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# Miracle Cure

Written by Harlan Coben

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# Miracle Cure

HARLAN COBEN



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# Prologue

*Friday, August 30*

Dr Bruce Grey tried not to walk too fast. He slowed his pace, fighting off the temptation to sprint across the soiled floor of Kennedy Airport's International Arrivals Building, past the customs officials, and out into the humid night air. His eyes shifted from side to side. Every few steps he would feign a soreness in his neck to give himself the opportunity to glance behind him and make sure he was not being followed.

*Stop it!* Bruce told himself. *Stop lurking around like a poor man's James Bond. You're shaking like a malaria patient, for chrissake. You couldn't look more conspicuous if you wore a sign.*

He strolled past the luggage carousel, nodding politely at the little old lady who had sat next to him on the flight. The old woman had not shut her mouth during the entire trip, gabbing on about her family, her love of flying, her last trip overseas. She was sweet enough, just somebody's grandmother, but Bruce still closed his eyes and

pretended to be asleep in order to get a little peace and quiet. But, of course, sleep had not come to him. It would not come for some time yet.

*But maybe she wasn't just some sweet, little old lady, Brucie boy. Maybe she was following you . . .*

He dismissed the voice with a nervous shake of the head. This whole thing was turning his brain into sewer sludge. First, he was sure that the bearded man on the plane had been following him. Then it was the big guy with the slicked-back hair and Armani suit at the telephone booth. And don't forget the pretty blonde by the terminal exit. She had been following him too.

Now it was a little old lady.

*Get a grip on yourself, Brucie. Paranoia is not what we need right now. Clear thinking, old pal – that's what we're looking for.*

Bruce moved past the luggage carousel and over to the customs official.

'Passport, please.'

Bruce handed the man his passport.

'No luggage, sir?'

He shook his head. 'Only this carry-on.'

The customs officer glanced at the passport and then at Bruce. 'You look quite different from your photograph.'

Bruce tried to force a tired smile to his lips but it would not hold. The humidity was almost unbearable. His dress shirt was pasted against his skin, his tie loosened to the point of being nearly untied. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. 'I . . . I've gone through a few changes.'

'A few? You're a dark-haired man with a beard in this picture.'

'I know—'

'Now you're a clean-shaven blond.'

‘Like I said, I went through a few changes.’ *Luckily, you can’t tell eye color from a passport photo or you would want to know why I changed my eyes from brown to blue.*

The customs official did not appear convinced. ‘Were you traveling on business or pleasure?’

‘Pleasure.’

‘You always pack this lightly?’

Bruce swallowed and managed a shrug. ‘I hate waiting for checked luggage.’

The customs official swung his line of vision from the passport photograph to Bruce’s face and then back again. ‘Would you open your bag, please?’

Bruce could barely keep his hands steady enough to set the combination. It took him three tries before it finally snapped open. ‘There you go.’

The customs official’s eyes narrowed into thin slits as he rummaged through the belongings. ‘What are these?’ he asked.

Bruce closed his eyes, his breath coming in short gasps. ‘Some files.’

‘I can see that,’ the official replied. ‘What are they for?’

‘I’m a doctor,’ Bruce explained, his voice cracking. ‘I wanted to review some of my patients’ charts while I was away.’

‘Do you always do that when you’re on vacation?’

‘Not always.’

‘What type of doctor are you?’

‘An internist at Columbia Presbyterian,’ Bruce replied, telling a half-truth. He decided to leave out the fact that he was also an expert in public health and epidemiology.

‘I see,’ the official replied. ‘I wish my doctor was that dedicated.’

Again Bruce tried to smile. Again it was a failed attempt.

‘And this sealed envelope?’

Bruce felt his whole body quake. ‘Excuse me?’

‘What is in this manila envelope?’

He willed a casual look on his face. ‘Oh, that’s just some medical information I’m sending to a colleague,’ he managed.

The customs official’s eyes locked onto Bruce’s blood-shot ones for a few long moments. ‘I see,’ he said, slowly putting the envelope back in the bag. When the customs official finished going through the rest of the carry-on, he signed Bruce’s customs declaration and handed him back his passport. ‘Give the card to the woman on your way out.’

Bruce reached for the bag. ‘Thank you.’

‘And, Doctor?’

Bruce looked up.

‘You might want to visit one of your colleagues,’ the customs official said. ‘If you don’t mind a layman giving medical opinions, you look awful.’

‘I’ll do that.’

Bruce lifted the bag and glanced behind him. The little old lady was still waiting for her luggage. The man with the beard and the pretty blonde were nowhere in sight. The big guy in the Armani suit was still talking on the phone.

Bruce moved away from the customs desk. His right hand gripped his bag with excessive vigor; his left hand rubbed his face. He handed the customs declaration to the woman and walked through the sliding glass doors into the waiting area. A sea of anxious faces greeted him. People stood on their toes, peering out from all points

with each swish of the glass doors before lowering their heads in disappointment when an unfamiliar face approached the threshold.

Bruce moved steadily past the waiting friends and relatives, past the bored limousine drivers with name signs held up against their chests. He made his way to the Japan Air Lines ticket counter on the right.

‘Is there a mailbox near here?’ he asked.

‘To your right,’ the woman replied. ‘By the Air France desk.’

‘Thank you.’

He walked by a garbage can and casually dropped his torn-up boarding pass into it. He had considered himself very clever to book the flight under an assumed name – very clever, that is, until he got to the airport and was informed that you could not have an international ticket issued under a different name than the one on your passport.

Whoops.

Luckily, there had been plenty of space on the flight. Even though he had to purchase another ticket for himself, reserving one under an alias had not been such a dumb idea. Before his actual departure date, no one could have found out what flight he was booked on because his name was not in the computer. Pure genius on his part.

*Yessiree, Brucie. You are a regular genius.*

Yeah, right. Genius. Bullshit.

He located the mail slot near the Air France desk. A few passengers spoke to the airline representative. None of them paid him the slightest attention. His eyes quickly checked the room. The old lady, the bearded man, and the pretty blonde had either left or were still going through customs. The only ‘spy’ he could still see was the big guy



in the Armani suit who now moved hurriedly through the sliding glass doors and out of the terminal.

Bruce let loose a sigh of relief. No one was looking at him now. He turned his attention back to the mail slot. His hand reached into his bag and quickly slipped the sealed manila envelope down the chute. His insurance policy was safely on its way.

Now what?

He certainly could not go home. If anyone was searching for him, his apartment on the Upper West Side would be the first place they would look. The clinic was no good at this hour of the night, either. Someone could nab him there just as easily.

*Look, I'm not very good at this. I'm just your average run-of-the-mill doctor who went to college, went to medical school, got married, had a kid, finished residency, got divorced, lost custody of the kid, and now works too hard. I'm not up to playing I Spy.*

But what other choice did he have? He could go to the police, but who would believe him? He had no real evidence yet. Hell, he wasn't even sure what was going on himself. What could he tell the police?

*Try this on for size, Brucie: 'Help! Protect me! Two people have already been murdered and countless others may join them – including me!'*

Maybe true. Maybe not. Question: what did he really know for sure? Answer: not a hell of a lot. More like nothing. By going to the police, Bruce knew he would do little more than destroy the clinic and all the important work they had accomplished there. He had dedicated the last three years to that research and he was not about to give those damn bigots the weapon they needed to kill the project. No, he would have to handle it a different way.

But how?

He checked once more to make sure he was not being followed. All his enemy spies were gone now. That was good. That was a nice bit of relief. He hailed a yellow taxi and jumped into the backseat.

‘Where to?’

Bruce thought for a moment, mulling over every thriller he had ever read. Where would George Smiley go, or better still, Travis McGee or Spenser? ‘The Plaza, please.’

The taxi pulled away. Bruce watched out the back window. No cars seemed to be following as the taxi began its journey down the Van Wyck Expressway toward Manhattan. Bruce settled back, letting his head rest against the seat. He tried to breathe deeply and relax, but he still found himself trembling in fear.

*Think, goddamn it. This is no time to catnap.*

First, he needed a new alias. His eyes moved left and right, finally resting on the taxi driver’s name on the displayed license. Benjamin Johnson. Bruce turned the name around. John Benson. That would be his name until tomorrow. John Benson. Just until tomorrow. Now if he could just stay alive until then . . .

He dared not think that far ahead.

Everyone at the clinic thought he was still on vacation in Cancún, Mexico. No one – absolutely no one – knew the whole vacation idea was merely a diversion. Bruce had played the role of happy traveler to the utmost. He had bought beachwear, flown down to Cancún last Friday, checked into the Cancún Oasis Hotel, prepaid for the week, and told the concierge that he would be renting a boat and could not be reached. Then he shaved his beard, cut and bleached his hair, and put on blue-tinted contact lenses. Even Bruce had trouble recognizing the image in

the mirror. He returned to the airport, left Mexico, checked in at his true destination under the name Rex Veneto, and began to investigate his horrible suspicions.

The truth, however, appeared to be more shocking than he had imagined.

The taxi slowed now in front of the Plaza Hotel on Fifth Avenue. The lights of Central Park twinkled from across the street and to the north. Bruce paid the driver, tipping him no more or less than the proper amount, and strolled into the lush lobby of the hotel. Despite his designer suit, he felt conspicuously sloppy. His jacket was heavily creased, his pants completely wrinkled. He looked like something left in the bottom of a laundry hamper for a week – hardly what his mother would have called presentable.

He began to walk toward the reception desk when something he barely spotted out of the corner of his eye made him stop.

*It's just your imagination, Bruce. It's not the same guy. It can't be.*

Bruce felt his pulse quicken. He spun around, but the big guy in the Armani suit was nowhere in sight. Had he really seen the same man? Probably not, but there was no reason to take chances. He left the hotel by the back entrance and walked toward the subway. He purchased a token, took the 1 train down to Fourteenth Street, switched to the A train to Forty-second Street, cut cross town on the 7 train, jumping off the car seconds before the doors closed at Third Avenue. He changed trains haphazardly for another half an hour, jumping on or off at the last possible second each time, before ending up on Fifty-sixth Street and Eighth Avenue. Then 'John Benson'

walked a few blocks and checked into the Days Inn, a hotel where Dr Bruce Grey had never stayed.

When he got up to his room on the eleventh floor, he locked the door and slid the chain into place.

Now what?

A phone call was risky, but Bruce decided to take the chance. He would speak to Harvey for only a few moments, then hang up. He picked up the phone and dialed his partner's home phone. Harvey answered on the second ring.

'Hello?'

'Harvey, it's me.'

'Bruce?' Harvey sounded surprised. 'How's everything in Cancún?'

Bruce ignored the question. 'I need to speak to you.'

'Christ, you sound awful. What's wrong?'

Bruce closed his eyes. 'Not over the phone.'

'What are you talking about?' Harvey asked. 'Are you still—?'

'Not over the phone,' he repeated. 'I'll talk to you tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow? What the hell is going—?'

'Don't ask me any more questions. I'll meet you tomorrow morning at six-thirty.'

'Where?'

'At the clinic.'

'Jesus, are you in danger? Is this about the murders?'

'I can't talk anymo—'

*Click.*

Bruce froze. There was a noise at his door.

'Bruce?' Harvey cried. 'What is it? What's going on?'

Bruce's heart began to race. His eyes never left the

door. ‘Tomorrow,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll explain everything then.’

‘But—’

He gently replaced the receiver, cutting Harvey off.

*I’m not up for this. Oh, please, God, let my mind be playing tricks on me, I’m not up for this, I’m really not up for any of this . . .*

There was no other sound, and for a brief moment Bruce wondered if his overactive brain cells had indeed imagined the whole thing. Maybe there had been no sound at all. And if there had been a noise, what was so strange about that? He was staying in a New York hotel, for chrissake, not a soundproof studio. Maybe it was just a maid. Maybe it was just a bellhop.

*Maybe it was just a big guy with slicked-back hair and a custom-made, silk Armani suit.*

Bruce crept toward the door. The right leg slid forward, then the left tagged along. He had never been much of an athlete, had never been the most coordinated guy in the world. Right now, it looked like he was doing some kind of spastic foxtrot.

*Click.*

His heart slammed into his throat. His legs went weak. There was no mistaking where the sound had come from this time.

His door.

He stood frozen. His breathing reverberated in his ears so damn loudly that he was sure everyone on the floor could hear it.

*Click.*

A short, quick click. Not a fumbling sound, but a very precise click.

*Run, Bruce. Run and hide.*

But where? He was in a small room on the eleventh floor of a hotel. Where the hell was he supposed to run and hide? He took another step toward the door.

*I can open it quickly, scream my brains out, and run down the hall like an escaped psych patient. I could—*

The knock came so suddenly that Bruce nearly screamed.

‘Who is it?’ he practically shouted.

‘Towels,’ a man’s voice said.

Bruce moved closer to the door. Towels, my ass. ‘Don’t need any,’ he called out without opening the door.

Pause. ‘Okay. Good night, sir.’

He could hear Mr Towel’s footsteps move away from his door. Bruce pressed his back against the wall and continued to make his way to the door. His whole body shook. Despite the room’s powerful air conditioning, sweat drenched his clothing and matted his hair down against his forehead.

Now what?

*The peephole, Mr James Friggin’ Bond. Look through the peephole.*

Bruce obeyed the voice within his head. He slowly turned and put his eye against the peephole. Nothing. Nada, as the Mexicans say. There was no one there, not a damn thing. He tried to look to his left and then his right—

And that was when the door flew open.

The chain broke as though it were a thread. The metal knob slammed against the point of Bruce’s hip. Pain shot through the whole area. Instinctively he tried to cover his hip with his hand. That proved to be a mistake. From behind the door a large fist came flying toward Bruce’s face. He tried to duck, but his reflexes were too slow. The

knuckles landed with a horrid thud against the bridge of Bruce's nose, crushing the bones and cartilage. Blood flowed quickly from his nostrils.

*Oh, Jesus, oh, sweet God . . .*

Bruce stumbled back, reaching for his nose. The big guy in the Armani suit stepped into the room and closed the door. He moved with a speed and grace that defied his great bulk.

'Please—' Bruce managed before a powerful hand the size of a boxer's glove clamped over his mouth, silencing him. The hand carelessly knocked against the flattened nostrils, pushing them upward and sending hot surges of pain through his face.

The man smiled and nodded politely as if they had just been introduced at a cocktail party. Then he lifted his foot and threw a kick with expert precision. The blow shattered Bruce's kneecap. Bruce heard the sharp cracking noise as the bone below the knee snapped. His scream was muffled by the man's hand tightening against his mouth. Then the giant hand pulled back just slightly before slamming up into Bruce's jaw, fracturing another bone and cracking several teeth. Gripping the broken jaw with his fingers, the man reached into Bruce's mouth and pulled down hard. The pain was enormous, overwhelming. Bruce could feel the tendons in his mouth ripping away.

*Oh, God, please . . .*

The big man in the Armani suit let Bruce slide to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Bruce's head swam. He watched through a murky haze as the big man examined a blood stain on his suit. The man seemed annoyed by the stain, upset that it would not come out at the dry cleaner.

With a shake of his head, the man moved toward the window and pulled back the curtain.

‘You picked a nice, high floor,’ he said casually. ‘That will make things easier.’

The big man turned away from the window. He strolled back toward where Bruce lay writhing. He bent down, took a solid hold on Bruce’s foot and gently lifted Bruce’s shattered leg into the air. The agony was unbearable. Jolts of pain wracked his body with each slight movement of the broken limb.

*Please, God, please let me pass out . . .*

Suddenly Bruce realized what the man was about to do. He wanted to ask him what he wanted, wanted to offer the man everything he had, wanted to beg the man for mercy, but his damaged mouth could only produce a gurgling noise. Bruce could only look up hopelessly with pleading, terror-filled eyes. Blood streamed down his face and onto his neck and chest.

Through a cloud of pain Bruce saw the look in the man’s eyes. It was not a wild-eyed, crazed look; not a hateful, bloodthirsty look; not the stare of a psychotic killer. The man was calm. Busy. A man performing a tedious task. Detached. Unemotional.

*This is nothing to this guy, Bruce thought. Another day at the office.*

The man reached into his jacket pocket and tossed a pen and a piece of paper on the floor. Then he gripped Bruce’s foot, one hand on the heel, the other on the toes. Bruce bucked in uncontrollable agony. The man’s muscles flexed before he finally spoke.

‘I’m going to twist your foot all the way around,’ the big man said, ‘until your toes are pointed toward your back and that broken bone rips through the skin.’ He



paused, gave a distracted smile, and repositioned his fingers in order to get a better grip.

‘I’ll let go when you finish writing your suicide note, okay?’

Bruce made the note brief.