wooden molding, refinished to a pristine golden oak that matched the built-in cabinetry. She had furnished the room with a big inviting couch upholstered

in off-white raw cotton, and fawn-colored Oriental rugs. She was proud of her apartment; it was the first home that had ever been truly hers—purchased with the inheritance her father, who had died when she was still a toddler, had left her. She knew that her father would have loved this place, loved to watch the sailboats in the Bay, whereas sometimes she felt her mother only loved the idea that her daughter might at last be settling down. Ha, she wished! Lauren's schedule in the past two years hadn't much improved since her internship's slave hours, but she had devoted her few moments of leisure to decorating her apartment, to make it feel like her own.

She moved into the small kitchen and got Kali her breakfast, IAMS special served in a heavy earthenware dish.

Then she assembled butter, strawberry jam, an English muffin, a bowl of cereal, a container of peach yogurt, half a grapefruit, and a cup of coffee on a tray. Kali watched her, cocking her head inquisitively. "Yes, I know—but I'm hungry!" Lauren sternly pointed Kali's head back to her food dish and took her own tray to her desk in the living room. From the window, if she tilted her head a little, she could see the Golden Gate Bridge stretching elegantly between the two points of the Bay, and beyond it, the houses clinging to the hills of Sausalito and the fishing port of Tiburon. Directly below her, roofs descended like steps toward the Marina. She opened the window wide: the city was still sleeping; the only sounds relieving the morning languor were the mewing of gulls and the low horns of the big freighters, moaning as they shipped out for the Orient. She stretched again, then tucked into her breakfast with a hearty appetite. Three times last night she had tried to take a bite of her sandwich, but each time her beeper had

squealed its shrill summons to a fresh emergency. When people met her and asked what it was like to work in an ER, expecting her to expound upon profound issues of life and death, Lauren invariably told them, "I don't have time to ponder profound issues of life and death. There's not even time to eat."

Now, at last, she had a weekend with no crisis to be faced, and she could just be. Having polished off the better part of her feast, she took her tray to the sink and went to the bathroom. She slid her fingers between the wooden slats of her blinds to work them shut, let her cotton T-shirt fall to the floor, and stepped into the shower. The warm, powerful jets finished the waking up process.

Wrapping a towel around her, she made a face in the mirror. Her skin was pale, despite its being summer, but she still decided against makeup for the day. She threw on a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, took off the jeans and put on a skirt, took off the skirt and pulled the jeans back on. She took a canvas bag from the closet and stuffed in a toilet kit, a bathing suit, and a few changes of clothing. Then she tied a big red scarf around her hair so that the drive in the convertible wouldn't render it a hopeless, tangled mess. Voilà! She now felt ready for her weekend.

Walking back through her apartment, she noticed the extent of the disorder—clothes on the floor, towels everywhere, dishes in the sink, bed unmade—assumed a decisive air, and said aloud to all her household objects, "Not a word, no grumbling! I'll be back tomorrow evening to straighten you all up for the week!"

Then she took a pencil and paper and wrote a note, which she stuck to the refrigerator door with a large frog magnet:

Mom

Don't dare clean up, I'll take care of it when I get back.

Thanks for looking after Kali. I'll pick her up from your place Sunday around five.

Love you. Your favorite physician

She slipped on her coat and leaned down to tenderly pat her already whining dog. "Sorry, Kali. I need a break. Be good!" She planted a kiss on Kali's forehead, rose, and left the apartment, taking the outside stairs to the garage, and almost made it into her aging convertible with one jump.

"I'm off, I'm really off!" she said exultantly. "It's a miracle. Although now of course we have to pray that you'll agree to start. If you cough just one time, I'll drown your engine in maple syrup and turn you over to the junkyard. Then I'll replace you with a snazzy new model, fully loaded, that doesn't throw tantrums if it's cold in the morning. Got that straight? Let's go!"

The old English lady must have been impressed by the ring of conviction in her mistress's voice, for her engine came alive on the first twist of the key. A beautiful day had begun.

Two

LAUREN EASED THE TRIUMPH ONTO THE STREET QUIETLY, not wanting to awaken her neighbors. As soon as she reached the next block, she tuned her radio to 101.3 FM and turned up the volume. As the car sped through the empty streets, the pale morning light became brighter, polishing the dazzling perspective of the city. Lauren loved the thrill of climbing up and down the steep hills of San Francisco, loved the slight vertigo the downward plunge always brought to her stomach.

As she made a tight left onto Stockton Street, she heard an odd noise, a rattling, perhaps from the transmission. Probably nothing, she thought as she zoomed down the steep slope toward Union Square. It was six-thirty, Bruce Springsteen was celebrating with "Glory Days" on the radio, and Lauren felt happy, happier than she had been for a long time. Bye-bye, stress; bye-bye, hospital. She sang along with Bruce, at one with the spirit of the song. Union

Square was quiet. In a few hours the sidewalks would be spilling over with tourists and locals, shopping in the department stores around the square. The cable cars would file one after the other, shop windows would light up, and a long line of cars would form at the entrance to the central underground parking garage. Above it, in the gardens of Union Square, bands of musicians would gather to trade notes and songs for a few cents.

But now, on this early weekend morning, the storefronts were darkened, the gates still pulled over the display windows. A few homeless people were still sleeping on benches, and the parking lot attendant dozed in his booth at the entrance to the underground garage. The Triumph was sailing; the lights were green all the way. Lauren felt exhilarated as the fresh morning air enlivened her senses, billowed over her head scarf. She shifted down to second as she approached her turn onto Geary in front of Macy's vast facade. Perfect cornering, a soft squeal of tires, then a strange noise, a series of clicks. Everything was moving fast. The clicking became a blur of metallic sounds.

A sudden bang! Time stopped. All dialogue ceased between the steering and the wheels. The car swerved sideways and skidded on the damp surface. Lauren's hands gripped the useless steering wheel. It offered no resistance, spinning in a limbo of its own. The car continued to skid; the seconds passed in infinitely slow motion. Lauren felt her head spin, although in reality it was the scene around her that was spinning at an astonishing speed. The Triumph turned like a top on the slick asphalt until the wheels slammed into the curb. The front end skidded into the air and was stopped only by a fire hydrant's catching on the undercarriage as if in an embrace. The hood lunged toward

the sky. In one last effort, the car rotated on its axis and ejected its driver, by now much too heavy for the gravity-defying pirouette.

Lauren's body was hurled into the air, falling back down to crash against Macy's facade. The huge window exploded. Lauren lay in the blanket of glass, her hair tangled amid the debris. The old Triumph completed its long career lying on its back, half on the sidewalk. A plume of steam rose from its entrails, and then it breathed its ladylike last. Lauren lay still, peaceful, at rest. Her features were calm, her breathing slow and even. There might even have been a small smile on her slightly parted lips. Her eyes were closed—she seemed to be sleeping. Her long hair framed her face, her right hand lay across her midriff.

The parking lot attendant in his booth blinked hard. He had been aroused by the sound of the impact, had witnessed everything. "Just like in the movies, only this time it was for real," he would later say. He rose, ran outside, then changed his mind. He clawed frantically for the phone and dialed 911.

Within ten minutes the San Francisco Memorial Hospital EMS arrived. Two policemen were already on the scene. Dr. Philip Stern, the resident on duty, ran over to Lauren's body lying on the sidewalk and yelled to his colleague to come quickly. Using scissors, he cut through jeans and T-shirt.

"Let's get an EKG and start an IV. I've got a thready pulse and no pressure, respiration forty-eight, cut on head, looks like a closed fracture of the left femur with internal hemorrhage. Get me two units."

Stern's partner Frank, the EMS paramedic, pasted electrodes on the young woman's chest, connecting each one with