

7:53 A.M.

John Simmons ordered his last meal. If he had known it was going to be his last meal it's unlikely he would have ordered a farmer's omelet, hash browns and wheat toast with a large orange juice and coffee. But that's what he always ordered at the Boulevard Café across the street from Henry Ford Hospital. In fact, if he had known it was his last meal, the Boulevard Café would not have been on his list of restaurants at all.

Once a week ten friends, all faculty at Wayne State University or at Henry Ford Hospital, got together for a casual breakfast. For reasons known to no one, they met at the hole-in-the-wall Boulevard Café, a restaurant none of them liked that much, and some of them loathed. It had become a peculiar tradition, and Simmons, if he bothered to think about it, suspected that the low-class aspect of the place was part of the charm. A better reason was probably that the tradition had started with the hospital people, who could just walk across the street. He glanced out the plate-glass window at the early-morning traffic clogging up the Boulevard. The hospital valet entrance had a huge, almost disproportionate triangular-shaped eave over it. It reminded him of the brim of a baseball hat built out of red brick and concrete.

Melanie Tolliver, a researcher at the hospital, sitting next to Simmons, said, "Where's Rebecca?" Tolliver's green eyes sparkled with barely concealed nosiness.

Simmons shrugged, taking a sip of his coffee. “Called and told me she’d be late. Didn’t say why.”

Melanie brushed frosted brown hair off her forehead and cocked an eyebrow.

“Everything okay? I mean—“

”Yeah. Fine.” Simmons shrugged again and looked around the restaurant, which was crowded. There were nine of them, one short of their usual ten. The Boulevard Café’s non-smoking section was about the size of a phone booth, so they ended up in the smoking section, which was blue with cigarette smoke. None of them smoked. “Christ, can’t we—“

”Don’t start,” Brad Beales said from across the Formica table, which wobbled whenever anybody leaned on it. Brad was a linguist and stood six-six in his stockinged feet. He looked like a Q-tip. Tall and skinny with a shock of fluffy white hair halo-ing his long, thin head. In a falsetto voice Beales said, “*We like Margie.*”

Simmons and Beale laughed, but Melanie shot them a disapproving frown. “It’s convenient.”

“It’s a dive,” complained Simmons.

Beales shrugged, a half-grin on his face. “Food’s cheap.”

“Well, we’ve avoided food poisoning so far, anyway,” Simmons said. He was going to go on, but bit back his complaint. He glanced at his watch, wondering where Rebecca was. She’d sounded a little stressed when she called this morning. She’d called to tell him she’d be late. When he asked why she just said, “I’ll be late. That’s all,” and hung up. It wasn’t like her. Of course, three or four nights a week she spent the night at his place or he spent the night at hers. He knew Melanie was wondering if they’d had a fight. He wondered, too. But no. Everything had been okay. Everything *was* okay.

There was a popping sound from somewhere nearby. Not a large pop, like gunfire. More like the pop of a champagne cork. Like that.

It registered for just a moment. Simmons looked up, a quizzical look on his face, then dived back into his coffee. Margie, their regular waitress, arrived with a couple plates. She could have been on the Russian weight-lifting team in the '60s. She was round-faced and round-bodied, but looked like she could heft a bus. She wore her steel-gray hair pulled back in a blood-restricting bun and generally looked as if she was driving in second-gear in a third-gear world. She delivered Simmons's omelet and hash browns, no toast. The woman was incapable of delivering a whole order. It had to arrive in sections, like a seven-course meal. Toast, apparently, was the second course.

Beales had chocolate chip pancakes covered with chocolate syrup and whipped cream. Melanie said, "Are you ever going to grow up?" Her bowl of steaming oatmeal was placed in front of her. Her toast was also missing in action.

"As the great Mr. Buffet said, *'Mah umer draz ho raha hoon, laykin dunia dar nahien.'*"

Melanie sighed. "I give up. Turkish?"

"Urdu. Pakistan, you know?" Beales spoke nine languages, seven of them fluently. "*I'm growing old, not up.*"

Jorge Gomez, an administrator at the hospital, said, "Warren Buffett said that?"

"*Jimmy* Buffett," Beales said.

"But chocolate chip pancakes? I mean, really ..." Melanie trailed off, looking at John Simmons. "John, are you okay?"

John's hand went to his throat. His face contorted in a grimace and his skin was turning red. "Can't—" he gasped out, and tried to scramble from the booth, but fell sideways off the end

of the table onto the black and white tiled floor.

There was a scream and Melanie started after him, but she suddenly gasped, placing her hand against her chest as if struggling to expand her lungs. Around her she saw others in the restaurant doing the same thing. Screams were choked into silence. And one by one, they died.