



**THE HOUSE OF WORDS**

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# Chapter 1.

THE MATCHES WERE all twenty-five minutes long, but thankfully today they passed quickly. I was in the basement of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue with a couple hundred or so wannabe Scrabble champs, looking for ranking points and bragging rights at the state finals in Buffalo next month and the Nationals in Washington in the summer. You could hear the syncopated din throughout, the shuffling of tiles and muttering of point scores. But I was more worried about Suzy, who hadn't turned up or answered my calls all day.

Still I had to get past my last opponent. I shuffled my rack again, trying not to sweat the time. There was only a minute left on the clock and I was behind by 40, stuck with six duff letters and an *S*, my opponent trying hard to muffle a snigger. If I couldn't find something soon I was done. I looked over my letters again – an *A*, *I*, *O*, *U*, two *R*s, and the *S*. Nothing. When I finally found *ouraris*, there was only a second left, a handful of onlookers applauding my unlikely win, good enough for twentieth place and my best ranking ever.

Suzy was next, but I couldn't find her anywhere. I scanned the hall again and asked around to a few familiar faces, but no one had seen her. Where was she? I was starting to worry. Scrabble was her life.

I thought back to when we had first met after my first weekend tournament, and how she offered to help me over a cup of coffee after I had lost every game. I remembered how cold it was and how losing ten games in a row hadn't done my winter funk any good. My New Year's resolution to get out and about after Billy's death was going down the tubes.

"Rule number one: know how to spell," she said, bringing the coffee to her lips and blowing lightly over the edges. We were at The Greasy Spoon, a fifties-style diner around the corner from St. Patrick's on 51<sup>st</sup> Street, the juke box spitting out oldies amidst the minutiae of bad weather talk and lives gone wrong.

"That's obvious isn't it?" I replied.

"Sure, but you'd be surprised how easily you forget in the heat of battle."

"*The heat of battle?*"

"All games are a battle. No point playing if you don't play to win."

That smile. Those coral lips. How her eyes darted about, taking in the world around her in furtive gulps.

“Yes, I suppose, if you put it that way,” I offered meekly.

“If you want to win, you have to make yourself as perfect as you can,” she continued.

“Perfect?” I quizzed, my face scrunching in a perfect mix of awe and confusion. My juke box choices from Kind of Blue and A Love Supreme cooed from the corner. Suzy was a dream come true.

Anyway, that was the first of many après Scrabble coffees, followed by an occasional game at my apartment, and, as was becoming more regular of late, our own nocturnal adventures. The last time I saw her, we had even talked about moving in, having exchanged the standard list of boy-girl expectations. Today, though, I didn’t know what had happened to her, let alone the status of our seemingly cemented oneness.

Had our lives already become lost in a misbegot stream of words?

Words aren’t what they seem, that much I had learned, playing tournament Scrabble in New York against an army of English majors, math wizzes, and various other assorted word nerds. My first challenge, *Zaire*, was a proper noun, or so I thought, but there it was in the official word dictionary, *zaire*, a former currency, along with *zaïres*, my first lesson in the peculiarly pedantic world of competitive play. When I finally broke down and bought a dictionary, *zaire* was the first word I looked up, followed by *za* (*n.* pizza), *zin* (*n.* zinfandel), *zine* (*n.* magazine or fanzine), *ziti* (*n.* type of pasta), and *zori* (*n.* Japanese sandal). I hadn’t ever expected to find *zaire* or *za* in any dictionary, but any guilt over using words I hadn’t known in 30 years of living was soon lost to my slowly climbing ranking.

I looked outside for Suzy, quizzing anyone who knew her. I tried across the street at Rockefeller Plaza. The usual hordes were lingering by the stairs, but no Suzy. She wasn’t at The Greasy Spoon either, or Diabols, another Scrabble hangout off Broadway. Was she creaped out about moving in, I wondered, as I finally gave up and went home? It had only been three months. But the moving in was her idea. She had even joked it might help her game.

I trudged back to my apartment, a rent-controlled, two-bed on the shady side of Seventh Avenue, just high enough to see a few trees in the park if one leant out far enough

from the back-room window. The abrupt rain settled to a constant drizzle. When I got there, the police were waiting at the door.

“James Graves?”

“Yes?”

“We’re looking for Suzy Quest,” said the taller of the two, motioning for permission to enter. His gruffness hurried my response.

“Suzy Q?” I answered, waving them through to the hall.

“Sorry?”

“Everyone calls her by her handle, *Suzy Q*. She hates Quest.”

“*Her handle?*”

“You know, online moniker, identifier, alias? For game purposes.”

“Yes, Mr Graves. And you? Your *handle?*”

“*Aahing.*”

“Yes, James Graves, *Aahing.*”

The shorter cop eyed his way in further and I invited them to sit down. The rain outside blew harder. I wasn’t aware of any undue suspicion.

They explained that Suzy had been reported missing, someone leaving an anonymous message on the precinct hotline. After a few routine checks turned up nothing, they found me. I didn’t want to ask how.

“And your relationship with Ms Quest?” asked the taller cop.

I told him how we had met, how we had been spending more time together, and had even talked about moving in. I saw no reason to be untruthful. The taller one seemed surprised when I told him I didn’t know much about her past or her family. Suzy and I weren’t much on details.

Apparently happy with my explanation, he motioned to the door and arose.

“Do you know what *curare* is?” he asked as he lingered at the door, reading from a folded notebook.

“What?”

“Curare. It’s a poison resin used to relax muscles. Used in blow darts and the like. South American.”

“Yeah, I know what curare is. *So?*”

“Someone left a note at Ms Quest’s apartment on top of a pile of boxes. It had one word on it, scribbled in red ink. *Curare.*”

“*Curare,*” I mouthed.

“Yes, curare.”

After they left, I puzzled over their questions, opening a half-full bottle of Glen Breton, my thoughts screwed on Suzy as I drank. Had I missed something? Had she said something I misunderstood? Or was it me? Something I had said? A casual remark gone astray? Words and nuances of the game?

Or was it worse? *Curares*, a variant of *ouraris*, the very word I had played only an hour earlier in the basement hall of St. Patrick’s to finish 20<sup>th</sup> in the New York City Scrabble final. Very strange, I thought. Very strange indeed.

## Chapter 2.

IN THE MORNING, I woke with a start, imagining Suzy in bed beside me. She had been staying over most nights, and we already had a settled routine, making coffee, showering, playing a few games of Scrabble before work, a regular couple, zipping while the other zagged, although lately I went to work while she stayed and practiced. I felt for her body. The feeling was hard to shake.

I worked for Computer Services at NYU, taking a job as a systems officer after exhausting the last of my small inheritance and after a few stabs at gigging musician hadn't landed anything stable. Nothing too taxing. Basically, I made dubs and backed up data or, as was typical now, resurrected hard drives when an academic threw a laptop against a wall in frustration or downloaded something they shouldn't have. That was the fun part of the job, figuring out if Professor So-and-So was addicted to rage or porn.

As I showered, I could hear Suzy's voice pouring out, her Scrabble rules ever on my mind. "Know your lists. Greek and Hebrew letters, NATO phonetic alphabet, currencies. And the two-letter vowel words, *aa, ae, ai, oe, oi*, for when you're stuck but don't want to lose a turn changing tiles."

I circled the large *OI* I had scrawled on the bathroom mirror, watching the letters disintegrate as I shaved.

"And their meanings?" I remembered asking her.

"What?" she giggled. "Who cares? You need points to win."

"I care. I don't want to play without knowing. What's the point of that?"

That was our first disagreement. We were wedged into a corner booth by the window at The Greasy Spoon as per usual after the regular Thursday night club meeting, the unofficial hangout for Scrabblers, deadbeats, and the Rockefeller types who had grown tired of the sterility and sameness of Starbucks. I had earmarked the entries in my now well-thumbed dictionary, reading aloud as I turned through each page: "*aa, volcanic rock, ae, one, ai, three-toed sloth, oe, grandchild, and oi, shout to attract attention or raise alarm. But isn't it more fun to know?*" I quizzed.

Her smile suggested otherwise as I eyed the faded and grime-laden photos lining the walls, showing Scrabble champs through the years and various locals who had made good. Suzy was in more than a few, her same poised smile hiding her delight at having won. Suzy Quest, New York State Scrabble champ, four times running.

Eventually, she said she was like me, only playing words she knew, but couldn't ever hold her ranking. And so, she decided to memorize them all: every two-, three-, and four-letter word in the dictionary. There were thousands, 6,960 to be exact. Words I hadn't ever heard or read, let alone knew, words like *xi*, *xu*, *mib*, *zep*, *ajee*, *awee*. The hieroglyphics of the hunt she called them.

"Meanings are irrelevant in tournament Scrabble," she returned, that same hidden smile painted across her face. "After I started learning words as patterns, my ranking soared. You have to do the same James if you want to win." I hated to admit she was right, that words didn't need meanings.

On the way to work, I remembered more of her rules, "Beware the rage of others. Behind every happy Scrabble player is a demon waiting to crush you." The rage of others? Was there more to tell about her disappearance?

I remembered one guy who spooked her to the core after hurling abuse at her in an online game. Onkus was his handle. "I got all the power tiles," she had told me. "Z, Q, X, J, the four S's, both blanks, but when I played *quirted*, he started in with the taunts, how I could only win by luck. His invective was full of vacuity. If ever a handle fit – Onkus. You can write that down, *onkus*, adjective meaning *bad*."

Unfortunately, the foul language hadn't stopped with the game and Suzy hadn't wanted to play for ages afterwards. Was Onkus somehow connected to her disappearance?

In the end, I didn't make it to work, trying Suzy again on her cell and then buzzing her at her apartment without luck, before backtracking to the 18<sup>th</sup> precinct. I had to do something. Anonymous phone messages, notes, *curare*? The cops had totally weirded me out.

When I showed up, it was hard to get anyone's attention, the news of a gangland hit scurrying a Manhattan style phalanx of cops in patrol cars down Broadway, sirens wailing. I didn't mean to sound overly critical when the lead cop from before, Detective Jones, finally

showed up to enlighten me. He told me they still had no leads and that they couldn't follow up until they did.

“Mr Graves, please call if you hear anything,” he said, slipping me his card. “But no need to enveigh us. As you can see, Ms Quest's is not our only case.”

*“Enveigh?”*

“Verb, meaning to criticize strongly,” he said, his face pockmarked with intent. I hadn't noticed how big he was, like a linebacker without padding, his oversized hands protruding from his jacket, his beefy face staring me down with polite restraint. I thought he looked like more like a primate dressed up for a charity ball than a New York City detective.

It didn't take long for him to sally me out the door, his hands guiding me through the front foyer, down the stairs, and out onto the street. I watched as the returning phalanx of officers disappeared less urgently inside the precinct doors. I got his drift and politely legged it off.

Maybe it was all a misunderstanding. Maybe there was a good reason why Suzy had disappeared without telling me where she was going. Or had missed one of the top Scrabble tournaments of the year, for which she was favoured to win. Or why the cops showed up unannounced at my place full of questions about our relationship, but were now underwhelmed by my interest. I had to admit I didn't like how the odds were stacking.

When I tried her apartment again, the odds stacked even lower. The door was wide open and the place empty, save for two postcards and a letter stuck in an old Encyclopaedia Britannica on the mantel, opened to a page on the Conquistadors and the fall of the Aztec empire. Weird had just got weirder.

## Chapter 3.

THE OPEN PAGES were marked Corsica to Cortés, but I think the intended mark was another page, showing a highlighted entry for *curare*. Perhaps someone had been here and opened the encyclopaedia, the post cards and letter dropping out, only to return them to the wrong page.

I read the entry for *curare*. Poison darts were not the only use. Curare or curare-like agents were major pharmaceuticals, investigated by the FDA for a string of unexplained side effects in general anaesthetics.

I turned my attention to the letter. It was from Suzy's mother, Liz Mandrel, not terribly effusive, telling her news about her father, how he wasn't coming back, how she had done the best she could. Her stepfather, her mother wrote, Suzy didn't want to know.

The postcards were both from the Albright-Knox art gallery in Buffalo, colourful reprints of Roy Lichtenstein paintings, each showing a disconsolate woman crying, blank and slightly worn. I muttered aloud the captions: "That's the way it should have begun / But it's hopeless" and "I don't care / I'd rather sink than call Brad for help!" The postmark on the faded oyster-white envelope was a decade old, with a return address in Buffalo.

I returned the encyclopaedia to the mantel. The pages flew over as the wind whipped through the open window. Conquistadors, curare, captioned Lichtenstein postcards. Fathers and stepfathers. I couldn't imagine any meaning, but I knew I had to look for her. I took the next short hop to Buffalo. It was better than doing nothing.

I knew the trip from a few gigs I had played after college as the keyboard player and saxophonist for Fartlek, a band that fused more styles than any paying public wanted to hear. We had a couple of low-rent hits, covers played in different time signatures than the original. The best was Judy Garland's 'Over the Rainbow' done up as a punk piece. I even sang on one and made an appearance on a local breakfast show to highlight an upcoming summerfest, DigOut. It took ages to give up that ghost.

I played a few games on the way to distract myself. The good thing about online Scrabble and Wi-Fi (a good word, but not allowed because of the caps and hyphen) is that you can play anywhere.

In the first game, I drew seven vowels at the start and had to exchange them all – not every set of duff letters can be mined for *ouraris* gold. I then made the same dumb move twice against a lower-ranked player, giving away an easy double triple, forgetting Suzy’s fifth rule: “Play aggressively with good tiles, but not when the leave is too big.” I smiled, having done just that, my opponent’s two-way, front-end *fez* followed by a crushing *pudgy* on the end of my *curd* costing me the lead before he hooked the *d* on the front of *jinn* for *remated* and an easy win, knocking my ranking back under 1700.

I had also missed an obvious *quoin*, smiling again as I remembered Suzy scolding me for not memorizing all the *Q* and *Z* words. “The hot spots James!” I asked her if she thought too much about Scrabble. “Not always,” she smiled as she grabbed me full and dragged me to bed, our bodies syncing to a serenade of sultry sounds. Not all of Suzy’s life was words.

I tried not to think about what triggered her disappearance, hoping the answer lay somewhere in Buffalo and not in the pages of a police report. I stared out at the silent landscape, wondering what lay ahead. She hadn’t mentioned her family once, but then we hadn’t fathomed much in each other’s worlds besides words and sex. In the cold of a New York winter that seemed enough. I hoped I hadn’t booked passage on that unsinkable ship again.

But what did we really know about each other? *Three months*. “I express things people don’t want to hear,” she had told me. “Most people think something, I just blurt it out.”

Me, I was no good at filtering, or so I was diagnosed. All the signals come at once and when the wires get crossed I lose it. Inanimate objects are at risk: chairs, computer mice, printers that send out-of-bloody-cyan messages.

Our pasts were like an unfinished paint-by-numbers, neither of us keen to fill in much.

“One learns to be reserved when playing open-ended words,” her Scrabble voice tumbled into my thoughts again as we started our descent into Buffalo, a suggestive laugh following, waiting to add the twist to another of her rules. “Rule number six: The *re* words are great, but not all are good. Just because you can do something, doesn’t mean you can *redo* it.” Her voice dug further into my head. “*Recheat, replumb, reexpel*, but not *rekill, relick, rejimmy*. Don’t ask me why.”

Indeed. But what the hell was *remated*? To mate once and mate again? I'd like to see one instance where remated was ever used in a sentence. I felt like breaking the laptop over the seat in front of me.

After we landed, I took a taxi to Jewett Parkway, the return address on the letter, a set of steel chimes dinging gently on the veranda of a spacious century home in a leafy suburb near the Albright-Knox. The screen door was closed but with the main door half open I could hear the sound of a radio inside. I rapped out a quick hello. When no one answered, I sung out a louder hello. The woman answering wore a worn-out apron that hid an elegant, peach-coloured dress. Flour was smeared across her front. I was startled by how much she looked like Suzy, but there was no way she was Suzy's mother. If anything she was her twin.

After a short introduction, Suzy's double invited me in. The resemblance was striking, but her sexy stroll was more Rembrandt than Suzy's Modigliani. Over an iced tea, I told her I was Suzy's guy and she filled me in. I nodded at her offer of sandwiches and a tray of freshly baked buns.

As it turned out, Suzy's double was her sister, Dahlia, although they weren't twins. They weren't full sisters either Dahlia told me, having shared a mother but not a father. Suzy was older by a year.

Dahlia was very open about the Quest family history, and how their mother had gone missing four years ago. I eyed the wry sexiness in Dahlia's face as she spoke, more deliberate than Suzy and not as cerebral. It was easy to see Dahlia was not as angry at the world as Suzy.

"Mom worked at the Albright-Knox, walked to work every day, and raised the two of us after our fathers left," she told me. "Suzy and I were inseparable and knew every square inch of the gallery. The Lichtensteins, Bill Viola, Victor Vasarely. But she always had her sights on more. And then one day she left to work at a publisher's house in the Big Apple. A year later mom disappeared. I still can't believe how everyone vanished." The paint-by-numbers picture was being filled in with the thickest of brushes.

I nodded my puzzlement and asked about Suzy. If she had seen or heard from her lately.

“I haven’t seen her much since she left,” said Dahlia, “But she calls occasionally. She called the other day, said she had to go away, that someone had information about Mom. But she wouldn’t say more.” Dahlia rose to retrieve a letter. “And she said to give this to you... if you *happened to come by*.” Dahlia smiled approvingly. “Her exact words. It came special delivery. I tried calling her, but I think she may have lost her phone.”

Dahlia passed me the letter, the envelope crunched at the seal. “Did you read it?” I asked, not in an accusing way.

“No, I looked at it to see what it was, but I saw it was for you.”

I read the letter aloud: “Dear James, I can’t explain everything. But I have to see you. Dahlia will tell you where – a place we went on Sundays during school holidays. I’ll tell you more when I see you. XO Suzy.”

“Mysterious as ever,” said Dahlia, eyeing me as she refreshed my drink. “Anything wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I offered, not wanting to suggest something of which I had no idea. “One last thing,” I added. “Have you ever heard of *curare*?”

“*Curare*?” answered Dahlia, fidgeting over the word. “No, what is it?”

“Nothing, I was just wondering if you knew what it was.”

On Dahlia’s insistence, I freshened up, dowsing my head in a sink of warm water in the bathroom and combing back my rag of hair, all the raggier from a day of intrigue and travel. I started imagining what had happened, running through the possibilities that existed in the mystery crash course in which I was now enrolled. I had to admit I’d seen my fair share of crazy times, traipsing around half the country playing piano for The Replicants and the other half playing synth and sax with Fartlek, the wannabe pop band that had reformed from its disbanded remnants. But I never could have imagined this – a quest for Quest.

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