

## ONE

Late Friday evening, I'm in my home office, honing my opening statement for the Jeffery Hammond murder trial:

*If a person isn't responsible for the thoughts that lead to their actions, are they responsible for the results of those actions and, furthermore, do they deserve to be punished as a consequence of those actions?*

While I love how this succinctly presents the premise of our case, I worry that it sounds “too philosophical,” especially as three members of the jury didn't attend college and one dropped out of high school. On the other hand, juror number seven is a college professor and another juror is a small-business owner with a degree in sociology, so simplifying the language too much might not be the best move either.

I delete what I wrote and type, *How can you send a man to prison for the rest of his life who can't control his*, when I hear: “I want a divorce, Steven.”

Well, I *think* that's what Laura said. I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I didn't hear her enter the room and it's hard to believe she actually said this.

“Sorry, what did you just say?”

She's wearing what she wore at dinner—a black-and-white low-cut dress and heels. I'm in the jeans I wore at dinner, but bare-chested.

She gazes at me for a few seconds with no affect, then says, “You heard me. I've made a decision. I want you to move out. Tonight.”

Like all couples, we've gone through our rough patches, but lately things have been okay—no big arguments, a fun recent weekend away in the Berkshires.

“Come on, what's going on here?” I say. “What's wrong? Do you want to talk?”

“I've made my decision,” she says. “There's nothing to talk about. Our marriage is over, Steven. We're through. Just go. Get the fuck out. Now!”

Laura is my height, five-ten, but when she's in heels she can look especially tall, even a little intimidating, and right now this effect is, well, heightened because I'm sitting, looking up at her. I'm still straining, trying to figure out what this is all about, then it clicks—the sudden mood swing, the cursing, the unguardedness. I feel silly for not realizing it right away.

“Okay, I get it now,” I say. “I thought something was off during dinner, the way you were talking so fast, jumping from topic to topic, and Tom and Angie noticed it too. In the kitchen, Angie actually asked me if you're all right and I told her, ‘I think so.’ I meant to say something to you after they left, then I got caught up in work and didn't have a chance to. But, just so you know, I'm not angry about any of this. I totally understand why you're—”

“Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!”

I've been having persistent headaches lately—work stress, or maybe migraines—and this isn't helping.

“You have to calm down,” I say. “*Please*, Laura. There's no reason to make this more difficult than it needs to be. If you just relax and take a pill you'll feel much better and then we can dis—”

“I don't need a pill.”

“I really don't want to argue about this,” I say, “but we both know that's not true.”

“I am not fucking manic. That’s always your go-to explanation about anything that goes wrong in our marriage—‘There she goes, she must be manic again, she must be off her Lithium.’ This isn’t about me, Steven, it’s about you. I’m fine with me!”

I get up from my desk. I know I have to be patient when she gets like this; that’s what her psychiatrist told me.

“Look, it’s okay, Lau. I’m not going anywhere—now or ever. Whatever’s going on here, we can work this out, if you’ll just—”

She swats at me with both hands like I’m a rabid bat.

“Okay, okay. Just relax.”

“Go!” she screams. “Now! Go to your fucking brother’s. We’re through!”

She marches out of my office and slams the door. My brother Brian lives about twenty minutes away, near Katonah, with his wife Robin and their two kids, but there’s no way I’m going there, especially now, at nearly midnight.

I leave my office and find her in the bedroom. She has her back to me as she’s looking for something in her dresser. On TV, the news is on—Bernie Sanders campaigning for the Nevada Caucus, which he’s expected to win in a landslide over Biden and Buttigieg.

“Look, Lau, this really is the wrong night to be doing this. I have a huge case coming up on Monday—you know how important this is for me, for my career. Maybe if you *weren’t* off your meds right now you’d realize how unfair it is that you’re—”

She slaps my face hard, jerking my head to the side. I wasn’t expecting her to hit me, but I’m not surprised. She’s hit me before during manic episodes. Once, she broke my nose.

“See?” she says. “This is exactly what’s wrong with us. *This*—right here. You always think everything’s about you and you

never listen to me. You just tell yourself a story in your head and you believe it. *I told you our marriage is over and I want you out of here right now. That's all that matters.*"

It's getting difficult to control myself, to stay calm and understanding, but I tell myself, *This isn't her, this is just her disease. Don't get sucked into a big argument now. Then it'll be about something else, then it'll be about you.*

I breathe deeply, then say, "If you could see this situation clearly and rationally, you'd see there's another side to this."

She cocks her arm, as if she's about to slap me again. Instead, she says, "If you had no idea this was coming then you're even more clueless than I thought."

"Look, I'm not an idiot," I say. "Obviously things haven't been perfect lately, but we had that nice weekend away in the Berkshires, didn't we? Hiking was fun and that picnic at Tanglewood was nice."

"The Berkshires!" she says. "Let's go to the Berkshires this weekend, Lau. It'll be good for us to get away, Lau.' What if I don't want to go to the fucking Berkshires? What if I don't want what's *good* for *us*? Did you ever think about that? No, of course you didn't think about that. 'It's too late, I already booked the Airbnb. We have to go.' You and your have-tos! Maybe *you're* the problem, Steven, not me. You ever consider that? Just because you're not diagnosed doesn't mean you're not sick. You know what I'm sick of? I'm sick of this shit, I'm sick of *you*! Maybe that's how I wound up with somebody else!"

She's flirted before when she's gone off her meds, but she hasn't actually *cheated*. I know our marriage is dysfunctional, but having an affair would be taking things to a whole other level.

"I hope you're not serious about this," I say. "Come on, you wouldn't really do that, Lau. You really wouldn't do that to us, would you?"

Her eyes are wide and venomous.

“What if I did? What difference does it make now?”

*Don't overreact, Steven. You'll regret it if you do. Stay calm. Just stay calm.*

“Okay, so then who is he?”

“I don't have to tell you anything.”

“You said there's ‘somebody else.’ If that's true, and you're not just trying to get a rise out of me, then tell me who he is.”

“Stop interrogating me. I'm not on fucking trial.”

“What's his name?”

“*Her* name, you mean. *Her* name is Beth.”

She's looking right at me, not blinking at all. She doesn't seem to be making this up.

“A woman? Seriously?”

“Does that surprise you?”

It does surprise me, but not as much as finding out she's cheating.

“Where did you meet her?”

“Why does it—?”

“I want to know.”

“Okay. The post office.”

“The post office? How do you meet somebody at the post office? Who even *goes* to the post office?”

“Well, that's where we met.”

This doesn't sound like something she'd invent. My head is pounding like my brain is trying to escape from my skull. I feel gutted, nauseated, like I might throw up.

“You really did this, Laura? Please, tell me this isn't true.”

She takes a step toward me, then stops, looking right at me.

“I know you want to think this is just my sickness,” she says.

“Maybe it'll make it easier for your ego or something, I don't know, but I'm in love with Beth. I don't love you anymore,

Steven—at *all*. Wait, I can do better than that—I’ve *never* loved you. How’s that? Our marriage is a joke, it’s *always* been a joke. I’ve been faking it for a long time. Everything we have is fake. *All* of it.”

I stare at her for at least ten seconds, then I say, “I think you’re right. I should go.”

In the den downstairs, I call Brian on my cell.

“Hey,” he says, “what’s up?”

“I wake you?”

“No, what’s—?”

“I’m coming over.”

“To my place? Now?” He sounds concerned. “Why? What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to get into it.”

“You okay?”

“Not really. I might have to stay a couple of nights, or longer.”

“What happened, Steve?”

Now he sounds extremely concerned; could I blame him? I’d be concerned too if he wanted to mysteriously come over to my place late at night.

But I don’t feel like explaining—not over the phone anyway.

“Don’t worry, nothing life-threatening or anything like that.”

“Then why—?”

“I’m leaving, okay?”

“Yeah...yeah, okay.”

I put some clothes in a carry-on, including a suit to wear to court on Monday morning, and my laptop. I was planning to spend the rest of the weekend doing final preparations for the trial; now I’ll have to work from Brian’s.

This is, by far, the biggest, most high-profile trial of my career. Jeffery Hammond, a renowned abstract artist and a regular on Page Six and on the New York City social scene for years,

was charged with multiple counts of first-degree murder for the brutal killings of three men. Although the body parts of one of his victims were found in a suitcase in his art studio in Nolita, and forensic evidence and witness accounts linked him to the other murders, Hammond pleaded innocent. We're planning an insanity defense, which is always extremely difficult to pull off, but in this case it might be impossible. Hammond is without a doubt a psychopath, exhibiting no empathy or remorse, but he has no history of schizophrenia, or dissociating from reality, and it's going to be a huge challenge to prove that he couldn't control his actions at the time of the murders and that the murders weren't at least partly premeditated. We plan to have a psychiatrist testify that Hammond experienced psychotic breaks prior to and during the murders, and another psychiatric expert will testify that late onset schizophrenia is possible, but the prosecution will have their own experts, who will try to discredit ours, and I'm sure the prosecution will play up the viciousness of the murders by showing graphic autopsy photos to the jury—which the judge has already declared permissible—and establishing Hammond as a calculated sociopath and master manipulator, which in fact he is. To have any chance of winning, especially with a less than optimal jury, I'm going to have to be at the absolute top of my game, but I don't know how I'm going to pull this off, now that I'm suddenly going through a divorce.

Speeding along Route 35, I'm trying to see through the frost and haze on the windshield. It's snowing, not heavily, but enough to slicken the road. It's still hard to accept that this actually *happened*, that my marriage is actually ending. Maybe I shouldn't have left. After all, dysfunctional crap happens in all marriages. I hear stories all the time at parties and on the train commuting into the city. Recently, Patti—a friend of Laura's,

actually—found out that her husband Darren had been having an affair for years, even paying the other woman’s rent, but they went to counselling and stayed together. If Patti and Darren could work things out, so could we.

The idea that things might not be as bad as they seem gives me hope. As I drive in the snow, I glance at my phone periodically, expecting to see “Laura” at the top of my texts list. She’ll say she’s sorry for everything and she wants me to come home to talk about what happened. I’m a reasonable person; I don’t hold grudges. I could forgive her and we could work through this.

But she hasn’t texted me.

There’re only texts from Brian: *Sure everything’s okay?? You sounded really weird*

And Terrence, a partner at my firm: *Look forward to the new draft. Reach out when you have a chance, I’m around all weekend.*

Terrence sent me some ideas for the opening statement earlier today and I told him I’d get back to him tonight.

I say to Siri: “Text to Terrence:...Working on it...period... Talk more in morning...period. Send text.”

I’m surprised that there’s still nothing from Laura, and now I feel like an idiot for rationalizing that this was an episode, a momentary lapse. If she went off her meds and had a fling that would be one thing, we could work through it. But telling me that she’s in love with someone else implies that this has been going on for a long time. She was probably planning her exit strategy for weeks, maybe months, and I was too self-absorbed to see the signs. Or perhaps I did see the signs, but I was in denial. Maybe I’m still in denial if I can’t accept my new reality.

“Goddamnit!” I shout. “Fuck! Fuck!”

It feels good to release stress—to rage. For a few moments, the pain in my head seems to wane, and I can see the situation more clearly, with less emotion. It hits me that the problem

isn't that Laura is leaving me—the problem is that I left. I've been through so much tumult in my marriage, always staying and trying to work on things when a lot of men would've left years ago. But I made a decision—to stay in my marriage for better or for worse; I'm not a quitter, and I'm not throwing away a seventeen-year marriage just because she kicked me out during a manic episode. I'll fight to get her back, do whatever it takes.

I'm approaching a bend at the bottom of the hill. I usually slow here as this area is a known hotspot for accidents. Distracted by my thoughts, I don't slow as much as I should, though, and I have to pound the brakes. I skid a little, heading right toward a tree, and I experience the odd sensation of feeling the impact that hasn't happened yet, almost like it's *already* happened. Then I hear my first driving instructor, my dad, telling me, *Always turn in the opposite direction of the skid*. I do this, and thanks to my dead dad, I manage to stay on the road.

I have to catch my breath. The snow's coming down harder and my head's throbbing. I shouldn't be driving tonight. It's not just the weather; I'm too stressed and distracted to drive. But I'm not sure if I should go back now or wait till morning. If Laura doesn't take her meds, going back tonight could be pointless. Of course, if I do go back, Laura might not even be there—she might have gone to Beth's. Or, who knows, if the timing works out just right, I might arrive as Laura is leaving. I could follow her and meet this Beth, talk to both of them...

I need a cigarette. I officially quit about ten years ago, but I still smoke now and then, especially when under extreme stress.

I pull into a gas station just outside of Katonah. I park next to a few other cars, close to the road. When I get out, I feel the sleet, mixing with the snow, pelting against my face. The pain in my head is excruciating; I have to get this checked out.

Heading toward the minimart, I notice to my right, near another parked car, a guy and a girl arguing. The guy is older than the girl—he looks like he’s around my age, forty-seven. She looks like she’s about twenty, maybe a college student.

I try to ignore them. It’s none of my business, after all, and I’ve been through enough tonight.

Then the girl screams, “Stop, you’re hurting me!”

The guy’s yanking on her arm, saying, “Just get in the car. Get in the fuckin’ car.”

This is the last thing I need tonight—to get in the middle of a domestic dispute—but he’s hurting her; I have to do *something*.

I go over and say, “Hey, what’s going on here?”

The guy pauses, still holding her arm, as he glances at me. The girl is looking at me too. She’s pretty—shoulder-length blonde hair. They both look drunk, high, or both.

“How ’bout you mind your own fuckin’ business?” the guy says to me.

I notice he’s wearing an expensive watch—a shiny silver-and-gold Rolex. Somehow this detail makes the whole situation seem odder.

“He beat me up before,” the girl says to me. She sounds desperate and looks legitimately terrified.

The guy yanks on her arm harder and says, “I told you to shut the fuck up.”

With his other arm he opens the passenger-side door of the car and tries to get her to go inside.

“No,” she says. “Stop it! Stop it!”

I can call the cops, but they won’t get here for at least ten minutes, maybe longer during a snowstorm.

I rush up and grab the guy from behind. He’s taller than me, and thicker.

“Let her go,” I say.

“The fuck?”

He seems surprised I’m getting involved. I’m surprised too, but this son of a bitch caught me on the wrong night.

“You heard me,” I say.

He lets go of her, then shifts around toward me, and shoves me hard. I fall back against the side of another parked car. Then he resumes trying to stuff the girl into his car.

“Stop it!” she screams. “I don’t have to go! I don’t have to go!”

I rebound off the car and grab the guy again and pull him away from the girl. He grabs me and rams us both back against the car I just bounced off.

“Run!” I say to the girl. “Get help!”

Somehow the guy and I fall onto the pavement, scuffling in the snow. He pushes me down, but I manage to get back on to my knees and grab him again. There’s no way I’m letting go this time, not until the cops get here.

Then I feel the pain in my gut. It doesn’t feel like a punch, though. It feels much deeper.

“Stupid fuck,” the guy says. “Look what you made me do, dumbass. Look what you made me do.”

I fall to my knees and see a blur of the guy and the bright red in the snow all around me. I’m in shock I guess because it takes a few seconds before I realize it’s blood, and a few more to realize it’s *my* blood.

The guy’s grabbing the girl before she can get to the convenience store. They get in their car and peel away.

I’m lying on my side, part of my face in the snow. I’m weak and shivering and feel warm blood oozing over my freezing lips. I hear a male voice, not mine or the guy who stabbed me, but clear and distinctive: *I saw you, Steven Blitz.*



I have no idea what this means, why I'm hearing it, or where the voice is coming from. Then I'm in a large glass ball, and the ball begins to spin. I feel calm, at peace, removed, watching myself spin faster and faster, until the force of the spinning stretches and pulls me apart and what's left of me scatters and finally vanishes.

