

HEAD LOCK

BY

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Chapter One

THAT PARTICULAR SPRING DAY, fooling around in the library, I was interested in why good intentions so often wind up making things even worse than they were before. Consequently I was taking notes on a great reform called the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, which gave us Political Action Committees. Before the act, it had been easy but illegal to buy members of Congress. After the great reform, it became legal and even easier.

I was working my way through the language of the bill, and not, to tell the truth, very interested. It was too nice a day to be in Harvard's Widener Library.

How about my high school idol, Henry Wittenberg? What would the greatest amateur wrestler of all time be doing on a day like this? Henry Wittenberg would be doing isometric exercises, just as I used to do on spring days like this, bored like this, in the back row of high school classrooms.

So I locked my hands behind my head, filled my lungs, and pushed my head backwards against the hands with increasing force for four seconds and with maximum force for six more seconds. At this point in the process my old physics teacher, Mr. Xavier Prum, out of Luxembourg by way of Hitler, looked up from his demonstration one day and said, "Mr. Bethany, would you please be so good as to share it with the class why your face is so round and red like

a cherry?” Since it turned out I didn’t have a clue, he used the occasion to explain certain principles of hydraulics to the group.

But now nobody else in the reference library seemed to care that my face was getting round and red like a cherry, so I took hold of the sides of my chair and inhaled to get ready for number two in Wittenberg’s daily routine of isometrics for the busy office worker. Just then somebody squeaked.

One of the many dumb things about schools is that a lot of the time they have cork floors, like the one in the reference room of Widener. Cork floors are supposed to be silent, but they haven’t worked out any better than the Federal Election Campaign Act. Somebody’s rubber soles were squeaking my way, like sneakers on a gym floor. Mostly, we readers in Widener are too polite to look up when this happens. We stay hunched over the heavy oak tables, pretending we don’t hear anything. We don’t want to embarrass the squeaker. Next time, the squeaker may be us.

But I looked up once the noise was past me, and took off my reading glasses so I could rest my eyes by letting them roam around the room. The light from the high windows was slanting down steeply now, near noon. It disappeared into the brown cork floor and the quiet ranks of books bound in maroon and dark blue and black, leaving the enormous room somber no matter what was going on outside with the sun.

The other communicants, sitting still at the rows of refectory tables, mostly wore grays and browns and muted blues as if it were still winter. There was only one patch of in-your-eye springtime color in that room, and I was it. I wore a sweater of bright yellow, the yellow of daffodils and forsythia. It was the type of loose sweater that Arnold Palmer wears in the ads, with billowing sleeves that almost hide the cuffs—the type of light sweater you wear in spring or on cool summer evenings. The sweater had been a good idea, when I was walking through Harvard Yard to the library a couple of hours earlier. But now the blue of the

sky through the windows made it look as if shirt-sleeve weather had come at last. Perfect weather for a slow stroll down to the Tasty for lunch.

The sun outside was as warm as it had looked from Widener's windows, warm enough so that I decided to walk over to the Harvard Union and buy a *Globe* at the student shop on the first floor. I took my paper over to the semicircular stone bench inside the John White Hollowell gate and skimmed through the pages quickly, paying just enough attention to be sure there was nothing worth clipping inside it. There wasn't. The economy was still in free fall, of course. The newspapers were very excited just then about free falls. Anything headed downward—SAT scores, voter confidence, the dollar—was in free fall. I released my *Boston Globe* into free fall, too, from a point just above the trash can next to the gate.

I tied my pretty yellow sweater around my waist. The buds on the lilacs along Quincy Street were fat and ready to pop. The grass was mostly brown still, but a little green showed if you looked hard enough. The Chessmaster was sitting at his usual table on the terrace outside the Au Bon Pain, now that it was warm enough again. The Chessmaster is a Harvard man who now takes on all comers for two bucks a game. As I watched he pondered his next move for about a second and a half, before making it and hitting the timer that started the countdown for his current victim. Inside the Tasty I took one of the stools near the window. It was worth keeping an eye on the street again, now that the sun had shucked the girls out of their winter clothes.

"Bethany my man," said Joey Neary, turning a hamburger patty over on the grill so that the pink side would turn gray and match the other side. "How they hanging?"

In a bunch? Right one high?

"Not bad," I said.

"Your lady called."

"Hope?"

“You got more than one?”

“What did she want?”

“She said call her. I wrote it down.” It was her home number in Washington. Funny she’d be at home, on a week day. She took time off after each of her three babies was born, but apart from that she hadn’t missed a day at work since graduating from law school.

I ordered a bowl of soup and a container of milk, something light so I wouldn’t have weight on my stomach when I went over to Malkin later to work out with the Harvard wrestlers. I was a sort of unofficial and unpaid assistant to the coach, which gave me access to the gym and to workout partners. Once I had been good enough to make the Olympic team, but it turned out to be the year Carter boycotted the games. Sorry about that, as we used to say during the Southeast Asia War Games. Even at this late date, my ability and experience were enough to keep me ahead of most Harvard wrestlers. But it was getting tougher every year.

I had planned to go back to the library for an hour or so after lunch, but I decided the hell with it. I’d go back to my apartment, see what Hope wanted, and then listen to k.d. lang’s new CD till it was time for practice. Ms. lang was already better than Patsy Cline, and still climbing.

My apartment is only a few steps from Harvard Yard, on Ware Street. The name Tom Carpenter is on the mailbox downstairs, and on my lease, and on a full set of I.D. as well. My neighbors in the building think I’m some kind of consultant on something or other, who keeps to himself. Only a very few people know that there is no Tom Carpenter, and that the man who lives in the apartment with that name on the mailbox is actually Tom Bethany. My reasons for dropping out of the world’s computer data base years ago were personal, and probably a little weird, and only a little illegal, and by now more and more irrelevant, unnecessary and outdated. But I still like the idea that strangers can’t find the entrance to my den without making a considerable effort.

The air inside the apartment was overheated, and so I opened all the windows. What came in was a little cooler than a spring breeze, but it was still pleasant. Then I dialed Hope Edwards at her home number. Generally I call her at the Washington office of the American Civil Liberties Union, which she runs. That way I don't run the risk of her husband answering. He may know about our long-standing affair, but then again he may not. He may not care if he does know, but then again he may. Anyway, I seldom called Hope at home. She answered before the first ring was over.

"Hey," I said, "what's up?"

"Oh, Tom," she said, which told me right away it was something bad. Usually she calls me Bethany.

"What is it?" I said. "What's wrong?"

"I went to the doctor this morning, and . . . Tom, I don't know how to say this . . ."

"Jesus, Hope, what is it?"

"I'm pregnant."

I let loose with the first thing that jumped into my head: "Thank God."

"Thank God?"

"Sorry, I didn't meant it the way it sounded. I was thinking cancer or something."

"Oh."

"What do we do?" I asked.

"I need to talk to you about it. Can you come down?"

I RECENTLY GOT MY HANDS on a lot of money, enough so that I can get by at my modest level for as long as they keep issuing Treasury notes. The Roaring Eighties are over at last, leaving behind them the looted shells of the insurance companies and the S&Ls and the corporations and the pension funds. So I took the money I stole from one of the looters and loaned it to the U.S. Government with the understanding that the rest of you would pay me interest on it every year, without the slightest effort on my part. It may help to think of me, along with a whole bunch of rich

Arabs and Japanese and Germans and Republicans, as the Mafia. Now think of the Internal Revenue Service as our enforcer, and of yourself as the shopkeeper who pays protection to us every April.

Bottom line, as we say down here on the bottom where your money winds up, I not only can live modestly these days without working, I can even splurge a little now and then. So I took a cab out to Logan Airport instead of the T, and I took a plane to Washington instead of driving nine hours or so in my new Subaru, new to me anyway, and instead of taking the Metro I took another cab from National Airport to the Tabard Inn.

“I can give you your old room,” said Edward Cohen, the owner.

I told him I didn’t want my old room this time, but I didn’t tell him why. The room I usually stay in was where it had happened, not six weeks ago, during a long lunch hour Hope had spent with me.

I had told Hope I’d probably be settled in by eight, and just at eight the phone rang.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey to you.”

“So. Here you are. We are.”

“Did I have a nice flight, you’re supposed to say.”

“Did you?”

“It was okay. Took off. Landed.”

“All you can ask of a flight.”

“All you can ask.” I agreed. “When can I see you?”

“Tomorrow’s supposed to be nice. I thought maybe if we took a walk.”

We settled when and where, and that seemed to be all the business we had that could be done over the phone. “Well, then, that’s that till tomorrow,” Hope said, and paused a moment. “Bethany,” she said, “I do, you know. I really do.”

“Is there anybody with you?”

“No.”

“Say it straight out, then.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. It’ll be all right. Somehow.”

I went to sleep wondering just how.

HOPE HAD TOLD ME to meet her in Georgetown, by the tow path. I saw her standing beside the canal, looking at its dark water. She turned when I said hello. While I held her for a long moment we said nothing, and then we began to walk, still saying nothing. Hope was a little shorter than I was, but not much, so that we were able to walk hand in hand without the jerkiness that comes when your strides are too badly mismatched. Spring was two or three weeks further along here, so that the trees were pale green and all the new grass had come up. It should have been a nice walk.

We came to where a big mulberry tree leans out over the brown, slow water of the Potomac Canal. By then I had figured out that maybe she was keeping quiet because she was waiting for me to go first. So I told her how sometimes when I used to run along here, the path had been covered with blue-black splotches where people stepped on the ripe mulberries that fell. I told her about the carp that made little kissing sounds when they caught the mulberries as they fell in the water.

“I never heard of a fish eating fruit,” Hope said.

“Well, these ones do,” I said.

“Why are we talking about fish?” Hope asked.

“We’re scared.”

“We sure are. Let’s sit down.” So we sat down on the bank of the canal and stopped stalling.

“Well, it happened,” Hope said. “I thought I was being careful but it happened. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just bad luck,” I said. “You read about ninety-five percent effective, ninety-eight, whatever. You never figure you’ll be in the other two percent.”

“I’ve been in the two percent before. Steven.”

Steven was her 10-year-old son, the youngest of her three.

“There’s something I never asked you,” I said. “A lot of things I never asked you, I guess.”

“Ask it.”

“Does Martin know about us?”

“He knows we’re friends. Once or twice when I’ve mentioned seeing you, he’s asked why I don’t bring you around.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I thought I’d feel awkward. I thought you’d feel awkward.”

“Do you think he’d care if he knew?”

“I honestly don’t know. It’s a funny position.” Martin had discovered late in the day that his secret feelings for men weren’t just a phase but were a permanent part of him. While he was pretending otherwise, though, he and Hope had married and had three children. He was a wonderful father; she was a wonderful mother; the kids were wonderful kids. A wonderful family, except that he had been exclusively and discreetly homosexual for years.

“Up in Alaska, when I was screwing anything I could,” I said, “I used to wish my wife *would* find somebody.”

“I don’t think it’s quite the same, Tom. Probably you wanted out, didn’t you, and you hoped she’d let you off the hook by making the first move?”

“Probably you’re right. And the difference is that you don’t want out, isn’t that right? I’ve always assumed that, anyway.”

We assumed a lot more about each other than we ever said. So far, what we assumed seemed to be right.

“No, I don’t want out,” Hope said. “You know the joke about the two ninety-five-year-olds who go in for a divorce? The judge asks them why now, after seventy-five years of marriage? Well, judge, the husband says, we were waiting till the children died.”

“Jesus, that’s an awful joke.”

“Exactly.”

“So that means you don’t want to have the baby?”

“Not if you’re talking about divorce and remarriage.”

“Wouldn’t that be the only real way?”

“Not necessarily. Martin and I could raise the baby as his.”

“Would he do that?”

“I don’t know. Do you want me to ask him?”

“This is tough, isn’t it?”

“It’s tough, all right.”

“What do you think, Hope? What do you want to do?”

“I’m a little old for a baby. Not really too old, but a little old.”

“Do you want one, though?”

“Do you?”

“I left the baby I had. I don’t know how good a father I would be.” I haven’t seen my daughter since the divorce. I send her birthday and Christmas presents, along with an awkward letter every month. They’re non-letters, really, like those mimeographed year-end things that people send with their Christmas cards. She answers about one in three. Her real father is her stepfather, or so I hope.

“Does that mean you don’t want a baby?” Hope asked.

“I’d want your baby. Our baby. I’m just scared, that’s all. A lot of things about it are terrifying.”

“I’m scared, too. Probably I should have just gone ahead and had an abortion. Not told you.”

“I think I think it’s good that you told me. I think I’m glad.”

“I wanted you to have a say in it.”

“Not really my say, is it? I’m not the one who’s pregnant.”

“I don’t mean it wouldn’t be my decision in the end. I just meant I wanted to see what you felt before I decided.”

“I don’t really know what I feel.”

“Don’t you? Don’t you think we’re sort of closing in on a decision here?”

“Are we?”

“Listen to us. You say you’re scared and you’re a lousy father. I say I’m scared, and I’m getting a little old for this kind of thing and my kids won’t be dead for another sixty

or seventy years. We're really not too enthusiastic about this pregnancy, are we?"

"Is that what you want to do, then?"

"Abortion? Yes. I was pretty sure before, and now I'm all the way sure. That's why I wanted you to come down. So I could see you, not just talk to you on the phone."

"What happens next?"

"I'll just make an appointment and get it done. No need for you to stay around."

"Is there a problem if I do stay around?"

"Naturally not."

"Then naturally I will."

A LIFETIME OF SCROUNGING and living poor builds up habits. I could afford to stay in the Tabard for a few days or a few weeks, but I didn't want to spend the money. So next morning I started calling around, and in the afternoon I moved to a little Georgetown house on 34th Street. A friend of mine was keeping the keys for a dentist friend of his who was spending a month in Montego Bay. In his master bedroom the dentist turned out to have a waterbed with flannel sheets, which was an odd combination even for Georgetown. I settled myself in his tiny, windowless guest bedroom instead.

Normally I would have wanted to show the waterbed to Hope, and laugh about it with her, and maybe even give it a try to say we had. But the idea didn't sound funny just at the moment. I wondered if this kind of shadow would be between us from now on. I wondered what this abortion would do to us. I remembered the last time we had been together, the time that had led to all this.

I had been spending a couple of days in town, looking up some filings at the Securities and Exchange Commission for some investors. Their particular investment was in a Congressman who hoped to be governor of California. One of his potential rivals had been a Congressional liaison guy in Bush's White House. My job was to run down a rumor that the guy had stood to profit personally from his

work on Bush's banking "reform" bill. Presumably they called it a reform bill because it repealed the last of the reforms that Roosevelt had put in to prevent another Great Depression. In any event, I couldn't find anything over at the SEC that proved the rumor.

"Actually, I'm not surprised," I told the man who had hired me. "Why would the bankers have to waste money paying off a guy on Bush's staff? It's like the British journalist."

"Fuck does that mean?" my investor said, so I recited him the old poem:

"You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
Thank God, the British journalist,
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there isn't reason to."

"Fuck does that mean?" my investor said again. The guy was a movie producer after all, not Ezra Pound.

"Means Wall Street doesn't have to hire guys on Bush's staff. They get 'em for free."

That was in the late morning of my second day in Washington, when I talked to the rich producer. Lunch, a very long lunch, I spent in my room with Hope. We had gone straight to bed, because I was leaving the next morning and we didn't want to waste a minute of our time together. Hope hadn't even gone into the bathroom to, as they say, freshen up. Now that I thought about it, she seldom did. Now that I thought about it, I wondered what method she used, and why I never asked her. It could hardly have been the pill or an IUD, since her sex life was precisely as sporadic as mine was. As far as I knew, that left a diaphragm. Hope had said she was being careful, so when had she put it in? Before leaving home? In the ladies room at the office? Was a diaphragm something a woman would carry around in her purse? Was it something you would insert in a ladies room? Weren't these all things that a person would know if he wasn't a complete oinker?

So I had a spell of feeling guilty because I hadn't been more sensitive, more responsible, more this and that. I knew that the accident would have happened in exactly the same way if I had been a regular Kevin Costner kind of guy, in touch not only with my own feelings but also with the feelings of Native Americans, buffaloes, wolves, and the Great Spirit herself. Somehow this rational thought didn't help at all. It was no time for rational thought. It was time for confused, intertwined emotions about marriage, birth, parenthood, love, birth, death, commitment, guilt, innocence, responsibility, and irresponsibility.

And about abortion itself. In the polls, most people say they think it's wrong, but you ought to be able to have one if you want to. Maybe this isn't entirely clear or entirely consistent, but then the issue is only an easy one to the simple-minded zealots on both extremes.

Try not to be simple-minded and the zealots on the right holler situational ethics, as if that were a bad word, and as if there were any other kind of ethics. Hope and I—mainly Hope—were in a non-simple situation, and yet I was confident that abortion was the best of all the bad ways out of it. But I couldn't help asking myself what if, what if, what if ...

And I knew Hope was asking, too. I wondered what it would do to us, all this imagining of a baby that would never be.

I microwaved a dinner for myself, while Hope was probably getting a proper meal ready for her double-parent nuclear family. Afterwards I watched TV, hoping it would flatten my brain waves into non-thought. But it didn't. I thought of Hope sitting in her study, trying to work through the stuff she always brought home from the office in her briefcase. But failing. Thinking instead about tomorrow. What we had started in the Tabard Inn was going to end on a raised table with stirrups, in a clinic across the river in Arlington.

