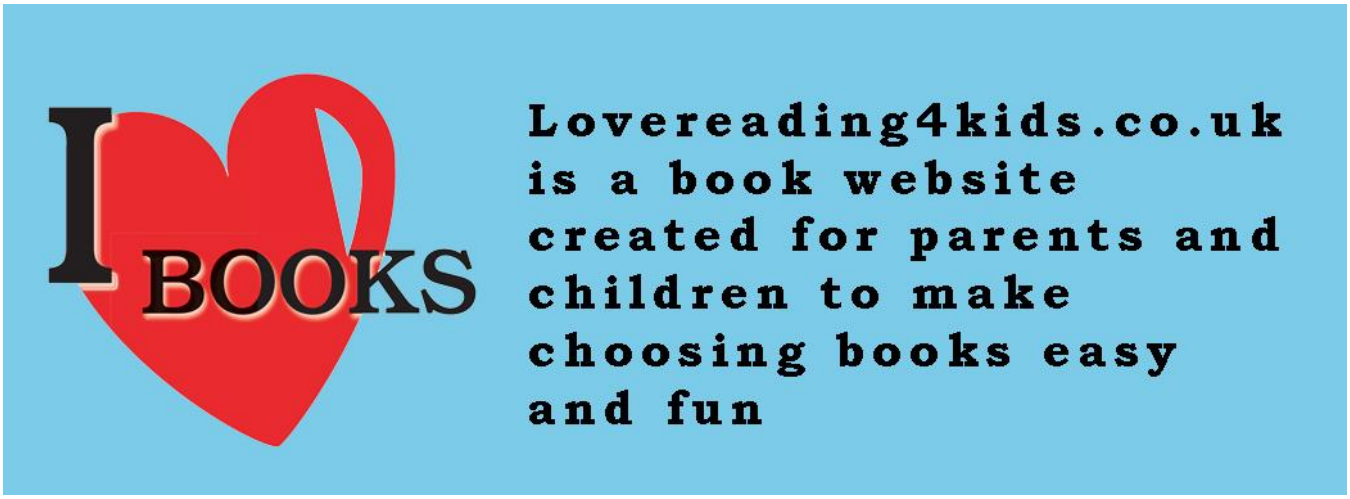


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Prologue

Thursday, September 10



Jackie Stone loved her father. She loved him a lot.

She kept a photo of her dad, Jared, taped to the inside of her locker at school. It was a recent selfie of the two of them on a ski lift. Wisps of Jackie's blond hair poked out from beneath her hat but did nothing to obscure the smile stretching from one side of her face to the other. Whenever the day got rough, which for Jackie was more often than not, she would sneak a peek at that photo. It had become a kind of visual security blanket.

On the days Jackie's father wasn't in Salem, where he served in the Oregon state legislature, she would find him barricaded in his study. Jackie suspected he was just as likely playing games on his Wii as he was working. The joy her dad took in beating Tiger Woods at his own game, even on a virtual golf course, made her love him even more. Either way, she knew better than to interrupt her father when that door was closed.

But Thursdays were different.

It was her father's day to run errands for the household—the grocery store, the post office, the dry cleaner's—and then head to the gym. On returning home, he'd drop his bag of sweaty workout clothes just inside the front door, take the stairs two at a time, and squeeze in next to Jackie on the top step. They would talk for a bit, eat a family dinner with Jackie's mother and sister, and then snuggle on the couch and channel surf the TV. She and her dad called it "father-daughter date night," and it was Jackie's favorite time of the week.

Even at fifteen, curling into the warmth and safety of her father's shoulder gave Jackie a feeling of peace and comfort that she found nowhere else in the world. She knew he felt the same.

But the wait for her father to come home on this Thursday was interminable.

He was late.

***

Jared Stone liked his brain. He liked it a lot.

Sure, there were times—the monotony of the evening commute, the late innings of a lopsided baseball game, the comforting repetition of the weekly church service—when it would seem to shut down, switch to some kind of autopilot. But for the most part, Jared's brain was hard at work.

It helped him navigate the halls of the state capitol, where he was serving his fourth two-year term representing the good people of Portland. It told him how to read the inscrutable faces of his wife, Deirdre, and his two teenage daughters, Jackie and Megan; to know when they needed him or when he should give them a wide berth. It knew which foods tasted good, which women were attractive, and which colleagues had a problem with body odor. And it seemed, generally speaking, to know right from wrong. Jared's brain, you could say, was his best friend. Which is what made it so hard to hear that his brain had a high-grade glioblastoma multiforme—or would have made it hard had Jared known what a high-grade glioblastoma multiforme was.

"A glio what?" he asked.

The doctor, a gray-haired woman with a square jaw and white sandals like Jared's aunt Eva used to wear, looked at him for a long moment. "I'm sorry, Jared. It's a brain tumor."

He let the words roll around his brain: *I'm sorry, Jared. It's a brain tumor.* Was she sorry that it was a tumor, or sorry that she

hadn't made herself clear when she used the term "high-grade glioblastoma multiforme"? Was the part of his brain that he was using at that very moment the part with the tumor?

"And?" he asked.

"And it's not good news," the doctor answered.

"Not good news?" Jared heard the words but was having trouble following the conversation. He knew he needed to focus, knew it was more important now than ever that he focus, but he just couldn't seem to do it. It was this intermittent lack of focus, these spells of confusion and memory loss, along with the persistent pain in his right temple, that had brought him to the neurologist in the first place.

"No," the doctor said. She waited for Jared to catch up.

"Not good news," he said, now understanding.

"It's inoperable."

"Inoperable," Jared repeated, this time understanding immediately.

"The only course of therapy I can prescribe is palliative."

"I'm sorry, Doctor. I don't know that word." Though he didn't know if that had always been true, or if he had once known the word and had forgotten it.

"It means we can try to alleviate your suffering, but we can't do anything about the growth. It's going to stay."

"The growth is going to stay?"

"Yes."

He let this roll around his brain, too, and again wondered if the thought was rolling over, under, around, or through the tumor itself. "Can I live with a tumor?" he asked.

The doctor let out a sigh. She hadn't meant to and stopped herself mid-breath, so it came out as an "ahh" and sounded more like a noise of agreement than sorrow. Then she said, "No."

"No," Jared repeated.

"No," the doctor said.

She delivered this news as a matter of fact, as if she were reporting the temperature and humidity, but Jared could see her eyes welling up, and he felt sorry for her. Empathy was central to his nature, or at least he thought it was. He couldn't be sure of anything now.

***

The high-grade glioblastoma multiforme tumor liked Jared Stone's brain. It liked it a lot. In fact, it found it delicious.

Like most living things, the tumor had no idea how it had come into being. Much as a baby emerges from the womb and finds its mother's nipple, the glioblastoma simply woke up one day eating its way through the gray matter in Jared's frontal lobe and knew that it was pleased to be there.

To the tumor, this was a normal existence. It's what tumors did: they consumed their hosts' memories until they both—the host and the tumor—ceased to be. As the glioblastoma imbibed the seemingly endless expanse of neurons, subsumed the very essence of its host's mind, it would, over time, become more Jared than Jared. That's when it would be game over. But the tumor didn't know that. It only knew it had to keep eating, that Jared's memories tasted wonderful, that they were things to be savored.

On the morning of Jared's visit to the doctor, the Thursday Jared learned he had a brain tumor, the glioblastoma was watching the memory of Jared's older daughter, Jackie, enter the world.

Deirdre, Jared's wife and Jackie's mother, was lying on an operating room table, her head and shoulders on one side of a blue sheet, a surgeon and nurses hovering over her body on the other, their work obstructed from the glioblastoma's view. The tumor took in every detail. The sparkling white sheen of the floor and walls; the odors of blood and disinfectant mixing together in a way that suggested something of great importance was afoot; the sounds of beeping equipment and inhaling and exhaling respirators. The tumor absorbed the sights, smells, and sounds as if it were experiencing them itself, which, in a manner of speaking, it was. To the tumor, the memory of the event was no different than when Jared had lived it.

From the flavor and construction of this particular memory, the glioblastoma knew that Deirdre was having an emergency C-section, that the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby's neck. Jared, and now the tumor, was sick with anxiety.

Jared, seated by Deirdre's head, hunched forward and held her hand, offering a series of bromides. *It's going to be okay* and *The doctor said this sort of thing happens all the time*. Jared tried to make each statement heartfelt, but the tumor knew that its host didn't believe his own words. It knew because the tumor didn't believe them either.

Deirdre was crying. More than anything, the glioblastoma wanted to stop her from crying.

And then, new crying.

Different crying.

Crying replete with all the mysteries of the universe.

At first, the crying was centered over Deirdre's body, but the sound quickly traveled farther away, and Jared—and now the tumor—had a moment of panic.

The anesthesiologist, who the tumor hadn't even noticed sitting next to Jared, must have sensed Jared's unease.

"It's okay," she said. "They're just cleaning her up and giving the Apgar test."

"Apgar test?" Jared asked.

"They give the baby a once-over to make sure everything is in the right place. It's routine."

A moment later, a nurse in mint-green scrubs, a mask covering all but her eyes, showed the baby to Deirdre, and then handed her to Jared.

"Congratulations," she said. The tumor could see that beneath the mask the nurse was beaming. It wondered how she could muster such sincere emotion for something she did every day.

"Well, hello, Jacquelyn," Jared began. "You are so small." The tumor could sense the muscles in Jared's arms and neck tense; it savored the fear that Jared felt, fear that he would somehow manage to drop this newborn human.

"I want to see," Deirdre said. Jared got down on one knee and held the baby in Deirdre's field of vision. Then Jared did something the tumor didn't understand at all: he began to sing.

The song was so soft at first that the glioblastoma was

certain no one else, not even Deirdre, could hear it. It was a private lullaby for his new daughter. But the tumor could hear it and thought it was beautiful: Willie Nelson and Ray Charles's "Seven Spanish Angels." The title popped into the tumor's head, or would have if the tumor had had a head, which it did not. But the experience was just the same.

"She stopped crying," Deirdre said, her eyes so filled with joy that the tumor thought its host's wife might burst.

Jared smiled, leaned forward, and kissed Deirdre on the forehead. Then he leaned forward and kissed Baby Jackie in the same spot. Where Deirdre's skin was rough and covered in sweat, Jackie's was smooth and smelled of hope and promise. The baby let out a small coo.

In that moment, the tumor knew, the bond formed between father and daughter was unbreakable. It paused to savor that feeling, letting the unbridled happiness envelop it.

Then the high-grade glioblastoma multiforme devoured the memory whole.

***

Jackie's younger sister, Megan, had a gaggle of her school friends over that Thursday afternoon and had made it clear that Jackie's presence was not welcome. Jackie was more than happy to oblige. The last thing she wanted was to watch reruns of *The Bachelor*, or some other moronic reality show, while Megan and her friends clucked at the television like a brood of hens.

After her father had failed to come home at the appointed hour, Jackie retreated to her room to do homework. She stepped

around the pile of crumpled laundry in the middle of the floor, patted the oversize *Mean Girls* poster for luck (as she always did), and pushed aside the textbooks and mystery novels scattered on the desk to get to her schoolbag. She flopped on the bed facedown, her schoolwork resting on the pillow.

A pencil in one hand, a finger twirling her hair with the other, Jackie smiled when she came across her tenth-grade English vocabulary "word of the day":

fatuous (fach-oo-uhs) 1. Foolish or inane

That summed it up nicely: Megan and her gang of eighth-grade celebrities were certainly foolish, and almost entirely inane.

Not that it mattered. Jackie would have been holed up in her room even if Megan and her friends hadn't invaded the first floor of the house. Jackie's room was her sanctuary. It was the only place in the house where she felt completely at ease.

The only place *outside* the house where Jackie felt comfortable was on the Internet. To be connected to the world, she often thought, was a lot better than actually venturing into it. For one thing, she loved the anonymity. You could lurk on web pages or in chat rooms, and no one cared. No one called attention to you, and if they did, you were gone in a click. It was like she had her own pair of Ruby Red Slippers and could teleport from Oz to Kansas to Hollywood to Tokyo in the blink of an eye.

The only person she ever spoke to online was Max. Jackie wanted to talk to him now but knew he wouldn't be there so late in the afternoon.

Jackie heard the front door of the house open and close, heard the entire pack of Megan's friends offer a "Hi, Mr. Stone" in unison and then laugh for no reason whatsoever. That was one of the things that bothered Jackie most about Megan's friends: the laughter without obvious cause.

But that didn't matter; her father was home. Jackie was off the bed, out the door of her bedroom, and sitting on the top step in an instant.

Jackie heard her dad say something—she couldn't hear what—to her mom, and then saw him round a corner and head up the stairs. Her ear-to-ear grin faded when she noticed her father was mumbling to himself and seemed more than a little distracted. Bewildered, Jackie watched as he walked right past her.

"Dad?"

Jared stopped in his tracks and turned around. "Oh, hey, Jax, sorry. I didn't see you there."

This was not their normal routine. Far from it. For him to walk by, oblivious to Jackie's presence, was akin to the president of the United States absentmindedly walking past the podium at a press conference. It just didn't happen.

"Dad, are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, just a lot of work today."

Jackie could tell it was a lie.

"I'm going to get cracking," he added before entering his office and closing the door behind him, leaving his daughter staring after him in confusion. He didn't invite Jackie in.

***

Jared wasn't ready to say anything to his family. He couldn't tell them what the doctor had told him; that his episodes of confusion and his headaches would get worse, and that in three months, maybe four, he would be dead.

As bad as he felt about what had just happened with Jackie on the steps, he couldn't worry about that now. He needed to think.

The doctor had told Jared he could keep the feelings of confusion at bay, at least a little, by reducing the number of "external stimuli" his brain was forced to parse. Jared surveyed his office looking for external stimuli. He turned off the computer, the monitor, and the printer to remove any background hum. He turned off the overhead lights and the desk lamp. Feeling silly standing in the dark, he lay on his back on the floor.

Jared was lying there for several minutes before he said "death" aloud.

He was startled by his own voice, so he said it again. "Death."

Trebuchet, the family dog, who had been napping in the office, looked up for a moment, and then, in a way typical of black Labs in their sunset years, put his head back down and heaved a heavy sigh of exhaustion.

Death is an anagram for hated, Jared thought. He realized the quiet room was, in fact, helping him think more clearly.

"I'm going to die," he said aloud. *That's an anagram for* goodie timing, he thought. *Strange*.

The more he thought about it, the less afraid Jared was of dying. He had bigger fish to fry. Like most state legislators,

Jared needed a second job just to survive. Unlike most state legislators, Jared was not a lawyer; he was a graphic designer. The limited income provided by his two jobs, even with Deirdre's salary, was going to leave his family in a bad financial state. He had life insurance, but it was only a $500,000 policy, purchased on a twenty-year term just after Jackie was born. The mortgage alone would eat through that amount of money like a worm through an apple, *or a tumor through a brain*, he thought. He stretched every corner of his mind looking for a way to fix the problem, but the harder he thought, the more his head hurt. He didn't know if it was the tumor or the situation that was causing him distress, but it didn't much matter.

"I need money," he said aloud. *Die enemy no*, he thought. Jared wondered where all these anagrams were coming from. Wordplay wasn't something he'd ever had an affinity for, or at least not that he could remember. Maybe it was a result of the tumor, maybe it was making parts of his brain more clever while it was killing him.

He thought of more anagrams as he "drifted off to sleep" (*edited effort flops*) among a sea of "words and letters" (*trestle and sword*).

***

Over the next few days, Jackie noticed her father keeping mostly to himself. She tried to talk to him, but each conversation was more baffling than the one that came before.

"Hi, Daddy," Jackie said one day.

"Huh? Oh, hi, Peanut. I'm good, thanks." And he walked away.

Not only was the length of the conversation uncharacteristic and troubling to Jackie, and not only had she not actually asked how he was, but "Peanut" was her dad's nickname for Megan.

"Dad," she asked on another occasion, "can you help me with my math homework?"

"Sure, Jax, but maybe later, after we watch *Jericho*."

That would have been normal if *Jericho* hadn't been canceled years earlier.

To be sure, not all their encounters were out of the ordinary—Jared still remembered to ask about school, and even managed to give the appearance of listening to Jackie's answers—but there were enough signs for Jackie to wonder if something wasn't right.

She tried asking her mom, but Deirdre was distracted in a different way, in the way that suburban moms are always distracted. They have too much to deal with to worry about anything that isn't a three-alarm fire. And while Jared's brain tumor was most certainly a three-alarm fire, it had yet to be phoned in.

Jackie figured her dad was just stressed about work or something and put it all out of her mind, unwittingly enjoying a last few days of blissful ignorance.

***

Jared kept the news of his brain tumor to himself for four days, spending most of that time lying on his office floor, trying to think. He came out just often enough to make sure his family wouldn't suspect anything was amiss, going right back in once he was convinced they were thrown off the scent of trouble.

Jared tried hard to think of a way out of what he saw as his financial predicament. There was college to pay for soon. And cars and spring break vacations and whatever else kids needed money for. But mostly he was just trying to think. When he was bored with lying in the dark, he would turn on his computer and click from one cancer website to the next. The grim news he read about high-grade glioblastoma multiformes made his head hurt, and he found himself linking instead to news and entertainment sites.

That was how he happened on a strange article from a few months earlier:

> **Divorced Man Auctions His Life Online**
>
> *March 14—Worldwide News Now*
>
> **When Jens Schmidt realized he needed a fresh start, he auctioned his material possessions online. From an unused tube of toothpaste to a 2002 Toyota Camry, Schmidt put his entire life up for sale to the highest bidder.**
>
> **The thirty-four-year-old Dutchman, a successful attorney who likes to hang glide and ski, seemed to have it all. But then his wife of seven years, an Italian woman named Anna Mazzucchi, filed for divorce, and Schmidt decided it was time to move on.**
>
> **"I just didn't want any reminder of my life before," he said.**
>
> **Schmidt's listing includes his house, his hot tub, his clothes, his television, his cat, and his car. He also**

> **notes: "My friends are included in the package. If you win the auction, they promise they'll be nice to you."**

Jared looked up from the article on his computer screen, and the world froze for a moment.

An idea started to percolate in Jared's brain. A crazy idea. An idea only a man with a high-grade glioblastoma multiforme could possibly have. He would auction his life—not his things, but his actual life—on eBay. The euthanasia lobby was pressuring him to take a position on a proposed expansion to Oregon's right-to-die laws; he would become their poster boy. Jared Stone, for sale to the highest bidder—do with him as you please.