

The Recovery Room

One

The recovery room at the clinic out on Route 54 had eight small stalls, each just big enough for a bed and the nurse to stand beside it. The room was kept very cold, so the women were all swaddled in cotton, waffle-weave blankets that were heated in a large warming cabinet at the back of the room. The nurses had a special way of replacing the used, cool blankets with new, hot ones without ever exposing the women to the cold air. Yellow curtains with white and blue flowers surrounded each bed for privacy. Patty, the head nurse, had chosen yellow because it was hopeful. She had said it made her think of the sunrise.

On this particular morning, two women were already in recovery. Now, just being wheeled out of the procedure room and down the hall to the recovery room, was a young girl, Clara Mahoney. She was only 16 years old, and the man who had come with her was in the waiting room pestering the receptionist.

“How is she? Is it over yet?” he had started asking, about ten minutes after Clara had been called in by the nurse.

“No, not yet. Sit down. Relax. She’ll be fine,” said Kathleen, the receptionist, hunching over her paperwork.

Michael Russo could not sit down. He stood in front of the nurse’s window, craning his neck to see into the inner depths of the clinic. Frustrated by the floor-to-ceiling file cabinets blocking his view, he turned on the heel of his army boot and started to pace in front of the first row of chairs lined up auditorium-style in the large room. His black hair, slick with gel,

glistened under the harsh fluorescent lights and the smell of disinfectant filled his nostrils. He was oblivious to the stares of the other patients, who worried that he would stomp on their feet as he assaulted the gray, industrial-grade carpet. A young man with crossed legs and a book in his lap cleared his throat as Michael marched by. Their eyes locked for a moment and Michael sat down, pulling on his mustache. Feeling as if the situation were out of his control, he rested his head on the back of the chair and forced himself to silently count, visualizing each number behind his closed eyelids.

Michael had met Clara two months earlier. It had been a warm spring night, one of the first of the season when the air smells sweet. After work he had headed to The Sportsman, the one working-class bar in town. When he walked in, he saw his buddies playing pool in the back but decided to have a quiet beer first. Jay, the bartender, flashed his crooked smile and gave him a draft Budweiser. Michael usually knew everyone who hung out at the bar, but there were some new faces there that night. Young faces. A whole pack of little girls. He saw them, five or six of them stuffed into one of the wooden booths by the jukebox. He scanned the table of silky hair and spaghetti straps. The girls' slim, tanned arms glowing from the light of the candles. Their silver jewelry shimmering. He chuckled at his interest in these girls and looked away. He took a long pull on his beer. Okay. Who was that at the pinball machine? Long legs. Tight blue jeans and a soft, loose blouse. Curly dark hair fell almost to her waist. He couldn't see her face. He grabbed his Bud and walked over to the pinball machine. As he did, she lost her ball.

"Damn!" she swore, banging the top of the game with her fist. "I didn't get the highest score," she said to no one in particular.

He leaned on the Ms. Pac-Man game next to the pinball machine she was playing and watched her with amusement. "I'll play you. I have the second highest score on that machine," he bragged.

She turned to look at him. She was still pouting over her lost ball. His heart skipped a beat. She was almost ripe, still a girl, just moments away from being a woman. Minus the eye makeup she would be fabulous, he thought. Her lips were so pink and so full, he stared at them and his mouth ran dry.

"Okay, but I warn you. I'm good," she said slightly slurring her words and holding out her hand for him to give her coins for a new game. He laughed at her presumption, but reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change. She picked out two quarters and put them in the machine. His palm tingled when her soft fingers touched it. She had made no attempt to introduce herself, being more interested in playing pinball than in meeting him.

"Ladies first," he said, but she was already pulling the lever to play the first ball.

Michael was fascinated. Of course, he was 23 and this girl was way too young for him, but it was only a game of pinball. He watched her manipulate the flippers. She was pretty good. He hoped he could beat her. After three humiliating games for Michael, he wanted to stop playing. "Let's get a drink," he suggested.

"Can't stand to lose again?" she taunted. She smiled at him in a slightly condescending way, her eyes twinkling. He noticed that she had two deep dimples.

"I'm letting you win," he lied, and laughed at himself. He took her arm and guided her to where he was sitting at the end of the bar.

“Really?” she laughed at him, but allowed herself to be escorted to a bar stool with a dirty, red leather seat. Clara, never having been in a bar before, was amazed at all the tools the bartenders used to make drinks. She watched Jay, the bartender, pour liquor from exotic-looking bottles into shot glasses and stole a cherry from the plastic box containing sticky fruit and sour lemons. At the center of the bar was a row of beer taps. Michael was amused by her interest in these common things.

“Don’t get out much?” he asked. Immediately, Clara’s face changed. She frowned slightly. “It’s okay,” he said, smiling. He ordered another beer for himself and a Tequila Sunrise for her. She already felt more than a little giddy from the first one. She took a sip from the tiny cocktail straw and looked up at him as she did. She had just begun to realize her effect on men and, like a child with a new toy, she played him. He was amused but excited by her at the same time.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Clara.”

“I’m Michael.”

“You really suck at pinball,” she said with a smile, fixing her eyes on him. He looked over at Jay, who tipped his chin toward Clara and smiled. Michael tipped his chin back.

She finished her drink. “I need’a go see my friends.” She pointed to the table of girls that now had a ring of young men standing around it. “Thanks for the drink, Michael.” She touched his shoulder and he flinched. She laughed. He watched her walk over to the table and join the other girls, noting that she was greeted by warm hellos from the men.

“Jailbait, that one,” said Jay.

“All of them,” said Michael. “Don’t you proof these girls? How are respectable men supposed to relax and just have a drink?” Michael laughed. “I should call the police.”

“Ha, ha,” said Jay.

At that point Michael’s friends had finished playing pool and came over to chat with him. As the night wore on, he couldn’t stop himself from looking over at Clara. He was never able to catch her eye. He wished she would play pinball again. While his friends talked of their day, he could hear her laughing in the background. Not being able to help himself, he glanced in her direction and saw her look up at one of the guys with the same alluring look she had given him earlier. Michael felt his cheeks grow hot.

Meanwhile, Clara was enjoying herself, flirting with the young men at the table, but for some reason she peeked over at Michael to see if he was still there. She knew that if she went over to play pinball, he would come to her. She thought he’d drive her home if she asked him. A rugged young man bought her another drink. Very drunk at this point, she suddenly felt as if she had had enough and tried to look at her watch, but the room was too dark.

“I’m gonna go home, Lin-na,” she said abruptly to her friend, her words slurring into one big sound. Linda, equally as drunk, ignored Clara and laughed as one of the young men kissed her ear. Clara rose unsteadily and walked over to Michael. “Take me home,” she demanded. Michael’s friends howled with laughter as Michael quickly stood up. They slapped him on the back and hooted. “They’re just jealous,” she said. It came out “ja-wus.” He laughed and put his arm around her to hold her up.

They walked outside into the parking lot to his red Mustang, and he helped her into the passenger seat. He ran around to the other side of the car and jumped in. After he put the key in the ignition, he looked over at her and saw that she was leaning back against the black leather seat with her eyes closed. Her lips were slightly parted, and he realized that she had passed out. He didn't know where she lived, and he didn't want to deliver her in this condition to her parents. With his luck, her father was a cop.

It was 11 p.m. according to the dashboard clock. Did she have to be home at midnight? He vaguely remembered midnight being the magic curfew hour. He decided to take her to his apartment and let her sleep for an hour. Driving through the quiet streets of Litchfield, she never moved. He parked his car in the lot in front of his apartment building and carried her up the stairs to the second floor. She was light, but her long legs kept hitting the wall and he hoped that snoopy Mrs. Stockwell, his neighbor, didn't see him carrying a drunken teenage girl into his apartment.

When he reached his door, he put her down, and then swung her over his shoulder so he could find his keys. Once inside, he put her on the couch and rolled up an old sweatshirt to put under her head as a pillow. She was totally unconscious. He felt kind of nervous, as if he were kidnapping her. If she had been five years older, it would have been different. He went into the kitchen to grab a beer. When he came back to the living room, he decided to watch television and wake her up in an hour to take her home. She was taking up the whole couch, so he lay down on the floor in front of her and turned on a rerun of *Seinfeld*.

Bored and stuck in his apartment, he turned around to look at the sleeping girl. He ran his finger down her cheek, noticing how rough his own skin looked next to hers. He wanted to

wake her up. Without thinking, he leaned over and kissed her on the lips. She turned her head a little and a silky strand of hair fell across his hand. Rising up on his knees, he leaned down, breathing in her apple-scented shampoo. He kissed her again, this time with more force. He felt himself stirring, but since she did not respond, he turned abruptly, sat back down, and looked at the television.

Seinfeld segued into *Friends*. He watched the show as long as he could and then turned back to the girl. She opened her eyes and he rose up on his knees to look down at her. She stared up at him, her gaze looked unfocused. Bending down, he kissed her, forcing his tongue in her mouth, and his hands reached under her shirt before he could stop himself. She didn't scream or struggle, but lay lifeless, as he climbed on top of her. He took her silence as submission. When he rolled over on his side to unzip his jeans, and then hers, she kept her eyes closed, arms stiff at her sides. She didn't stop him, but she did nothing to help him, as he struggled to pull her tight pants off. The skin on her thighs was so soft, and the smell of her hair was so overpowering, that rational thought left him.

Clara didn't know what to do. Panic bubbled in her chest, draining her of the ability to move. At first, her Tequila-soaked brain tried to comprehend the dim light, the laugh track from the television, the unfamiliar smell of masculine sweat mixed with beer, and the freckles on the shoulder above her, gyrating. Gradually, she became alert, her survival instinct kicking in, and she knew she needed to pull herself together, to get out of the apartment. She didn't know this man. What else would he do to her? He didn't seem hostile or angry, but he was very strong and heavy. She could feel the hard muscles in his arms, chest, and thighs crushing her. His body shuddered, and he moaned, his face buried in her neck. She suddenly felt like she couldn't breathe. Tears started to stream down her cheeks.

He picked up his head when he heard her snuffle. "It's okay, Clara," he said softly. "Did I hurt you?" She winced when he said her name, and looked at him with frightened eyes.

Michael's gut twisted. "I'm sorry," he whispered, putting his fingertips on her cheek to hold her face where he could see it. When she didn't answer, he asked more urgently, "Are you okay?"

"My parents...are waiting for me." She choked on her words, and then, afraid he might take this as a threat, she added, "I won't tell them."

Thinking fast, he said, "No, they would be angry at you for getting so drunk. You shouldn't tell them."

She finally steadied her voice and said, "I want to get up." Michael rolled off her toward the inside of the old gray velour couch, pulling his jeans up to cover himself.

She sat up quickly. "Yes. Can I use the bathroom?" she asked, grabbing her pants and underwear, which had fallen on the floor. He pointed to the door across the room. She got up, naked from the waist down, and walked to the bathroom.

Michael put his head down on the old sweatshirt he had made into a pillow for Clara and closed his eyes. *Shit. This could mean all kinds of trouble.*

In the small, dark bathroom that smelled like sour towels, Clara collapsed onto the toilet. She urinated and tried to wipe away the mess between her legs. Then, she hurriedly pulled on her underwear and her jeans. As she did, her cell phone fell out of the pocket, and she saw that it had run out of power. Taking some toilet paper and wetting it, she tried to fix her smudged eye makeup. As she ran her fingers through her hair to smooth it, she thought of her mother, who would be waiting up for her. She wanted to seek comfort in her mother's arms, but quickly

realized she could never tell her mother the truth. It would be the crushing blow. Her mother wouldn't be able to endure it. Both of her children ruined. No, Clara had always been invisible, and what had happened here tonight would not change that.

When she was done, she came hesitantly out of the bathroom. "Can we go now?" she asked awkwardly, standing in front of the man. Gone was the bravado and confident attitude he had seen in the bar. She looked vulnerable and frail.

"Sure. Let's go," he said, using the remote to turn off the television and getting up from the couch. He took a step toward her to comfort her, but a flicker of fear crossed her face and he thought it was better to just get going. They left the apartment and got into his car. Once they were out of the parking lot, he asked tentatively, "Are you okay?"

She sensed he needed reassurance of some kind, so she said, "Yes. I'm okay," and gave him directions to her house in Sunken Meadow, an exclusive area of town. Ten minutes later, they pulled up in front of a white six-bedroom house with a three-car garage. Lights were on at the front door and glowed through the large front windows. Fancy landscaping ran across the front of the house and down the side yard to a high wrought-iron fence. Michael heard himself swallow hard. He was a carpenter who lived in a tiny apartment.

"Listen, you had birth control, right?" he asked.

"No," she said.

