

## **-Doctor Cline-**

She woke early the next morning. By the time the town opened for business, she was already waiting at Dr. Cline's office, at the doorway she'd seen David Emory enter the day before.

Dr. Elias Cline practiced medicine from a sunny corner of a quaint old building, an office suite that took up much of the first and second floors. His nurse was confused to find a patient there before office hours; more confused to learn that the patient wasn't a patient at all.

It took McGill twenty minutes of conniving to get into Cline's second floor consulting room. She knew she would have only a very few minutes to let his space tell her what she wanted to know about him.

The austere, no-nonsense office didn't have much to say. Medical books, okay, expected. Less expected was the fine modern art on the walls: ethereal abstracts in dramatic greys and blacks—a far cry from the cloying, lifeless, pastoral prints in most doctors' offices. Doctor Cline had taste.

Here was no frou-frou anywhere. No plants or knickknacks or womanly touches. No pictures of wife or kids. No cutesy crayon art by grandkids. She found one small spot of character in the black and white handwoven throw on the arm of the Kennedy-style rocker near the window.

Her last three discoveries were the most intriguing. The first, the photo on the credenza, the only photo in the room, looked to be about 20 years old: a tall man—the doctor, she guessed—with a younger David Emory, white-haired even then. The second and third were behind the desk, a commendation from the U.S. Marine Corps for heroism under fire and, beside it, medical diplomas from Johns Hopkins. This was a small-town doctor with a much bigger story.

The doctor had left a pill bottle on the desk. She got up to look at it, the journalist's version of the brazen curiosity that sent people poking into other people's medicine cabinets. At that moment, Cline came in.

He was six-four, maybe taller. A solid, robust seventy-fiveish. Ex-Marine, no doubt about it—it was a carriage you never shed. She offered her hand to him. He ignored it. He glared at the pill bottle she'd managed to put

down just in time. He glared at her as if he could see her fingerprints on it.  
*Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night.*

"My name is McGill Forester, and..."

"I know who you are. I can read." He sat behind his desk, a general behind a citadel wall. "Don't waste my time with chitchat. I know you've been all over town asking about David Emory."

This guy was going to be a tough one. But she'd beaten down plenty of tough ones. "Not all over town, exactly. But you're right—I was asking about him. I'm still asking. Is he a patient? A friend?"

"What do you care what he is to me?"

"I met him in the...in St. Amelia's last week. I was curious."

"Curious enough to pester everybody here."

"I think there were one or two people I missed."

"You talked to Emily Boxton and Alice Exeter. Not exactly the right choices."

"And who is the right choice: You?"

"Not if you're planning to write about him. That's what you do, isn't it—talk to someone for five minutes and write about them as if you've got them all figured out?"

Clearly, Cline was not one of those secret softies with a heart of gold. The guy was a battle-hardened no-bullshit zone, mean as a snake. His disdain threatened her not one bit. With a man like this, you got what you saw. She liked knowing what she was in for.

"I don't know whether I'm writing about anybody yet. When I met David in the hospital, it struck me how out of place he seemed there. All I'm trying to do is to reconcile the man I met with what I've heard about him."

"Why would you need to reconcile him at all...unless there's something you could get out of it?"

"It's just that he seemed so...fragile...in that hospital."

"Exactly the opposite. And don't play me. You're not here because you care about his fragile self."

"Dr. Cline, my feelings."

"Screw your feelings, Ms. Forester."

He was good. She tried a different tack; dialed up the sincerity. "Okay, let's pretend for a minute that this isn't about what's in it for me. I met David. I felt he didn't belong in an asylum. From the way you talk about him, I think you feel the same thing I do: that he's not psychotic."

"I know he's not."

"Then what is it?"

"David has a rich inner life. Leave it at that."

"There's got to be one thing you'd be willing to tell me about him."

"All right. Fine. Here's five." He ticked the points off on his fingers, facts he knew would be of no use to her. "He doesn't drive. He seems shy, but he's not. He doesn't argue. He won't get angry. And he'll never say good-bye. Got what you wanted? Good. Now get out."

She wanted more. The doctor was stubborn, but he had no idea what stubborn was. "I was hoping for something more like background. Can you give me that? Before I go?"

Cline was exasperated. "Here's something I will tell you, and it's what everybody in town knows, so don't think you're getting a big story from me. His family owned the textile mill just outside of town—father, grandfather and great-grandfather. I expect that your friends in the coffee shop told you about that.

"David is the last of the Emorys. He was also the first one who ever got away from here. To art school. He was good; had a one-man show in the city at 25. That's his work on my walls.

"So here's this 25 year-old kid with all these possibilities in front of him, and his dad has a stroke. Same age David is now, and he's dead. So what does David do? He comes back to the mill. He takes all that weight on his shoulders and he never bats an eye.

"He changed everything around here. He took a good outfit and made it a showplace. Clean, safe, comfortable—state of the art. What that mill is today is because of him. He had this idea that one day he'd turn it over to the people who worked there. Their management. Their ownership. Eventually, that's what he did. Because it was the right thing to do.

"Then fifteen years ago, there was a fire. Dead of winter, a third of the plant gone, nobody working. David kept every single person on full salary until they could get the place running again. And he never said a word about it. Never gave an interview. Never once shone the light back on himself. He was 40 years old."

"That story made the national news. I read about it. So that was him."

"That is him. And that's why, even after the death of his wife and the hospitalizations and everything else that's happened to him, he still has friends here. Even if the pea-brains can't find anything better to do than to talk about him to outsiders." He got up, and looked at her with a ferocity she knew she'd be smart not to test. "Now go, because I won't ask again. And I *will* throw you out."

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## -David Emory's Truth-

Wanting to know. Needing to know. The chasm between the two was giving her the fidgets.

Cline had been busy. In the 24 hours since she'd spoken to him, he'd seen to it that the town's well of David Emory information had run dry. A seamless, united front had been raised against her like a fortress. Nobody was taking her phone calls. Nobody was answering her face-to-face questions except with too-polite smiles and pointed deflections. *After everything that's happened to him, he still has friends here.* No kidding.

Her *what's next?* had turned into a desperation so far over the edge that she was even tempted to cozy up to Arledge. She sat parked in at the top of her long driveway, without a plan and without a clue, trying to decide what her next move could possibly be.

She found herself driving restlessly up and down the length of Republic Road, miles and miles, madness on wheels. Her thoughts itched. The only possibility left was a conversation with David himself. Okay, so this was the plan. Bribe somebody at the Post Office. Find out where he lived. Or wait for him in town, for as long as she had to. Stalk him home. Whatever it took. The need had fastened itself too deep in her. She couldn't let it go.

At last the hungry moment passed. The temporary insanity had left an ugly taste. She u-turned and headed back for home, past the roadside farm stand, past the one-pump gas station, past the Deepwater Pond. And that, of course, was when she saw him. Up the road. David Emory.

He was sitting on his heels at the shoulder. Something lay motionless in the road beside him. It was the brown dog. She slowed the car to get a better look.

His face was crowded with an emotion she couldn't identify, like tenderness but more complex, closer to sadness. He was heavy with it. Then his expression changed; a smooth transit from deep distress to abiding calm. He rose unsteadily as she passed...and stumbled—right into her path. She stomped the brakes with both feet. The car fishtailed in the gravel. She missed him by inches.

She jumped out, shaken. "Are you all right?"

He didn't answer. He didn't recognize her. Suddenly, he seemed stricken and absent; a clear echo of what she'd seen in the institution. The alert, energetic man of yesterday was gone.

"David, was that your dog?"

He looked at her as if he were seeing her from under water. A vague shake of the head. A colorless voice. "...no."

"Can I take you home? Where do you live?"

He raised a wraithlike gesture toward the handsome, ivied white-brick Cape Cod across the road. She helped him into the car and took him up the driveway. He didn't get out. She pulled him out of the front seat and steered him up the walk to his front door. He didn't go in.

The door wasn't locked. She maneuvered him inside, to the old fanback Windsor chair near the rear window. His breathing was shallow; he seemed completely disoriented, caught in some inner squall. Whatever this was, it was intensely punishing. And whatever it was, she couldn't leave him alone with it.

She did the only thing she could think of. "Dr. Cline? This is McGill Forester. I'm calling about David Emory. Something's wrong."

Cline was there in ten minutes flat. He let himself in. He saw David. His reaction wasn't anywhere near what McGill had expected it would be. He was furious.

"Son of a bitch. Godammit, David." He closed the space to David's chair in four long strides. He peeled the white jacket off the unresponsive man as impatiently as if undressing a misbehaving child, unbuttoned David's shirt collar and took the pulse at his throat. Only then did he acknowledge that McGill was in the room.

"What happened? Did he speak to you? Tell me everything you saw when you found him."

She recounted the scene. How she'd found him crouched next to a dead dog. How he'd stumbled into the road. What he'd said to her. How he'd been too disoriented to walk though his own front door. Why any of it was important, she couldn't guess.

"How long ago was that?"

"Half an hour. Should we get him to the hospital?"

"No."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Shut up a minute." What Cline did next was a total surprise. The burly man knelt next to David's chair. He ran a gentle hand over the wind-tunnel shock of white hair and spoke in the murmuring, affectionate singsong a parent would use to comfort a five year-old out of a bad dream. "Listen to me, Em. Come on. Come on, now. Be here. Come back to us. Feet on the ground. Know where you are." This was not anger; it was the farthest thing from it.

Slowly, David came to himself. His gaze filtered back to the room, although he didn't seem sure where he was or how he'd gotten there. Now,

with the moment past, whatever strength had been holding him together fled him. His head dropped back against the Windsor chair. He puffed out a long exhale, a sound somewhere between exhaustion and relief. Finally, he focused on Cline. The look he settled on the doctor was nothing if not an apology.

Cline put a bearlike arm around David's slim shoulders, and kissed the top of the white head in undisguised relief at having his friend back from whatever brink he'd wandered to. He hauled the younger man to his feet. In little over an hour, David had gone from thin to gaunt. The planes of his face were sharper; his eyes were deeper and more intense. He was wearing the numb, relieved, wrung-out look of a cancer patient when the pain medication finally kicks in. As Cline ushered him out of the room, he found McGill with his eyes and edged out the shadow of a nod. David was saying thank you.

From behind the closed door of the bedroom, Cline was shouting. McGill could only hear the doctor's side of the conversation; David's responses, whatever they were, were too quiet to be heard. "Why, David?" Cline was saying. "Do you like what this does to you? What would have happened if that woman hadn't been there?"

The scolding ended, the room grew quiet. Soon after, Cline, came back into the living room. He went straight to the liquor cabinet with the familiarity of someone who'd made himself home there many times before. He poured himself a glass and brought it back to the table.

"Is he asleep?" McGill asked.

The doctor was brusque. "Yeah. You can go now."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You just don't give up, do you?"

"I will when I get what I want."

"Want is all you've got, lady." Now, with the anxiety of the moment past, Cline was done in. She saw in the lowering of his defenses exactly how much the incident had upset him. "Why don't you just forget the past hour and go back to New York. You'd be doing us a favor."

So he knew she was from New York. He should have known that New Yorkers don't lay it down so easily. "I take it that this is something you've seen before."

He scrubbed his face with his hands. "Not like this."

"So you know what's wrong with him."

"I've known everything in David's life since he was four years old. Of course I know."

"And it isn't psychosis."

"It isn't."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm his doctor. I'm not going to tell you that."

"Then don't tell me as his doctor, tell me as his friend."

"His friend isn't going to tell you, either."

"Does it have to do with his relationship with death?"

Full stop. Bingo. Cline screwed the lid down tight on his expression, but he'd already told her what she wanted to know.

"Doctor Arledge told me that where death is, he is."

He held up his hand. "Let's just say that David and death have...an understanding."

"So what is it? Arledge talks about it. Everybody in town seems to know about it. What's the *it*?"

"Forget it."

"Dr. Cline—Eli. This is a man who, by every observation, is a good man. I can see that you care enough about him to want to protect him. Why would you let anybody's wrong idea become the truth about him?"

"I don't know how to explain it to you. Except to say that whatever you think it is, it isn't." She saw it. The dropping of guard. She'd overmatched him; she'd worn him down. The conversation was hers. If he was going to tell her, it would be now.

She balanced his emotion on the head of a pin, mirroring his quiet, creating a space where the truth would come. "I think you've been carrying this for a long time, Eli. What happened to him? What is the *it*?"

"David has a gift."

"Tell me."

His look was an appeal. A challenge. And a knowledge of the absolute impossibility of what he was about to tell her.

"David Emory collects souls."