

CHAIN THINKING

A Shep Harrington
SmallTown® Mystery



Elliott Light

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“THE GREATNESS OF A NATION AND ITS
MORAL PROGRESS CAN BE JUDGED BY THE WAY
ITS ANIMALS ARE TREATED.”

Mahatma Gandhi





CHAPTER

O N E

Except for the unusually cool weather, August 1 began like most of my mornings. By 7:00, I had showered, dressed, and finished breakfast, and was sitting on the porch nursing a second cup of coffee.

But then I noticed a cloud of dust rising above the trees that line the long driveway to my house. Moments later, a car sped out of the plume, its rear end fishtailing in the soft dirt. If I had known who was in the car and why, if I could have foreseen how allowing this visitor into my home was going to affect my life, I might have gone inside and refused to answer the door. Thinking back, I should have realized that only bad news travels this early and this fast.

As the car slid to a halt at the edge of the lawn, I bolted from my chair, stopping at the edge of the porch. For a long moment, no one emerged from the car, leaving me to muse that maybe it was driverless. But then a door swung open with a loud screech, and the driver, dressed in a burgundy cloak with an oversized hood, appeared. I had no doubt that my visitor was female. As she walked, soft fabric clung to her subtle curves, so much so that I wasn't sure if the cloak was all she was wearing. Her face was hidden behind a dark oval shadow, but I stared into the darkness anyway.

When she reached the porch, she asked, "You are a lawyer?" She spoke with an affectation that was sensual, almost arousing.

"Yes," I replied. "My name is Shep Harrington. Who are you looking for?"

A moment passed. I heard her sigh inside her cocoon. Then she said, “An attorney who went to prison.”

Ouch! I had never considered my stay in prison a prerequisite to employment.

“That would be me,” I said, “unless, of course, you’re carrying a sickle.”

I heard a quick laugh, but she didn’t move. A moment later, she pushed back her hood. I don’t think I flinched, but I’m not absolutely certain. Judging by her right side profile, she easily could have been mistaken for a model, perhaps in the middle of her career, but still physically attractive by any objective measure. But the left side of her face had been burned, damaging her eye and ear, and causing the corner of her mouth to turn downward. Despite the damage, something about her seemed familiar, if only remotely so.

She waited quietly for a moment. This, I sensed, was to allow me time to reflect on her severely disfigured face and to consider what it might be like to be in her situation. Finally, she asked, “You were expecting Snow White?”

The question had a practiced quality, originating not from some well-wallowed pool of self-pity, but from an inner strength. She was challenging me, trying to disarm me, using her misfortune to gain advantage. I admired her immediately, and raised the ante.

“I wasn’t,” I replied evenly, “but neither was I expecting the Phantom of the Opera.” She glared at me, and I at her. Finally, her face brightened, and she laughed softly. “What can I do for you, Miss...?”

“What makes you think I’m not married?” Her eyes drilled into mine, then she laughed with such amusement that I couldn’t help but laugh too. The mirth, however, was short-lived. “My name is Sydney Vail. I don’t have much time. I don’t have *any* time.” Her voice quaked as she spoke. “I need your help.”

“Are you in trouble?”

She shook her head. “I don’t need your legal advice.” She glanced at the car. “I work with animals that need help. Reilly Heartwood used to assist me sometimes. With Reilly dead, I didn’t know where to go.”

Reilly Heartwood was an older man who died eight months ago. I was the primary beneficiary of his estate and, apparently, his causes. “So you need money?”

“I have an animal that needs a safe place to stay for a few days.”

“I don’t know much about caring for sick animals,” I said. “Surely you know other people who are far more qualified.”

Sydney stared at me. “Kikora is not sick,” she replied, her voice strident and demanding. “She is in danger. There is no one else. I have no choice. I need to go. You have to help me. Come with me.”

“Wait a minute,” I snapped. “Slow down.”

“I don’t have time for an interrogation,” said Sydney. She looked at me impatiently, then offered a suggestion that sounded more like a directive. “Call Frieda. She’ll vouch for me. But please hurry.”

Frieda Hahn had been Reilly Heartwood’s housekeeper before his death last Christmas. I went inside and called the house. Given the early hour, Frieda assumed that something bad had happened. “Nothing’s wrong,” I said. “I have a lady here named Sydney Vail. She’s asking for my help, and she says you’ll confirm that Reilly had helped her on other occasions.”

Frieda was suddenly quiet. “She has a scar on her face?”

The question seemed understated given the extent of Sydney’s injuries. “Yes.”

“It’s okay. Give her what she needs.”

I hung up the phone. “Okay,” I said to Sydney. “I’m game.”

I followed her to the car and she opened the back door. When she turned around, I thought she was holding a baby. Only after a

moment did I realize Kikora was a young chimpanzee. “She’s asleep because I had to drug her to calm her down,” said Sydney. “I have written instructions on what you need to do, how to feed her, and what to expect. I have some supplies in the trunk.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I can’t do this. I don’t know anything about chimps, you, or...”

“Do you want her to die?” Sydney looked at me, frustration and impatience in her eyes. “You’re my only hope. You’ve got to trust me.”

Kikora stirred and stared at me sleepily through large brown eyes. I was transfixed by the sadness and fear that I saw there. Sydney touched Kikora’s cheek, then looked at me. “I will call you in a few days. I promise. This will all make sense.” She saw my concern and forced a smile. “Taking care of Kikora isn’t going to be that difficult. Until a few months ago, she lived with a family. She won’t run away, so you don’t have to put her on a leash. If she plays hard to get, she can’t resist popcorn or chocolate. And despite what she’s been through, she’s in remarkably good spirits, so she doesn’t have to be medicated unless something really upsets her.” Sydney kissed me on the cheek, and got back into her car.

Kikora and I watched from the edge of the lawn as Sydney sped down the road, a cloud of dust eventually obscuring her car. I heard Kikora whimper, then felt her tighten her grip around my neck.

Life assumes a certain rhythm. The sun rises and sets, and in between we go about our affairs according to our whims and desires, oblivious to complex equations of cause and effect, and finding comfort in the illusion that we control our destiny. Sometimes, we arrive at a fork in the road and must choose one direction over another without knowing where either leads. Sometimes, the fork is chosen for us.

In just a few minutes that Monday morning, almost involuntarily, I had become a foster parent to a chimpanzee. Sydney said she would be back and all would make sense. Holding Kikora, I could only wonder.