

Blood Test Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The story opens with Dr. Alex Delaware in court to see the final judgment against Richard Moody, a father who has been deemed unfit to spend time alone with his children. Alex is mostly retired but still takes only court-related cases and a few referrals from friends. Following the court case, Richard Moody meets Alex outside and pleads with him to change his recommendation. Alex refuses and Richard becomes violent so that Alex has to knock him to the ground in order to get away.

Alex is then called by a friend, Dr. Raoul Melendez-Lynch, to consult a child who is being held in an isolation room pending the beginning of treatment for cancer. The child is Woody Swopes and he is being raised by Mr. and Mrs. Swopes, though Alex eventually learns they are not actually his parents. The young woman introduced as Woody's sister, Nona Swopes, is actually his mother. When Mr. and Mrs. Swopes steal Woody from the hospital and take him away, Alex volunteers to go to the motel where the family is reportedly staying. There he finds blood and a short time later the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Swopes are discovered. Nona eventually tells Alex that she'd told her parents she was no longer going to masquerade as Woody's sister and a fight had erupted. Nona's boyfriend, Doug Carmichael, had killed the Swopes and dumped their bodies at Benedict Canyon.

Alex begins his quest to find Woody but Raoul is already in La Vista, the hometown of the family, with the idea that Woody is being held by a cult known as The Touch. Alex finds former movie stars, lawyers and psychologists among those populating the cult and eventually discovers that there's a great deal of drug, sex and even a murder to be attributed to the illicit and illegal actions of the cult. As the plot unfolds, Alex discovers the truth about Woody's parentage and then discovers that Nona's own father was actually the La Vista Sheriff. The situation thickens as Alex learns that Nona had had sex with Sheriff Houton and that the sheriff had been led to believe that he might be Woody's father. A showdown occurs as Alex finds Nona and Woody and tries to convince Nona that transferring Woody back to the hospital is the only way he'll survive. Her boyfriend, Doug Carmichael, appears on the scene and would have killed Alex except for Sheriff Houton's intervention. Nona, enraged over Houton shooting Doug, shoots the sheriff. Woody is returned to the hospital with a good prognosis, Nona is arrested as are those involved in The Touch, and Alex makes plans to meet his girlfriend in Hawaii.



Chapters 1 through 4

Chapters 1 through 4 Summary

In Chapter One, Dr. Alex Delaware is in the courtroom listening to the final judgment against a man named Richard Moody. Richard is being sued for divorce by his wife and has been deemed by Alex as unfit for visits with his children except under strict supervision. The judge agrees with Alex and gives Mrs. Moody full custody. Alex is summoned to the judge's chambers after court is adjourned where he tells the judge that he is mostly retired but does take on some court-related cases and some referrals from friends. Out in the parking lot, Alex is approached by Richard who pleads with him to tell the judge that Richard is capable of handling himself with the children. Alex tells Richard that he needs professional help and urges that he seek it out. Richard eventually becomes very angry and attacks Alex, who fights back and puts Richard on the ground in order to escape.

In Chapter Two, Alex arrives at home and spends time doing what he loves - feeding the fish in his koi pond. He says that he hadn't thought there was room in the steep lawn to create such a pond but that it had been done and he enjoys spending time there. Later, Alex receives a call from his answering service saying that Richard Moody had tried to reach him and that Dr. Raoul Melendez-Lynch had also tried to call. Alex calls the number Richard left and is connected to a switchboard at the Bedabye Motel. Richard apologizes but when Alex again refuses to tell the judge that Richard should be allowed to see his children, Richard grows abusive. Alex reaches Raoul and agrees to meet him the following morning.

In Chapter Three, Alex arrives at the Western Pediatric Medical Center where Raoul tells him about a five-year-old, Heywood Swopes who is called Woody by his family. Woody has Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and the treatment options are good but the family is hesitant. Raoul says that the Swopes are from a rural area called La Vista, that the father uses a lot of biological terms and blusters a lot while the mother is mousy and deferential. There's also a sister. Raoul says that the parents had initially agreed to have the treatment prescribed by Raoul but have now decided that they won't allow chemo despite the odds in Woody's favor. Raoul says that the change came immediately after a visit by a man and woman but says that Dr. Augie Valicroix may also have helped them change their minds. Raoul says he believes he can win the case if he takes the parents to court to order treatment but that he wants to avoid it.

In Chapter Four, Alex meets the sister, Nona Swopes, who is an attractive young woman. Alex then meets one of the nurses, Ellen Beckwith, who learns that Alex had been instrumental in helping set up the isolation units used in the treatment of cancer patients. The units are aimed at keeping the children out of contact with contaminants that would spark infections and it's Alex's insight into helping the children adjust to this sterile environment that made the unit possible. He also encounters Beverly Lucas, a social worker he's known before. Beverly gives insight into the family, saying that the



mother is quiet whenever the father is around, the father is blustery and never stops talking, and Nona hates both of them. Alex goes inside the cubicle occupied by Woody and plays part of a game of checkers with him though it's noted that Woody tires easily and they quit before the game is over.

Chapters 1 through 4 Analysis

The judge asks Alex if Richard Moody might be capable of trying to kill his wife and Alex says he hopes not but doesn't discount the fact that Richard is capable of violence. What's interesting is that Alex, in his belief that Richard might be willing and able to see the error of his ways, doesn't report it when Richard accosts him in the parking lot after court.

The relationships among the Swopes are complicated from the beginning. Mr. and Mrs. Swopes are introduced and believed to be Woody's parents. However, it will later be revealed that Mr. Swopes fathered the child by Nona, the woman he has raised as a daughter. In fact, Nona is not Mr. Swopes' biological child. She is the daughter of Mrs. Swopes and a law enforcement official in La Vista, Sheriff Houton. Mrs. Swopes had become pregnant about the same time Sheriff Houton's wife had been pregnant and had eventually passed the child off as Mr. Swopes' daughter. Mr. Swopes apparently believes Nona to be his biological child and he treats her as something of a science experiment from the time she is about twelve. He diligently records their sexual encounters and the time of her pregnancy as he had done with horticulture experiments. Nona, fourteen at the time of Woody's birth, has lived as his sister these five years but will soon exert her authority.

Raoul immediately assumes that either Augie's actions or the words of the two mysterious visitors - who turn out to be members of the cult known as The Touch - were responsible for the Swopes' decision to take Woody out of the hospital. In truth, it seems that they may have simply come to believe the doctors weren't acting in the best interests of Woody and that they knew better. Raoul's personality is such that he would never believe that his actions or bedside manner could possibly have had anything to do with the situation.



Chapters 5 through 9

Chapters 5 through 9 Summary

In Chapter Five, Alex arrives at the hospital the following morning to find Raoul griping at a group of hospital personnel, including Beverly Lucas and Ellen Beckwith. The third person in the group is Dr. Augie Valicroix who Alex has yet to meet. After Alex comes inside, he learns that someone - apparently Woody's mother - posed as a laboratory technician and took Woody from his room and then from the hospital. Raoul is vocal in his accusations, saying that someone should have checked to know that Woody wasn't scheduled for tests and that they should have known that he wouldn't call for any tests at this stage anyway. Augie speaks up for the nurses, saying that they are nurses and that it's unfair for Raoul to expect that they think "like cops." Raoul rounds on him and yells some more. Raoul says that they've checked the motel, that the clerk was "uncooperative" but says that the car is still in the parking lot though the family hasn't been seen all day. Alex volunteers to go to the motel where they're staying, The Sea Breeze Motel, to check on them and to try to talk to the parents. Beverly agrees to go along as one of the few people who seems to have made any real headway connecting with the parents.

When he arrives, the clerk is uncooperative until Alex says that it seems he'll have to call the police for a welfare check, and then reluctantly agrees to take his key to the room. He tells Alex that if there's no one in the room, Alex will have to leave and Alex agrees. Inside Room 15, they find disarray and what appears to be a large blood stain. Alex goes for a telephone and calls his friend, Detective Milo Sturgis.

In Chapter Six, Milo arrives and says that he's already made contact with the police in La Vista, a man named Sheriff Houton, who promises to watch for any of the Swopes family. Milo looks over the room and finds a matchbook with "Adam and Eve Messenger Service" written on it. Beverly says that one of the nurses had told her that Nona Swopes had a job with that messenger service and that she'd thought it strange that Nona would get a job when the family would apparently be in town only a short time. Milo, in looking over the room, suggests that the disarray was caused by someone who is angry and asks Alex if it's possible that the anger was sparked by the situation - a parent with a desperately ill child and perhaps worry over the decision to take him out of the hospital. Alex agrees it's possible. But they both know that the blood stain is not a good sign.

In Chapter Seven, Milo and Alex go to Adam and Eve Messenger Service. They're met by a male receptionist who refuses to allow them access to the owner, Jan Rambo, without a warrant. Milo explains that they'd need a warrant if they were looking for evidence but that they only want to talk to Ms. Rambo and that refusing that is impeding a police investigation which means the receptionist will be arrested. He goes through a door and returns with permission for the two men to enter. Ms. Rambo begins the conversation by saying that her employees are messengers, that there's no sex



involved and that what her employees do with their own time is not her concern. Milo explains that Nona Swopes' family is missing and that he wants whatever information she has on Nona. Ms. Rambo produces the employee file, says that the girl's name is Annona Blossom Swope, and that she'd claimed Western Pediatric Medical Center as her home address. Ms. Rambo says that she'd believed Nona had an allure that would make her popular with the customers. There are photos in the file and Ms. Rambo says that Nona had only been employed for a week. Milo asks who Nona worked with and Ms. Rambo says her partner had been Doug Carmichael. Pressed, she presents Milo with Doug's file as well and Milo and Alex leave with both files.

In Chapter Eight, Alex calls the number on Doug Carmichael's file but gets an answering machine. The two men then go for lunch. During the course of the conversation, it's revealed that Milo is gay and lives with a man named Ricky. Alex discusses his life with his girlfriend, Robin, who is out of the country working on a deal to have a guitar design mass produced.

In Chapter Nine, Milo tells Alex that he can't continue to spend time working on the Swopes case because there is no real evidence of a homicide. He is working on a rape case involving a man who puts feces on the stomachs of his victims after the crime and says that he has to get back to that investigation. Alex returns to the hospital to tell Raoul what he'd found at the motel. Alex says that the police have documented the room but that the investigation is at a standstill unless bodies are discovered. The other catalyst that could create additional investigation is if Raoul decides to press the issue of the boy being taken from the hospital, an act that puts his life at risk. Raoul says that would create a media circus but that he's done it before. He cites another case in which a child needed blood but her parents, Jehovah's Witnesses, refused. Raoul says that in that case, the parents didn't want to fight the system and readily gave in under a court order. He's not certain the same would be true in this instance.

As Alex is leaving the hospital, he encounters Augie who says that he knows Raoul blames Augie for having changed the Swopes' minds about the cancer treatment for Woody. He suggests that Raoul's manner may have done more harm than anything else. He says that Raoul, with his aloofness, doesn't understand why anyone might be willing to get close to a family or a patient. He then cites the fact that he doesn't like to "gossip," and excuses himself. Alex goes home, finds it's too late to feed the koi, and goes inside with plans to read before bedtime.

Chapters 5 through 9 Analysis

Raoul's personality is truly a problem with all his colleagues. Beverly at one point tells Alex that she wants to quit Raoul's department but that her supervisor won't allow her to transfer without finding someone willing to replace her. Beverly is, in fact, a mess and has had a sexual relationship with Augie which has left her emotions in tatters.

Augie is an interesting character. He doesn't conform to what Raoul wants or expects and doesn't really seem to care very much. He dresses the part of a hippie and Alex



notes that one time he has on a psychedelic shirt and another time is wearing a Grateful Dead t-shirt. This is hardly appropriate doctor attire but may be more acceptable given the fact that it's a pediatric hospital. Another interesting aspect of Augie's personality is that he's a drug addict. When he's talking to Alex after Woody's disappearance, Alex notes that Augie is constantly wiping his nose, a sign of a cocaine user that is later verified by Beverly as accurate. It's interesting that Raoul is completely negative on Augie because of Augie's personality but doesn't see the drug use, or if he does see it happening, doesn't see it as a problem. Raoul apparently has the power to fire Augie and it seems he should have paid enough attention to the situation to figure out the drug use issue. However, it's probably because of Raoul's self-absorption that this passes unnoticed.



Chapters 10 through 13

Chapters 10 through 13 Summary

In Chapter Ten, Alex goes outside the next morning to find a note and a dead rat on his porch. From the note, he's certain it's from Richard Moody and he calls the attorney who had represented Mrs. Moody, a lawyer named Mal Worthy. Before Alex can speak, Mal says, "What color was yours?" indicating that he had also gotten a rat from Richard. He says that Mrs. Moody escaped Richard's hatred this time, that they have no real information for the police, and that the police probably won't follow up at this point. Alex calls on Milo with the story and Milo promises to send an officer to the Bedabye Motel where Richard is staying with a warning to stay away from Alex and Mal Worthy.

That night, Alex's answering service notifies Alex that Beverly Lucas is trying to reach him. He takes the call and she says that she really needs to talk to Alex. They agree to meet at a club called The Unicorn, though Alex hated the ambiance of the place. Beverly says that she knows that Alex is aware that a man and woman visited with Mr. and Mrs. Swopes just before they took Woody out of the hospital, and that she also knows that Augie had claimed he didn't know the man and woman. She says that she overheard Augie calling them by name and that she'd struggled with whether she should tell Alex this piece of information. Beverly says that Augie claims to have visited the retreat where The Touch is located, that he'd called it "peaceful" and had indicated an interest in that kind of lifestyle. Beverly says that she doesn't think there was any "collusion" between Augie and the couple with regard to talking the Swopes into leaving the hospital. She also says that Augie has made a habit of sleeping with female members of the families of sick children and that in this case he'd slept with Nona Swopes. Beverly then rushes out of the restaurant. Alex quickly pays and follows, catching up with her a short distance away. He asks what's wrong and she says that she and Augie had carried on an affair for about six months. She also confirms Alex's suspicions that Augie is using drugs and says the use has recently escalated. Alex can see that she's hurting over the ended affair and urges that she move on, saying that she's too good for someone of Augie's ilk. He walks her to the car and they part ways.

In Chapter Eleven, Milo manages to have a little time to advance the investigation in the Swopes case. Alex goes with Milo to interview Doug Carmichael and tells Milo what he's recently learned about Augie. Milo says that he'll interview Augie next. Doug is the son of a congressman and fears that his involvement in the Adam and Eve Messenger Service will raise his father's anger. Doug says that he and Nona had been paired up only a few times. He says that on one occasion, they'd been hired to go to a party of older men and that Nona had deviated from the script, putting her hands into Doug's pants and arousing him. She'd then moved to one of the men, doing the same, and the situation had been very uncomfortable. Doug says that he'd refused to work with her again after that time.



Milo goes to the hospital next and talks to Augie. Augie says that he'd visited The Touch's retreat in La Vista once, that it was peaceful and that there was no need for police presence, and that he knew the man and woman who had stopped in at the hospital only as Barry and Delilah because members of the cult don't use surnames. Augie doesn't deny having had sex with an array of women, saying that it isn't illegal and that he'll continue to do so.

In Chapter Twelve, Alex calls a friend for background about The Touch. He learns that a former high-powered attorney named Norman Matthews is at the head of the organization, though Matthews now calls himself Noble Matthias. The friend tells Alex that the movement is relatively small, that they avoid public notice and remain secretive because of these practices. The friend also notes that, though they might be involved in Woody's disappearance from the hospital, it seems unlikely because it would bring a great deal of unwanted public attention.

Mal Worthy calls Alex with the news that Mrs. Moody found an eviscerated dog at her house though she managed to clean it up before the children saw it. He also says that one of the Moody children had run away. The boy was found unhurt but his mother is frantic lest he try it again. Alex agrees to see the children at Mal's office. He arrives to find Mrs. Moody, her boyfriend Carlton Conley, and her two children, April and Ricky, all looking as if they'd been dressed for church. He meets first with April and finds that the three-year-old is organized and largely untroubled, despite the violence of her parents' divorce. Ricky is angry and is obviously listening to his father's ideas of who is in the wrong, therefore is blaming Mrs. Moody, Conley, Mal Worthy and Alex for the situation. After talking for awhile with Ricky, Alex tells Mrs. Moody that she has to take control of the situation, that she has to be the parent her son needs her to be, but knows that she probably won't be able to fulfill that role.

After the visit, Mal says that he's told Mrs. Moody she should leave the area and that she, Conley and the children are going to follow that advice. Alex then asks Mal about Norman Matthews. Mal says that Norman had taken on some high-profile cases and was making a name for himself as a divorce lawyer. He'd just won a huge settlement for a woman when the husband arrives with a gun, shooting both his wife and Matthews. The wife had died but Matthews survived.

In Chapter Thirteen, Milo arrives very early the following morning and says that he'd come with the news that the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Swopes had been discovered in Benedict Canyon along with the body of a third victim, a woman, who has obviously been dead a couple of years. As Milo and Alex talk about the case, Alex says that Beverly's opinion can't be trusted because of her involvement with Augie and Augie's involvement with Nona. They talk about where Nona and Woody might be and how they might have gotten there. Finally, Alex says that the other possibility is that Nona and Woody are simply buried somewhere else, a fact that Milo knows but hasn't voiced. Milo says that both Mr. and Mrs. Swopes were killed somewhere other than the motel room and their bodies dumped. After Milo leaves, Robin calls and they talk for awhile though Alex doesn't tell her any of the recent events. They make tentative plans to meet in Hawaii after she completes her work.



Chapters 10 through 13 Analysis

Doug is the product of an abusive father, though this doesn't come out until much later in the story. For now, Alex realizes that Doug is determined to act in self-destructive manners where his father's mandates are concerned. He says that his father wants him to finish college and become a part of Carmichael Oil, a career choice that holds no interest for Doug. He is also caught up in vitamins and exercise and will later convince Nona that these healthy choices are all that's needed to cure Woody. Doug tells Alex and Milo about Nona's overt behavior but that will also be revealed later as false. Alex suspects that Doug had hoped for this kind of behavior from Nona but hadn't gotten it and so made it up.

At this point, Doug has been presented only as a very minor character and the reader is being led to believe that Doug's role is completed. However, it will soon be revealed that Doug is the person responsible for the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Swopes and that he is mentally deranged as a result of his childhood of abuse. He will eventually tell Alex where and how he killed Mr. and Mrs. Swopes, first hitting them in their motel room which causes the blood stains found in the room, then taking them to another location where he used covering noises to shoot them before dumping them in Benedict Canyon. Doug says that he'd always planned to kill his mother and put her body there because she'd been a willing accomplice in his father's abuse, having never stopped it. He says that the body discovered there isn't that of his mother because she died of natural causes before he could carry out a plan to murder her. However, the body is Doug's victim. He says he'd eventually come across a woman who'd seduced him and had bore a striking resemblance to those he hated.



Chapters 14 through 17

Chapters 14 through 17 Summary

In Chapter Fourteen, Raoul's lab assistant calls Alex with the news that Raoul is in jail in La Vista. Alex calls on Milo for help, learns that Milo hadn't made a trip to La Vista as planned because of a break in an on-going rape case, and talks to Milo's partner, Delano Hardy, instead. Del agrees to make some phone calls and tells Alex later with the story of what happened. He says that Raoul had gone to La Vista, had found the retreat manned by The Touch, and had rammed the gates in an attempt to break in because he's certain Woody is being held there. Del says Raoul will be released if someone will pick him up. Alex agrees and sets out on the drive.

In Chapter Fifteen, Alex makes the drive to La Vista, parks in front of the courthouse and goes inside. He meets Sheriff Raymond Houton who agrees to let Alex meet with Raoul. The sheriff warns Alex prior to the meeting that Raoul is bruised and bloodied, having been in a fight with members of The Touch after ramming their gate. Alex asks Houton if there's any chance Nona and Woody are at The Touch's compound. He says that La Vista is a small town that the children were both raised there and that no one would hurt either of them. They then enter the jail and Houton tells Raoul that he's being released to Alex's custody provided he agrees to leave town. Raoul refuses and says that he won't leave because he's certain that Nona and Woody are being held by members of The Touch. Alex asks for time alone with Raoul and Raoul says that he won't give up on Woody until he sees the boy's dead body. Alex tries to convince him that he's on the wrong track but Raoul refuses to budge.

Houton says that he's going to get Raoul a lawyer. Raoul refuses but Houton ignores him. In Chapter Sixteen, Houton retains a retired attorney named Ezra Maimon to represent Raoul. Ezra goes into Raoul's cell and remains there for some time before telling Houton that he might have hit upon a solution. Ezra says that Raoul has agreed to leave town if someone else will go to the retreat manned by The Touch and search for Woody and Nona. Houton calls Matthias who agrees to the visit and Alex agrees to conduct the search. Houton drives stops at the gate to the compound, walking the rest of the way to the houses which were formerly a monk's retreat. Alex talks with Matthias who says that the two members of The Touch, Barry and Delilah, had visited the Swopes in the hospital only because they were already in the city, were being neighborly and had offered sympathy in the form of fresh fruits. Alex sees Barry who is a former psychologist. He also recognizes a movie star. Alex talks with the two who say they'd visited the Swopes in the hospital and both say the Swopes were appreciative of the gifts of fresh fruit but that there'd been no talk of taking Woody out of the hospital.

In Chapter Seventeen, Alex finishes his conversations with Matthias and the others and is then granted access to wander the grounds. He finds nothing but had not expected to. He returns with Houton to the jail and Raoul agrees to leave after writing a check for fines and damages. Houton says that he'll have Raoul's car fixed and returned to him.



While Alex is waiting for Raoul to be released, he talks with Houton. Looking on a map on the wall, Alex asks if it's possible that members of The Touch are coming and going by an alternate route. Houton says the road in question was built by an oil company that went bust and the road is closed off.

Alex and Raoul leave town headed back to Las Angeles and Alex stops to buy food to eat in the car though Raoul sleeps without eating. Back in the city, Raoul demands to be dropped at the hospital though Alex says he's in no shape to return to work and encourages him to go home first. Alex drops Raoul and sees Beverly who is obviously distraught. Beverly says that Augie has been giving her grief ever since Milo talked to him. She says that Augie had come on to her and that when she rebuffed his attempts, he'd said that Raoul had something on him and would soon terminate Augie's fellowship. Beverly convinces Alex to go with her to Augie's apartment where he asks a guard to let them in. They find that Augie isn't home and the place is a mess. Beverly wants to call the police, saying that Augie never leaves his apartment but Alex says there's no reason to call the police. They leave the apartment together.

Chapters 14 through 17 Analysis

Alex says that his visit to the retreat manned by The Touch is eerie in that the entire situation seems staged. In fact, it is. Alex will later return to the compound under cover of darkness to find that there's an armed guard at the gate and that those inside the compound are engaged in illicit group sex and taking copious amounts of drugs. The members of The Touch are wealthy and seem to have escaped from some sort of hectic lifestyle. They put forth the image of a group of quiet, introspective people living in a typical communal community. They apparently grow a great deal of their own food and are apparently living a very holistic lifestyle. The appearance and the reality don't really go together because those who engage in such elaborate drug lifestyles are seldom up to the level of energy necessary to keep up the front these people are presenting. It's left to the reader to decide the feasibility and significance.

Augie's obvious anger over Milo's questioning makes it seem that he has something to hide. In fact, Augie is tied up with the members of The Touch, though he's insisting that he's been there only one time and that one visit was an effort to know what the group stood for. However, Augie is helping maintain the group's viable drug trade as their person inside the hospital. He's also apparently feeding his habit. The problem Augie faces is that he doesn't have the self-discipline to maintain his façade. He's obviously doing drugs and his work is bound to suffer because of it. He's also going to become greedy and that greed will be what prompts his death.



Chapters 18 through 21

Chapters 18 through 21 Summary

In Chapter Eighteen, Alex becomes sick with the flu. He dreams he's in a hailstorm but wakes to realize that someone is pelting his house with bullets. He hears a cry from outside and a thud, then a car starting before silence. He calls Milo but reaches Del who promises to get Milo and come right over. Alex goes outside and finds several cans of gas and Richard Moody, dead in the koi pond. The fish are nibbling at the wreckage of his face and Alex tries to wave them away but they return. Milo and Del arrive with sirens going and Milo takes Alex inside. There, they discuss who might have been responsible. Alex tells Milo about Conley who he says might have been angry enough to kill Richard Moody. They discuss the fact that Moody might have been about to torch Alex's house when Conley finds and shoots him. Another possibility is that someone was aiming to kill Alex and that Richard happened to be there. Milo contacts the others involved in the Moody case and learns that Richard had already set two fires and had more gas in his truck, meaning he was probably about to set more after Alex's house. Milo says of all the people Alex had encountered over the past few days, he was leaning toward Augie Valcroix as the only one who could have gone so far as to plan to kill Alex and to have killed Richard by mistake. Milo says that he's about to have to leave the state on the rape case he's working and that he'll return in a few days. He suggests that Alex stay somewhere else and Alex agrees to check into a hotel. Milo's parting piece of advice is to stay out of the Swopes investigation as that might be the catalyst for this attempt on Alex's life.

Alex checks into the Bel-Air Hotel and sleeps a lot, getting past the flu. He picks up a paper the following day and finds a small story about a car accident and the sole victim, Augie Valcroix. The location of the crash means that Augie could have been headed to or from La Vista at the time of the wreck. Alex knows that Milo could be right, that he could be in danger because of his interaction with the Swopes case. Woody also knows that Woody could still be alive and that he doesn't want to sit and wait for another attempt on his life.

In Chapter Nineteen, Alex calls Ezra Maimon and arranges to meet him at an Oceanside restaurant called Anita's. As Alex is preparing to leave, he learns from Mal that the Moody children aren't doing well but says that he's too involved in the case to see them again and urges that Mal find someone else. He meets Ezra and they order food while talking. Ezra says that the Swopes were hermits with little interaction with the community. He then tells the story of what happened to create that situation. Ezra says that Mr. Swopes had been certain that he could raise a rare fruit tree, the Cherimoya, given the local climate and that he could become rich from the endeavor. He buys land, gets seedlings, works on an orchard and sells the idea to fruit buyers in the area. It takes ten years for the first trees to come to fruit and a freak storm brings in frosty temperatures that kill most of the trees and cause the fruit to drop off the rest. Mr. and Mrs. Swopes work to save what they can but there's nothing left at the end of the freak



storm. After that, Mr. Swopes becomes a hermit and takes his family into seclusion with him. Mrs. Swopes and Nona are sometimes seen in town shopping, but not often.

Ezra also answers questions about The Touch. He says that he'd believe that Matthias is a swindler but not a murderer. Ezra says that Nona had worked at the retreat for part of a summer and that he doesn't know what had happened, but that there were "snickers around town" after that. Ezra says that Nona, from the time she was about twelve, exuded promiscuity. He relates an incident in which Nona arrived at his house one day and made lewd gestures and comments aimed at seducing Ezra. Ezra says all this seductive behavior was tempered by anger. Ezra invites Alex to stop by his house and see his own exotic plants. Alex accepts.

In Chapter Twenty, Alex follows Ezra and realizes that they've taken the road Sheriff Houton had said was built - and closed - by an oil company. Ezra's drive is identified by a sign that reads "Rare Fruit and Seed Company." He takes Alex to the greenhouse where he explains that he makes an income raising and selling rare fruits and seeds. He then takes Alex inside where he gives him a sample of a Cherimoya. Alex is taken with the texture and taste. He says that he wants to check out the Swopes place as he leaves and Ezra gives him directions but warns that there's a locked gate with barbed wire. He suggests Alex pick up tools from Ezra's shed before he leaves, and Alex collects a crowbar and bolt cutters. As Alex is preparing to leave, Ezra reveals that Sheriff Houton once owned some nearby land but that he'd sold it off after his daughter, Marla, committed suicide by hanging herself from a tree on the property. Alex does the math and realizes that Marla and Nona would be around the same age. Ezra says the two girls had moved in different circles, Nona with a wild bunch and Marla spending most of her time alone, reading.

In Chapter Twenty-One, Alex finds the house and cuts open the chain holding the gate closed. The house is all but falling down and he stumbles on a board on the porch, noting dry rotted places as well. Alex remembers how Ezra had turned on the lights to his own greenhouse and goes to that spot at the Swopes' house where he finds a breaker box and flips switches. He locates the greenhouse lights but finds the lights to the house are not working. Alex goes to the greenhouse and finds there's an array of horrible plants. These range from huge Venus flytraps to poisonous plants that are obviously working as evidenced by the dead rodents at their base. The fruit trees are twisted and gnarled as is the fruit and Alex realizes that Mr. Swopes was carrying on bizarre experiments here, contrary to the fact that his neighbors believe he is completely out of the growing business.

Outside the greenhouse, Alex turns his attention to the house. He goes to the back door and finds a padlock. The hasp gives easily from the weight of his crowbar and he goes inside with his flashlight. He begins searching for clues as to where Nona and Woody might be. He finds that Woody's room has posters of superheroes on the walls and a toy box. Nona's room has perfumes and lotions covering the top of a dresser. There are boxes of things in Mr. and Mrs. Swopes' room and the clothing is drab and outdated. Alex finds an attic and goes up where he discovers a makeshift library. He finds several volumes of handwritten ledgers, obviously the work of Mr. Swopes. Alex reads and



discovers a painstakingly detailed account of his work with the orchard. Then comes the volume containing newspaper accounts of the storm that had cost the Swopes their orchard. Soon after, he begins to detail a new variety, "a. zingiber." Alex searches the bookshelves for some other mention of this variety but finds none. Then he realizes what he's reading, takes several of the volumes with him and leaves the house.

Chapters 18 through 21 Analysis

As Ezra talks about the personalities of the family members prior to Woody's diagnosis of cancer, he sees what effect that diagnosis had on the family. He notes that Mr. Swopes is a hermit prior to that and that he becomes a braggart and loud when confronted by the hospital staff. Alex notes that the loss of the orchard also explains the reaction of the Swopes family upon learning that Woody has cancer. The parents had been faced with a situation in which they lost everything they'd worked for and had no control over the situation or the losses. Alex believes that they probably reacted the same way when they'd been confronted with the diagnosis.

Alex doesn't reveal what connection he makes with the new variety detailed in Mr. Swopes' ledgers but the reader later realizes that this is Nona. Mr. Swopes realizes that Nona begins her period at age twelve and begins a studious documentary of her emerging fertility. He doesn't impregnate her for more than a year but makes an entry that details that event as if he were pollinating a particular plant. This information offers up clues of what's to come but still doesn't solve the mystery of Woody's disappearance.



Chapters 22 through 28

Chapters 22 through 28 Summary

In Chapter Twenty-Two, Alex says that he hadn't given any credence to the fact that Woody might actually have been kidnapped by members of The Touch, but that he's now concerned that he might have been mistaken. He travels to the compound, finds a place to park well away from the gate and finds an armed guard at the gate. He makes a hissing noise and when the man sticks his arm through the gate, waving the gun around, Alex grabs his arm and puts him in a choke hold until he passes out. Alex then uses the man's clothes to tie him up and goes on to the inner part of the compound. He gets the opportunity to watch a group of people through a window. They are apparently at Matthias's command and he calls names, has them take snorts of cocaine and then engage in sex, sometimes with Matthias and sometimes paired with someone else. Alex wanders through other rooms using keys he'd taken from the armed guard at the gate. He finds little until he finds a bookshelf that looks out of place and finds a secret compartment under it. There isn't room for a child to hide there but Alex does find a manila envelope which he slips into his shirt and a large cache of cocaine. The gathering is breaking up and he watches as some pass near him, most still naked, until he finds an opportunity to run away.

In Chapter Twenty-Three, Alex knows that he has a great deal of information to share with Milo and prepares to head home. He is driving with his lights off when he sees another car, headed another direction, also without lights. Noting the car to be a sports car and that evidence from the scene when Richard Moody was shot indicating a sports car was used for the getaway, Alex follows the car at a distance. They arrive at a chain link fence but Alex soon realizes that the car had driven through a gap in the fence and he follows into the abandoned area of Carmichael Oil Company, the place Sheriff Houton had told Alex about. Alex watches as a man goes into a trailer, stays for awhile, and then leaves. Alex goes to the trailer door and knocks, then enters and finds Nona there, putting away the supplies that had been brought in by the man, who turns out to be Doug Carmichael. Nona tries to fight Alex initially, using a knife and her fingernails, then promises sexual favors if he'll leave. Nona says that Woody is in the bedroom and Alex checks on him, discovering that the child's temperature is high. Alex tries to reason with Nona about Woody's condition and he tells her that he knows all about the situation that led to Woody's birth. Nona tells more than what Alex had read in the journals, including that she'd been treated brutally during her stay away from home upon Woody's birth. She also tells Alex that she'd decided to exert her parental rights after Woody's diagnosis and that's when her parents had been killed.

In Chapter Twenty-Four, Doug Carmichael walks into the trailer with a gun and an axe. He now says that he'd made up the story about Nona's actions during their job at Adam and Eve Messenger Service in order to throw Milo and Alex off the trail. He admits to having killed Mr. and Mrs. Swopes, saying that they'd not been willing to hear Nona's need to claim Woody as her son and that he'd hit them both at the motel then killed



them and dumped their bodies. He says the other body found there was also his victim. He then tells Alex that it would have been better if he'd actually killed Alex at his house when he'd shot at him there, because that would have been less painful for Alex.

In Chapter Twenty-Five, Doug tells Alex that he's going to kill him and that Alex can run if he wants. Just then Sheriff Houton tells Doug that Doug can't shoot Alex in cold blood and orders that he put the gun down. Doug refuses and Houton shoots him, though careful to only graze Doug rather than take a killing shot. Doug drops the gun but holds to the axe. Nona runs from the trailer and is hysterical at the situation. Doug swings the axe at Alex and Houton shoots him in the head, killing him. Nona retrieves Doug's gun and now confronts Houton. She begins to taunt him and it's soon evident that Houton believes he fathered Woody. He tries to deny the accusations made by Nona about their sexual relationships but can't make it sound believable. Finally, Nona tells Houton that she'd told Houton's daughter Marla about their sexual encounters and that Marla had committed suicide the following day. The situation escalates and Nona shoots Houton, killing him, but gives the gun over to Alex without a struggle. Alex uses Houton's radio to summon help.

In Chapter Twenty-Six, Alex meets with Matthias. He demands one hundred, fifty thousand dollars or says he will turn information over to the police about the sex and drugs at the compound. He goads Matthias into admitting that he'd ordered Augie's murder and that a branch from an apple tree had been used to mash the gas pedal to cause the car to crash with the body inside. Matthias refuses to pay up and orders several of his followers to beat up Alex when choppers and police converge. Alex is wearing a wire and police say the confession of Matthias to the murder charge will be much more effective than their case involving the illegal drugs.

In Chapter Twenty-Seven, Alex watches as Nona spends a few minutes with Woody under the watchful eye of a jail matron. Alex says Woody's prognosis is good and the matron takes Nona away, apparently back to jail. In chapter twenty-eight, Alex goes to Raoul's lab but discovers that any friendship he may have felt for the man is dead. He knows that he's soon to be vacationing in Hawaii with Robin and leaves the hospital.

Chapters 22 through 28 Analysis

Doug refers to Nona as his "sister" and indicates that they'd had a strictly non-physical relationship. This seems incredible, given Nona's propensity to seduce men but it may be true. Doug says that he'd found Nona alone in the woods and crying during a summer when Doug had been forced by his father to work in the oil business. He says that's how he'd known where the trailer was for Nona to use as a hiding place. According to Doug, he and Nona had forged a friendship so that he looked forward to summers on the oil drilling property and that he'd known the truth of Woody's birth. It seems that Doug has come to believe that he, Nona and Woody are a family unit and that the three of them are going to live happily ever after. Alex plays into that fantasy for as long as he can, buying time to try to figure out a way to escape.



Sheriff Houton apparently becomes involved in the situation because of the guilt he feels toward Nona and Woody. He seems to have been seeking ways to keep Nona and Woody safe from prying eyes and expects that Alex would have been looking for them on the night he breaks up the encounter between Alex and Doug. Houton says that he'd been notified by Milo that Alex had been the target of a shooting and was now missing, and that he'd come looking for Alex because of that notification. Nona continues to taunt Houton, saying that she never had a blood test but that Woody might be his child.

While Alex is talking with Matthias, he learns the secret of how Nona came to be dismissed from her summer job with The Touch. Ezra had said there were whispers after Nona was fired but that he wasn't sure what had happened. Matthias says that he'd caught Nona with one of the older men of the retreat. Apparently, Matthias didn't allow this kind of situation without his approval and he sent Nona away.



Characters

Alex Delaware

A psychologist who becomes involved in a series of adventures after a child is taken from the hospital against medical advice. Alex is serious about his profession and believes in his ability to help people. He is thirty-five and has made a series of good investments so that he no longer holds open a regular practice and sees patients only as referrals from the legal system and some friends. Alex becomes the target for two killers at the same time which ends in one of them killing the other. While he knows that he should remain in hiding as the police work on the case, he finds himself unable to do so and begins an investigation of his own. Following leads he discovers, he comes to find out the truth about the situation and learns about the parentage of the various characters at the heart of the story.

Alex has a girlfriend who is away at the time of the events of this story and is apparently on the verge of making a serious commitment to that relationship. Alex seems to be able to connect with an array of people and he has friends in all walks of life. He is non-judgmental of others as evidenced by his ability to be friends with a doctor who is hated by most of his colleagues. Alex doesn't take things at face value which is necessary for the solving of this mystery.

Nona Swopes

Presented as the older sister of Woody, she is actually his mother. Her full name is Annona Blossom Swope and she is named for her father's horticulture enterprise. Nona is described as having been a sexual youngster though she is also very outwardly angry. Alex eventually discovers that she was raped by Mr. Swope - who she believes to be her father - from the time she is about thirteen. The rapes become a form of habit and she is pregnant at somewhere around fourteen. She is sent away to have the child though the neighborhood is told that she is being sent to boarding school.

A neighbor says she seems quiet and reserved upon her return though it's also noted that she is overtly and continually sexual with no hesitation toward inappropriate advances. Nona is nineteen at the time Woody is in the hospital and it's while she's watching her son in the hospital that she comes to the conclusion that she has to exert her claims as his mother. She tells Mr. and Mrs. Swope of her intention and they refuse but are killed by Doug Carmichael. Nona takes Woody away after the deaths of her parents and is taking care of him at an abandoned oil drilling site. By the time Alex finds her, she has become increasingly concerned for Woody and would probably have agreed to let Alex take the child back to the hospital if not for Doug's interference. As the story comes to a close, she is being held in jail.



Raoul Melendez-Lynch

A physician and researcher who is handling Woody's treatment. Raoul is self-serving and rude, believing himself incapable of making wrong decisions. The result is that he is outwardly pushy and drives people away with this attitude. Raoul does, however, have Woody's best interests at heart and drives a great distance in the belief that he can find the boy and force him to return to the hospital for treatment.

Woody Swope

Named Heywood Swope, he is a child of five when it's discovered that he has Non-Hodgkins' Lymphoma. Woody becomes something of a pawn in the efforts of his family and his doctor. He is taken from the hospital against medical advice but is eventually returned. His prognosis, according to Alex, is good.

Doug Carmichael

The son of a senator, he is wealthy but works for a company that specializes in fantasy role play with a sexual slant. He has known Nona Swopes since they were teenagers and has found a way to spend time with her continually over the years. Doug fears his father and reveals that he was abused as a child. He is about to kill Alex when the sheriff intervenes. When Doug persists, he's shot and killed.

Augie Valcroix

A physician, he is a throwback to the hippie period and is using a great deal of drugs. He considers himself something of a ladies' man and routinely seduces the females of the families with sick children in the hospital. He discovers the secrets of the situation involving Woody and Nona Swope and tries to blackmail a cult leader, but is killed.

Milo Sturgis

The police officer who works homicides and who is Alex's friend. Milo is gay and is a respected police officer. He becomes involved with the case on several levels and continues to help Alex throughout the investigation.

Sheriff Raymond Houton

The officer at La Vista. Houton is actually the father of Nona Swopes though he doesn't know this until many years have passed. By the time he learns the truth about Nona, he has had sex with her numerous times. It's this relationship that makes him agree to help a cult known as "The Touch" with their illegal endeavors in La Vista. He goes so far as to run drugs for them and feeds Alex false information to help Nona and Doug remain



hidden with Woody. However, when Doug would have killed Alex, Houton steps in and stops the murder. He is killed by Nona.

Norman Matthews

Known as Noble Matthias, he is the former attorney who is now the leader of the cult known as "The Touch." Matthews is a high-powered lawyer during his time in the business and is called on by Emma Swopes to handle her divorce from her husband. Norman, knowing that Emma wants a divorce because the child she carries is fathered by Sheriff Houton, uses that information to blackmail Houton into helping with the illegal drugs being used at the cult compound.

Ezra Maimon

The retired attorney who agrees to take the case when Raoul is arrested in La Vista. He later meets with Alex and provides a great deal of information about the Touch, the Swopes and the community. Alex is a horticulturalist who tells Alex about Mr. Swopes' failed enterprise.



Objects/Places

Western Pediatric Medical Clinic

Where Woody is being treated when Alex first meets him and where Raoul works.

Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma

Where Woody is being treated when Alex first meets him and where Raoul works

La Vista

Where Woody and his family live

Bedabye Motel

Where Richard Moody is staying when he tries to set fire to Alex's house and is killed

The Sea Breeze Motel

Where the Swopes are staying when Mr. and Mrs. Swope are killed.

Room 15

The room in the Sea Breeze Motel where the Swopes are killed

Adam and Eve Messenger Service

The company that provides sexually-oriented messages. Both Doug Carmichael and Nona Swopes work for this company briefly

The Touch

A cult led by a former attorney, the group is involved in illegal drugs and illicit sex but is also responsible for the death of Augie Valcroix

Benedict Canyon

Where the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Swopes are found

Bel-Air Hotel

Where Alex goes to stay after Richard Moody is shot on his porch



Themes

Dreams

Dreams are an important theme in this story, especially as it relates to the plot involving Woody and his family. Woody's very birth is caused by the fact that Mr. Swopes loses a dream that had been his life for a full decade. Mr. Swopes had planned, worked and cultivated the dream of an orchard producing a fruit called Cherimoya. He'd gone so far as to induce fruit buyers to pledge to purchase the entire crop of his first year. For ten years, he cultivates the land, the seedlings and the buyers and would likely have made an incredible amount of money for his endeavors except for a freak storm that takes the crop and kills most of the trees, meaning Mr. Swopes would have to start over in order to cultivate this dream. He doesn't have the heart to start over and gives up on the dream but the dream has been so important that he has to replace it with something else. He builds another dream in the creation of the most horrid, twisted and repulsive plants he can produce. He also creates a child with the young girl he's raised as his daughter, calling all these endeavors experiments. In truth, they are nothing more than extensions of his lost dreams of the Cherimoya orchards. The fact that he needs a dream and isn't willing to risk losing a dream again makes him create abominations.

Taking Charge of a Situation

The desire to control a situation is another theme seen throughout the book. This theme is seen in the actions and reactions of the main character, Alex Delaware, but is also seen in some other characters as well. Alex becomes the target of a madman who wants to burn down his house and another who wants to shoot and kill him. His friend, a police officer named Milo Sturgis, advises that Alex lay low in order to avoid becoming a target yet again. Alex, however, is unwilling - an arguably unable - to remain hidden away while waiting for someone else to solve the situation, finding the killer and saving the life of a little boy in need of medical attention. He sets out to find answers and doesn't stop until he does, though it puts him in dire danger.

Raoul is another take-charge character though his personality is much more abrasive than that of Alex. Raoul finds himself unable to wait for the authorities to find Woody because he knows that he can save Woody's life. However, rather than searching for clues that might lead him to an answer in the form of Woody's hiding place, Raoul rams a gate and gets himself arrested in his effort to find the boy.

The Fight Against Cancer

One of the themes is the fight against cancer. While the victims and their families are often devastated with the news of a diagnosis, the doctors are also fighting battles that seem to be often lost. Raoul puts the trials facing the doctors into perspective when he talks to Alex about his anger over having Woody taken from the hospital. In Raoul's line



of work as an oncology professional, he is often faced with the knowledge that the victim will die of the disease. However, in Woody's case, the prognosis is not etched in stone. Woody has a highly-treatable form of cancer and will likely live, given the right treatment in a timely manner. Raoul says that there are always going to be losses, simply as a nature of the business. He says that the victories, seldom as they occur, become "uncommonly sweet" because of the sheer number of losses weighed against those victories.

This ability to continue in this profession is a statement of Raoul's personality and tenacity as a doctor. The fact that he works with children makes this doubly so. This fight against cancer theme is seen in the actions of several of the characters, including Doug who is urging Nona to give Woody fluids and vitamin C in order to combat the symptoms. Nona believes in Doug but is wavering and believes the disease to be something bigger than she can handle. Alex notes that people react differently to a diagnosis of cancer and that, in the case of the Swopes family, Mr. and Mrs. Swopes had exhibited personality traits that were not typical for them.

Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from Alex's perspective. This point of view is reasonable and acceptable for the story. Alex is at the heart of all the action and his perspective is all the reader needs. The author uses this perspective several times to build suspense. For example, Alex doesn't know why Richard Moody is shot and killed in front of Alex's house. He also doesn't know who the murderer is until much later in the book. The reader is also kept in suspense until Alex learns the truth of the situation, a fact that keeps the suspense alive for the reader until the appropriate time for revealing this information. On another point, the reader is kept in the dark long after Alex learns a fact. At the Swopes' house, Alex reads the journals kept by Mr. Swopes and discovers the truth about a particular species Mr. Swopes had experimented with. Alex discovers the truth about this species - that it is really Nona - but doesn't reveal that to the reader at that point. This is another means of building suspense though the author uses the first person perspective. The perspective is not overly limiting.

Setting

The book is set in California and at least some of the places are real. The use of an overall real setting lends credence and credibility to the entire story. For example, the majority of the story's action occurs in Los Angeles, California. Los Angeles is a real city and is located in California. It is a very large city meaning the law offices of Mal Worthy, the courthouse and Alex's home could theoretically all exist in this city. Other parts of the action occur in a rural town called La Vista. There are several towns with names similar to this, such as the town of Vista, California, near Los Angeles. The fact that the town and the rural area nearby is described in such detail makes it possible in the mind of the reader that the town actually exists.

The author offers detailed descriptions that also make the places seem more real. The trailer at the Carmichael Oil Company, for example, is described to include the curtain that separated the front from the back of the building and the note that a toy truck was on a nightstand makes the setting even more plausible. The book is somewhat dated. The book was published in 1986 and it seems likely that the story is set in that general time frame. This is borne out by the fact that Alex at one point stops and uses a pay phone, meaning cellular phones were not prevalent. Despite this and several other references that are somewhat dated, the story's setting is, overall not so far outdated as to be unbelievable to a modern reader.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in a fairly straightforward style with a reasonable vocabulary. The story is divided between dialogue and narrative and both are reasonable and believable.



The action moves fairly quickly though the writer seems to get caught up sometimes in directions. In a few cases, these elaborate directions seem to have a purpose. For example, as Alex is leaving the restaurant in Oceanside with Ezra and headed to Ezra's farm, Ezra gives Alex directions. These directions are actually the way to a road that Sheriff Houton had declared to be abandoned by an oil company. Alex begins to be curious about the road simply because the sheriff had indicated that it is closed and Ezra says that it isn't. In this case, the directions are significant. However, there are other directions given that have little to do with the story, such as the street where Mal Worthy's offices are located and the way to reach Alex's house. These directions may lend an air of believability that might otherwise be missing, but the details drag down the action of the story to a great degree.

The overall tone of the story is one of suspense and the ending is, to some degree, predictable. It seems impossible that the writer would have allowed the innocent child, Woody, to die because of the foolish decisions made by the adults in his life and this turns out to be true. In an apparent effort to make up for this predictability, there are twists and turns in the rest of the story, such as Nona saying that she'd told about her sexual relationship with Sheriff Houton and prompted Marla's suicide, and Alex learning that Houton was actually Nona's father.

Structure

The story is divided into twenty-eight chapters of widely varying lengths. For example, chapter twenty-seven is only two pages but chapter twenty-three is thirteen pages and chapter four is twenty-one pages. Most of the chapters seem to range from eight to eleven pages. The chapters are only numbered with no titles and no clues as to what might be forthcoming in that chapter. These numbers are numeric with no words used in the chapter titles. The chapters are roughly divided into events. For example, the first chapter begins with Alex in a courtroom and ends with the court case ending and Alex having a confrontation with one of the parties involved. Chapter twenty-seven is Alex watching as Nona visits with Woody in the hospital. Chapter twenty-two covers Alex's trip to the retreat where he discovers the illicit sex and drugs.

The book has a fairly simple plot - Alex's attempts to find a child in desperate need of medical treatment. But there are subplots woven into the story that makes the story much more complicated. For example, the fact that Richard Moody is involved seems to be only a way to keep the action moving. Richard Moody has nothing to do with the main plot of the story and Alex's involvement with that case as a subplot makes the story more convoluted than it would have been otherwise.



Quotes

Few nightmares compare to finding out one's child has cancer. And part of the nightmare is the guilt parents inflict upon themselves, searching for an answer to the unanswerable question: why me?" Chapter 3, Page 33

"Cure diseases with carrots and bran and foul-smelling herbs thrown over the shoulder at midnight. The culmination of centuries of scientific progress - voluntary cultural regression!" Chapter 3, Page 35

"As successful as he was in medicine, his personal life was a disaster. Women were fascinated by him but ultimately repelled by his obsessive character." Chapter 4, Page 45

"Each year I tell myself I've witnessed the depths of depravity and each year the scumbags out there prove me wrong." Chapter 9, Page 93

"Now that you've mentioned it, yes. His green eyes darkened with melancholia. The kids are buried somewhere else." Chapter 13, Page 150

"The process had a ceremonial look to it, which was appropriate for stemming the tide of those yearning for the good life was as feasible as capturing the rain in a thimble." Chapter 15, Page 164

"A small town is like a family, doctor. We don't murder each other, or kidnap each other's young." Chapter 15, Page 170

"They sat, hands in laps - more good schoolkids - and smiled with the maddening serenity of the born-again and lobotomized." Chapter 16, Page 187

"The entire case had a raw, primal stink that foreshadowed tragic endings for generations to come." Chapter 18, Page 208

"He collapsed like wet tissue paper. She stood over him and pulled the trigger again." Chapter 25, Page 288

"The raiders made the cultists spread their legs and frisked them, two officers for every captive. Once searched, they were handcuffed, removed from the group one by one like beads pulled off a string, read their rights and taken into custody at gunpoint." Chapter 26, Page 301

"Coming to see him had been a mistake. Whatever friendship we'd had was gone, and with it, any power I might have had to reassure." Chapter 28, Page 307



Topics for Discussion

Who is Dr. Alex Delaware? How does he become involved in the disappearance of Woody and Nona Swopes? How is he involved in the case of Richard Moody and the Moody children? How are the two situations connected?

Describe the four members of the Swopes family? How are each biologically related to the others? Who is Nona Swopes' father? How does Alex learn this? Who is Woody Swopes' father? How does Alex learn this? What is the importance of the parentage of each?

What is "The Touch?" How does this group become involved in the disappearance of Woody Swopes? What is the role the group actually played in Woody's disappearance? What does Raoul believe about their involvement? What does Woody learn about their actual involvement? What does he learn about their purpose?

Who is Augie Valcroix? Who is Mal Worthy? Who is Doug Carmichael? Who is Marla Houton? Who is Ezra Maimon? Who is Beverly Lucas? How does each of these characters figure into the plot of the story? What is the relationship of each with Alex?

What is the botanical endeavor Mr. Swopes sets out to achieve many years prior to Woody's diagnosis with cancer? What happens to that endeavor? What is the next "experiment" Mr. Swopes conducts? How does Alex learn about these experiments?

Why does Raoul believe Augie had something to do with Woody's parents' decision to take Woody out of the hospital and away from treatment? What does Augie say about Raoul's accusations? What is Augie's real role in that situation? What is Augie's reaction?

Dreams are an important theme in this story. Describe the role of dreams in the lives of the various characters. Why are dreams important to these characters? Are these dreams reasonable in real life situations?