

CHARLIE DONLEA

AUTHOR OF *TWENTY YEARS LATER*

GUESSES AGAIN

Books by Charlie Donlea

SUMMIT LAKE

THE GIRL WHO WAS TAKEN

DON'T BELIEVE IT

SOME CHOOSE DARKNESS

THE SUICIDE HOUSE

TWENTY YEARS LATER

THOSE EMPTY EYES

LONG TIME GONE

GUESS AGAIN

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GUESS AGAIN

CHARLIE DONLEA



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To Murf
Leader, brother, friend

The tragedy of life is not that man loses but that he almost wins.
—Heywood Broun

Summer 2015

Cherryview, Wisconsin

WHEN HE UNCLASPED THE BUTTON ON HER JEANS, SHE KNEW SHE would lose her virginity that night.

His aftershave was stronger than she ever remembered. She'd smelled it before, like the first time they kissed in his car. But tonight, in his apartment when he was on top of her with his lips on her neck, it was intoxicating. Hyperaware of every sensation and emotion, she tried to calm herself as she took in his scent. She wasn't nervous about losing her virginity. She was in love and wanted this badly. Her anxiety came from inexperience, and she worried that whatever the act of sex was supposed to be, she would get it wrong.

She felt his hand slip inside her underwear. The moment intensified when he gently pulled them down. She lifted her hips and was suddenly lying naked on his bed. It was the first time she'd been naked with a man. It was happening. It was real. And she had never been happier in her life.

He pressed his hips against her pelvis and slid inside of her. She inhaled sharply at the shock of it. But the pain was overshadowed by a thought. It dawned on her, as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, that she should whisper his name into his ear. But she couldn't. As a star player on the high school volleyball team, all she'd ever called him was Coach, and to refer to him that way now seemed wildly inappropriate and even more awkward. Instead, she closed her eyes and settled on a soft moan as he pushed himself deeper inside of her.

PART I

Un-Retirement

CHAPTER 1

Madison, Wisconsin Thursday, May 22, 2025

ETHAN HALL HAD BEEN THE OLDEST STUDENT IN HIS MEDICAL school class. He was thirty-six when he walked into gross anatomy lab during his first year of med school. Today, he was a forty-five-year-old emergency medicine physician. Although he was without the years of experience other physicians in their forties sported, Ethan was more than competent. He had finished first in his class and could have gone into any specialty. He chose emergency medicine because his previous occupation had conditioned him to chaos, and somewhere along the way bedlam became imprinted in his DNA.

Years earlier he was a special agent with Wisconsin's Division of Criminal Investigation and in charge of investigating crimes against kids. For a while it was satisfying to put away the subhumans who committed such atrocities. But the job had taken a toll. He saw too much violence directed at society's most vulnerable. A "win" in his old profession still left a kid dead, a family grieving, and a perp getting three meals a day and a warm pillow at night. During the ten years that he worked for the DCI, he'd lost faith in the human race. He fell so far adrift that he had started to lose touch with the human condition. It had been a decade-long slippery slope and dangerous spiral he needed to escape before the void swallowed him whole. He decided a career change was necessary to keep his sanity. So, he put in his notice and applied to medical school.

Now, as an emergency room physician, he was able to help his patients *before* they died. It was a refreshing change, and something his life desperately needed. For the first time in many years, Ethan Hall was a happy man.

He pulled the curtain to the side of ER Room 3 and found his patient sitting in the bedside chair. This was unusual. Patients were typically lying in bed when he entered the room. Also odd was that this patient was not wearing a hospital gown. The thirty-eight-year-old male, according to the chart, sat in the chair wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. Taken

together with the man's long blond hair that nearly reached his shoulders, he could have been on the cover of a surfing magazine. Ethan smiled.

"I'm Dr. Hall."

"Hey, Doc. Christian Malone."

"Are you the patient?"

"I am. I just can't do the whole gown and the bed thing. I mean, unless something was tragically wrong with me. Then it's fine. But otherwise, it just takes away my dignity and makes me feel like shit."

"Fair enough," Ethan said, tapping on the computer keyboard to bring up the man's file. "You're having abdominal pain?"

"I *was*. Not anymore. Listen, I don't want to waste your time. I had a nasty pain in my back, so I came in this morning. Your nurse told me it was a kidney stone. She said the doctor ordered pain meds, shot me up with morphine, and hustled me down to have a CT scan. But just before she gave me the morphine, the pain went away. Like from a ten to a zero in a matter of seconds. She insisted on giving me the morphine anyway because she said the pain had subsided only because I had found a comfortable position. But the pain never came back."

Ethan pulled up the CT scan on the computer and saw that his patient had a kidney stone sitting in his bladder, indicating that it had already made the painful trek through the ureter.

"Yeah, see? It passed into my bladder," the man said.

"You a doctor?" Ethan asked.

"No, just a tech guy from California."

"California? What are you doing in Madison?"

"I escaped Silicon Valley and live here now."

"Welcome to the Midwest. I'm assuming this isn't your first kidney stone."

"Nope. I've had two others. Hurts like hell until it gets to the bladder, then I pee it out a couple of days later. I tried to tell the nurse, but she shot me up with morphine anyhow. Gotta admit, the buzz is pretty phenomenal."

Ethan smiled. Christian Malone, the thirty-eight-year-old Silicon Valley transplant, suddenly sounded like a Californian.

"Did you drive yourself to the ER this morning?"

"Yes sir."

Ethan tapped on the keyboard as he entered notes into the chart. "I can't let you drive after we gave you morphine. We'll have to keep you for a few

hours before I can discharge you.”

“I’ll call an Uber.”

“I’d have to watch you climb in the car. Otherwise the hospital would be liable for discharging you while you’re under the influence of a narcotic.”

“Come on, Doc. I feel fine.”

“Morphine is like that. One moment you’re good, the next you’re high as a kite.”

“Can you make an exception? I’ve been here for three hours already.”

Ethan checked his watch.

“You’re the last patient of my shift. How about I buy you a cup of coffee? If you’re still feeling woozy, I’ll drive you home myself.”

“Sure thing, Doc. As long as I can get the hell out of this room.”

CHAPTER 2

Cherryview, Wisconsin Thursday, May 22, 2025

THEY SKIPPED THE CAFETERIA COFFEE AND OPTED FOR A STARBUCKS drive-thru, both ordering venti black coffees. Back on the road, Ethan commented on Christian's coffee choice.

"No skinny vanilla with soy for the California transplant?"

Christian smiled. "Black coffee all day for me."

"All day?"

"It's all I drink."

"If you want to avoid another kidney stone, I'd suggest adding some water to your diet."

"I'll take it under consideration." Christian pointed. "Take a right up there."

Ethan twisted his Jeep Wrangler onto a winding road that snaked through a tree-lined area along the water until he emerged a mile later at the edge of Lake Okoboji.

"There I am," Christian said, pointing.

Ethan looked across the lake to where a massive home sat at the water's edge. The morning sunlight reflected off the large windows that made up the back of the house. A set of stairs spiraled down from each side of the back patio and cut through the emerald-green grass to meet the man-made beach area that sprinkled down to the water's edge.

Ethan had seen the house before. Everyone had. It was the largest on the lake.

"That's your house?"

"Yes sir." Christian pointed through the passenger-side window. "Head around to the north, it's easier to get in through the back entrance."

Ethan hesitated a moment before turning the wheel and heading around the lake. Ten minutes later he pulled through the gate at the rear entrance of Christian's home and parked in the driveway, counting five bay doors on the garage.

"You feel okay?" Ethan asked.

“Unfortunately. My buzz is just about gone. Come inside and finish your coffee. I’ll show you the house.”

Ethan followed Christian through the massive double-doors at the front and shook his head at the enormity of the home. The interior was a combination of cutting-edge innovation and Northwoods Wisconsin.

“We’ll sit out back,” Christian said.

Ethan walked through the home, noticing the tablets on the walls throughout that put everything from the thermostat to music at Christian’s fingertips. Lights came on as they walked, although he never saw Christian touch a light switch. The back of the home was an uninterrupted sequence of floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a majestic view of the lake.

“This is pretty amazing.”

“You should see it when it snows. The only time I like the snow is when I’m sitting in this room and every window is filled with falling snowflakes.”

Christian pushed through a tall glass door and walked out onto the patio. Ethan followed and they sat at the patio table.

“The heat this year is nearly unbearable,” Christian said.

“It’s only predicted to get worse,” Ethan said.

“The heat is okay. It’s the humidity that’s killing me.”

“So how does a tech guy from California end up in Wisconsin?” Ethan said. “You’ve got to tell me that story.”

Christian took a sip of coffee and looked out over Lake Okoboji. A few sailboats tacked at different angles, the morning wind filling the sails. A speedboat hauled a water skier behind it.

“I founded an online file storage and sharing company. It started out primarily as files but expanded to include photos and videos and basically anything you want to store securely in the cloud, share with other users, and have access to across all your devices.”

Ethan squinted his eyes. “Like CramCase?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“CramCase is your company?”

“It was. I sold it.”

Ethan slowly nodded his head and raised his eyebrows. “I read about that last year. Didn’t it sell for . . .”

Christian nodded. “Billions.”

There was a short pause before Christian made a slight correction.

“Well, billions and billions.”

“Damn. And you owned the whole thing?”

“No, just fifty-one percent. I wrote the code for it in my college dorm room. Back then it was just my roommate and me. He’s still at the company. But I couldn’t take it anymore. Everyone thinks they want to be filthy rich, but there’s this threshold of wealth not many people know about. Once you reach it, especially through a publicly traded company, you *lose* freedom rather than gain more of it. I got sick of stuffy, Ivy League nerds telling me what to do with my money and my company. The whole situation beat me down and stole my passion. So I sold my portion and got the hell out of Silicon Valley.”

“And landed in . . . Cherryview, Wisconsin? How did that happen?”

“By way of Chicago, but that’s a whole other story.”

Ethan nodded. His life had taken a similar trajectory, minus the billions. He once had a job he loved, but lost his passion for it.

“You look like you’re doing fine,” Ethan said. “Both in life, and since my nurse shot you up with morphine. If you want us to analyze the stone when you pass it, we can. Tell you what it’s made of so that you can change your diet and try to avoid another one.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll just let it slip out to sea after it exits my body. But thanks.”

“Add some water into your daily routine. Trust me, it’ll help.”

“Got it. Thanks for the ride home, Doc.”

“Sure thing.”

“You headed back to the hospital?”

“No. I’m heading out of town. I’ve got a few days off for the long weekend.”

“Safe travels. And when you get back, stop over someday. I don’t know many people in town yet, and this big house scares everyone away.”

Ethan smiled. “Maybe I will.”