

I'm a sucker for kind eyes.

And often, they're a sucker for me. That's why I like to meet my marks face to face before I make my first approach. I give them a chance to see I'm just a kid. I am, and I'm basically pretty harmless. I'm not a violent person, not like my dad. I don't mean to hurt anyone.

So, I hang around places where I know people can afford it if I take ten or twenty off them. Fancy restaurants and clubs aren't good—people rush by as if my mere presence on the same block as them could spoil their entire evening. Mostly, I go places where the people are rich enough but more likely to be sympathetic to those “less fortunate,” as they like to call us. Places like art museums, the symphony, theatres, certain city churches. Recently I've been working outside Michigan Avenue doctors' and therapists' offices—there's a fair amount of upper middle-class guilt there, and that works to my advantage.

Not that I intend this to be my life's work. It's just what I do right now to get by. To support Charmaine and the baby. Just until we figure out what's what and what's next.

Therapy was making her crazy.

In the lobby of her therapist's building, Cecilia stopped at the newsstand, bought a pack of Marlboros, and tore into it as soon as she stepped outside. She hadn't had a cigarette since the summer after her junior year in high school, when she'd gone to a music camp in Europe and drank wine with the Italian boys, sophisticated and worldly. She tried twice to light one, defeated both times by the wind swirling around the building. On the third time it took, and she inhaled deeply, but the smoke roughened her throat and she immediately coughed. Anyone watching would think her such an amateur. She took another hit and her eyes watered. A woman came through the revolving doors behind her and gave her a nasty look, then pointed to a sign, "No smoking within 15 feet." Cecilia looked back at the door and pointed at the sign herself to indicate that she understood and that she was well within her rights, but the woman had hurried away on her own business.

Late May. Neither summer nor winter; too volatile to be spring. She was enough of a Chicagoan not to believe in spring; she called herself a Chicagoan because, except for school and training and a few gigs at theatres around the Midwest, in all her nearly forty years, it was the only place she'd ever lived. If she belonged anywhere, it was here, but she did not have that feeling of belonging.

A man in a gray security uniform hurried out of the building. She looked again at the sign, re-confirmed her right to stand and smoke exactly where she was, and then marched towards the street, as if that had always been her intention. She coughed again and stopped near a bus stop, where two gray-haired women in wool coats looked at her and moved inside the

shelter. She positioned herself twenty steps away and took another drag. A young man, in a grass stained tee-shirt and dirty jeans, approached.

"May I trouble you for a light, please?" he asked. His voice was thin, a tenor, in need of training.

Wordlessly, she fumbled in her pocket and offered him her pack of matches. He turned his back to her and struck one, then another. She studied his worn bulging back-pack, which appeared to be stuffed with clothes, and through a tear she saw plastic and the brown knit of a sweater. An outer pocket was unzipped, revealing a clump of loose white sheets, too many to be a term paper, too few to be a dissertation. He spun and faced her, inhaling deeply and smiling. She noticed then that he was very young, perhaps sixteen. She should've denied the boy the matches. He was too young to smoke. She abhorred smoking.

"Thanks so much," he said again, his manners impeccable. He shouldered the pack, and she noticed he was wearing sandals. A runaway? Living on the street?

"Which way is Union Station?" he asked.

She pointed with her own cigarette, its smoke drifting back at her.

"Walking distance?" he asked.

"Easily," she said.

He nodded, but made no move to leave. He seemed to study her face, with an interest akin to her deaf therapist's. Dr. Richardson probably wasn't deaf, but he kept repeating himself as if he hadn't heard her quite right. "Why" and "Why is that?" and, unapologetically, "How did that make you feel?" He was like a wild dog, scratch, scratch, scratching at dry earth, raising dead bones.

"You have kind eyes," the boy said, which startled her, not so much that he would notice—often she'd been told she had nice eyes—but that he would call them kind, and that, at his age, he would voice such a thought to a stranger.

"Thank you," she said. Her purse hung at her side and, without taking her eyes off the young man, she pressed her non-smoking hand against it. Although she'd lived in the city all her adult life, she'd never had a purse snatched or pick-pocketed, and she attributed that to being alert and having common sense. She didn't put herself at risk. She didn't walk alone at night, even in the nicest neighborhoods; always had her key ready in parking lots; avoided elevators if the only occupants were young men; carried a dollar bill in an easily accessible pocket and a twenty in the other so she could appease those few aggressive homeless men who, though possibly harmless, possibly weren't.

The young man fixed his gaze on her purse, then quickly looked both ways, as if to see whether they'd been noticed.

"West," she said firmly. "About twelve blocks."

He was roughly her height, but skinny, and pale. There was a thin layer of fuzz, reddish-blond, on his upper lip. He smiled, and she saw that his front teeth crossed ever so slightly. He worked his lips, as if deliberating.

"Thanks, again," he said finally. "See ya around."

She watched him walk to the corner, then turn left towards the Art Institute. She thought to call after him to let him know that he should've gone straight to get to Union Station, but as she raised her left arm, she saw the zipper of her purse a quarter of the way open, and was furious. She'd been on guard. How had he done it? She threw the last of her cigarette on the ground and unzipped her purse. Her wallet wasn't on top, and, rummaging around, she couldn't

feel it. Damn! There was a bench in the bus stop, and she poured the contents of her purse out, disgusted with herself. Ridiculously, her wallet tumbled out. How could she have missed it? She opened it, saw that her money was there, and was immediately embarrassed that she'd misjudged the boy. He'd said she had kind eyes, and she'd repaid him with suspicion. She looked to the intersection as if to apologize, but he was out of sight.

Ashamed of herself, and further distressed to be distressed over such a meaningless encounter, Cecilia turned towards home, ten long blocks north over the Chicago River and five more east to the lake. She was feeling even crabbiest than usual after a session with Dr. R. He'd hardly said anything that she could remember, but she felt almost physically sore from his poking and prodding, his professional snooping.

It was all Tyler's fault. Not long ago, they'd lunched, as they did only twice a year now, and Tyler, her coach and friend since her university days, had let her have it. Complaining about her plight--unemployed but well-off, talented but unknown, functional but depressed-- she'd moaned, "I can't stand myself anymore."

"Mid-life ennui! You are obviously depressed and have lost all direction and purpose in life," he'd pronounced. "You, my dear, need therapy."

She'd scoffed at his facile solution, insisting she was fine, but he'd ticked off a catalog of ills. "Fine? When's the last time you sang? When's the last time you enjoyed singing? When's the last time you went out—on a date? When's the last time you got any?" She'd squirmed, but he'd not let her off the hook. "Look it, darling, you know I love you. But I can't help you unless you help yourself. Tell me you want your old pep back. Tell me you want to have a life."

Despite herself, her eyes watered, and she'd agreed. The next day Tyler'd called with a name. He'd asked a lawyer friend of his who knew everyone. "Jack says this guy is the best guy

for creative people." She'd taken his word for it, called Dr. Richardson, and now visited him weekly, impatiently waiting for the old man to tell her the meaning of life, or at the very least, to save her from her own monotonous, depressed self.

The following week, perched on the right side of Dr. Richardson's mustard-yellow corduroy couch, she found herself chatting with the therapist as if he were holding up his part of the conversation, which of course he wasn't. She was trying to explain to him, perhaps to herself, why she'd stopped singing.

"You go to auditions, people look you over."

Uncharacteristically, Dr. Richardson interrupted her. "What do they see?"

"Kind eyes," she thought. The boy last week had said she had kind eyes, but that was not what the casting directors saw. "They don't see you," she said. "They only see whatever they're looking for. They barely hear you sing, a few verses, maybe, and then they decide you don't look right, or they owe a favor to another agent, or whatever. Meanwhile, you've wasted cab fare and God knows how much time and for what? Humiliation. I can't bear it."

"Didn't you have to audition or whatever to win that prize? Or to get the lead in the premiere you told me about?" The man did have a good memory, even if he acted deaf.

La Prix de la Société de le Public. A minor prize, as classical music prizes go, but nonetheless, she'd won it, in an international competition, when she was 25, and at 29 she'd sung the lead role in *Rumplestiltskin's Kin*, a world premiere at the Cadillac Theatre. It had been an odd play, a musical take on Rumpelstiltskin, from the daughter's point of view, but Cecilia had, in her own estimation, nailed it. Opening night had been a thrill beyond any she could have imagined during her years of understudy, minor, and then supporting roles on city and regional stages. She

hadn't told Dr. Richardson about the devastating review that closed the show: "Cecilia Morrison doesn't have the chops for the material this aspires to be, and was in no position Thursday night, struggling just to keep up with George Harris' aggressive accompaniment, to save it from its own shortcomings."

Cecilia's mother hadn't publicly acknowledged the show's closing, as if it were the most shameful thing which could have happened to her; she simply stopped pushing her daughter towards auditions and prizes. Her father mumbled to her on the phone, "When He shuts one door, He opens another." Cecilia shut herself in her apartment.

"I hate auditioning, but I did it well," she said, trying to sound objective. She'd told Dr. Richardson she couldn't muster the interest in auditioning; she didn't tell him that the thought of singing for a casting director terrified her. "The trick with auditioning is to give the director what he or she wants. I'm pretty malleable. I'm easily transformed."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Transformed," Cecilia chuckled. She wished she could jolly Dr. Richardson along, make him like her so that he could figure out the answer to her question. "I bet you don't think so, or else what would I be doing here?"

She was there, in part, because she'd not sung in public for the past ten years. Even at the own father's funeral. At the time, she'd felt as if her throat had been crushed and her mother, whether out of sympathy or spite, Cecilia never could decide which, hadn't asked her to. Then, when her mother'd died a year ago, her brothers hadn't expected it.

Although she maintained friendships with a couple people in the business, she never auditioned. Her women friends--also her competitors--didn't encourage her; they acted as if the press of family business consumed her time. In fact, her two brothers paid her a third of the

profits to stay out of it and let them bicker over how best to produce and market industrial fasteners.

Even as she sat in Dr. Richardson's office, she hated herself for having chosen therapy. Her mother would say therapy was for weaklings, people who had no discipline, no control of themselves.

"I can be made to look a lot of different ways. I can take direction. But that's a problem, because most directors, at least the ones I ran into, didn't know what they were doing. You do what they want, and then some critic comes around and says they think you have potential but they don't like the way you were directed. Or they like how you were directed, but...."

"I'm sorry, Cecilia, I see our time is up."

Cecilia laughed. He was so serious; such a parody of himself. She wasn't sure why she'd felt so chatty today. Perhaps she was looking forward to her cigarette. She hadn't had one since last week, but she had her pack with her.

Outside, she stopped in roughly the same place, but the wind was from the opposite direction, and she hunched her back against it to strike a second match. When she turned around, the boy from last week was no more than six feet from her. This time she noticed he was blond and had pretty, pale blue eyes.

"Didn't mean to startle you," he said. "Remember me?"

She was momentarily confused. She did remember him, actually, but it would be unseemly to say yes too quickly. She half shook her head, letting her brows knit as if she were trying to recall how they'd met. He seemed to be wearing the same tee-shirt as last week, its grass-stain on the right chest joined by coffee spills in the middle. It occurred to her he was wearing the same jeans, and she stepped back slightly, breathing through her mouth.

"I bummed a light," he said, as if that were sufficient introduction.

"That's okay," she said. His light blue eyes conveyed complete innocence.

"Um, I don't how to say this. You were so nice to me last week. But I have a problem, and I need to ask someone for help."

She felt her body tense, guilty for her past rush to judgment, but still she squeezed her purse against her as subtly as she could.

"I. Well. I was robbed. On the El. Last night. Money, cards, everything, my bus ticket home. I reported it and they gave me this." He pulled out a pink tissue carbon of something which looked like a citation.

She barely glanced at his proof, embarrassed to admit she didn't trust him. "Home?"

"To Indiana. My wife and baby are there. I was here to find work, but..." She must've looked as if she didn't believe him, because he interrupted himself.

"I know I look young, but I'm not, and they mean everything to me. It's about a hundred dollars round trip—about as far south as you can go and still be in Indiana. One way is \$53. I could send you the money when I get home."

Sixty dollars. She had sixty dollars in her purse—three twenties—but it was a lot of money to give to a stranger. Panhandlers asked for a dollar, sometimes two for the El, a mother wanted three once for a gallon of milk for her child. Sixty? The story was so false it had to be true. Didn't it? No panhandler would have the gall to ask for sixty dollars.

Mimicking Dr. Richardson, she looked expectantly into his eyes, and the boy held her gaze without flinching, like someone telling the truth. Unzipping her purse, with one hand she opened her wallet and used her index finger to count three bills. She bit her lip, unsure why she was playing along with so obvious a con.

"You are so kind," he said. "I need your address."

She really didn't want the young man to have her address. She had a little notebook in her purse, and she wrote down, "H. Richardson," and the address of the plaza where they were standing. Cautiously, she held it out. "How old is your baby?" she asked.

The boy grabbed the paper and shoved it in his left pocket. "That's great. Thank you."

He rushed off, not giving her time to change her mind. Half way down the block, he turned and waved. She noticed that, like the week before, he headed south on Michigan Avenue, not in the direction of the train.

The next day, Cecilia was restless. Although for most of the winter she'd limited her outdoor excursions to a weekly walk to the grocery store, Mass every other Sunday at Holy Name, and the occasional doctor, dentist or hair appointment, the day after being conned by the boy, she felt imprisoned by her own luxury. Her forty-story building was bright, and sunny, and located just off the Lake. Built in the nineteen seventies, it was solid, impervious to the noise of busy Lake Shore Drive. A twenty-four hour doorman and a round-the-clock garage man protected its inhabitants from intruders and non-belongers alike, escorting workmen and delivery boys and announcing visitors. Cecilia's three-bedroom apartment was on the seventeenth floor; most of the walls were painted a light gray, with bright white crown molding. Over the years, Tyler had selected half a dozen simply-framed splashes of color created by not-yet-famous friends of friends—most of the time these cheered her, though she understood none of them. Her building had its own indoor swimming pool and gym, which she rarely used, and a dry cleaners on the first floor. She had neighbors she avoided meeting. There was, in sum, little reason to venture out, but she was antsy, and had the urge to walk down Michigan Avenue to see what was happening. It was mid-morning, and a walk would do her good, twenty-five minutes there and

twenty-five back. She passed the cat lady and the Flintstones guy. She ignored the woman, who camped on the Michigan Avenue Bridge with a pet carrier next to her and begged, in a voice that sounded like a goat being hurled into the river below, "Feeeed my caaat, Feeeed my caaaaat." Her cry for help reminded her of the boy. What was it like to be him? Was there a small home in Indiana where the boy and his young wife tucked their baby goodnight in a nursery lined in yellow ducklings and proudly displayed the infant's pictures in china frames? She stopped herself. What was she thinking? The boy no doubt slept in the park or on lower Wacker drive. The man with the first eight or twelve bars of the theme from the Flintstones was so bad she gave him a dollar just so he would stop playing long enough to say, "God bless you." Some part of her thought that the boy's act, with the gall to ask for sixty dollars, was far superior to these two; as she mulled his performance, reenacting every detail that had prompted her to comply with his outrageous request, it rose to the level of art form.

"I can't believe I coughed up sixty dollars. I knew I was being taken, and I just let myself. Is that what you call progress, doctor? Does that show that I am less defended now than I used to be? Is that the kind of miraculous transformation I'm supposed to have here?"

"Just to be clear, Cecilia, I never suggested that you would have, or were supposed to have, a miraculous transformation. You came to me, remember, with certain issues, and you thought I could help you deal with them."

She fixed her gaze out the window. You'd think that someone you were paying big bucks to would be a little more eager to be nice to you. Dr. Richardson had a real tendency to piss her off. Over the past month or so of their relationship, she got stirred up right before her appointments, almost like she was itching for a fight, and he would neither overtly start one nor

defend himself, hugging the goddam neutral center. She'd been telling him about the boy and the sixty dollars, and he couldn't explain to her why she'd done it. She didn't say that she hadn't stopped thinking about the kid for a week, and that she'd returned to the plaza yesterday and the day before just to see if she might get a glimpse of him on the street.

"You wanted the boy to like you?" Dr. Richardson asked.

He so rarely started a thread of conversation, she wasn't sure she'd heard him right.

She shrugged. "I don't know where you get that."

"I get it from the fact that you did it," Dr. Richardson said evenly. "Why do you think you did it?"

"He needed it," she said, tossing it off.

"How do you know he needed it?"

"Because he asked," she said between clenched teeth. His asking of these obvious questions infuriated her, as if she were a child being taunted by a parent, being forced to answer a series of stupid questions which only led to the conclusion that one was stupid: *Is the stove hot? What happens when you put your hand in fire? Did you put your hand in fire? Was it hot? Did you burn yourself?*

"What would've happened if you hadn't given him the money?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, and in the face of his silence, she played it out. "He wouldn't have hurt me, if that's what you mean. He just would've gone away; gotten the money from someone else."

She'd given the money because the boy asked. Simple as that. Perhaps another person wouldn't have, but so what? She'd heard a friend talk once about traveling to third world countries in their small sailboat and being asked by total strangers for pencils or gum, or even for

their shoes. Her friend had said "no." The cruisers who'd said "yes" found it terribly uncomfortable and said they'd never go back; the ones who'd said "no," that they didn't have gum or pencils to give away and needed their shoes themselves, had actually become friends with the local people. The ones that could be guilted so easily had shown a certain amount of disrespect, and therefore had been disrespected as easy marks. The unapologetic ones, the ones who didn't claim to have so much that they could so easily spare it, had visited as equals; the askers hadn't really anticipated a "yes" and so weren't particularly disappointed. They were no worse off for having made the ask. She'd understood her friend, and it made some sense to her intellectually, but in her gut, she couldn't imagine not giving the gum or the pencils, when she had so much and the person asking had so little. Well, maybe not the shoes. The thought of that was kind of creepy, but it was only a matter of degree, not principle. Sixty dollars was like a pencil to her.

The session ended and Cecilia left feeling unsettled and expectant. She was itching for the confrontation with her young man.

He'd not gone to the train station! He'd not lost a train ticket! He'd taken advantage of her and her need to be loved. How unfair was that?

Everyone needed to be loved, or so the conventional wisdom had it. No, that's not why she'd done it. Even Dr. Richardson hadn't said she was a people-pleaser, hadn't said that she desperately needed praise, applause, approval, love. He hadn't said that, and that's not why she'd done it. Not at all.

She finished one cigarette and lit another, angry. The young man was not in sight, would not slip up and show himself, would not return and beg for her mercy or understanding. He would not come home with her, clean himself up, go back to school, be saved. She had no idea

where those thoughts came from. She flicked her cigarette, half unsmoked, on the ground and stamped it out. She was about to walk off when a student with a backpack caught her eye. With deliberate, slow dignity, she bent down, picked up the butt and placed it in the gray plastic receptacle near where, two weeks ago, she'd met the boy.

Cecilia turned north on Michigan Avenue to walk home, irritated at Dr. Richardson for making her out to be so starved for love and attention that she would give a young boy sixty dollars with which he would buy booze and drugs. How dare the boy use the excuse of a wife and baby! And that she would fall for it. At least Dr. Richardson hadn't gone down that path, hadn't made some huge deal out of the fact that she didn't question the existence of the wife and the baby, that she'd so wanted to believe in their existence that she hadn't demanded to see pictures, had instead created her own vision of them, blond and innocent and hungry. Dr. Richardson was a waste of time. They were no closer to solving her immediate problem than they'd been a month ago, and now she was having these totally unrelated thoughts about babies.

The sun was shining and the early June day was promising to be glorious. She couldn't bear the thought of going home, staying inside, playing the piano or reading. She turned around and headed for Millennium Park, thinking to sit by the flowing stream the landscape architects had thoughtfully built into the plan. She recalled that it had a Zen-like quality, and that no signs outlawed taking off your shoes and cooling your feet in it. On Michigan, she stopped to watch children playing in the granite fountain, under the morphing gaze of two glass brick towers, the giant Plensa sculptures on the north and south ends. In between the diverse faces of the city, water spouts jumped, soaking toddlers while their parents and nannies smiled on from the sidelines. On the opposite side from the street, she saw a blond girl, in jeans and a drab tee-shirt, idly watching the kids while she pushed her own infant back and forth in a simple stroller. She

was different from the others: too young to be the mother or a live-in nanny; too engaged to be a sibling. The babysitter, Cecilia concluded, and a bit young even for that. How did mothers gather the trust to engage young girls to care for their children? Weren't they afraid of what might happen in the event of an emergency, or, even not an emergency, just a situation which required good judgment? This mother obviously lacked judgment herself: The stroller was old-fashioned, flimsy. Most of the strollers she saw in the parks and on the streets in her neighborhood were like armored cars; in her building, if someone came into the elevator with a gray leather stroller with double wheels and a rucksack on the back, everyone stood aside. This one looked to be canvas, striped pink and white, an awning and a scooped seat, no doubt cheap. Probably second, if not fourth or fifth-hand. She remembered the young boy saying kids were expensive. He may've been lying, but he wasn't wrong.

An expansive public space. A crowd, even on a weekday. Tourists and conventioners, and non-English speaking nannies who resided in the luxurious downtown condos—no place to raise a child—what better place to hide in public, pick a few pockets, search out a new target for a con? There he was, longish blond hair, shoulders rounded, squatting down and poking his finger at the baby's chest, standing up and reaching in his pocket and handing the girl something in a closed fist and then bumping his fist with hers and skipping, literally skipping, south and east, towards the gardens and the river and his next mark. Cecilia stood stunned, uncertain she'd seen what she'd seen. How many young blond couples must there be in a city of almost ten million? How many on Michigan Avenue, on a morning in early June? How many young men so smooth and skilled at the urban sleight of hand: casually in his pocket, quickly in hers, swinging at his side. Skipping off to work the crowds, the young wife confident that he'd return

in the evening, bringing home the day's bounty, enough to get them by. There was no point in pursuing him. No use at all.

CHAPTER CONTINUES