

CHAPTER ONE
PAIN, PAIN,
AND MORE PAIN
Wednesday, November 27, 1985

Mary Wilson stuck her head in the bathroom and startled Albert, her husband of almost forty years. He was seated on the john, unsuccessful in his business.

“I’m off to yoga. I’ll be back before five. Why don’t we go to Houston’s for an early dinner? I’ve got a hankerin’ for some ribs. I’m sure we can beat the crowd.”

Her exaggerated drawl of the word *hankering* was intended to mimic and somewhat mock him in an endearing way. Just the reference to Houston’s ribs made Albert’s mouth water. He was momentarily lost in thought; he could taste and even smell the smoky pork and sweet, tangy sauce. Albert smiled and said, “It’s a date.”

The promise of food couldn’t get his bowels rolling, though. The old married couple said what they needed to. He returned to what he was doing, and she backed away. He could hear her descend the old squeaky stairs and open and close the door behind her. She left at precisely 2:15.

He went back to reading his favorite novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*,

which depicted both the good and the bad of his beloved Old South. In the 1930s racism and bigotry were pervasive, but the powerful sense of justice and humanity were equally apparent embodied in the character of attorney Atticus Finch. *Gregory Peck did a great job, but the movie can't compare with the book.*

He'd finished a chapter as he sat there reading about his childhood in the 1930s and remembering how the Depression and then the war forced him to grow up. He'd known men like Finch, men of vision and compassion, like his father and Abe Steine, his friend's grandfather. That wise old Jew had been the role model for him and several others, including his grandson. *I think Abe would be flattered he permanently influenced so many boys.*

Minutes passed as he sat there contemplating the past. He was under strict doctor's orders to take his time, instructed not to strain. He had trouble with his regularity.

He read another chapter, where Atticus taught Scout and Jim the important life lesson that "they were poor, but there were others worse off than they were." Atticus explained that "Walter's father, a farmer, was country poor, and the Depression hit them the hardest."

Without any movement, he exerted with more enthusiasm. As he did, a sharp pain struck him in the chest. He began to shake violently. Albert blurted out, "Holy shit!" Then he bit down hard on his tongue. He tasted blood, almost sweet. It oozed out the right corner of his mouth. He tried to spit but did so badly. A few drops dribbled down his chin and onto his shirt.

The sight of blood momentarily diverted his attention from his real problem and the sharp pain. Now dizzy, he fell off the commode, striking his head hard, cracking both it and the tile. He soiled himself as he lay there.

What the hell's going on? Is this a heart attack? Oh my God!

It got worse. The shaking stopped, but confusion set in. His body simply stopped following messages transmitted from his brain.

The reality of his situation terrified him. He mustered all of his strength and started dragging himself across the bathroom floor. It was cold, and he could feel the grout against his exposed thighs, his pants still down by his ankles.

Using only his right hand and arm, dragging the left side of his body, the sixty-five-year-old struggled to keep momentum. When he reached the threshold between the bedroom and the bathroom, continued progress required even greater effort as he lifted himself over the threshold and onto the bedroom carpet. His effort and the abrasiveness of the bedroom carpet burned a patch of skin off his thigh; it was pretty ugly.

The journey across the two rooms seemed to take forever.
Remember the tortoise wins the race!

When he reached the bedside nightstand, he reached up and felt around for the phone. His right hand scouted across the nightstand like he was playing his beloved piano. Frustrated, angry, and confused, he dropped his hand from the nightstand, lay there to rest, and stared at the dust balls under the bed. *Mother of God, what do I do?*

He'd faced death many times, but this was different. Albert was scared. Those other times he was young and prepared to die, almost half expected it. Now he was old and helpless.

His head clearing, he realized, *I can yank the cord, and the phone will fall to the floor.* When he tugged, the phone fell on his head, further dazing him. A goose egg formed above his right eye. *That's the least of my problems.*

Albert wasn't the type to give up. He tried to dial 911 but in-

stead got 411, information. The pain in his chest doubled, and it was now shooting down his left arm. *It's even in my damn fingertips. I haven't felt such pain since the war.*

He mumbled the numbers 911 to the information operator. Recognizing that the caller was in distress and in an emergency situation, she connected Albert to 911 with the words of encouragement, "Good luck, sir."

"911, please state the nature of your emergency."

Albert froze. He didn't know what to say, and he mumbled something incoherent. He tried to say his name, but nothing came out. He made a tight fist with his right hand, his only working limb. Frustration pulsed through his veins as his blood pressure rose dramatically. After a full minute, concentrating hard on his name, repeating it again and again in his head, *Albert Wilson, Mr. Wilson . . .*, he managed "Wilson," a common name and not much help.

"Where do you live, Mr. Wilson? We'll send help."

Albert panicked because he couldn't remember his address. He cried out in response to the legitimate question as an even sharper pain hit him. His eyes welled up with tears, but the pain jogged his memory. In his mind he screamed out his phone number 373-2047, but in reality it was no more than a whisper. He could say no more. He collapsed, the phone remaining tight in the grip of his right hand. His mind racing, trapped in his frozen body, Albert drifted into the past.

As he lay there, Albert Wilson reminisced about his life. His life did not flash before his eyes; it was more like a Super 8 movie in vivid color. The images seemed to jump around, as if some heavenly editor had spliced his life story together and Ted Turner amazingly colorized it. Albert couldn't believe how vibrant the colors were; the yellow had the intensity of the sun, and the sky blue would put

the Kodak people to shame. The story wasn't in any particular order. His reflections were random, some giving him a sense of confidence, while others made him uneasy.

He almost died fighting the Germans during World War II. His childhood friend Morty, young and dashing, was right there by his side. In rapid succession, he came home on the GI Bill, finished his undergraduate degree at Vanderbilt, and graduated from law school. Those formative years literally flew by, but it was comforting that Morty was right by his side, a constant companion.

In his semi-conscious state, he saw Mary. She was in a white wedding dress, with her long blonde hair down rather than in a ponytail, breathtaking. Morty was standing there, his best man.

He reflected that his thirty-nine-year marriage to Mary was as strong as ever. They were partners in life, and although they talked about retirement for years, they were still figuring it out and finalizing their plans. Albert thought Mary had grown more beautiful with age, her shoulder-length blonde hair turning shiny silver, which she generally wore pulled back in a ponytail. He loved all of her, but he most favored her intense green eyes. It was her eyes that followed him throughout his entire life.

Mary, also recently retired, had been principal of West End Junior High for the last fifteen years. Before that, she'd taught eighth grade history. She'd been tough, dealing with thirteen-year-olds whose bodies were changing as their hormones raged. The stories she could tell.

Albert in his mind next turned to his children and grandchildren. Their two daughters, both divorced, had struggled for years but now seemed to be in a good place. The grandchildren, eight-year-old Sarah, six-year-old Blair, and three-year-old Peter, were ready to really get to know their grandfather and spend more time with him.

A. Turk

His eyes fluttered as he contemplated the most recent news. He was excited about their trip to London scheduled next month and the presentation of his knighthood by Queen Elizabeth. He'd bought a black morning coat, waistcoat, striped trousers, and other new clothing for the trip.

He grimaced in pain at the thought that in an effort to dot all the *i's* and cross all the *t's*, he'd been examined by his internist and had seen his cardiologist for the green light to leave the country on his extended family vacation. The follow-up doctors' appointments were just two of the many items he needed to get done before leaving on December 19th for England.

Albert regained enough consciousness to realize that three paramedics were tending to him. He didn't know how long he'd been lying there, but it was long enough for him to have taken his trip down memory lane, the operator to locate his address, and the paramedics to have broken down the door.

One EMT was trying to pry the phone from his hand while another was trying unsuccessfully to start a line. It felt like the third was sitting on his chest, but instead he was checking Albert's blood pressure. Albert closed his eyes, hoping the scene would go away. When he opened them, he was very disappointed. The men placed him in an ambulance and transported him to Saint Thomas Hospital. He heard the driver tell the dispatcher, "It's three forty three, and we're en route from 23 Robin Lane. Our ETA is less than ten minutes."

Albert drifted into unconsciousness.