



GRAY
MATTER

Marvin Gray

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Gray Matter

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DEDICATION

To Regina, who never gave up on me.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday

Lahore, Pakistan

Our greatest enemies lurk in the recesses of our own minds. No external enemy can inflict a torture to surpass the debilitating agony we exact on ourselves. The untreated mental illnesses fester and haunt us during all waking and sleeping moments, if we sleep at all. We battle the guilt, the shame, and the inadequacy of our lives. Paranoia, fear, insecurity, and depression sizzle and burn away like battery acid at our potential happiness. Clark had come to believe that most of us suffer from some strain of bipolar disorder or neurosis that gnaws at our mental health like a hyperactive parasite inside the skull, eating away at healthy pink tissue and leaving necrotic blisters, matter, and nerve in its wake. He battled these disorders every day, and he was losing. He seldom slept anymore because he was up at all hours combating emotional demons.

On this night in the brothel where they knew him by name, he lay there struggling with guilt and neurosis, unable to sleep. The prostitute they called Desi had long since fallen asleep. She was plump, and well into her thirties. She'd survived in her profession longer than most. Her legs and thighs were thick. Her ass was heavy. She had dense, strong arms and a thin attractive face. He suspected that she had been striking in her teens and early twenties. She had beautiful, intelligent brown eyes, and a smile that hinted at wisdom beyond her years. He wondered what type of tragedy had landed her in this nightmare.

In the past two years, he had savored many different whores in *Hira Mandi*, Lahore's red light district. All of

them were more attractive than Desi, but he always returned to her. Something about her sensuality always pulled him back to her. Desi could dance, sing, and entertain. Despite her weight, she moved like a gazelle. She would recite Persian poetry. But best of all, she knew how to please him. Not just the typical ten-minutes of fellatio followed by copulation. She had mastered that too. No, Desi knew how to make ordinary, neurotic men feel special. She filled the emotional hollowness in their lives with doting female attention. Clark considered himself a sad creature, longing for the attention and affection of an old whore. For the hour or so he spent with Desi, she made him feel like a Moghul prince. And for a few drunken hours, she could almost make him believe that he wasn't a total failure. And as sure as the morning's sunrise would unleash a slashing hangover, the next morning would remind him just how meaningless his life was. He had but one purpose in Pakistan—come to think of it, only one purpose in life. And right now he was foundering.

Two years he'd spent in Pakistan, learning the language, studying the culture, reading the history, navigating the politics, working endless hours, earning and spending money, paying bills back in the US, building networks of underworld contacts, and searching. The sex and alcohol and friendships were unplanned by-products of the pursuit. But for the night, as long as he was in her presence, he could forget all of that. Clark was in Desi's spell.

Now the Punjabi courtesan had satisfied his flesh, but nothing could satisfy his emotional stirrings. He'd come here tonight to drink and fuck his way into transcendent amnesia. Yet thoughts of regret swirled about him like the stench from the Asian toilet across the hall. He pulled himself up into a sitting position on Desi's mattress on the

floor and leaned his back against a rich red pillow along the wall. The *tabla* and *harmonium* music wafted in through the closed door. He could imagine recycled whores dancing for the last vestiges of the night's clientele, hoping to score one last sale. The prostitutes would finish off the men in short order, collect their fees, and send them on their way back to their loud and frigid wives. Clark was one of the few who spent the night. His American citizenship lent him special status at the bordello.

He covered his nakedness with a thick blanket. It was cold in Desi's room. He lit a Pall Mall—not the cheap Asian version, but the authentic American imports. He opened a can of lukewarm Indian beer. He scooted the bottle of half-drunk whiskey closer to him. He drank and smoked and let the insanity parasite do its job.

He envisioned Lucy as she was as a child—maybe four or five years old. In this vision, she was pure, vibrant, and innocent. She could always light up his heart with that patented dimpled smile of hers. Tears drummed into his eyes at the thought of it. An invisible fist squeezed the air out of his lungs, and his breaths became shallow. He grabbed the whiskey and took a nip to fight off the nostalgia. He was on the verge of weeping when the second vision took over.

This image was the one burned into his mind the last time he saw her, an image he couldn't bear. Fury swept over him like the alcohol rush. He had always wanted to be a good father. He'd wanted to protect his children from evil. Once, he had wanted nothing more from life than to have his children commission for his tombstone the words *He was a good father*. But he was no good at parenthood or at protecting his children. He clamped his eyes tight to squeeze out all thoughts of his daughter.

Without really intending to, Clark began to entertain

evidence of random injustice that haunted his existence. He saw injustice everywhere. Not just the political injustice in the West Bank and Gaza, or wealthy Pakistanis enslaving impoverished ones. He hated the arrogance of supervisors at work, and of intolerance of religious extremists. He hated the TV newscasters who spilled out bigotry to home viewers in the name of “journalism.” He hated American politics, politicians, and their millions of devotees. Washington, DC was a politically intolerant world. It nurtured a milieu of black and white, with no tolerance for gray areas, and certainly no space for nuanced political views.

He hated the incompetent US government decision-makers in Islamabad who botched foreign policy, and the corrupt Pakistani officials who complied in order to secure their own futures at the expense of impoverished fellow-citizens. How many corrupt Pakistani contractors, non-profits, engineers and politicians had he clashed with?

Clark checked emails and texts on his phone, hoping to find something from Firdows, but there was nothing, so he let the parasite feed on. He fought back fears of failing finances and a retirement plan that he had not gotten around to setting up. The years were piling up, and he was ill-prepared. Once he had dared to embrace big dreams of investing in a vibrant financial portfolio and retiring early to paint. But he was not good at managing money or making investments. He spent too freely and invested poorly. And his artistry was an illusion. He was kidding himself.

Mostly he choked on unquenched yearnings for Firdows. He couldn't reconcile his insatiable appetite for her with the wretched future that she had painted.

At their last tryst, they had fought.

“This is fuckin’ Pakistan. Not San Francisco, in case you

haven't noticed," she had told him emphatically. "There is no 'us' here. We have no future. Just put it out of your mind and stop torturing yourself."

In the conservative Muslim society, theirs was a forbidden love. Clark called it love. She never did. She never valued the relationship enough to even lend it a label, but rather she led him to believe that he was no longer even capable of love.

"You are not in love with me," she told him. "You are in love with the idea of me."

"What does that mean?" Clark asked.

"Figure it out for yourself. Middle-aged American man. Failure with American women. Finds a younger Pakistani woman who you think will be at your beck and call. Shower you with affection. Hang on your every word. Laugh at your jokes. You see me as a South Asian princess just dying to explore every position in the Kama Sutra with you. That I will magically reveal tantric sexual secrets every night, suck your cock at the kitchen table before work."

"Jesus, Firdows. Don't degrade what we have like that. I adore you. I want to live the rest of my life with you."

"Wake up, Clark. I have two kids. What do you propose we do with them? Let Angelina Jolie adopt them?"

"Firdows, please."

"Or are you going to adopt them?"

"I love your children."

"What do you think they do to Pakistani women who abandon their husbands? Especially those who fuck American men?" she asked with disdain.

"OK, I will adopt them," he said as the desperation built.

"Oh God," she swore.

"Listen to me. I'll arrange everything. We can meet in