

THE SPACE BETWEEN

SUSAN ROOKE

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PROLOGUE

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

The fall seemed to go on forever. Sometimes plunging through clouds of icy shards, his flesh burning, scraped raw. Slowing sometimes, or seeming to, in the firmament's cold hollows. Once he thought he glimpsed the rim of eternity. A fiery radiance shimmered there, crackling at the farthest reaches of his sight. So empty were the heavens. Nothing to cling to. And thus he continued to fall—faster, slower—until he thought he would fall for the rest of time.

He understood the emptiness was not complete. The only true void had existed in an age before his own. But in these infinite distances, the few bodies were a sparse scattering of tiny specks of light, so removed as to have no relevance. Like his shattered heart, a vast emptiness dotted with rocky, sterile hopes. The darkness he saw upon the face of the deep frightened him. It was like the darkness growing within himself.

As he fell, he had time to ponder. *Why such fury, this ultimate punishment?*

He had acted boldly, with imagination and daring, and for that he should have been rewarded. Instead, he had come to this. Great and manifold his blessings had been—then were stripped away. How far he

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had come from the first light of morning, the light that brought day out of night!

Ice crystals flayed him, searing with a chill fire. His single comfort as he fell was the thought he held close to him in the measureless universe. I DID NOT FALL ALONE.

CHAPTER ONE

THE TAKING

Two young male observers stood at the edge of the small clearing that lay in the secluded heart of a sprawling suburban park. They were of average height. One had short, curly brown hair; the other had a long sheet of fine white hair that glowed in the afternoon light and spilled down his shoulders like a waterfall. Except for the faint shouts and shrill whistles from the soccer fields over a hundred yards away, it was a peaceful spot.

Oak trees and undergrowth shrouded in wild grape vines concealed the young men. They watched a young red-haired woman who appeared to be in her early twenties; she was seated on the grass in the center of the clearing.

A shaft of late afternoon sunlight slanted through the trees, and her hair flashed like a sheet of polished copper. One of the men released a low hiss from between his teeth, the sound of a teakettle verging on the boil. The other man stepped hard on his foot, and the hiss was cut short.

Mellis looked up and glanced around the clearing but saw nothing out of the ordinary. A thick curtain of leaves surrounded her,

in varying shades of late-summer green. *Just an insect*, she decided. She went back to watching her dog and to thinking.

Orlando leaped and bit at the flies that buzzed in the warm, moist air. He moved gracefully for a large dog, and his dark, shaggy coat gleamed with good health. When he reared up and spun around on muscular hind legs, Mellis smiled at his excitement. The dog bared his teeth and snapped at a passing fly, his jaws meeting with an audible *clack*.

The two men heard this, and one of them took a half step back from the clearing. The one with long, pale hair didn't move, but only stared at the girl and her dog more intently. As he studied his quarry, a fat bumblebee landed on the crown of his shining head, and began to crawl slowly toward his face. The man ignored it. The bee continued, down one side of the forehead, across the fair skin of the cheekbone, back up around the orbit of the blue, blue eye, and again to the forehead, unlined and glassy smooth. Still the man paid no heed.

The bee had inched halfway up the forehead when it lost its hold and dropped. It fell to the ground and lay there for a stunned moment before remembering its wings—then it lifted off and flew away, staggering like a drunk through the steamy air.

Mellis, meanwhile, was pondering her life, something she did often lately—in this spot, which she liked to imagine as her secret retreat. No one ever disturbed her here. And she had Orlando for protection. Her dog would defend her at any cost to himself. She sat cross-legged on the soft grass in jeans worn smooth at the knees, plucking blades of grass and shredding them between her fingers. Her eyes were still on her dog, but without really seeing him now. Instead, she was trying, with little success, to look into her future.

She contemplated her limited options. *I could go back to school, I guess, but what would I study?* Her three semesters of college had left her empty and frustrated. Although her mother had tried to reassure her that, at twenty-three, she had time to decide, Mellis still felt an urgency to accomplish something—anything—*but what?* School had no answer for that urge.

The idea of marriage was laughable. There'd been no shortage of nice men her age who wanted to spend time with her, but they'd all seemed as vacant and purposeless to her as she did to herself. After turning down—nicely—the last two who'd asked her out, she stopped accepting invitations. She didn't want to waste their time. Or hers.

Since high school she'd held a part-time job, working in the kitchen at Goodwin's Permanent Care. Minimum wage, but enough money so that she didn't feel like a burden to her mother. She found the work gratifying because she was helping people who had a genuine need. But she couldn't see herself working in a nursing home for the rest of her life.

She looked down and noticed a small hole near the hem of her T-shirt. The blue of her jeans showed through it, like a small, faded blue flower in the field of her green cotton shirt. She put a finger through the hole and wiggled it. *Why can't I plug the holes in my life this easily?* She shook her head. *I wish Mom were happier.*

Her mother's dissatisfaction was something Mellis had been aware of as long as she could remember. She'd never known the source of it; they never talked about it. Mellis had no doubt that her mother loved her with every bit of her body and soul, but there'd always been an underlying sadness too. Because of her father? All her mother ever said about him was that he'd been "a good man."

Once, as a child, Mellis had made the mistake of asking her grandparents about her father. Her grandmother had fixed her with a cold, pinched stare. Her grandfather had patted Mellis on the arm and changed the subject.

A wet black nose poked itself into the crook of her elbow, startling her out of her reverie. Orlando's expression made her laugh, and she wrapped an arm about his neck to give him a playful squeeze. He squirmed out of her grasp, put his paws on her shoulders, and together they tumbled down onto their sides and rolled in the grass.

She sat up, still laughing, and finger-combed her hair. A few leafy bits dropped into her lap, and she flicked them off. Orlando gave himself a vigorous shake, his tags jangling.

Mellis looked at her watch and sighed. "Time to go, I guess. Come on, Orlando." She got to her feet and brushed off the seat of her jeans.

Orlando growled deep in his throat. Startled, Mellis followed his gaze, and saw a tight knothole in a live oak tree open like an eyelid and blink twice on an expressionless, bark-brown eye.

Mellis froze. As she stared, the knothole squeezed shut again, leaving a scar in the tree's trunk. *I must've been mistaken.* Then the two watchers stepped into the clearing and moved toward her.

She had an instant to form an impression of two fair young men dressed in strange clothing. *What's happening? What do they want with me?*

Orlando lunged at them, then, much to her horror, backed away from the men and sank to his haunches beside her—hesitant and confused. *What is he doing?*

The two men stopped. The curly-haired one said, "Don't worry. This won't hurt." He reached for her with both arms.

She was shocked to see that his hands looked like giant lobster claws—pale pink, fleshy and crescent-shaped. Each one fingerless, but with a long thumb.

She tried to scream, but all she could muster was a breathy, panicked squeak. The blond man said to his companion, “Let’s get this done before one of them interrupts us.”

One of them?

“What about the dog?” The first pointed at Orlando with a lobster claw hand.

The blond shrugged. He flipped a long, limp forearm at Mellis and Orlando. From the elbow down, his arm appeared boneless, and tapered to a blunt point where his hand should have been. “Let’s bring them both.”

Mellis found her courage. Lurching backwards, she slipped a hand in her front pocket, and yelled, “Stay back, Orlando!” Then she held up her keychain and shot each of her assailants in the face with pepper spray.



It felt like she was floating in a warm bath. Snatches of low conversation came to her.

“What—? What did I say?” someone asked in a strangled voice.

“Apparently you weren’t convincing,” another answered.

There was a loud sniff.

“I always hate this part,” the first one said.

She drifted into oblivion again, escaping what the last remark implied.



When Mellis came to, she was sitting in a stiff-backed wooden chair, her bare feet on a chilly stone floor. She was in a large room that held

several long wooden tables with chairs tucked under them. Three people stood looking down at her. Two of them were the young men who'd abducted her. Badly disoriented, she bowed her head, attempting to collect herself, and was appalled and stunned to see she was naked. As she flung both arms across herself, she saw that her watch was missing. She hunched down in her chair and looked back up at her audience. They were regarding her with deep interest.

"This looks promising, I think," the female, an old woman, said. "Well done." Her knotted, veined hands were clasped together at her thick waist. Her hair hung in a heavy braid over her right shoulder, which was several inches lower than her left. The braid was the color of iron streaked with rust. "Very promising." The old woman's lined face was thoughtful.

The men exchanged looks of congratulation and relief.

Mellis observed their red, swollen eyes and tear-streaked faces. *Good!* She saw they were dressed in plain, knee-length shifts of a dull mud color, beneath which their legs were pale as milk. On their feet were fabric slippers the same dull color as their shifts. The blond's blunt-tipped forearms dangled like lengths of rope. The other stood with his fleshy lobster claw hands clasped before him.

Mellis dropped her head as a wave of wooziness overcame her, and noticed a still, dark shape on the stone floor a few feet from her chair. *Orlando! What's wrong with him?*

He lay on his right side, eyes closed, his top ear flipped over to reveal the pink underside. As Mellis scanned him, fearing the worst, his ribs rose and fell in a deep breath and his paws twitched. *He's okay—he's just sleeping.* He lay on a plump cushion, and although relieved to see he was comfortable, she was also, for some reason, a bit annoyed. She looked up again at her captors from under her lashes.

The old woman turned to the young men. “What does she call herself?”

Mellis’s annoyance grew, and her head began to clear.

They shrugged. “She was too afraid to speak,” said the curly-haired one. He spoke like a man with a bad cold.

“Well of course she was!” said the blond. “Don’t worry!’ you said. ‘This won’t hurt!’ you said. What did you expect?” He flipped his boneless forelimbs in disgust.

His companion turned to him, his face bright pink. “How was I supposed to know that was a terrifying thing to say?”

The blond clucked his tongue. “You should know by now that just the *mention* of pain is enough to do it.”

“Then next time handle it yourself—I’d be delighted to let you!” The curly-haired one broke off and looked at the blond’s face. Then he did something that surprised Mellis. From a pocket in his shift he pulled out a square of white cloth with one claw hand, and carefully wiped his companion’s running nose.

“If you’ve done your jobs, there will be no need of a next time.” The old woman sounded amused. “I’ll ask her myself.” She turned to Mellis and spoke as though to a small child. “Can you tell me your name?”

Mellis lifted her head and looked into the old woman’s plain, capable face. Her thoughts swam out of focus again, and it was a moment before she managed to speak. “Mellis. My name is Mellis.” She abandoned the attempt to conceal her nakedness, and dropped both hands to rest on her thighs. She tried to summon what remained of her dignity. “May I have something to wear?”

“Oh, of course. You must be cold.” The old woman turned to the one with lobster claw hands. “Fetters, if you wouldn’t mind.” She

turned back to Mellis and smiled. “He’ll have a covering for you in a moment.”

Fetters walked out through an arched doorway into a hall beyond. Mellis saw him gesture to someone out of sight.

The rest of them waited. Mellis, exhausted and anxious, struggled to keep a grip on herself. A tide of confusion threatened to drag her under. The old woman and the blond seemed unaware of her turmoil. At last Fetters returned, a length of dark fabric over his arm. He gave it to the old woman, who offered it to Mellis.

As Mellis took it from her, she met the faded eyes and felt her thoughts spinning. She stood and hurriedly wrapped the fabric around her body like a bath towel and sat down again. Her head felt like it would float away.

“Warmer now?” the old woman asked. She seemed unaware that Mellis was embarrassed by her nakedness.

Once covered, Mellis felt her strength of mind returning. She brushed the woman’s question aside. “Who are you? What am I doing here?” She was becoming angry. “And what *is* this place, anyway?” When she saw the glance her three captors exchanged, she became even angrier. “Where in the hell *am* I?” She saw the blond man roll his eyes.

Orlando stirred on his cushion and turned over like a walrus on an ice floe. With a gusty sigh he drifted back into sleep. Mellis looked at her dog in disgust. *Some protection he is!* Then she noticed that his chain collar and tags were no longer around his neck. He’d been stripped just as she had.

The old woman cleared her throat. “You are not in Hell.” Her voice was mild. “Far from it. You and your animal are our guests.” She held out her arms to Mellis, as though drawing her in. “We mean no harm to either of you, and I’m sorry we’ve inconvenienced you. We

want you to be comfortable here.” She nodded her head at Orlando, whose paws now jerked in eager pursuit of some prey in his dream. “I think one of you already is.”

Mellis tried to give her an angry stare, but the effort made her tired. She then tried to avert her eyes, but discovered she couldn't. After a time, she felt her gaze released, and, though still angry, she couldn't recall why. “But . . . where am I?” she repeated, wondering why it had seemed like such an important question. She began to relax, the anger slipping away. *Whoever they are*, she told herself, *they seem friendly enough*.

“At the moment, you are in the room where we take our meals. You are in our house . . . on our lands . . .” The old woman spoke in a soothing sing-song. “. . . in a place you would not be familiar with.”

“Why not?”

“Because very few are.” She smiled and shrugged her uneven shoulders. “It's how we prefer it. We are a bit . . . reclusive.”

Mellis looked them over. How strange they were, especially the two men. *The one with those flimsy, soft forearms!* Like nothing she'd ever seen on a human being.

Under her gaze he turned his head sharply away, and his pale lank hair drifted across his shoulders. His companion, Fetters, put up a fleshy claw hand and touched his upper arm. Mellis flushed and lowered her eyes. The last of her anger faded to nothing.

“We realize we must look odd to you,” the old woman said.

With an effort, Mellis forced herself to try again. “I want you to tell me who you are and what I'm doing here.” She looked at each of them in turn. “Wherever ‘here’ is.”

“Of course.” The old woman put a hand up to her chest. The knuckles were rough and inflamed, the fingers crooked. “I am

Deirdre.” She gestured to the two young men. “And this is Fetters and Feldspar.”

Fetters raised a tentative claw hand in greeting. Feldspar looked at Mellis with a slight frown.

“Will you tell us your dog’s name?” Deirdre asked.

“It’s Orlando.” Mellis paused. “And what about my other question?”

“Which one was that?” The old woman’s voice was gentle, calming. At first her mind was empty. “Oh. What am I doing here?”

Deirdre looked at Fetters and Feldspar, then back at Mellis. “As I said, you are our guest.” Before Mellis could respond, she went on, “For now, that will need to be answer enough.”

“For now?” Mellis felt a tickly chill creeping across her skin. “How long is that?”

“You mustn’t worry about that. We only want you *both* to be comfortable here.” Deirdre smiled down at the dog, still lying on his back, taking slow, deep breaths.

Mellis looked at him, and her chill receded. *If Orlando doesn’t sense danger, maybe there’s nothing here to be afraid of.* She would try to follow his lead and put her anxiety aside. Her throat tightened as a deep love for him overwhelmed her. Orlando had been her fierce protector and loving guardian for . . . for how long? She couldn’t remember. She gazed down at him, trying to picture him as a puppy, all huge feet and sharp tiny puppy teeth, but the image wouldn’t come. *I’ll think about it later.* For now, she would just accept things until she learned more about her situation. *It’s not urgent . . . really . . .*

“All right.” She sighed. “What happens now?”

Deirdre smiled at her. “I’m sure you’re hungry—.” She stopped and looked at Fetters and Feldspar, who had their heads together and were murmuring in low voices. “What *is* the matter?”

Fetters jumped like a schoolboy caught passing notes in class. “Nothing.”

Feldspar flopped a forearm at Mellis. “We were just saying it seems almost too easy this time.”

“Right,” Fetters agreed. “Except for the, uh . . .” He gestured at his swollen red eyes.

This time? Mellis wondered. She tried not to focus on the dangling, flabby thing Feldspar still held out in her direction.

Deirdre appeared mildly exasperated. “Would the two of you go tell Laurel to draw the bath and make the room ready?”

“Especially if you consider there’s never been a *dog* to deal with before,” Fetters said to Feldspar in an undertone.

“I think we handled it well, though,” Feldspar replied. “What else could we have done? Leave it behind? Of course not.”

“I agree.” Fetters nodded.

Deirdre clapped her hands together. The sharp crack echoed off the stone. “That’s *enough*, you two. Find Laurel and inform her. And tell Blodgett I need to speak with him, please.”

Orlando opened his eyes and gazed at the room upside down. With a snort he rolled over and heaved himself to his feet. He ambled to the chair where his mistress sat and laid his square black head across her thigh. Mellis stroked his ears and gave up trying to make sense of what Fetters and Feldspar had said. Orlando leaned against her leg and swabbed her bare arm with his tongue.

Feldspar looked at them and shuddered as he followed Fetters from the room.

Once they were alone, Deirdre regarded Mellis with a pleasant expression, her hands folded at her waist. “After you are bathed and dressed we’ll feed you a good meal.”

Mellis shook her head. "I'm not hungry. And I showered this morning." She stopped to think. *Didn't I? I must have. Why can't I remember?* "Clothes are what I'd really like."

"Of course. But when food is brought, you might change your mind." Deirdre bent and put one hand on the chair's wooden arm, leaning in close. Her coarse braid swung forward. "You need a bath because you have a film of dust and pollution on you that must be washed away." Her blunt nose wrinkled, but she smiled.

Mellis felt a little insulted, but didn't shrink from her. Orlando sat beside her chair with his hind feet splayed out, tongue lolling from his mouth. He watched his mistress and the old woman with eyes half-closed.

"Do not be afraid, Mellis," Deirdre said. *"You have nothing to fear from us."*

Mellis looked into her faded grey-green eyes for a long moment. A pool of glacial age was just visible in their depths, a reach spanning more than one world and time. They held sorrow, and untouchable distance. With difficulty, she looked away.

The old woman released the arm of the chair and stepped back. She looked at Mellis as though seeing to the center of the girl's being. Her face wore an expression of anticipation. *What is she expecting?* Mellis wondered, then let the thought drift from her. Soft footsteps brushed across the stone floor. Deirdre turned to the arched doorway.

"Blodgett," she said to the man who entered. "This is Mellis."

Blodgett gave Mellis a pleasant nod.

Deirdre continued, "She is staying with us, and will need food in her room a bit later. Let the kitchen know, please."

Mellis looked at the tall, slender man. He had thinning brown hair, and wore dark green loose pants and a long tunic almost to his

knees. Slippers of dark green cloth were on his feet. He bowed his head at Deirdre and left the room. *He looks quite ordinary*, Mellis thought. *That's a relief*. Then she saw Deirdre watching her. *I think she just read my mind*. Mellis let that thought drift from her too. With mild curiosity she looked around while she waited for whatever might happen next.

She was in a long room built of dull grey-green stone cut into precise rectangular blocks. The ceiling dropped low to meet the walls, but vaulted much higher in the middle. Several floor-to-ceiling stone columns ran the length of the room down the center, and numerous mirrors of varying shapes and sizes hung throughout. Most were at a height to reflect the face and upper body of a person standing before them, but some were in unexpected places—waist-high or knee-high, with a few even lower.

A fireplace large enough to incinerate small trees was in one wall perpendicular to the doorway. At the moment it was empty, clean and swept. Near the hearth stood an ornate structure several feet high, with plain vertical and horizontal bars set off by elaborate curlicues and flourishes. It was made of a polished yellow metal. Mellis wondered what it was for.

The furnishings were made from honey-colored wood. Her chair, straight-backed and severe, was like the ones arranged around the room's several sturdy tables. Down the length of each table, three wide, fat candles—each with several wicks buried in the wax—gave off a buttery yellow light. Then Mellis noticed one chair—opposite the doorway and facing it—that was unlike the rest. It was decoratively carved from a red-toned wood that glowed in the candlelight. A plump cushion embroidered in rich purple and gold lay against the back. Mellis couldn't see the chair arms underneath the tabletop, but she felt sure they were as embellished as the seatback, from which sprang a pair of . . . *Wings?* Powerful

and muscular, like those of a bird of prey. The wings were unfolded, the wingtips aimed toward the ceiling, as if the chair at any moment would spring from the floor and fly away. The feathers were carved into the warm wood in meticulous detail. *Whose chair is that?* she wondered.

Blodgett reentered the room and approached the old woman. “It’s taken care of,” he said. “What else will you need?”

“Please take this young woman to her quarters, Blodgett. Laurel is making everything ready there. See that she’s comfortable, and doesn’t lack for anything.” Deirdre motioned for Mellis to get up. “Go with Blodgett, child. He’ll take good care of you.”

Mellis stood up and tightened her wrap. Orlando gazed up at her. She bent to pat him, to reassure him, if necessary, but he seemed quite content.

Deirdre glanced at the dog. “And don’t forget Orlando, here. He’ll need food as well. Perhaps a bowl of bread and milk, or a bit of the leftover dinner roast?”

Blodgett nodded. “We can find something he’ll enjoy.” He bent to stroke the dog’s shaggy black coat. Orlando moved close to him and sat down on his left foot. This made Blodgett chuckle and Deirdre smile. “So I’m supposed to stay here and pet you awhile, is that it?” he said. Orlando lay down across the servant’s feet and lifted one foreleg to expose his belly for scratching.

Mellis stared at her dog in disbelief. To say he wasn’t frightened was an understatement. But the sharp clarity of that thought soon clouded over, and confused acceptance took its place. *That’s nice—Orlando’s really enjoying the attention.* Then she saw that the hand rubbing her dog’s belly had seven fingers fanned out across the dark fur.

INTERSTICE ONE

THE SON OF THE MORNING SEES HIMSELF

He had suffered terrible, destructive injuries from the fall. So terrible he thought he would never be whole again, but time proved him wrong. While still frail, he desired to see himself as a martyr—held up as an example to others who might dare to act as he had. Not because he regretted what he had done—he was not sorry at all. But for a time he wanted only to stew in the warm, comforting bath of self-pity. If others also found him pitiable . . . at least it meant that he was not forgotten.

Worse than the pain was his decline in stature. At times he loathed the weak thing he had become, and longed for the unthinkable—for his existence to cease. But such feelings were fleeting. As he healed, these undesirable emotions plagued him less often, until at last he was himself once more.

The odd thing was, as his healing progressed, his appearance evidently degenerated. Beauty had always been his hallmark, and the source of his fatal pride. Thus he was stricken to the bottom of his soul when he saw horror, quickly masked, in the eyes of those whose glances fell upon him. For a time—unable to confront the

truth—he refused to believe his suspicions. Until the morning he saw it for himself.

In the early days of his exile he had carved out a realm for himself as soon as he could stand upright again. The lands he claimed abounded with cold, shining pools of silvery metallic liquid, still and deep. His companions liked to play with it, to splash handfuls out onto the rugged ground and watch it disperse into little globules that ran into crevices and crannies. Because of its lively behavior, he had dubbed it quicksilver. If he cared to see himself, any one of those pools could have captured his shimmering image and offered it back to him. When his suffering and anguish were greatest he had refused to look, not wanting to know what the fall had done to him. Instead, he waited for the day when he might be whole, and could bask once again in the radiance of his own reflection. As he recovered physically, so did his pride, and with pride came the sweet expectation of looking again upon his splendor. But the averted eyes of his companions began to taint his anticipation with doubt, then with apprehension. At last he knew he could no longer postpone the moment. He had no choice but to see himself.

They cowered when they heard him roar with the agony of his shame. His terrible epiphany pained and astonished him more than the fall ever had. In his fury, he lashed out at those who made up his new world. He bullied and browbeat them, demanding they pay homage to the beauty that no longer existed. They did, but he saw it was only to appease him. Then he saw something else.

Their eyes were filled with fear. They turned away and covered their faces. They shrank from him.

And the truth was—he liked it.

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