

[The novel [Radical](#) starts with the Epilogue]

EPILOGUE

After Sir Hubby shot me, I fell to the floor.

The tumble, the hard impact, stuttered my concentration. Lizzie must have fired the next shot because suddenly Sir Hubby dropped to the floor, too. Face down. Near my feet.

Already laying on the floor—the woman everyone assumed was Stephanie Lane-Pryor.

Dead.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was flat on my back and staring directly into the harsh, white wattage of the bedroom ceiling. It dazzled me. Blinded me. My eyes blinking, squinting against the saturation of white. Long blinks. Yet blinks that were rapid. Continuous. Uncontrollable. “Turn,” I choked, “off the light. Turn off the light!”

Someone obeyed me.

Even with my eyes closed I could detect the light leave.

Could feel my vision readjust.

I squinted my eyes open again. Squirmed. Moaned. The pain felt like nothing more than an odd tingling burn, so I bent my neck upward. Felt all the muscles in my stomach collaborate, as if I were straining to complete the last sit-up of a rigorous workout. I opened my eyes all the way. Stared down at my own chest and abdomen. At the oil-black ooze. Witnessed my own hands, one palm on top of the other, pushing down against the slimy entrance wound in my stomach.

My own hands.

With a mind of their own.

Already there ahead of me.

Determined to help.

To.

The pain interrupted.

Truncating.

All my thoughts.

Fragmenting my.

Sentences.

I relaxed my neck. The back of my shoulders, the back of my head coming to rest against the floor again.

My stomach hurt.

Bad.

Also, my elbow and arm—from the fall to the floor.

Then, the pain spiked through me with an unbelievable intensity.

My eyelids gritted together.

Took me to a refuge within my own subjective darkness.

Pulled triggers aren't what they used to be. No gasps of surprise from the audience. No smell of lingering gunpowder. No bullet to be tweezered out and dropped with a single metallic ping into a sterilized surgeon's bowl, or extracted hours later from the crime scene wall like a dense, lead wisdom tooth. Civilization has advanced. Progressed. Pistols are different now. More accurate and instantaneous. Their design unique. A conspiracy between the manufacturer's ability and the owner's psyche.

When Sir Hubby shot me, I'd been wearing nothing but my underwear. I hadn't even realized his words were serious, his intentions literal. But then, out of the snub-nosed barrel of his Harper and Dunn had come a laser beam. A deadly, quarter-inch snap. The duration of its glow no longer than a lightning strike. Opaque and villainous and white. The aftermath should have given me a permanent hole in the front of my boxers. But Sir Hubby was slightly taller than me—and probably the bull's-eye that had seemed almost horizontal to him had turned out to be somewhere near my belly button instead. Instantaneously, the beam had penetrated me. Deep inside, I had felt my gut starburst with a million tiny tunnels, the acceleration like a thick thumb over the gushing end of a garden hose.

Now, from somewhere deep inside me, I felt the pain subside.

Withdraw for a second.

I opened my eyes.

To the sounds of hysteria and concern and Karen. With my eyes closed for so long, she probably thought I was dead.

I tried to move, but a porcupine wiggled inside my chest.

In spite of my hands pressing down against my stomach, I could feel more blood sneaking out between my fingers.

My next breath. Something in the. Trying to be. Timing. Skipping a beat. Not, at all, autonomic.

The symptoms refused to spare my feelings.

I knew too much to kid myself.

I was dying.

Dying, damn it!

I felt my eyes widen. More at the determinism than the pain.

Near my feet, Karen screamed again. Pointed down at me.

I rolled my head left. Nothing but bedspread. Right. Saw Lizzie stop examining Sir Hubby's body and look my way. He came toward me. Knelt down at my side. He smelled like garbage. Old fruit rinds, spicy potatoes, cigarette ash, gourmet vegetables, sour milk. In his hand was an old, transparent, plastic police-issue. A street-ready, nine millimeter, laser pistol. With his free hand, he gently pulled back one of my palms. Evaluated the entrance wound. Slowly, his eyes rendezvoused with mine. Then, without disconnecting his stare from me, he handed his street-ready back over his shoulder to Karen, who I now realized was squatting slightly behind him. In a calm voice, he ordered her to go get some help.

Karen immediately stood up and turned toward the door. Yelled, "Somebody get a doctor!"

I managed an ironic exhale.

I had been a doctor once.

Saved people's lives.

In a way.

Severed.

Sewed.

Improved upon the intentions of fate.

In a way.

A crowd of observers had gathered at the threshold of the bedroom. Although I couldn't make out their individual forms, the general reaction came across as dull. Apathetic. No one was leaving to go get a doctor. Maybe they were so rich they'd forgotten how to do anything for themselves. Or, maybe they were just afraid. Maybe more interested in the spectacle than the practical. Anyway, I watched Karen burst through them to go get help herself. Afterwards, the wall of them closed up behind her. Then moved forward, to see deeper into the bedroom.

Someone in the crowd pointed toward my feet. "Is that Hubby Pryor?"

"I can't tell. He's face down."

"It sure looks like him."

"I think you're right."

Still kneeling next to me, Lizzie turned toward them. Nodded. "Sir Hubby's dead."

Next came a silence, that even to me, seemed awkwardly asymmetrical. A woman poked through the crowd and around the threshold. Her eyes searched the bedroom floor. "Oh, my God!" her voice jumped. "That's Stephanie!"

"Stephanie Lane-Pryor?"

"Yes!"

I noticed the mumble, the movement of the observers. Could hear them energize.

Then, a deep, important voice added, "Get a doctor in here, for Christ's sake. That's Stephanie Lane-Pryor!"

"Stephanie Lane-Pryor's dead," Lizzie whispered to no one in particular. Then, he faced the crowd. "But that's not Stephanie Lane-Pryor."

Silence and stares at the woman laying on the floor. The death of a celebrity they could accept, but the issue of her identity brought their voices back for more.

"What'd he say?"

"He said that's not Stephanie Lane-Pryor."

"Is he blind, or something?"

"Turn the light on, for God's sake!"

"No. They want the lights off."

"What the hell for?"

"If that's not Stephanie Lane-Pryor, then who is she?"

Still kneeling, Lizzie turned and looked down at me. Slowly, he smiled. Waited for an answer. As if it were the obligation of my words, and my words alone, to explain.

Not who I was, but who she was.

A sharp, internal surge of pain wrenched me into one tight muscle.

I squirmed.

Moaned.

Closed my eyes.

Within my own subjective darkness, fragments and memories and possibilities fought for president. Later, when this was all over, I knew Lizzie would fingerprint the dead woman on the floor. Maybe run a DNA test. But eventually, some type of factual information would come forward to claim her. Place the explanation of least resistance on the bottom line of a police report for him.

But facts never explain as much as people presume. The skin-deep advantages that some people have from the delivery room onward. The ostracism that others feel their entire lives, based on characteristics beyond their control. The variations in qualitative experience. The ways in which we see the world differently. The actions and attitudes that define our unique style. The way the world responds back to us.

Still, eventually, some fact about her past would surface. Would share its secret with Lizzie. Would explain enough about her that he could dismiss her. But he'd never really know her. Not really. And I wondered if I would live long enough to even learn *that* much about her.

Deep inside me, I sensed the pain take a breather again.

I opened my eyes.

Lizzie was across the bedroom now. Standing up.

I looked sideways toward her dead body.

If I couldn't translate her story, how could the measly facts that Lizzie ended up with ever hope to?

A sharp voltage of pain made my body cinch-up.

Made my eyes wince.

Returned me to subjectivity and blackness. Mixed conclusions in among the excruciating torment taking place inside me. Facts had certainly never been able to translate the most influential ingredient of *my* life to other people. And my mysteriousness was much more profound than hers could ever hope to be.

Throughout childhood, I had shared the biggest secret of my life with no one, and during my beginning school years, I had surrendered even the possibility. Ignorant of my perspective, my kindergarten classmates, as well as my teachers, had grown excessively cruel and degrading. I became clingy. Fearful. Shy. Almost every instruction the teacher gave prompted my classmates to act in one way, me another. During Art, I pigmented the face I had drawn with what was evidently an inappropriate hue, because all the color crayons had looked the same to me.

Immediately, I was labeled as uncooperative. The class clown. The notorious rebel. My continual failure to conform suggested that special teachers run special tests on me. But when their tests found nothing wrong, not only did they conspire to give up on me themselves, they also forwarded their facts on to every teacher and adult who had the possibility of dealing with me from that day forward. The tests had proven that my problem was not color-blindness. The rods and cones that actually existed in my eyes had quickly crossed that possibility off their list. And so, answers had been sought in pathways that were, in essence, more psychological.

However—persistence and compassion being such rare virtues among the underpaid and overworked—all further efforts proved inconclusive, as well, and eventually, other priorities elbowed me out of the way. From the second grade onward, my alienation escalated. The perpetual sadness and failure I experienced throughout childhood matured. Grew up to become bitter, intense, teenage desperation. Finally, by the end of high school—after forcing myself on numerous general practitioners, MDs, and

ophthalmologists—I had saved enough money to visit a neurological optician. That day changed my life forever, because I finally discovered that the answer to my particular problem was not located in my eyes, but in my central nervous system.

Suddenly, I felt fingers on me.

Prodding.

Poking.

The pain let me open my eyes.

It was doctor somebody. I couldn't remember his name. The chief medical officer. He was kneeling beside me now, his gloved fingers gently tamping my stomach. Circling the wound. His knees came toward my head, like walking. Then, he lifted my right shoulder up slightly. Looked underneath me. I could feel the blood inside me turn and flow toward the tiny exit wounds in my back, as if my body were a colander. Then, the doctor gently sat my shoulder back on the floor. Looked at Lizzie. Shook his head almost imperceptibly.

I was dying.

I hadn't gotten the money, and I hadn't gotten the girl.

But most of all, I hadn't gotten my license back. That glorious piece of paper. That framable document that would have allowed me to perform plastic surgery again. Legally. That precious written sanction, which had become the most important thing in the world to me.

Lizzie would come to understand the ramifications of that fact soon enough.

But because I had never shared the most important secret of my life with any other person, no one would ever know what it was truly like to be me. My hypersensitivity to light. My poor visual acuity. My inability to distinguish colors. No one would ever know that, from birth, my central nervous system had been damaged in a most unique way. A way that had affected my vision. That had filtered all my observations. Distorted my perspective.

But the phenomenon that effected me was much worse than simple color-blindness. When other people referred to things they saw in terms of

colors and hues and pigment, I marveled. And in order to relate, to improve communications, I pretended to understand. Faked it. Purely as a defense mechanism, I memorized the words that others used to reference things. When I described things from my own perspective, they marveled, too—and then ostracized me. Ridiculed me. This painful and predictable exchange taught me very early on not to share my feelings, or my perspective, with other people. Rather than a participant, I evolved into a listener par excellence. The astute observer.

And, had it not been for the neurological optician who diagnosed my problems correctly in high school, I might have lived my entire life, like many people, in quiet desperation. Instead, that bizarre, yet accurate diagnosis had refocused my life. By the time I took my college entrance exams, my scores were exceptionally high. Scholarships presented themselves. Offers smiled at me. And I determined to become a doctor myself, based on the difference that this one correct diagnosis had made in my own life.

“Can you fix it?” I had asked the doctor. “Is there a cure?”

The doctor had shaken his head almost imperceptibly.

When I had finally finished crying, he continued. “It’s an extremely rare vision disorder, Will. It’s called achromatopsia. The severity of the symptoms can vary a great deal. It affects only one person in every 33,000. Even most people in the visual sciences never meet a patient with achromatopsia, so you can’t blame the rest of the world for not knowing how to treat you. You’re a brilliant young man, Will. Don’t waste the rest of your life carrying a grudge.”

I resumed crying.

He hugged me. Talked to me about various visual strategies. Blinking. Squinting. Being aware of the light source in all situations. Then, he said, “Other people look at things and see colors. All your life, people have used words to describe these concepts. But for you, no workable translation has ever taken place. For you, no meaningful associations have ever been made. Red roses. Blue sky. Green grass. For you, these adjectives are meaningless. But, an exquisite opposite is also true. Other people, like

myself, will never be able to fully understand or see the world in exactly the same way you do. We see colors," he had said. "You, on the other hand, see everything only in black and white."