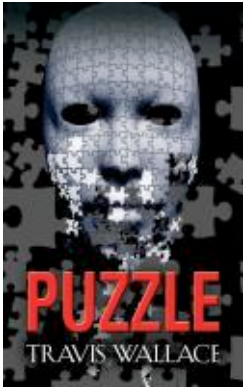




PUZZLE

TRAVIS WALLACE



Everything has led to this. The alligator, the sinners, justified deaths and Her voice guiding him. Thomas Wyland has been chosen. Are his fiancé, psychiatrist, abused trailer girl and talking bobbleheads all part of Her PUZZLE, or have the past few days been nothing more than desperate rationalization in the mind of a tormented man? The final piece lies with the body in the barn. Thomas must finish and find his way back to Her.

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Travis Wallace

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CHAPTER 4

“I couldn’t begin to tell you what terrible trigger for such insanity lies deep in my subconscious. Though no doubt some would say that, indeed, it may be some demon of conscience. A deeply buried guilt for some unforgivable depravity. Then again, perhaps not.”
- Angel Rosa.

I can’t believe I am mistakenly categorized with the people in this waiting room. At least it makes for great people watching, even better than Wine Flights the other night. I would compare it to people watching at the airport; only in here it is just a little bit different because you know they all have issues. Too many victims in this room. Not as fun to fuck with people in here like I normally do in the airport or did at Wine Flights. I *could* do it in here, but it would be too easy. Most of these people are already paranoid or embarrassed or OCD and I wouldn’t want to add to their situation. These people are here to actually try to address their issues.

Or maybe they are trying to satisfy someone else’s concerns.

Just as many people with problems in the airport, I’m sure, but they seem like fair game. I

wonder how I would feel if I saw some of these people in the airport after seeing them in this waiting room? Most of these people I want to help. If it is *Her* will to give me the insight into their situations, then I may be able to help them. In most of these cases it was somebody else who molded them into who they are. That person did so, on purpose and those...those are the people I have no tolerance for and the type of people who really set *Her* in motion. When you take people watching as seriously as I do, you can distinguish between those whom have been bullied and those that are the bullies in an instant.

There *are* some neutral people and those are the ones who are the most fun to fuck with. In here though, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel. If I fuck with one of the people in here, then there is the potential they would jump out of one of these windows. Bad design putting windows on the 17th floor of an office filled with all of these crazy people. No, instead I will sit here and read my magazine until it is my turn. They really should have private waiting rooms in these places. I don't need the added pressure of someone seeing me in here. If the wrong person saw me in here, it could ruin my credibility and make my mission more difficult. Some persons, like the princess sitting on the opposite side of the room in her cocktail dress and designer handbag, probably brag about going to the

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therapist and how often they do. Reminds me of Woody Allen's character in *Annie Hall*, "Yes, I'm making excellent progress. Soon when I'm lying down on his couch I won't have to wear a lobster bib."

"Thomas, are you ready?"

I follow Dr. Rachem back to her office and immediately notice the pen behind her ear and know it will soon be in her mouth. Just a matter of time. I let out a low chuckle from this thought.

"You seem to be in good spirits. Is something particularly funny?" She peers at me over her glasses, which makes her look even more naughty.

"Not really, just was thinking I should have brought my lobster bib." She doesn't break her stare. "*Annie Hall*? Nothing? You don't get out much do you, Doc?"

Dr. Rachem rolls her eyes and takes a seat. "Have you been doing any more writing?"

"Yes."

"Can we read what you've been writing?"

"No."

"And why is that?"

"Because it isn't finished and a writer shouldn't share their work until it is finished...or at least ready for an edit. Besides, it seems incomplete work gets me in trouble."

I finally read what I wrote at Wine Flights before coming to my appointment today and based on Dr. Rachem's preconceived notions on

my mental stability and appropriateness of my writing; it probably isn't in my best interest to share too much information. I wonder what she would think about me not knowing what I write until I read it later? Best to keep that to myself as well. To protect me. To protect Her. To protect everyone from Her.

“Okay then, let's discuss the writing that got you to me in the first place then. Had you ever had suicidal thoughts before?”

No matter how I answer this question I would implicate I had a suicidal thought this time. Is that what she is trying to do?

“What a bullshit question. Shouldn't I get a little foreplay before you bend me over?”

Calm down, Thomas. You are going to make things worse.

“Thomas, I am just trying to start a dialogue. Anna was concerned about someone finding your body so why do you feel it a bullshit question?” Dr. Rachem states her side very matter-of-factly and it just irritates me even more. Look at how smug she is, sitting there with her pad a paper.

I change my tone to match hers. “You are trying to get me to un-knowingly admit to something that may or may not have actually ever taken place so you can get them cornered and upset. Is that what you are trying to do, Dr. Rachem?” I never raise my voice and I think the calm demeanor caught her off guard, especially

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after my initial outburst. She isn't the type to give up any ground though.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Thomas. I'm just trying to see if there is any history to substantiate the concern over the current situation." The pen goes into her mouth and she crosses her legs, waiting for my response.

I have to watch too not sound annoyed. This is a test and I know it is *Her* controlling the conversation. "There isn't a *current* situation."

"So you are saying you have never had a suicidal thought?"

Just answer yes.

I tell myself to just answer yes, but I can't get those words out of my mouth. "I'm saying the writing Anna found was just a random expression of thoughts that might be of use in a book later. Don't you ever have people write out what is in their mind and then expound upon it? Have *you* ever done that? Have you ever had a thought, maybe a daydream while stuck in traffic and then just take it to the extreme?"

"We discussed that last week. Would you like to do some writing now?"

"No. What I would like is for you to end the condescending tone and answer the question." I level my eyes on her.

"You aren't here for me to answer your questions, Thomas. We are here to understand what you were thinking when you wrote your

journal entry and if those thoughts have any basis for concern. Now where were we?”

Dr. Rachem must not be used to having another alpha in the room. I bet she would love to be controlled in the right situation.

“We were trying to determine if you daydream, Doc.”

“No, Thomas. We were trying to determine why you have had suicidal thoughts.” She is trying to regain her control now and the pen goes back to her lips. She feels confident again, and now I know her game.

Well played.

“That’s right. We were trying to get me to admit to something that never happened.”

I can’t do anything but just look at Dr. Rachem after my response. The truth is I had attempted once, a very long time ago, but has no impact on this situation and would lead to a lot of speculation so I don’t think it would be a good idea to bring it up...although I remember lying there, staring at my ceiling through blurred eyes and I believed them.

I was made to believe I was a burden on my family financially and deep down a disappointment to them...to my father. What I later realized is their disappointment was not in me. My father was disappointed in himself because I was better than he was...or ever would be. He knew I was better and he wouldn’t be the star of the house anymore. Competing

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with his kids, the sick fuck. Financial burden? I earned money since I was nine mowing yards and took on a full time job at the age of 13 to help with all the additional expenses like lunch and money when I traveled on school functions. I don't begrudge, because times were hard and I learned early on you had to be responsible...maybe I learned too early. I don't feel sorry for myself. I had an advantage most do not have and this is what Dr. Rachem or anyone else wouldn't understand or would over-analyze and obsess on. I had an advantage, although I didn't know exactly what it was at the time. I know now that it was Her. She was there to teach me. Reinforce the lessons when I started to slip and venture down the path of becoming one of them, one of the bad ones who preyed on others for enjoyment or control and one of them I now protect others against, whether they realize they need protection or not. I am Her incarnate, in the flesh. The flesh toughened and calloused...like my heart, my mind and my soul. I didn't even show any bruises when I forgot to tie the knot...not that I didn't feel them though.

Dr. Rachem speaks and her voice is a welcome distraction from my thoughts. "Thomas, you haven't done anything wrong and you are loved and why it is important for you to open up to me. Not for you, not for me, but for those who want you back and care for you. If you don't want to talk then you will remain here and I can only

go with my gut and experience and what they tell me. What I would have to conclude is you are hiding something. Your paperwork indicates a history of depression and other mental illness in your family and at least an initial diagnosis treated with medication yourself. What was the situation of your diagnosis?”

Was she reading my mind or is it Her feeding the information?

“A bad marriage weighing me down and I hadn’t had time to go to the gym to help even myself out. It wasn’t anything more than that. I had trouble sleeping and just was in a bit of a funk. I wasn’t *diagnosed*, but just like you, the doctor was concerned about the history in my family and provided a prescription as a precaution. I ended up getting divorced and didn’t need the medication any longer. Sometimes people have situations that make them sad, Doc, and there isn’t anything more to it.”

Church camp. That is what it was about. Church camp. Not drugs, not property damage, not partying or getting my first B in school, but church camp. I guess I was looking that night for a more direct route to God or to Her. A cheaper route. But, I forgot to tie the fucking knot. Or was it Her who had stopped me?

My mind was set and the cool sheet felt so comforting around my throat. The window was open and I could feel the mist from the June rain

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blowing across my face. Like a baptism, I was being purified for my sins, but how do you purify the sins of others projected on you? Sins that became your burden? Your cross to bear?

I love the smell of rain, so calming. The sheet criss-crossed across my throat and I wound each end of the sheet around my hands. I still hear the arguing in the other room....

“How is he taking off work for a week to go to that camp?” My dad’s voice getting higher pitched with each question.

“It’s good for him to go.” My mom’s voice started to crack. “I have been doing some extra work and will help him pay for it.”

“So we are paying for it? It is church camp right? Isn’t that why he gives an offering every Sunday? Shouldn’t it be free? I suppose we have to take him there too? Jesus Christ! Doesn’t he have games that week? So what? He’s going to let down his team to go spend a week with people telling him how we should all live our fucking lives? Goddamn hypocrites!”

I heard my Mom mumble out something in response, but her tears were flowing and her voice was trembling. She only cried when it came to my brother and I.

The sound of the rain, the mist across my face and the cleansing smell was taking me to a better place and I started to pull. I pulled the sheet steadily in opposite directions, strangling out the voices. I felt the sheet tighten and

imagined my eyes straining, like I had seen so many times in cartoons. The yelling became more faint and in my mind this would stop the yelling completely. Not just for me, but also for my brother and mother. All that was left was the smell of the rain. My body instinctively tried to take in more air so I turned my hands in the sheet again, again, agai....

“I completely understand there are times and situations which can make anyone sad. There isn’t anything wrong with that, Thomas. It is absolutely natural. In fact, there are quite a few people who go on medication short-term to address sudden life situations. What we need to consider is if the medication is what worked for you before. It may be something we consider in the future. Did you have any thoughts of suicide during the marriage problems and divorce?”

Here is my way out. “No. None at all. Not even after I started taking the medication and I knew it was a possible side effect.”

My response isn’t a lie and should get us off of this topic...the night of the bed sheet though was a different story. A story Dr. Rachem won’t hear.

I woke up the next morning with a terrible headache and the sheet loose around my neck. My neck sore, vocal chords tender and the air had a sharp piercing pain as it passed through my recently restricted windpipe. How low and worthless are you when you are rejected by

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death? I had failed. Failed to set everyone free. It would be years before I would understand that I didn't really fail that night, but had been failed by my father, tested by Her and saved to protect those that are taken advantage of, preyed upon. A part of me did die that night. The part full of self-doubt and looked for the approval of others to justify my existence. There was also a birth. Her hero was born and over time I would understand the power I possessed, the judgment I was allowed to pass and how to justify my actions.

“Good. That tells me you understood you were in a difficult situation and by understanding the side effects of the medication, you are very aware of yourself. That is something most people often have a hard time with.” Dr. Rachem looks at her watch. “Our time is about up, I don't want to spend as much time arguing next session. What would *you* like to talk about? *Her*?”

“I'm not sure who you mean? Are you talking about Anna?” I know damn well whom she means, but she doesn't realize knowing more about *Her* is not something she should wish for.

“I wasn't talking about Anna and I think you know it. I meant the *Her* from your writing.”

“So you want to talk about a fictional character?” I know I am not to discuss *Her* with others until she decides differently. “I don't know how that will give us any progress. Aren't you supposed to be keeping me in the real world?”

“Why is everything with you so difficult? How about we talk a little bit about your family so I can try to get a perspective on maybe why you like to challenge everything I say?” She catches me rolling my eyes. “Listen, Thomas, I know it is a little cliché, but we can make this easy or hard. It is your choice. You have a huge chip on your shoulder and it is either from the way you grew up or you had bad counseling before or something. There’s something, and we are going to have to get past it or you will be here longer than you want or probably need to be.”

I don’t even respond...just stand and walk out of the office. I hadn’t told Dr. Rachem about my attempt to take my life when I was 14, but it was weighing on my mind and opened the door for *Her*.

Inside the elevator, I decide next week we will discuss the alligator. The alligator is a form of *Her* that had gone dormant about three years ago; the same time Anna had entered my life. I wish Anna was in the lobby waiting for me, but I was alone with my thoughts...and *Her*. It was *Her* decision to bring another into our secret. If Dr. Rachem wants to know about *Her*, then we will talk about my family and the impact of the alligator on my family. She wants to know my history? She will learn how I once conquered the alligator and hope she doesn’t unknowingly bring the alligator back into action.

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I have to work this out in my head. The curving roads and rolling hills on the way home always allow me the chance to get lost in a daydream. Reminds me of being out in the country back where I grew up. So peaceful.

Peaceful, until this jackass decided to cut me off. *Her* and I have prepared for jackasses like him. I know exactly what must be done. The alligator is beginning to wake.

CHAPTER 5

“There are no heroes...in life, the monsters win.”

- George R.R. Martin.

I catch the change of expression in his review mirror. I can see him very clearly and the look in his eyes gives me much satisfaction. The fingernails-on-chalkboard sound of metal and plastic merging together. The smell of burning rubber as he slams on the brakes to try to stop from going into the ditch. I smirk at his reflection and press on the gas. He was such a badass just a few moments ago when he decided I was going to slow. Tailgating for a distance before making his move to pass on this busy, curving two-lane road. He was mouthing obscenities in my direction in an extra gesture to try to look cool in front of his girlfriend with the bottle-blonde hair and too much eyeliner. I wonder how cool she thinks he is now sitting in his own urine? If this jackass wanted to pass and was in such a fucking hurry to get someplace, then why slam on his brakes in front of me with that smug little grin on his face? Anna would not have let me do this, but it is something *Her* and I agree is a justified reaction to these people who plague our

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society, so it is okay and completely understandable. At first glance my actions might seem a bit excessive, but as soon as I explain what I was dealing with, the police would be on my side. As soon as they realize I'm not crazy and my reaction is a rational act against road rage. I've seen his kind before and is the reason I have the cattle guard with hooks on the front of my truck, you piece of shit.

A coincidence that I drove the old truck today instead of the SUV? Or just another convenient piece of *Her* puzzle?

How many times have you pulled this stunt in front of an old couple, a mom with her children or any one of a number of countless law-bidding citizens like myself? We are supposed to just overlook your kind? I'm done overlooking.

I feel the impact and never take my foot off of the gas. Slingshot engaged! The look on your face changing from smug to panic provides satisfaction. You fucked with the wrong car this time. Playing your game, but the rules changed didn't they? I didn't slam on my brakes in panic. Instead we, *Her* and I, make contact and accelerate, the hooks latching into your vehicle, allowing me to drive you. You grip the wheel tighter to keep control, but there is no control for you and you will go where I decide to take you.

His pretty little lady who had been laughing through his antics is now screaming harder than she screams with his best friend when he has her

bent over the outdated sofa in her trailer. How are her screams adding to your current situation? There is little worse than a screaming woman when you can't do anything to calm her, to stop the situation. The situation. This situation you put all of us in, you impotent little shit. Soon you will not be able to hear her screams over your own.

I turn the wheel and slowly slide his canary yellow coffin to the left, across the centerline. In the distance we all see the top of the rig approaching over the hill. How ironic. He never thought about the screams coming from decent people in the cars he has played this game with before, but it isn't the same game is it?

The suspense is agonizing and I don't even know what I will do next. I would love to see him meet the front of the MAC truck, become nothing but a yellow twisted piece of art, but I can't involve the innocent. I guide us back to the right and slowly, slowly, slowly apply the brakes.

Slow is crucial. I'm not done with this little prick yet, not near done with him. If I apply the brakes too rapidly his car may be freed from my grasp and I have plans for him. Plans, plans, plans. I guide us to the shoulder, get out of the truck and make my move.

You remember your move, you piece of shit? Tailgating, then moving up beside me, and then shooting past me? Now it is my turn to come up beside him, only I am on foot. I am smiling at him through his window, sitting there with that *I just*

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pissed myself look in his eye, wishing he could curl up in a fetal position in a quiet dark corner. Maybe in your mind you are already curled up away from reality. I wouldn't blame you. It will be much less painful if you disengage your mind from this situation.

Before he objects, I punch through the window and drag him out across the broken glass. I have Her power and Her strength running through my body. He is struggling, trying to resist the inevitable, and yet I am able to pull him through the window and up over my head with full arm extension. I yell over his pleads for mercy. "You aren't in your fetal position in the corner of your mind any longer are you? That's too bad."

I initiate full impact, slamming his body onto the hood of his car. I pick him up again, his body a little more limp this time and I pause before introducing him to the hood again. I notice the imprint the initial blow left in the hood and I have seen the image before. Many years ago, but I know the familiar image....

I received a call to come out to a bar where the band was playing. My mom was friends with the band and was out watching their show, but she wasn't the only one watching something that evening. My mom isn't the one who called. You had been spotted in the parking lot and her friends knew what to do. That was the night I first understood violence in the name of justice

makes me a hero. When used to rid the world of someone bad, like a piece of shit stalker, then it is justified to use any means and force necessary. She had no idea you were out there, waiting, watching. I knew you had been in a lot of parking lots waiting for her over the past few months and you had been warned numerous times by her friends, but I came without warning and after two solid impacts into the hood I felt I had made my point very clear. Just to be crystal clear, I had explained that the catfish in the nearby strip pit leave very little to be identified. What would be left would sit in the mud some 40 to 60 feet below the murky surface. The look on your face as you lay on the stretcher, slurring your case to the officer between the warm blood gurgling in your throat and the look on your face when the officer explained that you were lucky this time. He recommended you take this as a very strong warning. Justified....

“Is this you again? In a different body because I didn’t finish the job the first time? Could it be *Her* gift to me? Is the girl in the car actually innocent and another woman you stalk, or will stalk if I don’t finish the job this time?” I’m yelling questions to a lifeless body, but I don’t stop. I can’t stop and it feels so damn good doing *Her* justice. “I am justified...justified...*justified*.” I hear these words direct from my mind and out my mouth, almost screaming as I slam his body again and again and again. His girl looks

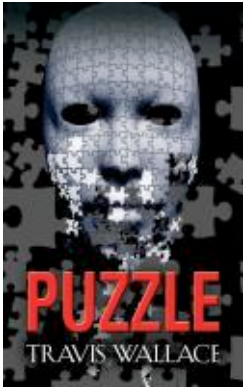
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relieved, almost smiling. Are you *Her*? Are you *Her* cheering me on with an approving stare?

I feel his body crumble each time I pick him up from the hood before slamming him down again. The crinkled yellow metal splattered with crimson droplets and fragments of white bone. I feel his girl beside me, getting a closer look. Should I tell you the story, a reminder of the last time we met, as you lay here motionless?

I drag him from his hood for the last time and load the loose skin-bag of shattered bones into the back of my truck then wave to the freed girl as I drive off. She will be okay now. Her troubles are all over.

Do I have any regrets? Only that I'm not responsible for the outcome. You did this to yourself and I am justified, justified, justified....



Everything has led to this. The alligator, the sinners, justified deaths and Her voice guiding him. Thomas Wyland has been chosen. Are his fiancé, psychiatrist, abused trailer girl and talking bobbleheads all part of Her PUZZLE, or have the past few days been nothing more than desperate rationalization in the mind of a tormented man? The final piece lies with the body in the barn. Thomas must finish and find his way back to Her.

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