

Chapter 1

Clifford was sufficiently aware to know he was lying on his back. He felt woozy. Although there was light all around him, he couldn't see anything. He didn't know whether his eyes were open or closed. His visual field was pinkish-orange, with bright yellow at the center. No shapes or images. Just a happy glow.

He could feel a cold compress on the back of his neck. He was grateful for the sensation, but it was making him feel chilly all over.

He felt them lift him onto a stretcher. They must have covered him with a blanket because he felt warmer.

He guessed they were carrying him into an ambulance. It would be effortless to die now, to just slip away. But he was pretty sure he wasn't going to die. Not now. He was in good hands, capable hands. They would take care of him, whatever needed to be done. Perhaps this feeling of confidence was from something they'd injected into him? If so, it was good stuff.

"I've got Brady," he heard a man with a commanding voice say.

"Bee pee ninety-two over fifty-four," a woman said, as if in response.

Moments later, the guy repeated, "I've got Brady."

If Brady is on the phone, why don't they take the call?

Clifford couldn't remember anyone named Brady in their group at the restaurant. Last he knew, he was getting up from the table at his friend Gabe's eightieth birthday party. He'd had too much to drink and a lot to eat. He was a sucker for Italian food, and, the icing on the cake, Bea had insisted on paying for everyone, and not just the cake. Eleanor wasn't there. She was already off on one of her juggernauts.

“I’ve got Brady,” the paramedic said again.

Had he taken this fellow Brady down in his fall? Clutched at the waiter and upended his tray? Maybe poor Brady was injured, with a broken arm or something, and required more urgent attention.

Okay, okay. By all means, take care of Brady! But who’s got me?

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“Mr. Klovis, can you hear me?”

Clifford opened his eyes. He was flat on his back in a bed with side rails. An IV bag was connected to his left forearm through a plastic tube, and an oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. The oxygen was delicious.

He was wearing a hospital gown, the kind that fastened in the back. He could feel the cool clamminess of the bedsheets against his backside. He hoped no one would ask him to stand up. At his age, there were divots of cellulite on his ass.

He couldn’t read the information on his wristband. Stenciled on his sheets was “Rush UMC” and the medical caduceus symbol. He felt privileged, as though his case were sufficiently urgent to deserve priority treatment, the acronym perhaps meaning Urgent Medical Condition, when he realized the linen service had simply used a proprietary identifying logo for Rush University Medical Center, a Chicago institution he knew quite well, but till now, only from the outside.

Towering over Clifford with his hairy hands on the bedrail on the right side was a burly man in mint-colored surgical scrubs. The obligatory stethoscope hung from his neck like a decoration of honor.

“I am Dr. Garabedian. Mr. Klovis, you’ve had a hemorrhagic episode in the left frontal lobe of your brain. A significant stroke. How do you feel? Are you feeling dizzy?”

Clifford didn't answer.

"If you can understand me," the doctor said, "blink twice."

Clifford just stared at him.

"I see," he said. "You fainted at the restaurant. When the paramedics arrived, you had symptoms of bradycardia, that's abnormally low heart rate, and low blood pressure. You're in the hospital now, and we've stabilized you with medication. Your faculties may improve over time. For now, on the chance you can hear me, you should know that your friends gave us contact information for next of kin. We understand your wife is traveling. We'll get word to her. We've notified your son Jeremy, who will be flying in from Los Angeles to make decisions about your care — if by that time you can't express yourself. Your Medicare card was in your wallet, so Uncle Sam has your back. Any questions?"

Clifford saw no need to respond. He wondered how long his generous uncle would stand behind him.

The doctor walked away and was met by a colleague, presumably a nurse, a few paces away from the foot of the bed.

They spoke in low tones. Clifford thought he heard "cognitive workup" and "assisted living."

On the wall, Clifford noticed a poster with the headline "Let Us Know About Your Pain." There was a bubble chart with a scale from one to ten, designating each increased gradation of discomfort with a more anguished emoticon. Clifford thought this considerate but odd.

*There is no negative scale! Zero pain must be the ideal. Where is the index for joy? If they shoot you up with morphine, how happy can you get? Maybe there's a law against surpassing minus ten?*

As a marketing pro, he was well versed in the one-to-ten scale of the Net Promoter's Score: "How likely would you be to refer us to a friend?" As an insider, he knew the dirty secret behind these scores. The score tends to go up the more often you ask the question. So, the value of a corporate brand is more likely to increase if you continue to spend more on asking marketing questions than actually improving the quality of your product or your customer service. Where this hospital was concerned, the practice would be doubly problematic. Many of the people who have "unsuccessful" outcomes and would therefore be less likely to recommend, won't be able to vote. They're dead!

He was feeling drowsy when the often-retouched face of Gabe's wife Bea appeared beside his IV bag. She clutched the left rail. Maybe that's what those railings were for — to steady the visitors lest they be thrown by high seas or emotional turmoil.

She could barely get the words out.

*Maybe they should give her a cognitive workup.*

"Clifford, darling. You gave us all such a scare." She was sobbing. "Everything's going to be fine now."

The choppy sea must have been too much for her. She let go of the railing and hurried away.

*Darling?*

Too late, Clifford realized he should have said something to her. With that *darling*, maybe the two of them had a history, and he couldn't remember any of it, just now.

He told himself he *could* speak if he wanted to. But he saw no need.