

# **COURAGE RESURRECTED**

**A novel by R. Scott Mackey**

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*For Mariah*



## Prologue

Pam Courage drove and drove and drove, a brilliant November mid-afternoon turning to dusk then dark. She made the same loop four times. Sacramento to Davis and back again. She'd driven more than two hundred miles, but clarity would not come. She usually thought best when she drove alone. Today, not so much.

How had everything become so screwed up so quickly? This was not a gradual buildup of events, or a perfect storm of random happenings, nothing that she could have predicted or seen coming. This was a two-ton anvil falling out of the sky and clobbering her. The meeting with Yuri had been a disaster. Ray? He'd upset her like never before.

Her cell phone rang on the passenger seat. Ray. Now the third time he had called, no doubt worried, maybe approaching frantic as the dinner hour had come and long since passed. No, let it go to voice mail. Ray. God dammit.

More than five hours had passed since she had surprised Dr. Susan Whitehead when she dropped in to her office unannounced. Pam had never been to a psychologist before, but Dr. Whitehead had helped others in her office. They talked only briefly, Pam too distracted to say much more than she'd fought with her husband in the morning, and problems at work had her distressed. Dr. Whitehead had encouraged her to talk more. Instead, Pam said she needed to think things through on her own. So she drove.

She would have to go home. She could not keep driving, avoiding the inevitable. No, this time she would merge onto Interstate 5 and go home. She owed it to herself and she owed it to Ray.

Just a couple of days ago she considered her life almost perfect. Great job. A good marriage. She thought about Sara and the joy she felt when she watched her daughter play tennis and soccer. Now she had the lead in the sixth grade play. A budding thespian. Was there anything that her twelve-year old daughter couldn't do? Pam had been the same way as a girl. Confident. Adventurous. Fearless. She smiled. Quickly the smile evaporated. Now here she was, her confidence shaken to its very core, everything she felt true and right turned upside down. Not in a million years would she have predicted this happening to her. She looked at her eyes in the rearview mirror and saw something almost animalistic—panic, fear and hopelessness.

Her hands on the steering wheel did not obey the direction from her weakening will as she flew past Sutterville Road, the exit leading home. Five miles later she exited at Meadowview Road, turned right on to Freeport Boulevard and drove past the tiny town of Freeport, where the road met the river and followed its windy route towards the delta. Here there were no streetlights, nothing but darkness and the narrow tunnel of illumination from her headlights.

The cell phone rang again.

“Shit.” Even without looking at it she knew it was Ray. But this time, rather than spurring her to drive on, the call convinced her to return home. Her grumbling stomach announced the hunger she’d been ignoring all afternoon.

She never drove down here, by the river, where she regularly read of cars plunging off the side into the cold waters, the bodies of drivers, passengers, men, women and children fished out by grim scuba divers. Though only ten miles from home, she felt in another world, a million miles away. A dark place, timeless, untouched by civilization. She turned up the heater to combat the increasing chill of the late fall evening.

She glanced in the rearview mirror again and noticed a truck following a couple of hundred feet back, its headlight higher and farther apart than those of a car. Had there been someone behind her when she started her aimless journey? Of course there had. She had been driving on some of the most traveled freeways and roads in Northern California, millions of vehicles passed over them each day. At any given moment there was sure to be someone—a car or a truck—right behind her. She’d been so lost in her thoughts all day that she never paused to think about the other cars around her; yet her subconscious seemed to have been at work because it told her that the truck behind her right now, shrouded in the black night, had been with her all day. She snorted at the idea and its improbability. She was getting tired and starting to imagine things.

Cold, hungry, and growing more afraid in the alien landscape, she looked for a side road or pullout so that she could turn around. About mile later she spotted the driveway leading to a house on the right side of the road. She slowed and flicked on her blinker. The truck behind her seemed to slow as well.

A wrought iron gate guarded the driveway, but there was enough space between it and the road for Pam to pull over and turn back towards the road at a ninety-degree angle. She looked to her right to make sure the lane heading back towards Sacramento was clear. She looked left to see the vehicle advancing on her. Advancing *at* her, its high beams blinding.

She reached down for the shifter to put it into reverse, but failed to engage the release button, leaving her car centered in the road. The truck was going to hit her. With little choice, she floored the accelerator to propel herself forward and out of harm’s way. The truck veered towards her new path.

Walter Heffner told police that night that he thought an airliner had crashed on the road in front of his house, the sound so deafening, the eruption of flames so huge that only an object that large moving that fast could explain it. By the time he put on his shoes and coat he saw what was left of a car straddling the center stripe of the two-lane country road, the heat from the fire so great that he could not get within a hundred feet. His eyes searched the now brightly lit landscape for a second vehicle or whatever might have caused such a conflagration. He looked up the road and down. Nothing but darkness. That seemed strange to him.

## Thirteen Years Later

November 11

one

“Why should I believe that you’ve changed?” Rubia asked the thick Hispanic man with the neck tattoos. She studied him, awaiting his response.

The man’s eyes moved slowly up from the table to look at her. “It changes you,” he said softly, putting his hand over his heart. “Ten years in prison can make you go one of two ways. You can either let it make you even harder. Or, you can choose to change, to be better, to walk away from the brutality all around you.”

To me, an ex-college professor turned private investigator, this man seemed sincere. I knew Rubia, who had grown up on the streets, in a world so much different from mine, might see him differently. I watched my former student to see how she would react.

The three of us sat at a small table inside the cramped offices of It’s My Life, or IML as it was usually called, the non-profit Rubia had founded after she quit running one of the most ruthless gangs in West Sacramento. By the time she had enrolled in my organizational communication class at Sacramento State University, two busts and a dozen tattoos later, she had gone straight. Then, as now, it was difficult for me to imagine this beautiful, petite Latina with the sad brown eyes and long black hair to be an ex-gangbanger. She possessed the street smarts, guile, and viciousness to run Los Modernos, the gang that ran the largest meth operation in the north state. IML’s goal was to steer kids away from gang life by focusing on school, sports, and other more productive activities. I had agreed to volunteer a few hours a week to help her, though I felt woefully inadequate for the task. Even here, interviewing a possible employee, I lacked the experience to know what would pass for street cred with teen and pre-teen kids in the poor, drug riddled streets of Sacramento. Ray Courage, clueless, middle-aged white guy.

“I will get back to you on your cell,” Rubia said after a long pause during which she appeared to battle her thoughts about Edgar Ruiz.

“Just so you know, I’ll take any pay, even minimum wage. For me it’s not about the money. I need to do what’s right and this is a place where I can make a difference.”

“Okay, Edgar, let me think about it for a day.”

“Thank you.”

After he left, I asked if she was going to hire him.

“Not sure. He might work out. Seems like he’s turned it around. I can relate to what he said about how you can go one of two directions once you’re inside. That’s exactly what I went through. So, he might be the right guy for the job.”

“You said that about the last two guys, the one who died from an overdose and the one who’s now back at Folsom Prison for murder.”

“Thank you, Little Mister Sunshine.”

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket to announce the arrival of an e-mail. I pulled out my phone and glanced at the subject and the sender: “You need to read this” from

Pam1111@blazermail.com. Probably junk mail. I returned the phone to my pocket. My thoughts drifted back and, reflexively, I sighed.

“Ray, are you going to tell me what’s going on with you?” Rubia asked.

“It’s November,” I said, finally answering truthfully the question she’d been asking all week. “I always get this way in November.”

“Pam.”

I nodded. November no longer brought tears, those had stopped a few years ago. It did bring heartache and memories, though usually good memories after so long. I couldn’t help but miss her, now thirteen years ago to this day, November 11, when she died in a horrific automobile accident. I missed so much about her—our bike rides in the park, laughing at the same stupid sitcoms, having a cup of coffee while we read the morning paper together, and mainly the time spent together with our daughter Sara. We were a close family, watching our daughter’s tennis matches and soccer games, our weekends consumed by her activities. We didn’t mind that at all. Mind it? Hell, we lived for it. Some of the other parents complained that they had no lives because of all the things they did for their children. Not us. We loved every minute of it. Sure, maybe it seemed like everything centered on Sara, but it brought all of us closer, sharing those times together. After the accident, when it was just my daughter and me, things became so different. Sara and I grew even closer, that closeness partially filling the void left by losing Pam.

“Get over it Ray. We’ve got too much shit to do here.”

Rubia. I appreciated that so much more than all the clichéd condolences everyone else offered. We worked for another hour, she making calls to set up meetings with a half dozen kids the following week while I created a spreadsheet of schools and contacts where we hoped to make presentations about IML.

“All right, I’m out of here,” she announced just after six o’clock. “I’ve got a hot date tonight so I need some time to get pretty.”

“What’s that involve, deciding which tattoos to reveal?”

“Ha, ha.”

After she left I took out my phone and opened the email from Pam1111, fully intending to delete it after a quick glance. Instead of some offer for an erection booster or the chance to aid a Nigerian princess, the message gave me an immediate chill:

*Ray,*

*How could you have done that to me 13 years ago? Me, the person you said you loved? Well, it didn’t work. I’m not dead and I am going to make you pay after all these years. Better look over your shoulder.*

*Pam*

Who could be so cruel to send me a message like this? Pam1111. My wife’s name and the day she died. November 11. The sender knew that today was the thirteenth anniversary of her death. Who disliked me so much that they would try to hurt me by sending such a cruel message? Only a few names came to mind and they didn’t fit. Lionel Stroud, my previous client. He and I had a few run-ins but in the end we parted without any lingering resentment. No, it wasn’t Stroud.

Then there was the young woman, the student, who accused me of sexual harassment when I was still teaching at Sacramento State. The subsequent investigation deemed her charges spurious

and she left the university disgraced. A few months later I left as well, unable to deal with the sideways glances and whispers when I approached a group of students or fellow professors. An exonerated man, but guilty in the court of public opinion solely on the basis of a false accusation. No, she didn't seem likely either. Both she and I paid for her lie, and it could be argued mine came at the steeper price. She seemed an unlikely suspect at best.

And what about the content of the message? It was bad enough that the sender tried to trick me into thinking Pam still lived. To suggest that I had been the one who killed her—or tried to kill her—went beyond cruel, the stuff of a deviant, someone who'd pull the wings off flies, lacerate cats, and torment widowers with false accusations of attempted murder.

I concluded the e-mail had been sent by a prankster. A mean-spirited prankster, but a prankster nonetheless. My finger hovered over the delete icon. I pulled it back and let the message stay, just in case.

A much-needed rain began to fall, the heavy drops plinking the top of my car as I approached it from the IML office. It hadn't rained this hard in a couple of years. Many of us in California wondered if the three-year drought had become the new normal, one of the consequences of global warming. Watching it through the window of my car made me feel good, as if the drought might be one less thing I'd have to worry about. My mind had already shifted from the e-mail to what to have for dinner when my cell phone vibrated again.

The muscles in my test tightened when I saw the message came from Pam1111. I opened it.

The body of the e-mail was blank, the message contained only an attachment. I debated the wisdom of opening the PDF labeled only "article," but my curiosity overcame my fear of infecting my phone with a virus. The *Sacramento Bee* article from thirteen years before recounted the fiery car accident that had killed my wife. At the bottom of the article someone had scrawled in ink:

*Nice try, Ray.*

*Pam*

My giddiness about the rain suddenly evaporated.