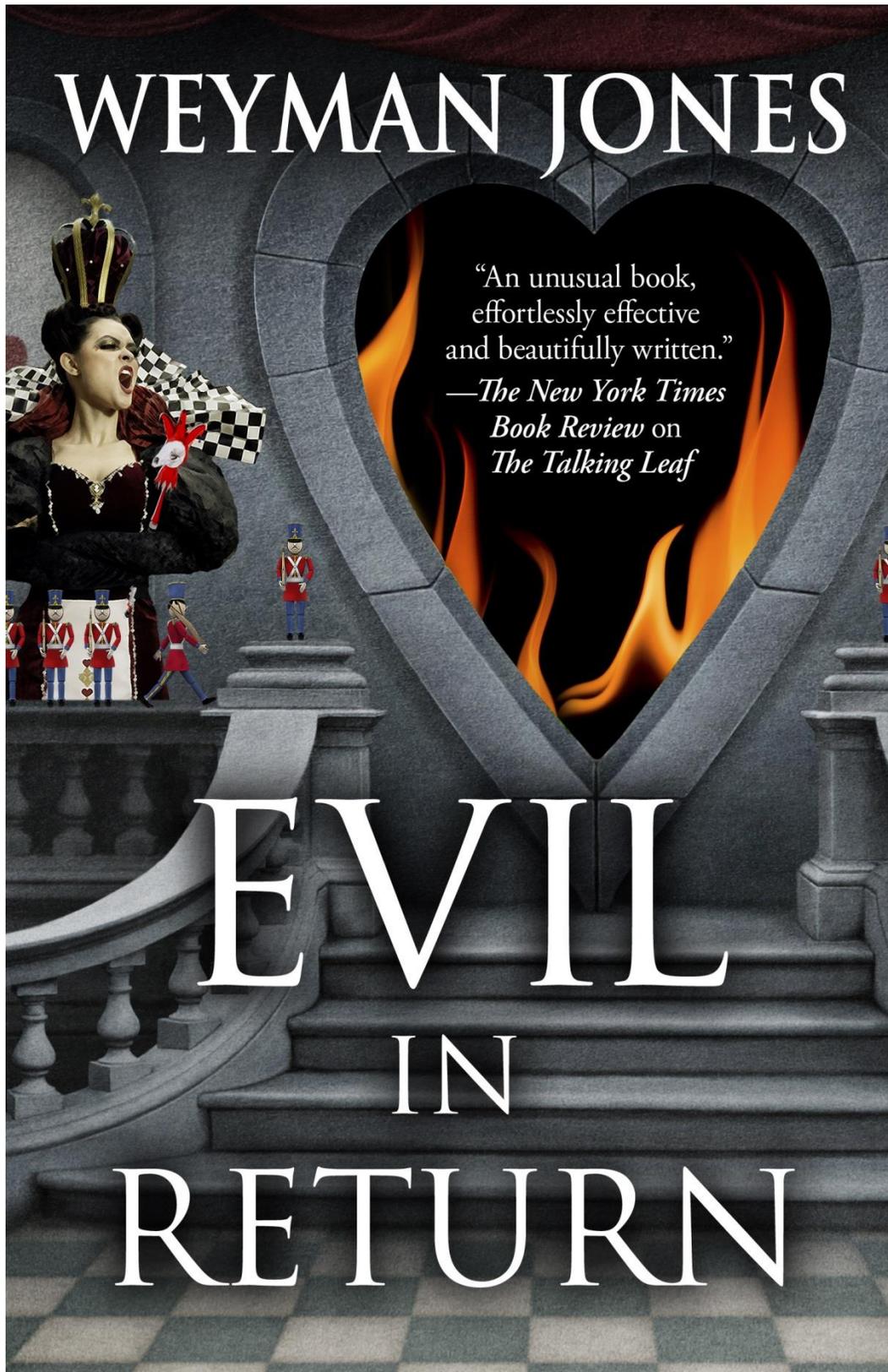


(Sample Reading)



“Come on, Sam, let’s be grownups.” Closer now. “I’m going to find you, so let’s not play games.”

Back in the kitchen?

“You wouldn’t try to sneak out on me, would you Sam? Make a run for it? I guess what I have to do is figure out how to search the rooms and still keep an eye on the doors.”

Not down here. No way to see the doors from down here. Please God, or Charley’s Nunnehi or anybody else up there who’s listening: please don’t let him come down here.

“Maybe I can lock the doors from the inside. I suppose you could—”

*CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!*

Without consciously moving she found herself crouched in the corner, staring around with trapped-animal eyes. The clamor was everywhere. She raised her hands to her ears. Then she remembered: Seth. The alarm clock. Charley’s time lock. She heard the latch scrape as it lifted. The door exhaled open and drifted ajar.

Knees wobbling, she stood and stumbled to the door. Peered out. Dark hall, with a rectangle of light spilling down the steps at the far end. The *CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!* bounced around the bare walls like an echo chamber. A rickety end table outside the door. She edged out as if onto quicksand, grabbed the clock off the table and snapped the twine running up to some kind of an eye-screw in the ceiling as she jammed the alarm button down.

Sudden silence, as loud as the alarm had been.

“Is that you, Sam? Your alarm clock? You just waking up down there?”

Four doors along the hall, all closed. What had Charley said? Closets. And one for something else, she couldn’t remember what. Footsteps. She saw his feet coming down the steps

at the end of the hall. Without thinking she backed into her cell—familiar territory—and pulled the door closed.

“If you’ve set off some kind of an alarm to draw me down here while you get away . . .”

So this is it. In a moment he’d kick open the door. Check out the room and then step inside. He’d expect her to be scared and helpless. Stepping carefully, as if he might hear her, she went into the bathroom.

“These doors seem to be locked. You wouldn’t have a key, would you Sam?”

There it was. The pantyhose was stretched, but the lump of lead was still in the toe. She wadded up a grip and let the rest trail behind as she went back into the bedroom.

“Furnace room is open. You couldn’t climb up that coal chute, could you? Maybe, but I doubt it.”

She looked up at the light bulb in the ceiling. Unscrew it? No time. Hide behind the door? No. Face him. She planted her feet on the sun in the rag rug with her hands behind her, pantyhose puddling out of the way at her feet. She thought of Charley discovering the skull of the raccoon or whatever it was. A shot of calm that makes you into something different.

Something scraped outside the door. “What’s this little antique table doing down here in the basement? And what’s—oh, I see. This must be the alarm clock I heard . . . Light’s coming from under the door, Sam. Game’s up. You going to come out so we can talk?”

She actually felt a smile. He didn’t want to come into this claustrophobic little room.

“You going to make me come in after you?”

She hefted the pantyhose behind her, testing the stretch.

*CRASH!*

The door slammed open against the wall. He was a murky silhouette in the dark hall until he stepped into the doorframe. She recognized that cool smile, and then she saw the bloody khakis—and the big knife.