

DARK HEARTS

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FOUR NOVELLAS OF DARK SUSPENSE

JEREMY BATES

Ghillinnein Books

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FIRST EDITION

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BLACK CANYON

THE PRESENT

I didn't want to kill them. I loved them. But sometimes you have to do what you have to do to survive. I think you'll agree with me after you hear my account of what happened twenty-five years ago. I had no other choice. It was either them or me.

A quarter of a century seems like forever ago. That would make the year in discussion the year the Berlin Wall fell, the

year Iraq invaded Kuwait, the year *The Simpsons* debuted on television, the year the first webpage was published on the internet, and the year the Cincinnati Reds defeated the Oakland Athletics in the World Series in a four-game sweep. It was, I guess, a pretty great year all in all—at least, a pretty important one. On a more personal note, it was the year I kissed my first girl, the year I got a mountain bike for my birthday, and the year I broke my collarbone when I fell off that bike while biking where I wasn't allowed to be biking.

It was 1990. I was a grade-six student at Dry Creek Elementary School in Englewood, Colorado, and the people I killed were my parents.

When you say Colorado most people think of skiing. Some think of Mesa Verde, or Garden of the Gods, or Estes Park, or Cañon City. Not many think of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. But they should. They should go there too, see it with their own eyes. It's a breathtaking gorge half as deep as the Grand Canyon, though much, much narrower, which, in my opinion, makes it all the more spectacular. I try to return there once a year, partly for the scenery, but mostly for the memories.

1990

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument (it wouldn't be upgraded to national park status for another four years) is located in the western part of Colorado State, a bit south of center, making it a two-hour drive from Englewood, where I lived. My dad was behind the wheel of the eight-year-old Chevrolet Citation. My mom, in the seat next to him, was smoking a cigarette and reading one of those supermarket magazines that give you all the dirt on celebrities. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, so I had the backseat to myself. I sat with my back against one door, my legs stretched out so my feet almost touched the opposite door. I didn't have my seatbelt on, but my parents weren't the type of parents who cared about seatbelts. In fact, they didn't care about a lot of grown up stuff that other parents cared about. Junk food was okay in our house, for example. And I was allowed to come home from school whenever I wanted, as long as it wasn't *really* late. I didn't even have to call if I was staying at a friend's for dinner, which I did a fair bit because neither my mom nor dad liked to

cook much.

It was Friday, October 24. My dad had told me I didn't have to go to school this morning, which was awesome. Yet with both him and my mom around it didn't feel like a real day off, like when I got to stay home sick by myself. It felt more like a regular old Saturday. Even so, a Friday feeling like a Saturday was still better than a Friday feeling like a Friday.

We didn't leave the house as early as my dad had wanted because my mom was hung over and refused to get out of bed before ten, so we were just getting to the southern rim entrance to Black Canyon now, around midafternoon. I was staring out the car window, watching the golden aspens and other turning trees disappear behind us as we entered into a tunnel of dark, somber evergreens that blocked out much of the daylight.

When we stopped at a wooden gate, my parents started arguing about something. I tried to ignore them, but this proved too hard in the closed confines of the Chevy.

"What if someone checks, Steve?" my mom was saying in the same tone she used when she was cross at me.

"Who's going to check?" my dad replied offhandedly, annoyed, like he thought my mom was overreacting. "Camping season is over. There's nobody here but us."

"A ranger probably comes by."

"It's a waste of money."

"It's called the honor system."

"What are you, a Girl Scout?"

"Don't be so cheap."

Grumbling, my dad opened his door. "It's just going to sit there, you know?"

My mom didn't look at him or say anything; she already knew she'd won.

My dad climbed out of the car and stuck his head back inside. "Or some kids are going to come along and pilfer it."

"Kids?" my mom said, raising her eyebrows amusedly. "Look around, Steve. We're in the middle of nowhere. And you said there's nobody—"

He slammed his door shut and circled the vehicle. He stopped before a little wooden box sitting atop a pole. He took his wallet from his back pocket—he got the wallet as a free gift with a case of beer he'd bought during Labor Day weekend—and produced several one dollar bills.

"What's Dad doing, Mom?" I asked.

"Paying the camping fee, hon." She kept her attention on my dad, likely to make sure he put the money in the box and didn't fake it. My mom was right: my dad could be pretty cheap sometimes. I'd been bugging him for a raise in my allowance a lot lately, but he wouldn't negotiate. I got the same one dollar a week that I got when I first started getting an allowance two years before. It sucked. One small bag of salt and vinegar chips and a can of Pepsi wiped me out until the following weekend. My mom was a bit more generous. She usually gave me fifty cents, or sometimes a whole dollar when I asked her politely. I had to have a good excuse handy, like I needed to take the bus somewhere. Still, what I got from her added up, and I was no longer considered the poor kid by my friends. That dishonor went to Ralph Stevenson. His dad didn't work either, and he was always begging everyone for a spare dime or quarter. We never gave him anything, but we often

shared our lunches with him. All his mom ever packed him was a raw carrot and a couple pieces of buttered bread.

My dad stuffed the dollar bills into the slit in the wooden box, cast my mom a you-happy-now? look, then returned to the car.

“Thank you,” she told him as he shifted the transmission into first and popped the clutch.

He grunted, and we continued in silence to the campground. I never said anything when my parents were fighting with each other. I’ve learned it was best to simply “zip it,” an expression my dad used a lot, and to wait the fight out. Otherwise chances were good I would become the focus of their anger and get grounded or spanked for doing nothing.

The campground, my dad had told me earlier, contained three loops of campsites. Loop A was open year round, while Loops B and C were open spring to early fall. Being late October, I figured we must be driving to a campsite in Loop A.

A few minutes later we parked in a small clearing and got out of the car and looked around at the crowding forest. “Smell that, Brian!” my dad said, inhaling deeply and clapping me on the shoulder roughly.

I sniffed. “Smell what?” The air was cool, brittle, reminding me that Halloween was next week.

“Nature!” he exclaimed. “You won’t smell that back in the city.”

“Worth four bucks, if you ask me,” my mom said. She was standing on the other side of the car and cupping her hands around a cigarette she was lighting.

“Bitch all you want, Suz, you’re not going to spoil my

mood.”

“Dad,” I said, “can you open the trunk?”

“All I want,” he went on, ignoring me, “is a bit of peace and quiet. That so much to ask? A bit of peace and quiet?”

“Dad?”

“*What?*”

“Can you open the trunk?”

He glared at me.

“I need my tent,” I said.

Reaching inside the car, he pulled a trigger that released the trunk lid. I went to the trunk, lifted the lid, and collected my tent and backpack.

The clearing was little more than the size of a baseball infield. The amenities included a vault toilet, a picnic table, and a grill. I stopped at a flat spot of ground a good distance away from the car and unpeeled the nylon tent bag, dumping the poles and guy ropes and metal spikes onto the mat of spongy pine needles. There was no instruction booklet—or if there once had been, it had been long since lost—and it took me a solid half hour to set the thing up properly (and even then I wasn’t sure I had constructed it correctly as it seemed to lean drunkenly to one side).

Still, it wasn’t falling over, and that was good enough for me. I glanced at my parents. They had set their tent up next to the car and were standing with their arms around each other.

Happy they were in one another’s good books again, I joined them and said, “So what do we do now?”

“Huh?” my mom said. She’d been staring off into the distance with one of her thinking faces on.

“I said—”

“Sit back and relax,” my dad told me. He released my mom’s waist and snatched a bottle of beer from the blue Eskimo cooler chest that sat on the ground, next to the Chevy’s front tire. He twisted off the cap, flicked it away into the trees, and took a long sip.

“I hope it’s not going to rain,” my mom said.

I looked where she was looking and saw that the sky had smudged over with dark storm clouds.

“It won’t, baby doll,” my dad said. “It’ll blow over.”

“Can I have a beer, Dad?” I asked.

“Even if it does,” he said, hooking his arm around my mom’s waist once again and kissing her on the cheek, “we’ll just go inside the tent. It’s waterproof. And I think we can figure out something to do there.” His hand slipped off the small of her back to her rear.

She swatted it away. “Not in front of Brian, Steve.”

“Dad?” I said.

“What?”

“Can I have a beer?”

“You hear that, Suz? The boy wants a beer.”

“Can I?” I said.

“Hell no. You’ll just waste it.”

I frowned, but I wasn’t disappointed, not really. My dad had given me sips from his beers before, and I didn’t like the taste of them. I only asked for one to show him I wasn’t still a little kid. He was always treating me like I was still in grade four or something.

“Have a Pepsi, hon,” my mom said. “And bring me a bottle

of wine while you're at it."

I removed the lid from the cooler. "Which one?" I asked. Three wine bottles floated in the icy water alongside brown bottles of beer and blue-and-red Pepsi cans.

"You choose, angel."

I selected the bottle with the fanciest label and brought it to my mom, along with a Styrofoam cup that had been in a plastic bag next to the cooler. Then I returned for my Pepsi and popped the tab before my mom changed her mind about letting me have one before dinner.

My dad's hand, I noticed, had found its way down to my mom's rear again, but this time she didn't swat it away.

I said, "What are we having for dinner?"

"Hot dogs," my dad told me.

"Yeah! Are we going to cook them on the grill or over the fire?"

I don't think he heard me, because he was asking my mom where she wanted the folding chairs.

"Right over there," she said. "By the fire pit."

He went to the car's trunk, which he'd left propped open so it resembled the mouth of a sunbaking alligator, and carried two slat-back folding chairs to the stone ring that formed the perimeter of the fire pit.

"Dad?" I said, following him.

"What, Brian?"

"Can we cook them over the fire? The hot dogs?"

"You can cook your wieners over the fire, if you want. But you're going to need to find a sharp stick."

"Can I go look now?"

“That’s a great idea.”

“Don’t go too far,” my mom called

I spent about an hour wandering the woods surrounding the campground, looking for the perfect stick. I didn’t know what characteristics the perfect stick entailed, but I figured it needed to be long enough so I didn’t burn my hands in the fire, thick enough so it didn’t snap beneath the weight of the wiener, and have a thin, pointy tip. In the end I found one that sported all these requisites, plus, as a bonus, it ended in *three* prongs, like a devil’s scepter, which meant I could cook three wieners at once.

When I returned to the campground to show the stick to my parents, I found them lounging in the folding chairs, my mom laughing at something my dad was telling her. Loud music played from the portable stereo, some old-fashioned stuff, maybe Elvis, or The Beatles.

“Look at my stick!” I said as I approached them.

“That’s lovely, Brian,” my mom said. She had one of her funny smelling cigarettes pinched between her fingers. The filter was smeared with red lipstick.

“Dad? Look.” Four empty beer bottles sat next to him on the ground.

“Let me see that.” He held out his hand.

Beaming, I passed it to him.

He snapped off two of the prongs, then handed it back. “That’s better.”

I was too shocked to say anything. My eyes smarted with tears. I turned around and pretended to be interested in the stick.

“Brian?” he said.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Grab me another beer, will ya?”

Rubbing the tears from my cheeks—there had only been a couple—I opened the cooler and grabbed a beer. I considered asking my mom if I could have another Pepsi, but I didn’t because I knew she would say no. I brought the beer to my dad, then sat on the ground a few feet away from him.

I listened to my parents’ conversation for a bit. They were talking about their friends. My mom kept calling one of the women she worked with a skank. I wondered if maybe she meant “skunk.” Sometimes when she was drinking she didn’t always pronounce her words correctly. And I could tell she was a little drunk already. Her face was flushed, her eyes filmy. My dad wouldn’t be drunk, not after four beers, but he probably had what he called a buzz.

He cracked open the beer I’d given him, then asked my mom for the cigarette she was smoking. He didn’t smoke, not every day like she did, but he would have the funny smelling ones every now and then.

I leaned back on my elbows and breathed deeply. Despite my dad breaking my stick, and despite shivering a bit in the chill autumnal night, a swell of contentment washed over me. I liked times like these, when my parents were drinking alcohol. It was weird because in the movies parents drinking alcohol always yelled at their kids, or hit them. But mine were the opposite. They didn’t fight as much, and they became nicer to me, more attentive.

“Hey, is there electricity here?” I asked suddenly, wonder-

ing if I could charge my Gameboy. I glanced at the stereo. There was no cord; it was running on batteries.

“Nope,” my dad said. “But there’s water in case you get thirsty.”

I knew that. I had seen the rusty tap poking out of the ground.

“By the way, Bri-guy,” he added. “We’re going to need some tinder and firewood to make the fire before it gets dark. How about you go find us some?”

“Do you want to come with me?” I asked.

“Not right now. I’ve had a long day. You go along.”

I went, even though I figured my day had been about as long as his had been.

Half an hour later I had built a good stockpile of tinder and kindle and firewood next to the fire pit. My dad came over and joined me and soon had a fire going. It was just in time too, as the last of the daylight was seeping from the sky, turning it a muddy orange that quickly bled to red, then to purplish-black.

My mom set the picnic table with paper plates and napkins while my dad got the grill going. I slipped two slimy Oscar Mayer wieners from the package and impaled one on my stick and kept the other gripped in my left hand. Then I extended the stick with the attached wiener into the fire and turned it slowly, like a rotisserie. When the wiener had blistered and blackened, I extracted it and took a bite.

“Ow!” I yelped.

“It’s going to be hot,” my mom told me from the picnic table. I could barely see her in the dark.

I blew on the wiener to cool it down, ate it quickly, then

stuck the second one on the stick and repeated the cooking process. To my dismay, it slipped off the prong and dropped into the fire and ashes.

“Dad!” I cried. “My hotdog fell off!”

“Christ, Brian.” He was seated next to my mom at the picnic table.

“Can I have another one?” I asked.

“You already got your two.”

“But the second one fell off.”

“What do you think we’re going to eat tomorrow?”

“But I’m still hungry.”

“You can have a bun.”

My parents had lit tea candles, and I could see both of them in the jittery candlelight, chomping down on their hotdogs, shadows jumping on their faces.

“Just the bun?” I said, nonplussed.

“You can put ketchup on it.”

My mom giggled, spitting food from her mouth. This started my dad giggling too. I didn’t find that solution funny. In fact, now I knew what Ralph Stevenson felt like every day at lunch with his buttered bread.

Nevertheless, I was hungry, so I joined my parents at the picnic table and ate a bun with ketchup and drank the metallic-tasting water from the tap.

When we finished eating—my dad had had three hotdogs, I’d counted—my mom lit another one of her funny smelling cigarettes and shared it with my dad and talked about the stars. I looked up too. The moon was little more than a silver hook, but there must have been a gazillion stars twinkling down at us.

I wondered what it would be like to get on a rocket ship and visit distant places in the galaxy. I decided it would be pretty great. I'd invite my parents and maybe one of my friends, maybe even Stephanie, the girl I'd kissed recently. Maybe we'd run into aliens. Maybe we'd even find God hiding somewhere.

When my mom ran out of things to say about the stars, my dad told some ghost stories. They weren't very scary because my mom kept interrupting him, saying, "He's just a child, Steve," which effectively ended each one right at the gooey parts.

Later, when it was my bedtime and I had to go to my tent, I read an *Archie* comic book—a Betty and Veronica Double Digest—from cover to cover. Then I turned off my flashlight and lay perfectly still in the darkness. My parents had stopped talking and laughing some time ago, so I guessed they were asleep. The only sound I heard now was the chirrups of crickets. Then I made out a soft rustling in the leaf litter. It was quick, sporadic. I pictured a wood mouse rummaging for acorns, pausing every now and then to sniff the air to make sure nothing was about to swoop down from the black sky, or sneak up behind it. I ended up falling asleep reflecting on how crappy it would be to be stuck at the bottom of the food chain, living your life in constant danger of getting eaten by something bigger than yourself.

I woke at dawn. The fire had winnowed to nothing but a pile of

smoldering coals. My dad was crouched next to it in the murky half-light, trying to set fire to some scrunched up newspaper pages by rubbing two sticks together really fast. He soon gave up doing this and used my mom's bronze Zippo with the picture of a tiny airplane on it. He set kindle atop the burgeoning flames, then larger sticks.

He was whistling and seemed to be in a good mood, so I approached and said, "What's for breakfast, Dad?"

I almost expected him to tell me he wasn't made of food when he grinned and said, "Pancakes." He grabbed a box of pancake mix from next to his foot and tossed it to me. I caught it and looked at a smiling Aunt Jemima. "Don't even need eggs or milk," he said. "Just add water. What will they think of next?"

"Can I have three?" Two of anything was usually all I was ever allowed.

"Aren't you listening to me, boy? It's just mix and water. Have five if you want."

"Five!"

"Now come here and help me out."

I followed my dad's instructions, pouring half the box of pancake mix into a plastic bowl, then adding water from the tap. I stirred the mix until it became thick and gooey. Then I poured three circles onto the oiled grill.

"All right, all right. Give me some space here, Brian," my dad said. "I'll tell you when they're ready."

I retreated to my stump by the fire and continued to watch my dad cook the pancakes. He was a handsome man, I thought. He still had all his hair, which I knew he was proud of, because

he always made fun of bald people. When he combed his hair and shaved, my mom often told him he looked like a movie star. Now his hair was scruffy and unwashed, and stubble pebbled his jaw. He wore a pair of Bermuda shorts and a red tank-top with a picture of a setting sun on the chest. His feet were bare.

Sometimes when my mom wasn't around, and it was just my dad and me like this, I didn't know what to say to him. I was worried about saying the wrong thing, upsetting him. He wouldn't yell at me or anything, not usually, but he'd go quiet, or ignore me altogether. That's when I knew I'd annoyed him.

He used to be an air conditioner repairman, my dad. But then last month he was fired. He got in a big fight with my mom about this. They still argued about it a lot. My mom wanted him to get another job, and he said he was looking. Once he told her he was going to drive trucks. I thought that was neat. But she didn't want him to, because it meant he would be away for long periods of time and there would be nobody home at nighttime to look after me when she went to the bar where she worked. She told me she was a waitress there, but I think she was a dancing waitress because my dad was always talking to her about quitting her dancing.

He cocked an eye at me now. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You ready for the hike today?"

"Where are we going?"

"The north pole, where do you think?"

I didn't know and got nervous.

"To the canyon!" he said. "Did you think we were just go-

ing to sit around here all day?”

“Awesome!”

“You bet it’s awesome. You’re going to keep up, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Hope so. Now come get your pancakes.”

I grabbed a paper plate and held it in front of me. My dad flopped three pancakes onto it. I doused them with maple syrup, then returned to my stump. While I gobbled the pancakes down, I noticed my mom stir in her tent. My dad had left the door unzipped and I could see inside as she kicked the sleeping bag off her, got up, and started to fuss through the clothes she had brought. She was wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy panties. Her breasts were medium-sized and nice-looking, like the ones you saw on TV sometimes. A tattoo of a unicorn decorated her right thigh. A much smaller dolphin circled her belly button. I frowned at the ugly bruise the size of an apple on her left biceps. She always told me the bruises were from bumping into things, but I knew that wasn’t true. They were from my dad, when he hit her.

She was old, thirty I think, but she was still pretty. When we went to a restaurant for dinner, other men would look at her. Also, the waiters were always flirting with her, or at least my dad said they were. Some of my friends had weird crushes on her too. They told me she was hot. I told them they were gross.

A moment later she emerged from the tent dressed in a pair of short canary-yellow shorts and a tight white top that made it obvious she didn’t have a bra on. Her hair was messy, and her face was free of makeup. I liked her face better like this. I

thought she wore too much makeup sometimes. Without it she looked more like my mom.

“Hey, Mom,” I said with a full mouth, smiling at her.

“Morning, hon. Mmm. That smells good. Did you help your father with breakfast?”

“Yup! And he said I can have as many pancakes as I want.”

“Hold on there, Brian,” he said. “Three’s plenty. There’s not as much mix as I thought. We need to save some for tomorrow.”

I glanced at the small triangle of pancake left on my plate and wished I hadn’t eaten so fast now. My mom sat on a stump next to mine and lit a cigarette. She was rubbing the corner of her eyes like she did in the mornings when she drank wine the night before.

“Baby doll?” my dad said. “How many pancakes?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You have to eat something.”

“Brian can have mine.”

“All right!” I said.

“I just told him—”

“Please, Dad?”

He looked at me for a long moment, but I held his eyes, refusing to look away, and finally he shrugged. “One more, Brian,” he said, turning back to the grill. “But that’s it. What do you think, I’m made out of food or something?”

According to my dad, there wasn’t going to be much shade at

the canyon, and the sun, even in October, would be intense at the high elevation we were at. So we filled our water bottles with water from the tap and slathered on sunscreen from an old brown Coppertone bottle that was almost empty and kept making farting noises every time I squeezed it. Then my dad clapped his favorite trucker cap on his head—“Fuck Vegetarians!” was written across the front in gothic lettering—and we set off through the forest. Along the way guideposts described the trees we passed. There were sagebrush and pinyon pine and Utah juniper to name a few, all of which were apparently well-adapted to growing in the thin soil and harsh climate.

I was walking next to my mom, searching the woods for the squirrels and chipmunks that seemed to be everywhere, when my dad said excitedly, “Look at those!” He was pointing at a pair of animal tracks in the dirt. “Reckon they might belong to a bobcat, or mountain lion.”

“What did I tell you about scaring Brian, Steve?”

“I’m not scared, Mom,” I said.

“I’m not trying to scare the boy, Suz,” my dad said.

“Last night with the ghost stories—”

“He’s not a goddamn baby.”

“I’m not—”

“Quiet, Brian!” She frowned at me, touched her temple. “Sorry, honey,” she added more softly.

“I’m not scared, Mom,” I assured her.

“That’s good.” She turned to my dad. “I’m going to go back.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Suz.”

“I have a headache, and I’m not going to spend the day ar-

going with you.”

“I’m not arguing. I just said they were fucking bobcat tracks!”

“We’re camping in the middle of nowhere. We haven’t seen another soul since we arrived. Brian’s eleven. He doesn’t need to worry about bobcats and mountain lions.”

My dad’s eyes darkened, his face tightened. But then he said, “You’re right, baby doll.” He turned to me. “Brian, I made a mistake. They’re probably deer tracks. You’re not scared of deer, are you?”

“Steve,” my mom said.

“Look,” he said, coming over to her. “Today’s supposed to be fun. I don’t want it to be ruined. So I’m sorry for whatever I did.” He cupped her cheek with his hand, then kissed her on the lips. “Okay?”

She hesitated.

“We’ll stop in a bit, roll a spliff,” he said quietly into her ear, but not so quietly I couldn’t hear. “That’ll clear up your headache.”

“I suppose it might help...”

“Good,” he said, and broke into a wolfish grin. Then he scooped her into his arms and ran along the path, ignoring her laughing protests to put her down.

I skipped to keep pace, and when my mom was back on her feet, I said, “What’s a spliff?”

My mom ruffled my hair. “Just a cigarette, honey.”

“The funny smelling ones?”

“That’s right, angel. The funny smelling ones.”

Roughly ten minutes later we emerged from the shadowy forest and found ourselves standing under the bright blue sky and staring out over Black Canyon. My immediate impression was that the far side of the crevice seemed very close, and this made the two-thousand-foot rock walls seem all the more impressive. Large sections of them were blanketed in shadows, which, I guessed, was the reason for the canyon's name.

"Oh wow!" I said, shading my eyes with my hand to lessen the sun's glare.

"How's this for something?" my dad said proudly.

"Awesome, Dad!"

I hurried toward the edge.

"Don't go too close!" my mom called.

She didn't have to worry, though, because the ground didn't drop off suddenly. It angled downward from one rocky terrace to the next for some distance, each one covered with scrub and boulders.

I stopped at the edge of the first terrace and looked west along the canyon rim. "Hey!" I said to my parents, pointing to a promontory that stuck out over the lip of the canyon, almost like the tip of a ship about to sail off the end of the world. "Is that a lookout spot? Can we go there?"

"Sure, Brian," my mom said, coming up behind me. "But you're to stay with your father and me. No running off."

The lookout point was fenced in to prevent people falling to their deaths. I approached the fence hesitantly and looked down. I swallowed, and my stomach felt as if it had left my

body. The bottom of the chasm was impossibly far down, the river that created it little more than a squiggly blue-white line.

I stared, mesmerized at how small everything looked. I'd never been this high above anything in my life, not even when my parents' took me to the top of the Space Needle in Seattle for my mom's birthday dinner in March.

My dad, his arm hooked around my mom's shoulders, said the view was gorgeous and started laughing.

I frowned because I didn't get what was so funny.

Apparently my mom didn't either because she said, "What's so funny?"

"The view! It's gorges!" He spelled it out: "G-o-r-g-e-s."

My mom groaned.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Your father thinks he's funny, Brian. I just hope you don't develop his sense of humor."

"Why not? I think Dad's funny."

"Thanks, Brian," he said, leaning casually against the railing in a way that made my nonexistent stomach queasy. "Now, who's up for hiking to the bottom?"

"The bottom?" my mom said, her eyebrows lifting above the frame of her sunglasses. Her mouth made a pink O.

"Why not? People do it all the time," he told her. "There's gotta be a trail."

She joined him at the fence and peeked over the railing for the first time, hesitantly, like she thought something might streak up from the depth of the canyon and bite her nose off. "Are you serious, Steve? You want to hike all the way to the bottom?"

“We have all day. What else are we going to do?”

“We’ll have to climb back up too, remember.”

“I never forgot that in the first place. Look, Suz, it’ll only take us a couple hours to get to the bottom, then a couple to get back up. The exercise will be good for us. You’re always telling me to exercise more, right?”

“I’m never telling you to climb a mountain.”

“It’s not a mountain. It’s a canyon.”

“I don’t know...”

“Brian’s up for it. Aren’t you, Brian?”

I wasn’t. I was scared senseless by the idea. But I nodded my head.

“See?” my dad said. “Bri-guy’s game.”

“You sure you want to do this, Brian?” my mom asked.

I felt my dad’s eyes on me. “Yeah, Mom. Totally.”

She sighed. “I guess that means I’m outnumbered.” She moved away from the railing, dusting her hands on the rear of her yellow shorts. “All right, Steve. Lead the way.”

We continued the trek west, to the lowest saddle on the ridge, where we found a trail that descended below the rim into the inner canyon. This excited my dad, who increased his pace and kept shouting over his shoulder for my mom and me to keep up.

The trail switchbacked through Douglas fir and sunburst aspens before coming to a junction where a sign with an arrow pointing left read: “River Access. Permit Required.”

My mom frowned. “You didn’t say we needed a permit, Steve.”

My dad shrugged. “I didn’t know we did.”

She harrumphed.

“It’s true,” he said. “Besides, you probably only need one during the summertime, when it’s busier.”

“How much did they cost?”

“Jesus, Suz. I just told you. I didn’t know we needed one. So how am I supposed to know how much they cost?”

“What if a ranger catches us down here without one?”

“You and your rangers.”

“We’ll get fined. And the fine will be a lot more than the permit that you were too cheap to get.”

“I didn’t know we needed one!” he snapped.

I moved away from them and pretended to study a bush that had little red flowers sprouting among the green needles.

“If you had simply told me,” my mom said, “I would have paid for it.”

“Suz, I’m warning you...”

“What? You’ll hit me?”

A long pause. Then my dad, softly: “You don’t talk about that.”

“Oh God,” my mom said, and it sounded more like a moan than words. “What am I doing?”

“Don’t say that...”

“Maybe we need a break...”

My dad’s voice hardened. “You’re going to do this? Right now?”

“It’s not working, Steve. *We’re* not working.”

“You’re going to throw away eight years together over a *camping permit*?”

“This isn’t about a permit!”

Another long pause. I blinked away the tears welling in my eyes.

“Listen,” my dad said. “I’m going to be working soon. I’ll have money. We won’t need to worry about shit like this. I’ll take care of you.”

My mom chuckled. “You’re going to take care of me? Baby, I make more with my tips—”

“Honest money, Suz. Honest fucking money. You can get out of that shithole. You just give me a bit more time, you’ll see.”

My mom started making strange noises, and I finally turned around. My dad had his arms around her and was stroking her back. Her head was buried in his shoulder, and she was trembling. When she lifted her face, to wipe the tears from her eyes, she saw me watching them and said, “It’s okay, Brian. Your father and I are just having an adult talk. Everything’s okay. We’re working some things out. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, and returned my attention to the bush.

The trail steepened immediately, weaving through more thickets of oak scrub and evergreens. Some sections squeezed between huge boulders, forcing my parents and me to progress single file. Other sections tiptoed along dangerous drops of ten or twenty feet. My dad walked bravely along the edges of

these, tossing rocks over them now and then, while my mom and I kept our distance.

About three quarters of the way into the canyon we came across a flat rock outcrop where we stopped for lunch. Ravenous from walking all morning, we ate the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches we'd brought with us. We drank most of our water too. I could have easily finished the rest of mine, but my mom cautioned me to keep some for the hike back to the top of the chasm.

My parents were lying on their backs now, staring up at the sky, talking nicely to each other again. Adults are weird, I decided. I didn't know how they could hate each other one minute, then love each other the next. When I got in a fight with my friend Richard Strauss last month because he wouldn't give back the skateboard I'd lent him, I didn't talk to him for a full week. And I still didn't talk to Johnny Bastianello after he squeezed an entire bottle of glue into my pencil case, and that had been last year in grade five.

Anyway, I was glad my parents could make up so easily. I didn't want them to get a divorce. Sampson Cooper's parents divorced last year. At first it sounded cool because suddenly he had two homes where we could play, and his dad's place was in a new-smelling building with a swimming pool and tennis courts. But Sampson said moving between his parents' homes every weekend wasn't as fun as it sounded, and the swimming pool and tennis courts got boring after a while. Also, his dad had a girlfriend who was always trying to act like his mom, which he really didn't like.

My dad rolled onto his side and kissed my mom on the

mouth. His hand rubbed her thigh up and down, then cupped one of her braless breasts. She moved it away, and he lay down again on his back.

I was sitting cross-legged about ten feet away from them, and I decided to lie down on my back too. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on my face. My mind drifted to Stephanie, the girl I'd kissed and was sort of dating. I couldn't wait to tell her that I'd hiked all the way to the bottom of a canyon. She thought I was super athletic, even though I wasn't, not really. She probably assumed this because she always watched me play fence ball at recess, a game that anybody could do okay at. Pretty much all you do is throw a tennis ball at a chain-link fence. If the ball gets stuck between the links you get five points. If it goes through, you get ten. If it rebounds without bouncing on the ground and someone catches it, you get out.

Stephanie and I had met last month in September. She was the new kid at our school and didn't have any friends. During morning and afternoon recesses and the hour-long lunch break in-between, she would sit by herself on the portable steps that faced where my friends and I played fence ball because the grade sevens always hogged the basketball court.

I knew what it was like to be the new kid, because I'd been in that same position only two years earlier when my family moved and I changed schools. So on the third or fourth day I'd seen her there, I worked up the nerve to go talk to her.

"Hi," I said, pounding the mitt of my baseball glove with my free hand nervously.

"Hi," she replied, smiling.

“Do you have any friends yet?”

“Not really.”

“Do you want to play with us?”

“No, thank you.”

“Oh.”

I waited with her until the next fence ball game started, talking about nothing, making a bigger and bigger fool of myself. Then I went back and played my hardest in the new game, showing off. When the bell rang, I caught up to Stephanie and said, “Do you like this school so far?”

“It’s okay.”

Ralph Stevenson and Sampson Cooper and Will Lee ran by, singing “Brian and Stephanie sitting in a tree...”

I felt my cheeks blush. But I also felt special. I was talking to a *girl*—a pretty one too. They hadn’t been brave enough to do that.

“Where do you live?” I asked her.

“On Amherst.”

“I live on Cherokee. Do you want to walk home together?”

“Okay.”

We started walking home together every day after that conversation. Stephanie’s house was nice, much bigger than mine, white stucco with brown wood trim. On the third day she invited me inside. I was nervous. I had never been in a girl’s house before. She showed me the kitchen, then the living room. We sat on the sofa for a bit, watching MTV. But all I could think about was whether I should sidle closer or take her hand, and whether her parents were going to come home and get us in trouble. Before I left she showed me her swimming

pool in the backyard. I couldn't believe she had one. Sampson Cooper was my only friend who had a swimming pool, but he had to share it with everyone in his dad's building.

When Stephanie invited me to go swimming the next day in her pool, I said sure, but I purposely forgot to bring my swimming trunks to school. I was a skinny drink of water, as my dad called me, and I didn't want her to see me without my shirt on.

I'd been saving my allowance the last two weeks because I wanted to take her to the movies, and I figured I would probably need to pay for both of us. I currently had enough to buy the tickets, but I was going to keep saving until I could afford popcorn and Pepsis too.

My eyes fluttered open. The sun was getting hot on my face. Squinting up at the towering cliffs, the blue sky and white drifting clouds, I spotted a raptor wheeling back and forth on invisible air currents. Then, faintly, I heard what might have been rocks tumbling down the canyon walls.

I didn't mention this to my parents, because it might scare my mom. She might want to turn back. Then she and my dad might start fighting again. He might hit her this time; if I tried to stop him, he might hit me too, like he did two years ago, after my baby sister Geena died in her sleep. And if I'd learned anything from that experience, it was that fists hurt a heck of a lot more than the usual ruler or belt across your backside.

With our stomachs full and our thirsts quenched, we embarked

on the final leg of the descent. The canyon walls blocked out most direct sunlight now, and the sound of the churning river became louder and louder. Then, abruptly, the drainage channel we were following came to a steep drop-off.

“Give me a fucking break!” my dad said, arming sweat from his brow. “A dead end!”

My mom plopped down on a rock. “Can we rest here for a bit before we head back?”

My dad seemed surprised. “Head back? We’re almost at the bottom.”

“Do you plan on flying the rest of the way, Steve?”

“Maybe we can monkey down or something.”

He started toward the drop-off.

“Steve, be careful!”

“Stop worrying so much.” But he was indeed being careful, taking baby steps, testing each foothold before progressing forward. He looked like a man walking on thin ice who expected it to break beneath him at any moment.

Then he was at the edge, peering over it. He whistled. “Not too far to the bottom, fifty feet maybe. But it’s a sheer drop.” He turned back to us. “Let’s look for a different route—”

Loose talus and scree shifted beneath his feet. A surprised expression flashed across his face. His arms shot into the air. Then he was gone.

My mom shouted. I would have shouted too, but every muscle had locked up inside me, so I couldn’t move, breathe, make a sound.

“Steve!” my mom cried. She took a step forward, almost lost her footing, stopped. “*Steve!*”

He didn't answer.

"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!" She repeated this litany over and over.

"Mom?" I managed in a tiny, breathless voice.

"He's gone!" she said. "He's gone!"

I'd never seen my mom so scared before, which in turn made me all the more scared. Finally my body responded to my thoughts and I started instinctively forward, to peer over the edge, to determine how far my dad had fallen.

"Brian!" my mom shrieked, grabbing my wrist and yanking me backward. She pulled so hard she tripped and fell onto her bum, pulling me down with her. Then she was hugging me tightly and sobbing and whispering a prayer, and when I got past the shock and bafflement of what just happened, I started crying as well.

It took my mom and me an hour to find an alternative route to the canyon floor. At first my mom kept crying, albeit silently, like she didn't want me to know she was crying even though I could see the tears streaking her cheeks and could hear the occasional muffled sob. She kept telling me that my dad was okay, that he wasn't replying because he probably hit his head and was sleeping. I didn't believe her, the way I didn't believe her when she told me she wasn't angry at my dad after they'd had one of their fights. Which left one alternative: my dad was dead. But this proved impossible for me to comprehend. He was my dad. He couldn't be dead. He was *my dad*.

My mom was moving so quickly I had to half jog to keep up with her. To the left of us the canyon wall soared to the sky. To the right the river splashed and frothed, filling the air with a thunderous roar and a fine damp mist.

Soon the rocky ground turned to burnt grass, then to hardy shrubs—then to poison ivy, a huge patch that stretched from the chasm wall to the moss-covered rocks along the riverbank. I recognized what it was it right away because I'd contracted a rash from it two summers before while my parents had been visiting their friends at a cottage in Colorado Springs. It had spread to every part of my body, from my face to my toes, and itched like crazy. The worst was when it got between your fingers and toes and began to bubble. I popped the bubbles, which leaked a yellowish puss and probably spread the toxin to other parts of me as well.

And those poison ivy plants had only come up to my shins. This stuff easily reached my waist and had leaves as broad as pages from a book. They ruffled in the slight breeze, almost as if they were beckoning me to come closer.

My mom had stopped before the patch. She was looking for an alternate path. Finally she said, "This is poison ivy, baby. We have to go through it."

"No way!"

"We have to, Brian. There's no way around it."

I glanced at the river. The poison ivy stopped at the rocky bank. "Maybe we can walk along the edge of the river?"

"Those rocks look really sharp, hon, and they're covered with moss. If you slipped on them, you could cut your leg wide open. Or get washed away by the river. Now, all you have to

do is hold your hands above your head, like this.” She demonstrated. “If you don’t let the leaves touch your skin, you won’t catch anything.”

“But the poison will still stick to my clothes.”

“There’s nothing we can do about that, honey. And I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”

She pioneered a path through the poison ivy patch. I followed, holding my hands above my head as instructed. When we reached the far side, I examined my hands, half-convinced I could already see welts forming. I was wondering what Stephanie would think if she saw me covered in yucky red splotches and pussy bubbles when my mom stifled a yelp, then burst into a run. I looked up and saw the yellow of my dad’s jacket in the distance.

He was lying on his back beneath the skeletal branches of an old, twisted tree that looked as though it had been dead for a real long time. Bloody gashes and ugly purple bruises covered much of his body, almost as if someone had shoved him in one of those industrial dryers at the coin laundry alongside a handful of razor blades and put the machine on permanent press.

Nevertheless, he had a pulse. He was alive.

My mom had a fully stocked first-aid kit in her backpack, and we spent the next half hour plucking pine needles and clumps of dirt from his wounds, dousing them with iodine, then taping bandages over the larger ones. I thought we did a

pretty good job, but my mom was worried about broken bones and other internal injuries we couldn't see.

"How are we going to get him back to the top?" I said, staring up the canyon walls. They looked impossibly high when you were at the bottom.

My mom didn't reply.

"Mom?"

"Do you know how to get back to the campsite, honey?"

"It's just up, then...that way." I pointed east.

She didn't say anything.

"Mom?"

"We walked for a long time, Brian. I wasn't paying any attention. I let your father take charge. I'm not sure I remember where we came out of the woods the first time."

"The first time?"

"When we saw the canyon for the first time. If I can't find our car..."

"I can find it," I said. "I'm sure I can."

"No, baby. You're going to have to stay here with your father."

"Without you?"

"You have to be here in case he wakes up. If he does, he's going to be scared and in a lot of pain. You need to keep him calm, tell him I've gone for help, I'll be back soon."

"You don't want me to come with you?"

"You have to look after your father. You have to keep a fire going too. I might not be back until dark, so you need to keep the fire going so I can find you. Can you do this?"

"I want to come with you."

“No, Brian, you have to stay here. Now, if your father does wake up, he’s also going to be thirsty, so give him some water—but not all of it. Not right away. You have to make it last.”

“But I can get more from the river.”

She glanced at the river. I did too. It was roaring and frothing and moving really, really fast, reminding me of the rivers I saw people white-water rafting down on TV. Suddenly I wasn’t so sure I wanted to get close to it. I didn’t even know how to swim.

My mom took my hands in hers and looked me in the eyes. “You will *not* go near that river, Brian. Do you hear me? No matter what. It’s a lot stronger than you think. It will sweep you straight away. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

“Tell me you won’t go near that river.”

“I won’t go near the river.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“I’m trusting you, Brian.” She stood. “Now c’mon. Let’s find some firewood and get that fire going.”

We scavenged a good stockpile of sun-bleached deadfall, along with bark and fungi for tinder, and twigs and smaller sticks for kindle. Then my mom started a fire and gave me her bronze Zippo and showed me how to restart the flames if they went out. Finally she hugged me, kissed me on the cheek, told me to

be brave and to stay away from the river, then left the way we had come, back through the poison ivy patch.

As soon as she disappeared from sight a heavy cloak of fear and loneliness settled over me as the seriousness of the situation hit home. I was on my own. My mom was gone, my dad unconscious. I was in a strange, unfamiliar place. I felt tiny and helpless next to the grandeur of the canyon and the power of the river. I didn't have any food and only a bit of water.

What if something bad happened? I wondered. What if my dad had a heart attack? What if there was an avalanche? I recalled the sound of the tumbling rocks earlier. What if one crushed my dad's head, or mine? My mom would return with help only to find us dead, our brains splattered everywhere...

Stop it.

I settled next to my dad, rested my chin on my knees, and watched him for a bit. His face appeared pale and shiny in the bright afternoon light, like the flesh of a slug. His breathing was slurpy, like when you sucked the last dregs of soda through a straw. His chest moved up and down, barely.

I touched his forehead. It was really hot, and I didn't think that was from the sun. I touched my forehead to compare, and his was definitely hotter.

Did that mean he had a fever? I pondered this, because I thought you could only get a fever when you had the flu.

A fat black ant crawled up his neck and onto his chin. I picked it off, squished it between my index finger and thumb, then tossed its broken body away. Shortly after another industrious ant, smaller than the first, crawled up over his ear and along his jawline. I was about to pick it off as well, but then it

beelined toward the wound below my dad's right eye. I decided to watch it, to see how it would react to the bed of exposed liver-red meat. Ants ate other insects, which made them carnivores. But this one simply stopped before the wound, its antennae twitching, feeling, then turned away. I pinched it between my fingers and dropped it on the gash. It shot straight off, like it was scared, though I didn't think ants could get scared. It ran up over my dad's closed eyelid, over the ridge of his eyebrow, and disappeared into his greasy, clotted black hair.

Feeling bad for letting it find refuge in his hair, I promptly squished any other ants that came close to him. There turned out to be a good number, and I searched the ground until I found the sandy-hole entrance to their subterranean dwelling. I stuck a twig in the hole, so the twig stood erect like a flagpole, effectively blocking any more ants from emerging.

I didn't want to look at my dad any longer, so I took one of my *Archies* from my backpack and tried to read it. After a few minutes of staring blankly at the same page, I forced myself to focus on the words in the speech balloons. They weren't funny or interesting. They were just words.

I closed the comic book and stared the way my mom had gone, willing her to come back soon.

Night came first, and quickly. The strip of sky overhead turned yellow, then pink, then red, then purplish-black, like a giant had pummeled it with its fists, leaving behind a broken mess.

The Milky Way glowed impossibly far away, but the starlight didn't reach the canyon floor, so it was pitch black outside the circle of firelight. I knew this because when I went to pee I couldn't even see my feet. Only darkness. Emptiness. A void. Like I was a tiny organism at the bottom of the ocean. That's how it felt anyway.

The drone of the now invisible river continued unabated, and my stomach kept growling hungrily. I hadn't eaten anything since lunch on the rock outcrop, and that hadn't been much, just the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and the apple.

My thirst, however, was even worse. I had about three inches of water left in my water bottle. My dad had less. I'd taken a sip from mine after my mom had left, but that was all. It needed to last me until she returned... whenever that was.

And why wasn't she back already? According to my wristwatch, it was 10:07 p.m. That meant she had been gone for nearly eight hours. It should only have taken her two, maybe three hours to return to the campground, fifteen minutes to drive to that town we passed on the way in, Montrose, or whatever it was called. Another two/three hours to bring help to us. That was seven or so hours in total. So where was she? Had something happened to her? Had she fallen off a cliff like my dad had?

No, I wouldn't let myself think that. She was coming. She would be here any minute now—

My dad was staring at me.

I was so startled I cried out and toppled backward.

Then, just as quickly, I scrambled forward.

"Dad?" I said.

“Where’s...your mother?” His voice was dry, raspy. He spoke softly, as if each word was an effort.

“She went to get help. She’ll be back soon.”

“When...?”

“When did she go? This afternoon, about eight hours ago.”

“Eight...?”

“She’ll be here soon, Dad.”

“Water?”

“Here.” I grabbed his water bottle and tipped a bit of water into his mouth. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. His tongue slithered over his cracked lips, probing for every last drop.

“More,” he said.

“Mom said we have to save it—”

“More!”

I poured a bit more into his mouth.

“More.”

“Mom said—”

His hand moved amazingly fast, snagging my wrist

“Ow!” I cried.

“Let go,” he said.

I obeyed. The bottle toppled onto its side. My dad released my wrist, retrieved the bottle, and finished what was left.

He smacked his lips weakly. “Where’s yours?” he said.

“I— It’s finished,” I lied.

“Show me.”

“It’s all gone.”

He tried to grab me again, but I scuttled out of the way this time.

He maneuvered himself onto his elbows. In the firelight his face was a severe mask of strained muscles and hard angles. Sweat beaded his skin, making it shinier than ever. His dusty eyes swept the area, locking onto my water bottle, which was propped against my backpack a few feet away.

He held a shaking hand toward it. "Give me it, Brian."

"Mom said we have to save what we have."

"Give it!"

I hesitated. Under normal circumstances I would never oppose my dad's wishes like this. But my dad wasn't acting like my dad. He was acting like a stranger.

"Brian," he said more gently, as if realizing he was scaring me. "Please. I'm...de'drated."

I retrieved the water bottle and handed it to him. He finished all the water in two gulps, tossed the bottle aside, and lay back down. He closed his eyes.

"Dad?"

He didn't reply.

"Dad?"

Nothing.

"*Dad?* Are you okay?"

"I'm not your fucking dad, Brian."

I stared at him, confused, waiting for him to explain what he'd meant. But he didn't. He fell back to sleep almost immediately, once again making that slurpy breathing sound.

I'm not your fucking dad, Brian.

In the nightmare my dad and I were in some kind of treehouse, a big one like in the *Return of the Jedi*, only ours was a lot closer to the ground, and bad people were trying to climb the tree to get in. I could see them huddled together below, conspiring. My dad kept shouting orders at me, getting angrier and angrier because I didn't understand what he wanted me to do. At one point he got so mad he hit me. When he tried to hit me again I knocked aside his arm with mine and realized I was stronger than him. I shoved him to the ground and told him to stop hitting my mom. I was telling him this in a reasonable voice, but I was shouting too. A part of me kept waiting for him to say he wasn't my dad, for him to tell me to go away, but he never did. He just kept yelling at me to stop the invaders—

I woke to blackness, disorientation, my dad hissing dangerously, telling me to wake up.

"I'm awake, Dad," I whispered. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Bear. There."

His words zapped me like an electrical shock. I looked in the direction he was looking, past the still-burning fire. I didn't see anything but darkness.

"Where...?"

A forceful expulsion of air startled me, louder than that which any human could make. A second later I saw the bear. I had been staring right at it, though it was little more than a black patch against the black night.

Holy crap! I thought, sucking back a mouthful of dread.

My mind reeled.

Why's it just standing there?

What's it doing?

I wanted to ask my dad these questions, but my throat was suddenly too small, my tongue too thick.

“*Brian?*” my dad hissed.

“What?” I managed.

“Scare it away.”

Scare it away?

“I can’t.”

“Brian!”

The bear—which had been investigating my mom’s backpack, I realized—now swung its huge round head toward me. Its eyes shone silver. It snorted and made deep throaty sounds while pawing the ground with its long claws.

“Go away!” my dad said, waving his arm weakly. “Ga! Go away!”

The bear lumbered into the firelight. Its short glossy hair was a bluish-black, and it was skinny, with disproportionately large shoulder humps. Its ears stood erect and rounded, its muzzle narrow and grizzled brown, ending in a broad black nose.

It roared, flashing yellow canines, which dripped with saliva.

My bladder gave out. I barely noticed.

“Ga!” my dad croaked. “Go! Scat! Brian!”

The bear roared again, shaking its head from side to side.

Instinct screamed at me to run away, but I knew I couldn’t. If I ran, the bear would chase me, like dogs do. And bears were fast. Someone once told me they were faster than people. So it would catch me, rip me apart, eat my guts.

“Go away!” I yelled, flapping my hands madly.

The bear reared up on its hind legs and roared a third time, reminding me of a bear I had seen at a circus a few years ago.

This gave me a crazy boost of courage—*it’s just a stupid animal*—and before I knew what I was doing I was springing toward the fire. I snatched a burning stick from the flames and threw it at the bear. It bounced off its head.

The bear chuffed, as if surprised.

I flung another stick, then another, shrieking nonsense all the while.

The bear started huffing and clacking its teeth while backing away. Euphoric with anticipated victory, I scooped up a smoking log and heaved it at the monstrous thing. When it struck the ground it exploded in sparks.

The bear fled.

“Will it come back?” I asked my dad, who was staring in the direction the bear had gone.

“More wood, fire,” he rasped. “Now!”

I chose a big fat log from the stockpile and dumped it onto the bed of smoldering ashes. For a moment I was afraid I had ruined the fire. But then flames appeared, licking up the sides of the log. I added some smaller sticks and dry pine needles and anything else that would burn. As I was doing this I detected an icky, sulfuric smell. A moment later I noticed that my hands and forearms were waxy smooth. I’d burned off all the small dark hairs when I’d stuck my hands in the fire to grab

the log.

My dad rolled onto his side and began coughing. It sounded like he had a really bad cold, like he was hawking up phlegm...and then I saw it wasn't phlegm, it was blood.

"Dad!" I rushed to his side, but he shoved me away. Finally he stopped coughing and eased himself onto his back, groaning with the effort. His mouth was smeared bright red, as if he had been pigging out on strawberries. He folded his hands together on top of his chest and closed his eyes, looking eerily how my dead grandma had looked in her coffin at the funeral home.

"Dad? Are you okay?"

He didn't reply, and I wasn't sure whether he was ignoring me or sleeping.

"Dad?"

Silence.

I checked his pulse. It was faint, but beating.

That night seemed to stretch forever. I had never been so frightened or jumpy in my life. Every unexplained sound sent my heart galloping. I knew bears were supposed to be more scared of people than people were of bears, yet the one that had attacked us was awfully skinny, which meant it was probably sick—and desperate. It wouldn't hesitate to eat my dad and me. I was one hundred percent sure of that.

As the minutes inched by, I found myself wondering what I would do if the bear returned and I couldn't scare it away again. I could run. But what about my dad? I couldn't leave

him here...could I? Yet what else *could* I do? He couldn't walk. I couldn't carry him. I'd have no choice. I'd have to leave him.

And he isn't really my dad.

I frowned. Was this true? After all, my dad had been sick when he'd told me this. He'd had a fever. Maybe he didn't know what he was saying. Maybe he was...what was that word? Delirious? Yeah, he was delirious. Of course he was my father. I looked like him, didn't I? That's what my mom was always telling me. "You're just as handsome as your father, Brian. You're going to break a lot of hearts one day."

I went over to my dad, knelt beside him, and studied his face. My frown deepened, because now that I was looking at him, really *looking* at him, I didn't think I resembled him at all. We both had dark hair, and we both had eyes a comparable shade of gray. But that's where the similarities ended and the differences began. Like his eyebrows, for example. I'd never paid any attention to his eyebrows before. They were thick, tilting upward at the outer ends. Mine were thin, arching in the middle, like upside-down smiles. And his nose was long and straight. Mine was curved slightly, like a ski jump. And his jaw and chin were square. Mine were oval. And his head was proportioned normally to his body, while mine was too big. It's why my friends sometimes called me Bighead, or Humpty Dumpty, or Brian the Brain, even though I wasn't that smart.

"Dad?"

He didn't reply.

"Dad?"

No reply.

I pressed my ear to his parted mouth and heard his wet, raspy breathing, almost like he was gargling mouthwash. I should have been relieved, but I wasn't.

I was angry.

“Why don't I look like you, Dad?”

No reply.

“Why haven't you ever liked me?”

No reply.

“Are you my dad, my *real* dad?”

No reply.

“Why do you hit Mom?”

No reply.

“I've heard you. When I'm in my room, and you think I'm sleeping, I hear you yell at her about Geena dying, and hit her. I hear her cry. She tells me the bruises are from other things, but I know they're from when you hit her.”

No reply.

“I don't think you're my dad.”

No reply.

“I don't think you are.”

I stared at him for a long, silent moment, then went back to the fire to keep watch.

I must have fallen asleep at some point because when I opened my eyes the sun was high in the sky and it was warm, the way it had been yesterday around lunchtime.

Squinting, I glanced about for the bear, half convinced it would be hanging out somewhere nearby, watching me. It wasn't. However, I was startled to discover about a dozen crows perched in the bare branches of the old, twisted tree. Every one of their beady black eyes seemed to be trained on my dad and me.

When had they arrived? And what did they want?

My dad? Did they know he was dying? Were they after an easy meal?

"Go away," I told them.

They remained, staring greedily.

I tossed a stone at the closest one. It cawed, which almost sounded like a bray of witchy laughter.

I turned my attention to my dad. He was in the same position he'd been in earlier, only his hands were no longer clasped together on his chest; they were sprawled to either side of him, as though he were making lazy snow angels in the dirt. His skin appeared pale, sickly, almost yellow. His face seemed thin and older than usual.

My hands were itching and I scratched them absently, thinking about how hungry and thirsty I was, and how there was no food or water.

And where was my mom? She definitely should have been back already. She'd been gone for almost a full day.

"Mom!" I shouted, my voice cracking and echoing throughout the chasm.

She didn't answer.

"Mom?" I repeated, though more to myself this time.

I picked up the water bottle my dad had tossed aside and

upended it to my lips. No water came out. Not a drop.

I looked at the river. My mom had warned me not to go near it. She'd said it could sweep me away. I didn't doubt that. But I didn't have to go in it very deep, did I? I could stop at the edge, just close enough to fill the water bottle...

My ankles began to itch. I snuck my hands beneath my pant cuffs and scratched—and realized the skin there was lumpy. I yanked my hands away as if I had been bitten. I rolled up the cuffs.

Red splotches marred my skin. They resembled puffy red birthmarks.

Poison ivy!

“Shoot!” I said, resisting the temptation to scratch more. “Shoot!”

“Water...”

I snapped my head toward my dad. His eyes were open but hooded.

“You drank it all!” I said.

“Water...”

“There's none.”

“River...”

“Mom told me I can't go near it.”

“Brian...” He cleared his throat. “I need...we need...water...”

“I promised Mom I wouldn't go near it.”

“I'm lying.”

I frowned at him. Lying about what? About not being my father?

Something shifted inside me. Hope?

“Water...” he said.

Lying or dying? I wondered. Maybe he said he was dying...

That something inside me vanished.

“Brian...”

“What?” I griped. I felt hot, tired, confused.

But he had closed his eyes again.

The minutes ticked by. The sun beat down on the back of my neck. I worked my mouth to generate saliva, then swallowed with difficulty, as if my throat were clogged with a roll of pennies. I rubbed my hands on a large rock that jutted from the ground, thinking that by doing this I wouldn't spread the poison ivy to other parts of my body. I rubbed my ankles on a different part of the same rock. I tried not to think about my dad who wasn't my dad dying, or the crows, waiting to fight over his corpse. I tried not to think about the long, bleak day ahead of me, or about spending another night here if my mom didn't return.

I tried not to think about any of this, but in the end it was all I could think about.

After a bit, I got up and went to the river.

My mom had been right. The mossy rocks were slippery and sharp. I kept to the pebbly ground when I could and only stepped on the rocks when I had to. Then I was at the edge of the river. I had become so used to its continuous drone I had stopped hearing it, but now it sounded as loud as a million bees

buzzing in unison. And it was moving so fast! I glanced east, then west, searching for a calmer section, but it was swift-moving and frothy for as far as I could see in either direction.

I stood on a large slab of rock that sloped downward into the water at maybe a forty-degree angle. I lowered myself to my bum, then butt-hopped forward. Stretching my right arm as far as I could, I submerged my water bottle into the rushing water, pointing the mouth upriver. The frigid water stung my hand and tried to tear the bottle from my grip. I held onto it tightly until it had filled up. Then I raised it in the air triumphantly.

That wasn't so hard, I thought.

Tucking it in my pocket, I attempted to fill my dad's bottle next. Almost immediately, however, it slipped from my grasp. I cried out in dismay, lunged forward—instinctively, stupidly—and skidded down the rock into the river.

I was waist deep in the freezing water before I knew what was happening and still sliding on the slick surface of the rock. Then my feet touched flat ground. I tried to stand. The current yanked me along with it, away from land.

“Dad!” I shouted. “Help!”

I was pin-wheeling my arms, trying to keep myself upright.

“Dad!”

I could see him by the fire. He was propped up on his elbows, watching me.

“Dad! Help!”

He didn't move.

I flailed toward shore. Top heavy, my feet shot out from beneath me. My head dunked underwater. I opened my mouth,

to cry out, and swallowed icy water. Then I was moving, pushed and dragged by the current. I somersaulted, didn't know up from down. My eyes bulged with fear, but I couldn't see anything...or could I? Yes, the sky! It was rippled and blurry and blue. I reached for it, kicked and kicked.

My head crashed through the surface of the river. I sucked back a mouthful of air and spat it out again in a fit of coughing. My throat burned. My lungs ached inside my chest.

As I struggled to remain afloat, I gagged on more water, gasped for air. My body suddenly felt as if it were made of lead. I was going to sink. I was going to drown—

I smashed into a rock. I tried grabbing hold of it, but it was too slippery, there were no handholds, and then it was behind me.

The river spun me twice, and when I was facing forward again another rock reared up in front of me.

Somehow I managed to clasp onto this one and not let go. Water crashed over my shoulders, roared in my ears.

The rock that had stopped me, I noticed with relief, was the first of several that protruded from the water in a line like well-worn molar teeth.

Moving from one to the next, I made slow but steady progress toward shore until I could stand once again.

Thankfully the riverbank here was not as steep as where I'd slid in, and I was able to clamber onto dry land, where I collapsed onto my chest and spewed my guts out.

Back at the campsite my dad was still propped on his elbows, still watching me.

“Water...?” he said.

“I lost our bottles.”

Something flitted across his face. It took me a moment to realize it was fear. Then a kind of loathing filled his eyes, a kind of hate. I was convinced he was going to jump up and smack me before I remembered he didn’t have the strength to do that, even if it’s what he wanted to do.

Instead he slumped onto his back.

“I can go get some,” I said. “I can bring it back in my hands?”

He didn’t reply, and I didn’t persist. I didn’t really want to go back to the river anyway.

I turned my attention to my right hand. A half-moon gash split my palm from thumb to pinky finger. I didn’t recall when or how it happened, but it must have been when I’d grabbed onto one of the rocks.

I scavenged the first-aid kit from my mom’s backpack and tended to the wound. The white cotton bandage bloomed red immediately. I unwrapped it and applied a fresh one, securing it more tightly. It turned just as red just as quickly.

“Dad,” I said, “my cut won’t stop bleeding.”

He didn’t reply.

“Dad!”

He mumbled something. I caught “guy” and thought he was saying “Bri-guy.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Guy...knocked up your mom...”

“Who?”

“Left...”

“Who?”

“Because...you...”

“Me?”

“Didn’t want...”

“What—?”

But I understood.

*My real dad didn’t want me. That’s why he left my mom.
Not because of her. Because of me.*

Because I was born.

Over the course of the day the old twisted tree had become host to at least fifty crows. The black birds had taken up residence on every rotting branch, turning the tree into a living monstrosity, like something out of a dark fairytale, or a haunted forest. Aside from the odd caw, or the leathery beat of wings, however, they remained eerily quiet.

The last of the sunlight had faded to dusk a few minutes ago, and although I could no longer see the ghastly tree or the greedy crows, I knew they were still there, still watching my dad and me with their unreadable black eyes, biding their time until they could feast.

The gash across my palm had stopped bleeding some time ago, so I was no longer worried I was going to bleed to death. But my poison ivy was worse than ever. It had spread everywhere. To my ankles, my stomach, my upper arms, my neck,

behind my ears. Even to the dreaded area between my fingers. The itching there was so intense, the small puss bubbles so intolerable, I wanted to chop off my hands.

My mom had yet to return, and I'd resigned myself to the fact that I would be spending another night just me and my dad who wasn't my dad.

My dad who wasn't my dad.

I glared at him in the firelight, and for the first time in my life I felt nothing for him. No love, no fear, no respect. Nothing.

Actually, that wasn't true, I realized. I did feel something. I felt cheated. He was a phony, an impostor, a stranger who'd only pretended to be my dad to make my mom happy. He had been lying to me for my entire life—or, at least, since I was three. I knew this because there was a photograph in my baby book that showed him and my mom and me together at my third birthday party.

So what happened to my real dad? Did he really leave my mom and me because I was born? Where did he go? Why didn't he ever come back to see me grown up? Did he try? Did my fake dad send him away...?

A noise distracted me from these reflections. I glanced about, surprised to find the night had already deepened to an ebony black. I didn't see anything.

It could have been my imagination, or a falling rock, or the crows.

Or the bear.

I waited, listened.

Nothing.

Not the bear.

But it would be coming. I was sure of that. It would be coming because it was sick and starving and knew it had an easy meal—an easy *two* meals.

I stood decisively. Maybe I should just go, just start running. But which way? What if I ran straight into the bear? By myself? Without a fire?

I looked at my fake dad. He resembled a corpse. He wasn't one, not yet. Sometimes his breathing would go real quiet, and sometimes it would go real loud. Now it was real loud. It almost sounded as though he were snoring.

Could the bear hear him? I wondered. Was it coming for us this minute? And when it arrived, who would it attack? My dad was helpless, yeah, but the bear didn't know that. Chances were, it would go for me, because I was smaller.

I added another log and more sticks to the fire, feeding the flames. All the while my eyes kept drifting to my dad.

Maybe if he was farther away from the fire, the bear would go for him first. Maybe it would stuff itself silly, and it would leave me alone...

“Dad?” I said, stepping quietly toward him.

He didn't reply.

“Dad?”

His hair was drenched with perspiration, plastered to his head like when you get out of a swimming pool. His eye sockets seemed to have grown bigger, while somehow sinking into his face. Black stubble covered his jaw, forming a thick tangle that could almost be called a beard.

I seized one of his ankles in each hand and dragged him

away from the fire, toward the river. He was heavy, and it took all my strength. I stopped after twenty feet or so. I didn't want him too far away in case the bear didn't see him and came straight for me.

I dropped his legs and was about to return to the fire when his eyes opened and he said, "Brian...?"

"You're not my dad."

"What, doing...?"

"You're not my dad."

I left him.

The bear arrived an hour later. I couldn't see it; the night was too black, the shadows outside the reach of the fire too thick. But I heard it grunting and snuffling. I crouched next to the flames, statue-still, hyper alert, praying it ignored me.

A scream. Weak. My dad.

Another one, so high-pitched it sounded like it belonged to a woman.

I plugged my ears with my fingers and kept them plugged long after the screams had stopped.

It took the bear forever to eat my dad. It kept making strange chuffing sounds, like when you swallow too quickly and the food gets stuck in your throat. Above the constant rush of the river I heard bones breaking, cartilage crackling, like when you

tear a wing from a barbecued chicken, only much louder.

Then, finally, the munching sounds stopped.

Later, I tried to sleep. I couldn't. My body was exhausted, but my mind was wired. I rolled from side to side, from back to front. The poison ivy itched maddeningly.

I ended up pacing to keep warm in the dark, frigid morning for what seemed like hours. Then, in the silvered light of breaking dawn, I made out my dad...or what remained of him. For a moment my brain couldn't recognize what it was seeing because my dad no longer conformed to the shape and form of a man. He was more like a pile of clothes tossed haphazardly on the floor.

I went closer.

His red tank-top was split down the middle. His stomach was slit open. White ribs, several snapped in half, jutted into the air, glistening wetly like a mouthful of monster teeth. Everything they used to protect, all his organs and guts, were missing, leaving an empty, sagging cavity. Both his legs were chewed to the bone. Oddly his left forearm and his face were perfectly intact, though covered with blood splatter.

His eyes stared blankly at nothing.

I returned to the dying fire, shrugged my backpack over my shoulder, and went looking for my mom.

I found her on the other side of the poison ivy patch, a little ways along the steep path we'd followed to reach the canyon floor.

“Mom!” I shouted, waving my hands over my head ecstatically.

She stood there for a moment, as if she didn’t recognize me, or thought I was a mirage. Then she called my name—*shrieked* it, actually—and ran toward me.

She scooped me into a mammoth hug. I think she tried to lift me off my feet, but either I was too heavy or she was too weak and we collapsed to the ground. She started laughing and crying and kissing me all over.

My mom looked as bad as I felt. Her hair was messy and knotted, her face and clothes streaked with dirt and sweat, her hands enflamed with poison ivy. But she was smiling like she’d just won a million bucks.

“Oh baby, oh God, oh baby,” she cooed. “I couldn’t find the car...then night came...then I got even more lost...” She stiffened. Her smile faltered. “Where’s your father, angel? Why’d you leave him by himself? What happened?”

I told her.

Well, not everything. I told her a bear ate him. But I didn’t tell her I dragged him from the fire to use as bait. I said the bear did that, dragged him away.

I wasn’t sure how I’d expected her to react to this news, but she surprised me by not reacting at all.

Face impassive, she stood, ordered me to wait where I was, and went to confirm my dad's death for herself.

When she returned I could tell she was super upset because she didn't say anything to me. In fact, she barely looked at me, just marched past where I was waiting, back up the canyon wall. I fell into line behind her, relieved to be with her again, and even more relieved to be returning to the campsite.

After five or ten minutes we came to an eighty-foot-long iron chain that had been installed in the drainage passage we were ascending.

"Why's this here, Mom?" I asked. "To help people climb?"

She didn't answer me.

"Mom?"

No answer. She was breathing as heavily as I was. Perspiration saturated her white top, making it cling to her shoulder blades and her bare breasts. She drew a hand across her forehead.

"I don't think this is the right way," I went on. "We never saw the chain on our way down—"

"Shut up, Brian! Please! Just...shut up!"

I frowned at her. She was looking at me in a way she had never looked at me before. I didn't know if she was sad or angry or what. Then her legs gave out and she dropped to her knees. She leaned forward and vomited.

I stared, terrified. I had never seen her puke before.

When she finished, I tried to help her—but she pushed me

away.

My eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong, Mom?”

She glared at me sidelong. “Did you move him?” she asked quietly. A string of saliva dripped from her mouth. She didn’t seem to care.

“Huh?” I said.

“Your father. Did you move him?”

“No,” I said, telling myself I wasn’t lying, because she didn’t ask me *when* I moved him. And I didn’t move him today. So I wasn’t lying, not really.

Besides, how could she know I’d moved him?

“There were footprints,” she said, as if reading my mind.

“Footprints?” I said, pretending not to understand. But I thought did. My insides turned to mush.

“Next to...drag marks. He was dragged. You dragged him.”

“The bear dragged him.”

“They were your footprints, Brian!” she blurted, and I thought she might throw up again. She didn’t. She just kept looking at me, but in a pleading way now, as if she wanted me to tell her she was wrong.

But what could I say? How could I explain why my footprints were next to the drag marks?

“Did you do something to Geena, Brian?” she said.

Geena? Why was she asking me about Geena?

“No, Mom, Geena died in her sleep,” I said earnestly. “I didn’t do anything to her. I swear.”

Geena died one month after her first birthday. My parents had gone to the neighbors who lived four doors down the street. I was only nine then, too young to babysit, but my parents didn't want to pay for a real babysitter so they left me in charge. Geena had already been fed and put to bed. All I had to do was keep an eye on her, and if there was any trouble, to call the Applebee's. Their telephone number was stuck to the fridge with a Budweiser magnet. My parents said they would be home around eight o'clock. They didn't return until midnight or so. I'd fallen asleep on the sofa in the living room, and I was just waking up, clearing the fuzz from my head, when my mom started screaming hysterically from Geena's room. Then she was shouting, and my fake dad was shouting, and I was asking what was wrong, but nobody would tell me.

An ambulance arrived a few minutes later. The serious-looking paramedics took Geena to Craig Hospital. No one there could save her though. She'd been dead for too long.

Over the next couple days specially trained police officers came to our house to comfort my parents and me while Geena's death was investigated. At one point a detective asked me if I had been alone all evening, if anyone had come over, if Geena had been behaving differently, and a bunch of other questions. I told him Geena had been sleeping quietly. I had been watching TV, then I fell asleep. That was all that happened, all I could remember. I think he believed me. *I* believed me.

Since then, however, I've always wondered whether maybe I did do something to Geena after all. Because every once in a

while I would have the same memory, sometimes when I was awake, sometimes when I was asleep. I'm standing by Geena's crib, looking down at her, and I hate her. I mean, I really, really hate her, for no reason at all. I hate that she is so small. I hate that she is so unaware. I hate how she looks at me with her big black eyes. I hate how she kicks her pudgy legs and arms. And in the memory I see myself reaching down, into the crib, and pinching her nose between my index finger and thumb. And when Geena begins crying loudly, *squealing*, I cover her mouth with my other hand. And then I begin counting Mississippis to fifty...

"Geena died in her sleep, Mom," I said again. "That's what the doctor said—"

"And I believed him!" my mom said, pushing stringy hair from her face. "I believed him, I believed him. You were her older brother, you would never do something to hurt her. Why would you? You wouldn't, so that's what I believed. She just stopped breathing..."

"That's what happened, Mom."

"I don't believe you, Brian! God forgive me, I don't, not anymore..."

Convulsions shook her body.

"Mom..." Her crying made me want to cry too. I patted her head.

"Don't touch me, Brian!" She batted my hand away. "Why did you drag your father away from the fire?"

“I didn’t.”

“Don’t lie to me! Stop lying! Stop it! I saw your footprints!”

“Are you mad at me, Mom?”

“Mad at you? Mad? *You murdered your father—*”

“He’s not my dad!” I shouted, tears bursting from my eyes. Her mouth gaped wide in surprise.

“Not my *real* dad!” I plowed on. “He told me! *You* lied to me! You both lied to me! He’s not my real dad, that’s why he’s never liked me—”

“He stopped liking you, Brian,” my mom snapped, almost wearily, “because he thought you killed Geena! Everybody thought that! Don’t you remember the police, the family court, the judge? Don’t you remember any of that?”

I frowned, because I didn’t. Not exactly. It was foggy, dreamlike, like the memory of standing at the crib, looking down at Geena.

“I was the only one who believed you, Brian. I’ve always believed you. But now...not now. You killed Geena. You killed your father. My boy, my baby boy...why...?”

She covered her face with her hands and curled into a ball.

I studied my mom coldly, processing what she had told me. Everyone knew I’d killed Geena? Was that really why my dad never liked me? Why we moved to a new neighborhood shortly after Geena died? Why I started going to a different school?

If this was true—everyone knew I’d killed Geena—and my

mom told the police I dragged my fake dad away from the fire so the bear would eat him and not me, then they'd probably believe her over me. They might even go to my house to search for clues and stuff. They might check my fort in the backyard. If they did that, they would find the squirrel heads. I got rid of the bodies, tossed them into some bushes in Cushing Park, but I kept the heads in a shoebox so I could look at them now and then. They had dried up and were just bones and teeth and tufts of fur. But if the police found those, they would know I liked to kill things, and they might change their minds and arrest me for killing Geena, and for helping the bear kill my dad.

They might put me in jail and throw away the key.

I didn't want them to do that.

I couldn't let them do that.

I chose a rock the size of baseball and approached my mom from behind. She was still folded into a ball, still holding her head in her hands, crying. I didn't want to do this. I really didn't. But she had forced me to. She was going to tell on me. And maybe she would be happy being dead. She would be with Geena and my fake dad.

I swung the rock.

I hit her squarely on the top of the head. The impact jarred my hand and caused me to drop the rock. Instead of dying, though,

my mom sat up. Her left hand went to the top of her skull and she stared at me in shock and horror. Then she was pushing herself away from me.

I scanned the ground for the rock, saw it a few feet away. I snatched it up and turned back to my mom. She was still trying to get away from me and trying to stand at the same time. Luckily she didn't have the strength, or the balance, and she kept falling to her side.

I raised the rock.

"Brian!" she said, protecting her head with her arms.

The first blow deflected off one of her forearms. The second struck her in the same spot as before.

"Brian!" she cried.

Furious that she was proving so hard to kill, I swung the rock a third time with all the strength I could muster. This blow was the best yet, cracking open her skull. She collapsed to her chest. Blood gushed down the visible side of her face. One scared eye stared at me, fish-like.

I didn't think I could strike her again, not with her looking at me like that, and she would probably be dead soon enough anyway. She had a hole in her head.

I tossed the rock aside, grabbed her ankles like I had my dad's, and began dragging her.

I dragged her all the way to the canyon floor. Moving her was a lot easier than moving my dad had been. One, it was downhill. Two, she was smaller than he was, my size, and just as

skinny. Even so, it still took me most of the morning to get her to the river. She was awake for the first bit. She kept trying to talk to me, but she wasn't making any sense. Now she was quiet, her eyes closed. I figured she had finally died.

I rolled her body into the raging river and watched it wash her away.

I made it to the original campsite shortly before night descended. Everything was as we'd left it. I'd forgotten to search my mom's pockets for the car keys, so I broke one of the Chevy's windows with a rock to unlock the trunk and get to the food. I was so hungry I wolfed down four Oscar Mayer wieners raw and an entire box of salted crackers. I also drank the three remaining Pepsis, then about a liter of tap water. Later that evening, I nibbled on Oreo cookies and read an *Archie* until I fell asleep in my tent.

When Ranger Ernie found me two days later I was filthy but in otherwise fine shape. Nevertheless, I pretended I was worse off than I was and made myself cry while I explained how a bear had killed my parents. I'd tried to help them, I insisted—that's why I'd gotten blood all over me—but my mom told me to run away, so I ran away.

I spoke to a lot of police officers after that. I even had to speak to the same detective who'd questioned me about Geena's death. I really didn't like him, especially now that I knew he thought I'd killed her. I stuck to my story, however, and he soon gave up badgering me. After all, my dad had

clearly been eaten by a bear—I couldn't fake that—and my mom's body, discovered far downriver, had been too bashed up and decayed to determine the cause of death.

The police never searched my home as I'd feared they would, never found the squirrel heads, which I packed with all my other stuff when I moved into foster care, where I lived with other kids who didn't have parents.

I missed my mom at first, but gradually I forgot what she sounded like, then what she looked like. After about a year I didn't miss her at all.

I never gave my fake dad a second thought—except when I replayed in my head the bear eating him, and when I did that, I always made it daytime, so I could watch it all happen again.

THE PRESENT

When I had first approached the young Swedish couple thirty minutes earlier, they had been friendly and chatty. I told them I was camping in the lot one over from theirs, and they told me to join them for a beer. Their accented English was close to fluent but sometimes difficult to understand. From what I gathered they had both been hired as ski instructors at Aspen for the winter season, and they had decided to camp in Black Canyon to save money on their accommodation until they had to report to the ski resort. The man had introduced himself as Raoul. He was handsome and blond, the hair on one side of his head cropped short, the hair on the other side wavy and chin length. The woman, Anna, was an impish brunette with a thin yet voluptuous body. In fact, she reminded me of my old flame Stephanie. I'd never had a chance to see Steph again before I was shipped off to foster care, but I'd tracked her down through Facebook a couple years back. She was married, a stay-at-home mom with two young boys. She didn't remember me when I knocked on her door late on a Tuesday morning.

But she remembered when I mentioned our elementary school. It had been nice to hear her say my name again, which she did over and over as she begged unsuccessfully for her life.

The once-chatty Swedes, who had been so eager to hear my Black Canyon story, had become fidgety during the last quarter of it, and now, after its conclusion, seemed downright uncomfortable.

“So you see,” I told them, opening my hands expansively. “I really had no choice. I had to kill my parents. It was either me or them.”

Silence ensued, pleasantly uncomfortable.

“You know, that is a good story,” Raoul said finally, clearing his throat. He was sitting across the campfire from me, next to Anna. He ran a hand over the side of his head that had hair. “But, well, it is late. I think we will go to bed soon.”

“Yeah, sure. Bed, sure.” Never one to overstay my welcome, I stood and smiled, to show there were no hard feelings for the not-so-discreet send off. “Well, thanks for listening, guys. It really is a good story, isn’t it? I like to tell it. You can psychoanalyze me tomorrow. Nature or nurture, right?” I tipped him a wink, Anna a smile. She returned the smile nervously, looked at her feet.

“Right,” Raoul said, though I don’t think he understood what I was talking about.

I strolled east, cutting through the forest. When I had gone fifty feet, I stopped and faced the way I had come. Although Raoul and Anna would not be able to see me in the thick shadows, I could see them in the firelight. They were leaning close to one another in conversation. Raoul was gesturing

quickly. The next moment they got up and ducked inside their tent.

Still watching them, I undid my shoelaces, slipped off my shoes, then my socks.

Raoul and Anna emerged from the tent carrying their backpacks. Raoul opened the backdoor of the old station wagon they were driving and tossed both bags onto the backseat.

I shrugged out of my jacket, then pulled off my T-shirt.

Raoul and Anna returned to the tent and began dismantling it

I retrieved the twelve-inch hunting knife from where it had been secured snug against the small of my back and clenched it between my teeth. I unbuttoned my jeans, unzipped the zipper, then stepped out of the legs. I shoved my boxers down my hips, stepped out of them too.

Naked, I started forward, transferring the knife to my right hand.

Raoul and Anna were making too much noise with the tent to hear me approach. When I was fifteen feet away, however, Anna looked up from the stake she had pried from the ground and saw me. She froze, like a hare that had just spotted a predator.

She said something in Swedish to Raoul, who jerked around.

I went for him first, closing the distance between us in a burst of speed. He sprang to his feet and bumbled backward into the tent as I plunged the blade into his heart and tugged down.

People don't die easily. My mom taught me this. But if you

don't mind the mess, slitting open the heart will always get the job done.

Blood fountained from Raoul's chest and struck my shoulder with wonderful force.

Anna wasn't screaming, not exactly. I don't know how to explain the sound she was making, because it wasn't really human. Warbling? Yowling?

She ran.

I gave chase. For thirty-six I was in great shape. I went to the gym five days a week and was lean as a barracuda.

I caught Anna before she had even decided which way she wanted to flee.

I sank the knife into her back, into her heart, and twisted the blade sharply, blending the vital muscle into puree.

She expelled a jet of blood from her mouth and belly-flopped to the ground.

I gripped a fistful of her hair, tilted her impish head back, and slit her throat from ear to ear. Then I returned my attention to the boyfriend. He was still on his feet, his hands trying to stem the fountain spurting from his chest as he tottered back and forth on legs that would never ski again.

I finished him off.

I know all about famous serial killers. I've read about them in books and on the internet. I've watched documentaries on *A Current Affair* and *60 Minutes*. I've rented biopics on Netflix. I don't look up to the Gacys and the Bundys of the world. I don't

idolize them, or want to imitate them. I simply relate to them. They're my kin. Yet as similar as they and I may be, we are all equally unique in regard to what tickles our fancies. Dean Corll, for instance, only tortured and murdered young boys. Bruno Ludke was into young women, and necrophilia. Gerald Stano strangled and shot hitchhikers of both sexes, provided they were Anglo Saxon. Personally, I didn't care much for the demographics of my victims; I just liked feeding them to bears.

After Raoul bled out, I rinsed the blood from my skin using the campground tap, then collected my clothes from where I'd shed them in the woods. Back at my car I dressed, then drove to the Swede's campsite. I parked fifty feet from their bodies, cut the engine, but kept the high beams on.

The bear arrived thirty minutes later. It never took bears long to show. They were always hanging around campsites, even in the off-season before they went into hibernation, in the hopes of scrounging a last-minute meal. They had amazing noses too. They were like bloodhounds and could zero in on a fresh kill from miles away.

This one came from the west. It stood at the perimeter of the campsite, on all fours, sniffing the air as if for a trap. It looked directly at me, but I knew it couldn't see or smell me in the darkened cab.

Eventually it waddled toward the dead ski instructors, into the throw of the headlights. It sniffed the hunks of meat, then made a loud mewling sound, calling its two cubs from their

hiding spot among the nearby vegetation.

I leaned forward with anticipation as the mama bear and her kids got ready to chow down.

REWIND

CHAPTER 1

When I opened my eyes, the slab of ceiling above me skated back and forth. I blinked repeatedly until the ceiling stopped moving. More blinks brought it into focus—or what I could see of it that wasn't lost in inky shadows. It was off-white, the paint blistered and cracking in places.

Light came from the left. I squinted at the glow that was bright as the sun. The spangles faded. I made out a single-watt light bulb screwed into a fixture. No shade or anything. Just the bulb, naked, a phosphorescent pear surrounded by darkness.

My mouth, I realized, was hanging ajar. I closed it. My lips felt scratchy. I worked my mouth to generate saliva, but I couldn't muster any.

Where had I gone last night? I wondered groggily. How much had I drunk? Whose bed was I in?

No, no bed. Some sort of reclining chair. As I pushed myself to my elbows something tugged at my head. In the next moment I discovered a dozen multi-colored wires extending from my skull to a machine on a nearby table. The machine was about the size of a home printer and bristling with knobs and dials. Next to it stood a giant flat-screen monitor, the screen blank, and a laptop, the screen also blank.

My first instinct was to tear the wires free, but I didn't. I wasn't sure of their purpose.

Suddenly wide awake, I glanced about the room: sallow yellow walls dirtied with age, scuffed and chipped hardwood floors, a single door, closed.

"Hello?" I called—and almost jerked about to see who had spoken. But it had been me, only I didn't recognize my voice. It wasn't coarse from a hangover; wasn't nasally from a cold; wasn't high-pitched from fear. It was just...different. *Not mine* were the two words that came to mind. "Hello?" I repeated. Then, to hear more: "Where am I? What's going on?" Gruff, deep, generic.

Not mine.

A trick? A gag? A candid camera thing?

I gripped a blue wire, hesitated, then tugged it free, consequences be damned. The printer-sized machine didn't whirl and click in alarm. My brain didn't explode.

Nothing happened.

I studied the end of the wire. It didn't squirm madly in my grip with a life of its own. It didn't have devil-red eyes and a wormy orifice bristling with razor teeth. In fact, it appeared to be nothing more sinister than some sort of electrode pad.

Still, it filled me with fear.

What the fuck was going on?

I removed the dozen or so other wires, swung my feet to the floor, and pushed myself free of what I now recognized to be an old-fashioned dentist chair. A wave of dizziness washed through me, though it passed quickly enough. I went to the door, gripped the brass doorknob, but hesitated, wondering whether I might be walking into some sort of trap. Yet why would someone bother with that? I had just been out cold in that chair. They could have done to me whatever they pleased then.

I opened the door and peered into the adjoining room. A dozen feet from me a grotesquely fat bearded man lie on his back on the floor, bovine eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

The skin over my skull tightened and tingled, as if it had shrunk a size. But I wasn't all that surprised to discover the body, was I? Because I was in some sort of waking nightmare, and this is what happened in nightmares.

I forced myself forward. The new room was bigger than the previous one and featured boarded up windows. To my left was a closed door, which I guessed led to a bathroom. Adjacent to the door, in a shadowed corner, sat a cardboard box spewing reams of printouts and manila folders and other miscellaneous stationary. A refrigerator hummed in a dingy

kitchenette. An open can of SpaghettiOs and a spoon encrusted with tomato sauce rested on the table.

When I reached the body, I tried to avoid looking at the bloated face and the glassy eyes. The guy must have been close to four-hundred pounds. He wore jeans and an enormous shirt. The mass that was his belly strained at the buttons and hung over his groin like an apron. I crouched and felt his doughy neck. The skin was cool. There was no pulse. I had known this would be the case, of course, yet at least now I could tell the police I had checked—

I stiffened as a bolt of fear iced my spine.

The Police? Yes, the police—I didn't want anything to do them. I didn't know why. But I didn't.

Get out of there. Now.

Obedying the warning, I hurried down a short hallway. I took the steps to the ground level two at a time. At the bottom I unlocked and opened a black-painted door and squinted at daylight so bright it seared my gloom-rotted eyes.

I stumbled onto a quiet commercial street lined with dilapidated buildings and started away from the second-floor apartment, my hands jammed into my pockets, my head bowed. I didn't look back.

CHAPTER 2

My name is Harry Parker. I live at 3225 Turtle Creek Boulevard in Dallas. I'm forty-eight years old, five foot eleven inches tall. I have a full head of black hair tapered into a widow's peak. My eyes are brown, set into a handsomely rugged face that could have belonged to a washed-out boxer, or a world-weary traveler.

This was all according to my Texas-issued driver's license, which had been in my wallet, which had been in the inside pocket of my sports coat.

Sitting on a park bench several blocks from the apartment containing the *Doctor Who* machine and the dead body, I examined the other pieces of identification inside my wallet. Two credit cards, a Visa and an American Express, both issued by Citibank. A debit card, also with Citibank. A birth certificate. A social insurance card. And a scrap of paper with a seven-digit telephone number scrawled on it.

I didn't know if the number was written in my handwriting or not.

I put the wallet away and stared at the playground in the middle of the park. A Hispanic mother sat on the grass next to a stroller, watching her daughter play on the colorful equipment while sipping from a bottle in a paper bag.

I watched the girl too, wondering what the fuck I'd gotten myself into.

Why had I been in that chair, in that apartment, hooked up to that machine? Had I been a guinea pig in some madcap experiment, and something went terribly wrong, something along the lines of accidentally pressing the delete key in a word-processing document, or formatting a computer hard drive? Then again, maybe I had known something important, perhaps some government or industrial secret, and someone had wanted it badly enough to take it from my head with all the finesse and compassion that one uses when removing a hook from a fish that had swallowed the hook to the gills?

I grimaced, drawing my thumb and forefinger over my eyes. Now was not the time for fanciful speculation. A couple minutes ago the park had seemed like a safe, inviting spot to gather my thoughts. Yet sitting here, in the open, I was becoming increasingly paranoid. After all, I had walked away from a dead body without reporting it. I felt like a fugitive. And more, I thought maybe I *was* a fugitive. I didn't believe I'd murdered Moby Dick. There had been no indication of a struggle, no physical signs of trauma to his body. Nevertheless, any thought of the police still sent a shock of anxiety through me, which led me to believe my unconscious self knew something my conscious self didn't. In fact, the cops could very well be cruising the neighborhood looking for me at that very moment.

So I needed to put as much distance between myself and that twisted apartment as I could. That was priority one. Yet where could I bunker down? Not the Turtle Creek address. No hotels either. Because if I was indeed wanted for some crime or another, hanging out in my home or using my credit card to check into a Holiday Inn would likely land me on an episode of *America's Dumbest Criminals*.

There was the debit card, of course, but I wasn't sure I wanted to risk making a bank withdrawal in person, and I didn't know the pin number—

7-4-9-9.

Jesus Christ! I thought, sitting straight. 7-4-9-9. That was it. That was the pin number. I was positive of it.

I sprang off the park bench and went searching for an ATM.

I wasn't in Dallas as I'd initially believed. I was in Brooklyn, New York. I discovered this when, through a break in the buildings, I glimpsed the Manhattan skyline to the north. On the heels of this realization came another one: I was familiar with Manhattan. I couldn't muster any specific memories of myself there, but I could see the streets and neighborhoods in my mind's eye, knew their layouts, knew what buildings and landmarks were where.

I cut through a sprawling cemetery and found a street-facing ATM on the other side of a busy overpass. I stuck the debit card in the slot and punched in 7-4-9-9. I held my breath,

waiting to be informed that the pin was incorrect, or that the card was being retained by my financial institution. A second later, however, a prompt asked me how much money I would like to withdraw. I entered fifty dollars. The guts of the machine churned. The mouth spat out two twenties and a ten. I requested a printed receipt to check the balance.

\$749,950.

I had to read the figure one digit at a time until I was certain I was not mistaken. Then, with a trembling hand, I requested another withdrawal. This time I punched in five hundred dollars, hesitated, then added another zero, hoping I didn't bankrupt the machine.

It spat out the money just as dutifully as before.

I continued toward downtown Brooklyn, a pinball of emotions banging around inside me. I mean, on the one hand, waking up to discover you had lost your memory and might be wanted by the police was a pretty lousy way to begin your morning. On the other hand, discovering you had three quarters of a million bucks in the bank was a pretty damn good feeling—especially when only moments before you didn't know whether you had a penny to your name.

I zigzagged through a number of streets, passing the Barclay's Center, Long Island University, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I caught glimpses of my reflection in storefront windows, but I didn't want to stop and gawk at myself in public. Instead I popped into a Burger King restroom. Standing in front of the grubby mirror—"Things I hate: vandalism, irony, lists" was scribbled on it in black marker—I was relieved to find the driver's license photo had

not been deceptively flattering. I was indeed a ruggedly handsome man.

I leaned closer to the mirror, to examine my eyes, my hairline, the pores on my nose, when the door opened and an old guy with a cane entered. I cleared my throat, rinsed my hands, and left.

Back outside I wandered about in a daze, glancing at the people I passed as if expecting one of them to offer me a nod or a wink, to let me know they were in on the gag. But as I'd already surmised, this was no gag, no candid camera show, none of that. This was real. Fucked up, but real.

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, next to a blue postal box, realizing I was famished. I looked back over my shoulder at the Burger King I had recently departed. But I didn't return. Because I didn't like Burger King, did I? No, I didn't. In fact, as hungry as I was, the thought of one of their greasy bacon-and-egg breakfast muffins turned my stomach.

"I don't like Burger King," I said in the voice that wasn't my voice—and felt inspired. This newfound disdain for fast food might not be a memory; more like a feeling, something on the instinctual level that informs thought and memory. Still, it was something, wasn't it? Some echo of my past identity?

Across the street I spotted a sushi restaurant—and *that* got my stomach growling. I entered the shop, which turned out to feature one of those rotating conveyor belts moving dishes around in a big loop. I took a seat on a padded stool and snatched one color-coded plate after the other—salmon, tuna, octopus, mackerel, miso soup, tempura—and washed it all down with countless cups of green tea. By the time the waitress

came by to tally up my bill, I had more than twenty plates stacked high beside me.

She was cute, the waitress. Maybe twenty, almond eyes, pouty lips. I felt a need to speak to someone and made small talk. She told me she was Japanese, though I guessed Korean or Chinese. I'm not sure how I knew this; it was just a feeling, like how I knew I didn't like Burger King. Maybe I'd dated a Japanese woman before. Hell, maybe I'd been married to one.

I left her a generous tip—told her *arigatou gozaimasu*, which turned out to be all the Japanese I knew, killing the Japanese-wife theory—and left the restaurant, feeling semi-human for the first time that morning.

The sky was clear and blue. The sun warmed my skin. And for a moment—and only for a moment—I considered going to the police and telling them everything, letting them figure out the quagmire I'd woken in. Nevertheless, as tempting as this seemed, it was not an option—at least not until I had learned enough on my own to know I wasn't going to be cuffed and booked on sight.

I decided to make my way to Manhattan on foot. The walk would do me good, give me time to get my thoughts together, figure out my next move.

I crossed the Brooklyn Bridge via the pedestrian walkway suspended above the road. As traffic roared below me I repeatedly glanced at the World Trade Center soaring to the east. I knew the original two buildings had been destroyed in a terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. I knew there had been subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as pseudo retaliation. I knew these wars had been the equivalent of kicking a hor-

net's nest, and now terrorist cells were popping up all over the globe.

So if I knew all this, why couldn't I recall what my house looked like, or what I did for a living, or whether I was married with children?

Or why I'd been hooked up to that fucking machine with a dead guy decomposing in the next room?

I cut north through Chinatown, then followed Second Avenue through the East Village toward Midtown, soaking up the sights and smells and sounds of the dirty Big Apple—all of which remained frustratingly familiar yet unfamiliar.

While waiting at an intersection for a red light to change, I noticed a walk-in medical clinic on the ground floor of a mint-colored building. It hadn't struck me to see a doctor—even now that seemed like an all too ordinary solution to an extraordinary predicament—but perhaps a doctor would know something about memory loss? I couldn't tell him about the machine and the body, of course, but I could tell him I woke knowing fuck all.

What was the worst that could happen anyway? He prescribes me some anti-psychotic meds and tells me to check into Bellevue?

The clinic was air-conditioned to the point of being chilly. The receptionist gave me a patient questionnaire to fill out and told me to take a seat. I completed the form quickly, using the alias "Bart Mulroney" and checking the "no" box next to each question, given I had no clue as to whether I had allergies or existing medical conditions. Then I flicked through the same hotrod magazine three times before my name was called by a

female GP in a white coat and a pink hijab.

I followed the doctor down a corridor to a sterile office that smelled of latex. I took a seat on the examination bed, while the doc sat in front of a tidy desk featuring a large-screen Mac.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” she said with a faint Indian accent. “My name is Avni Singh.” She shook my hand with a cool, dry grip. She was in her fifties, short, her pale skin more white than brown. Beady eyes peered at me over the top of gold-rimmed bifocals.

“I’m Bart,” I said, using the alias.

“So how can I help, Bart?”

“My memory’s gone,” I told her bluntly.

She seemed unimpressed with this declaration and said, “You can’t recall what you’ve done earlier today?”

“I can’t recall what I’ve done before today.” I hesitated. “Ever.”

Now her thin eyebrows came up—slightly. “What you had for dinner last night?”

“No idea.”

“Whether you went to work yesterday?”

“I don’t even know what I do.”

“You don’t know what you do?”

“That’s the thing, Doc. I know it’s July. I know I’m in New York. But everything about me before this morning—autobiographical information, I’d guess you’d call it—is gone.”

She considered that. “But you know your name?” she said, indicating the questionnaire attached to the clipboard in her hand.

I shook my head. “My name was on my driver’s license, which was in my wallet when I woke up, which was in my pocket. At first I thought I had someone else’s wallet, because I didn’t recognize my photo or my name. But then, well, I just sort of had a feeling it was me.”

“A feeling?”

“I don’t know, Doc. Like being hungry. Just a feeling, an instinct. It was like that, sort of. I don’t know how to explain it better.”

She took a pen from the desk and scribbled something on the clipboard. I couldn’t see what she was writing, but given the conversation thus far I imagined it might be something along the lines of: *Patient equates his ego to hunger, believes he is a cheeseburger.*

I waited for Avni Singh to continue. She did so a moment later.

“When you look in a mirror,” she said, “who do you see?”

“Me,” I said.

“So you recognize your reflection?”

“No—what I mean is, I know it’s me, you know, the way a monkey would know its own reflection, even if it’s never seen itself before. So I recognize it’s me. I just don’t recognize *me*.”

She scribbled more notes. *Patient now believes himself to be a monkey.*

I clenched my jaw in frustration at my inability to articulate my situation. “Look, Dr. Singh,” I said, keeping my voice neutral. “I know how this sounds. But it’s the truth.”

“Yes, I see,” she said in a distracted, almost indifferent way. She peered at me again over the bifocals. “Do you have

any history of seizures, anxiety, depression?”

I stared at her. “Are you listening to what I’m saying?”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know my goddamn name, Doc! So how would I know whether I have a history of goddamn seizures?” I stood to leave. “You made your forty bucks. Thanks for your time.”

Dr. Singh stood as well. “Where are you going?”

“To be alone.”

“Please,” she said, indicating for me to sit again.

I hesitated.

“I’m happy to try to help you,” she said. Then, sensing my skepticism, added, “Look...Bart...my next patient is going to tell me about chronic back pain, or irritable bowels, or a skin rash, or what they’ve diagnosed on their own to be a broken hip. You, on the other hand... I’ve been doing this job for many years now, but I’ve yet to come across a case like yours before.”

“That’s supposed to be confidence inspiring?”

“I’ve treated patients with memory loss before, yes,” she amended. “Just not to the extent you’re describing.”

She indicated again that I sit. I studied her, and decided maybe I’d read her wrong. Maybe she hadn’t been distracted earlier because she was uninterested; maybe she’d been distracted because she was trying to figure out what had happened to me.

I sat.

“Thank you,” she said, though she remained standing. She set the clipboard on the desk and folded her arms across her chest. “Bart...can you tell me, do you remember what you did

today?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Everything.”

“How do you feel at the moment? Dizzy? Nauseous? Hungover?”

“I don’t think my memory going AWOL is the result of having a few too many last night, Doc.”

“I’m not saying you’re merely hungover,” she said. “I asked because a hangover can be an indication of alcohol abuse, which, over time, can lead to a thiamine deficiency, which can lead to a fugue state.”

“Fugue state?” I repeated.

“It’s a rare psychiatric disorder characterized by amnesia—including memories and other identifying characteristics of individuality.”

I perked up. “Is it reversible?”

She nodded. “And usually short-lived, ranging from a few hours to a few days.”

A delicate hope swept through me—delicate because I knew my memory loss didn’t have anything to do with a thiamine deficiency; it had to do with that fucking machine I’d been hooked up to. However, the fact people can lose their memory and get it back was welcomed news, regardless.

Avni Singh said, “I’m going to ask you a couple simple questions, if that is all right?”

“Shoot,” I said.

“Can you describe your mother or father?”

“What they look like? No.”

“Can you recall their names?”

“No.”

“Do you know what month it is?”

“I told you that. July.”

“What is the capital of the United States?”

“For real?”

“Please?”

“Washington, DC.”

“What is the world’s most populous country?”

“China. Unless India’s caught up.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do tomorrow?”

I frowned. “Haven’t thought about it.”

“Any idea?”

“No, none.”

Avni Singh said, “May I examine your head?”

“I haven’t hit it, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“How would you know this if you can’t remember anything before this morning?”

“Because it doesn’t hurt.”

“Pain recedes.”

I shrugged. “Be my guest.”

She tilted my head this way and that, parting my hair, prodding my skull. I sat patiently, feeling like an ape getting groomed by its kin for parasites.

Avni Singh said, “There doesn’t appear to be any signs of trauma.” She stepped away from me and assumed a thoughtful expression. “I suppose a blood test might—”

I frowned. “A blood test?”

She nodded. “Trauma to head is the most likely candidate for memory loss, but an epileptic seizure or a viral infection can also produce similar effects. A blood test could reveal low

thyroid functions, or low vitamin B12—”

“I didn’t lose my memory from not eating enough goddamn fish, Doc!” I said, thinking once again of the microwave I’d been hooked up to. “Listen,” I added. “You mentioned that a fugue state can be a result of alcohol abuse. Can it also be a result of something else?”

“Certainly,” she replied. “A tumor, a stroke—but without running diagnostic tests I can’t tell you anything for certain.”

“No tests. Not right now. I just want to know what you know about memory loss.”

“I’m not a neurosurgeon—”

“Humor me, would you?”

Dr. Singh hesitated, then shrugged. “There are two main types of amnesia I’m familiar with. The more common is called anterograde amnesia. Patients can’t remember new information, like what they had for breakfast, or where they left their car.”

“My short-term memory is no problem,” I reminded her.

“Yes, so we’ve established. The other type of amnesia is called retrograde amnesia, ‘retro’ meaning it happened before the injury. In this case patients can’t remember information or events that occurred before the trauma.”

“Like their name or where they live?”

“Their name, facts about their life—everything you’ve described.”

“So why can I recall who the president is and other shit—stuff—I must have learned before today—those are long-term memories, right?—but nothing about *me*?”

“Like I said, Bart, I’m not a specialist. Nevertheless, I be-

lieve that the memories you're describing—the name of the president and such—are stored in a different part of your brain than your autobiographical memories, just as your motor memories such as walking and speaking are stored in a different part of your brain. This is why you know what a bicycle is, you can likely ride one if you tried, but you can't remember the first time you rode one—can you?"

I shook my head. "So you're saying only a specific part of my brain has been affected?"

"That would be my guess. But again, because there are no physical signs of trauma, I would recommend—"

"Thanks, Doc," I said, hopping off the bed and going to the door. "If I change my mind about any of those tests, you'll be the first to know."

I left before she could say anything more.

As I continued down Second Avenue, I replayed everything Dr. Singh had told me and wondered if maybe I should have gotten a blood test after all. But really, what would have been the point? I didn't, as she suspected, have thyroid or vitamin B12 deficiencies. I had a case of someone screwing around inside my head. So what I needed was a CT scan, or an MRI, something that would show what was going on in my brain, show how badly that machine had scrambled it. Those options, however, were out of the question. I'd need to see a neurosurgeon. I'd need to fill out forms that couldn't be falsified. I'd need to provide my insurance card, proof of identity. Which

meant I'd be in the system for anybody looking for me to find. So it seemed I was back to square one. I knew a bit more about memory loss and amnesia, thanks to the good doctor, but I was still in the dark about what happened to me—or how to reverse it.

What I needed to do was figure out what that *Doctor Who* machine was, but the only way to accomplish this would be to return to the apartment, which was also out of the question. I'd seen *Pulp Fiction* (at least I believe I had, because I could recall the plot), and I wasn't prepared to deal with a Vincent Vega taking a shit in the bathroom with a MAC-11 within easy reach.

Remembering that scrap of paper with the telephone number on it, I stopped and dug it from my wallet. Seven digits, no area code—or country code for that matter.

Local? Dallas? Tokyo?

I started walking again, keeping an eye out for a payphone. If I got lucky, really lucky, the number might put me in touch with someone who could tell me what the fuck was going on. But nothing was ever that easy, and I wasn't going to get my hopes up. Still, even if the number was for my favorite pizza restaurant, that would be something, wouldn't it? Because the guy who ran the joint would likely know me and might be able to tell me something about myself other than my name.

At East Forty-second Street I turned west and walked the two blocks to Grand Central Terminal. I passed through the chaos of Vanderbilt Hall and found a bank of public payphones in the main concourse. I accessed Skype on the thirty-two-inch touch-screen display and dialed the unknown number.

Local after all because it rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Cursing, I hung up after a dozen rings.

Back amongst the hustle and bustle of East Forty-second, I paused out front a Kenneth Cole retail store. I was tired and sweaty and fed up with walking, and all I wanted to do was find a hotel—now that I had cash, renting a room anonymously wasn't going to be an issue—where I could make a stiff drink and drown myself in blissful oblivion. Yet before I did this I figured I should purchase some new clothes. Because I would have to wake up at some point, I would have to start another day, and I couldn't continue wearing the same smelly duds until my memory returned and reminded me where I kept my New York wardrobe. So I entered the store, ignored the snooty-looking salespeople, and picked out several pairs of socks and underwear, a pair of white-soled oxfords, five dress shirts, and two suits. I paid for everything with crisp hundred-dollar notes.

Burdened with shopping bags, I stopped at the first hotel I came to—The Roosevelt Hotel—but it was booked out. So was the Crown Plaza Times, and The Manhattan. I got lucky at The Plaza and splurged on a six-hundred-square-foot room that featured high ceilings, a comfortable sitting area, and a mosaic bathroom with gold fixtures and a marble vanity.

“Not too shabby, Harry,” I said to myself as I kicked off my shoes and hung the suits in the closet. I snapped on the flat-screen TV for company, dimmed the lighting with the iPad on the writing table, and poured myself a triple Scotch from the

stocked bar tucked discretely inside a large armoire.

The news anchor on the tube was rambling on about the latest mission to the newly built lunar base. I couldn't have cared less and went to the bank of tall windows, where I sipped my drink and watched as dusk stole over the harried city, blanketing it in layer of dark and anonymity.

CHAPTER 3

An hour later, riding a sluggish whiskey buzz, I sat at the room's writing table, staring at the list I'd made. It was divided into two columns. The left read: "Know/like." The right read: "Don't know."

Beneath "Know/like" was: name, address, age, bank, face, PIN, Scotch, Manhattan, Japanese food. After contemplating the pathetically short list I added "a good suit" because I suspected I liked—or was used to—wearing well-tailored suits of fine quality. This might seem like a trivial detail to add to the list, but right then anything and everything was significant. The fact I appreciated a good suit could mean I was some sort of businessman.

This led me to the first point in the "Don't know" column. Occupation. And if there was one sliver of personal information I didn't know about myself that I wanted to most it was what my job had been. Because in a way your job equaled your identity more than anything else. It defined you, explained you. An artist was not an accountant. A sales clerk was not a chief

executive. Some Willy Loman might say he was a door-to-door salesman because times were tough and there hadn't been much else in the classifieds. I didn't buy that. Because Loman was ignoring the thousands of choices he'd made that led to his shitty lot in life. The subjects he'd pursued in school, the time he'd put into studying for tests, the people he'd socialized with. The way he treated others. Sacrifice. Punctuality. Integrity. Honesty. *Everything*. Every single choice, good or bad or neutral. These were what composed your identity. What made you President of the United States or a door-to-door salesman. Not the fact there were no other fucking jobs available the day you checked the paper.

So me? My occupation?

No idea. I began jotting down adjectives I felt applied to me. Then, in the next instant, I scribbled across the page so violently the tip of the pen tore the paper. I scrunched the list into a ball and threw it against the wall.

What the fuck was I doing? A list! It was bullshit. It wasn't getting me anywhere.

My mind was a tabula rasa, a blank slate, and maybe I was just going to have to live with that.

Tears burned in my eyes. I got up and paced the room before stopping in front of the gilded mirror on the wall. I stared at my reflection, stared hard, and told myself to get a grip.

Look, you ungrateful bastard, you're a good-looking guy, and you have nearly a million dollars banked. Things could have been a lot worse. You could have looked like Steve Buscemi and been dirt broke.

Besides, maybe there's an upside to having no knowledge

of the past. It means no baggage. Fine, you don't know what you do for a living, whether you have kids somewhere, what you did last Christmas. But you don't have any bad memories either, do you? No heartbreak, no shame, no guilt, no regrets.

Tabula rasa? Good. Great. Fan-fucking-tastic. You get to start over however you please. How many people get that opportunity? How many people get a second chance like that?

Holding onto these positive thoughts, I decided I needed to get out of the room, do something, anything. Sitting around getting drunk by myself wasn't proving to be the solace I'd hoped for. So I showered in the walk-in waterfall shower, dressed in a new suit, and left the hotel.

The humidity of the afternoon had been replaced by a dry evening heat, and West Fifty-seventh Street buzzed with smartly dressed people and an electric energy. I didn't mind the lights and noise, but the touts trying to hawk me tickets to comedy shows pissed me off, so I veered north into Central Park. I passed couples strolling under romantic pools of lamplight, dog-walkers trying to keep up with their eager canines, cyclists and joggers. The desultory clop of carriage horses echoed in the distance, accompanied by the occasional honk of a car horn.

Eventually I left the park and strolled through the 60s and 70s east of Park Avenue. The side streets were studded with nineteenth-century brownstones, most carved up into apartments. Madison, on the other hand, was thick with bars, restaurants, boutiques, and retail shops.

I found myself in the mood for something quiet and classy and entered an elegant-looking cigar bar. The crowd was

predominantly male, white, and upscale—and I immediately felt at home. Also, one whiff of the pungent aroma of cigars and I knew I was a cigar smoker myself.

Something else to add to the list, I thought dryly.

I took a seat at one of two bars. A waitress dressed in tight black pants, a white tuxedo shirt with rolled-up sleeves, a black bowtie, and suspenders greeted me with, “What can I get you?”

“Chivas, neat,” I said.

“Won’t be a sec.”

I watched her as she made the drink. She was blonde, late thirties, tall and thin. Her lashes were long and full, her nose straight, her cheekbones prominent. The lashes were fake, the makeup heavy under the buttery light from the barrel-shaped light fixtures, but she was attractive nonetheless.

And her eyes—they captivated me immediately. They were blue, intelligent...and sad.

How could someone so beautiful be so sad, or at least cynical?

She set the Scotch in front of me. “Would you care to see the cigar menu?”

“I think I’d like something mild,” I said, pleased to discover several cigar brands pop into my mind. “A Gran Habano Connecticut would do fine, thank you.”

While she disappeared into the humidor room, I sipped my drink and tried to puzzle out for the hundredth time the paradox of how I could know I liked something without any recollection of ever having tried it before. Dr. Singh had mentioned that different memories were stored in different parts of the brain, and I guess I bought that. It was just so

bizarre to discover in the span of seconds that you possessed a preference, such as an appreciation for certain cigars, which would have taken you months or years to acquire.

This led me back to that stupid Know/Don't Know list, and I ruminated over what other preferences or qualities or skills I possessed. Was I a wine connoisseur, for instance? Could I downhill ski? Hell, maybe I had a black belt in karate?

Maybe I'm a raging alcoholic? I thought as a quiet voice reminded me I was on my fifth or sixth drink of the evening and had no interest in slowing down.

I executed a swift karate chop through the air with my right hand. The gesture didn't feel natural or instinctual. I tried again, this time striking the polished mahogany bar.

"Do you have a grudge against wood?"

I glanced at the waitress, who had returned and was fixing me with an amused expression.

"I'm Harry," I said.

She snipped the cap off the Gran Habano with a guillotine, handed the cigar to me, and lit the foot with a butane torch. I puffed, drawing smoke into my mouth. The sweet tobacco flavor was immediately familiar and pleasant.

"Satisfactory, Harry?" the waitress asked.

"I can't remember having a better one."

"I don't think I've seen you here before?"

"I don't think I've been."

"Don't think?"

"I—no, I haven't. Have you worked here long?"

"Too long," she said as a tourist who'd been perusing the one hundred-plus bottles on display behind the bar waved her

over. “But, hey,” she added over her shoulder as she left me, “don’t tell my boss that.”

Her name, I learned a short while later, was Beth, and I think she found me attractive. She kept pausing in her duties to talk to me at any rate. Maybe she was simply bored. There weren’t many customers at the bar. But I didn’t think this was the case. She didn’t bat her long eyelashes or anything melodramatic like that, but she seemed genuinely interested in sharing my company.

Nevertheless, whatever the reason for her decision to chat me up, she managed the impossible and made what was likely the shittiest day of my life a little less shitty. In fact, in her company, I was almost enjoying myself.

While I rested my cigar in the ashtray—it had burned itself out—Beth finished telling me a story about a German tourist who’d incorrectly believed a long, stiff ash was the sign of a cigar aficionado and accidentally tipped his two-inch ash down the cleavage of his date.

I took a swig of Scotch and said, “What are you doing later, Beth?”

Beth looked at me coyly. “Later?”

“What time do you get off work?” I asked. It was nuts, bloody nuts. My memory had more holes than Swiss cheese, I might be wanted by the police, and all I could think about right then was what sweet, flirtatious Beth had on beneath her tight black pants and tuxedo shirt.

Beth polished a spot on the counter with her rag that didn't need polishing. "Ten," she said without looking at me.

"Would you care to join me for a drink?"

"I don't know anything about you, Harry."

I almost laughed at the irony of that. "You know my name."

"You could be a total scumbag." And her deadpan delivery told me she'd likely had her fair share of scumbags walk through her life.

"Did I make that good of a first impression?" I asked, to lighten the mood.

She smiled.

"Give me a chance, Beth," I said. "One drink, that's all. Maybe two, when you realize what a fun guy I am."

"Are you even from New York?"

I hesitated, thought about lying, then realized I'd hesitated too long to pull off the lie. "No," I said.

She frowned. "Well, see, that could be a problem for me, Harry. I don't do one-night stands."

"Hey, I don't either," I said. "I'm in New York for a while."

"A while?"

I nodded, deciding this was true, given I had no immediate plans to return to Dallas. "And like I said, a drink, nothing more. I'm just looking for some company."

"Harry, you seem like a nice guy—"

"Look, Beth, when you get off at ten come by The Plaza. It's only a few blocks south of here. I'll be in the Rose Club. If you decide not to come, no hard feelings."

“Is that where you’re staying?” she asked.

“Rest assured. I haven’t seen any cockroaches yet.”

“What did you say you do again?”

“I didn’t.” I stood and left a hundred on the bar for the cigar and the drinks. “So I’ll see you there?”

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

The Rose Club was dimly lit and opulent, though I found the rose neon garish. I settled into an oversized velvet chair at a table overlooking the lobby and ordered a Chivas. I wasn’t smashed, but I was definitely getting there. My thoughts felt slow and loose, my body heavy, and I decided I liked this feeling very much.

The white-jacketed Bangladeshi waiter brought my drink, along with complimentary popcorn, dried fruit, nuts, and pretzels. I ignored the snacks, finished the whiskey in two minutes, and waved Bangladesh over again. He was a strange-looking fellow. Too big ears, too small chin that almost melted into his neck. A pencil mustache and thick, black-rimmed glasses added character to an otherwise unfortunate face.

“nother,” I said, raising the empty tumbler.

“Of course, sir,” he said.

“Is there a problem?”

“Sir?”

“The way you’re looking at me. I don’t like it.”

“Sir?”

He was still looking at me the same way. How you looked

at a drunk relative at Christmas dinner: wary, wondering if he might topple over at any moment. A rage warmed inside me. Because this guy, this meaningless waiter making minimum wage, was judging me?

“Is that all you can say?” I said. “Sir? *Sir?* You know, maybe had you tried a little harder in high school, you wouldn’t be pouring drinks to pay the rent. Or did you just get off a boat?”

His nonexistent chin quivered.

“Go get my bloody drink.”

He went to the U-shaped bar, where a guy in a suit and a guy in a military uniform were sitting by themselves, and proceeded to make my drink. Watching him, I felt like total shit.

For most of the day I’d believed myself—or at least believed whoever I had once been—to be an admirable person. I seemed polite and cultured. I spoke with an educated inflection. I had what I believed to be an above-average vocabulary. I felt I commanded a certain amount of respect. I’d even go so far to say I was charming. After all, I talked the receptionist at The Plaza into letting me pay upfront in cash, and I got Beautiful Beth to meet me for a drink.

But was this the real me? Or was it a civilized front masking a depraved asshole?

Go get my bloody drink.

Because, really, nobody was the person they presented to others, were they? Everyone had a private persona and a public one. In many cases these two identities meshed closely enough to lump them together as one. Off the top of my head I’d say

roughly fifty percent of the population fit that bill. But then there was the other half. The smiling kindergarten teacher by day, the pedophile by night. The bubbly coworker with a fifty grand gambling debt. The successful doctor with a safe full of snuff videos. The handsome Ted Bundy next door.

Humans were masters of deceit and disguise. It's what allowed them to live together in relative harmony in such large numbers.

Deceit and disguise.

My, Mrs. Harrison, you look lovely today. *When are you going to get that growth burned off your eyebrow?*

Great seeing you again, Steve. Give the wife my best. *Or don't, because I'll tell her myself while fucking her in a Motel 6 tomorrow evening.*

Your children are rambunctious little angels, aren't they? *Maybe if you learned some parenting responsibilities and showed a little tough love they wouldn't be such snot-nosed brats.*

"Your drink, sir," Bangladesh said. He set the Chivas on a coaster before me. He was smiling. Not smug. Worried, like he feared I was going to lash out at him again.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Sir?" he said, then seemed to think better of that response and added, "Sumon, sir."

"Listen, Sumon. I want to apologize for my behavior. I've been having a bad day."

"No need, sir."

I took a hundred from my wallet and pinched it between my fingers. "No hard feelings?" I said.

His face lit up. The bill disappeared into his tux pocket with a magician's flourish. "None at all, sir."

He returned to the bar, where alternating colors of light played behind the crystal glasses. My eyes drifted to the other patrons for the first time. No families or whining kids thankfully. Mostly couples and a splattering of business people racking up their company tabs with the twenty-five-dollar cocktails.

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was a Rolex, an Oyster perpetual model, steel, as unassuming as a Rolex could get. I'd noticed Beautiful Beth peek at it a few times earlier.

The hands read 10:42 p.m. Beth was already close to three-quarters of an hour late. Was she coming or had she stood me up?

Well, screw her if she had, I thought tiredly. It was getting late. The anxiety and depression gnawing in my gut like a nest of rats was stronger than ever, and Beth standing me up was the last thing I needed—especially when I had been so looking forward to seeing her.

Maybe I'd go find myself a prostitute and bring her back to the suite? Then again, The Plaza wasn't the type of place to which you invited streetwalkers.

An escort? One of those classy ones that cost a grand an hour?

I raised my hand, to catch Bangladesh's attention and signal the bill. Then I changed my mind. As much as I wanted to get my rocks off—who knew the last time I'd had sex?—I figured maybe I wanted company even more. Real company. Beautiful Beth company. We had clicked. I had enjoyed her conversation, her stories, her humor.

And if we ended up in bed? Well, that would be a very pleasant bonus.

I'd give her another twenty minutes.

I picked up the Chivas, swished the amber liquid around in the tumbler. God, I wanted it. In fact, I do believe I actually craved it. But I was walking a very thin line. I'd held my composure together pretty well thus far. Yet the last couple drinks had hit me hard. Beth would take one look at me, see a bumbling drunk who couldn't slur together two words, and turn right back around.

I set the Scotch aside and went to the bar, happy to find myself surefooted. If I was indeed an alcoholic, at least I was an accomplished one.

I tipped the guy in military fatigues a brief nod. He tipped one back. I might be a sleaze. I might be a drunk. I might be a murderer for all I knew—but I respected the kids who put their lives on the line for this country, and that was something I knew as innately as I'd known anything all day.

Bangladesh flashed me a smile as big as the guilt-fuelled gratuity I'd given him. "Help you, sir?"

"Bathroom?"

"Right that way." He pointed.

The bathroom turned out to be a mishmash of marble and sophistication, a place where Marie Antoinette wouldn't have minded taking a royal dump. I leaned close to the mirror and studied my reflection. My eyes were lidded, but the whites weren't bloodshot.

I ran cold water and splashed my face repeatedly. The frigid water helped wake me up. I checked my reflection again,

which was now dripping wet, and saw the same droopy face.

One again I considered returning to the suite, calling an escort. I could tell Beth I'd waited for her for over an hour—which would be true—and when she failed to appear, I left to take an important business call. Tomorrow when I got myself together, I could return to the cigar bar, apologize, and ask for a second chance.

Hell, maybe I would wake up in the morning with my memory fully intact. Wouldn't that be something!

Or maybe you'll wake up like you did this morning with your memory wiped clean all over again?

Not wanting to contemplate that, I turned off the tap and heard a swine-like snort originate from one of the stalls. I patted my face dry with paper towel for a good twenty seconds until the stall door opened and a yuppie in a fitted navy suit, open collar, silver cufflinks, and coifed hair emerged, running a finger beneath his nose. He went to the door.

“Got any more?” I asked him.

He glanced over his shoulder, barely slowing. “Don't know what you're talking about, brother.”

“A gram.”

“Sorry—”

“Two hundred bucks.”

He stopped, hand on the door handle. “For a gram?” He shrugged, sniffed. “Show me the money.”

I presented him two Franklins. He glanced left and right, like a SWAT team might bust out of the ventilation system, then pressed a baggie into my palm.

He left the restroom.

I went to the same stall he'd used, closed the door, and examined the baggie. Half a gram at most. He'd vacuumed up the other half a minute ago. But I didn't care. Half a gram would do fine.

I tapped three lines onto the top of the ceramic toilet tank, rolled a hundred, and snorted the lines consecutively. I flushed the empty baggie down the toilet and inhaled deeply. The high hit me right away, and just like that the drunk was gone. I exited the stall and studied myself in the mirror to make sure there wasn't any residual powder on my nose.

All good.

I left the restroom and retook my seat in the velvet chair and sipped the Scotch. I checked the Rolex, discovered the time to be a bit past eleven, and cursed myself for not asking Beth for her number. At least that way I could have called her to find out whether she was coming or not.

Nevertheless, I didn't dwell on this. My thoughts were wickedly alert and euphoric, and for the first time all day I actually wanted to think about that *Doctor Who* machine and the fat bastard who'd died on the floor in the next room. They were no longer mysteries to be feared, but mysteries to be solved.

So what was that half-baked theory I'd come up with in the park the day before? Not the secret spy shit... Right-o, someone hitting the delete key of my mind. That was at least plausible. But why were they in my mind in the first place? Was I a guinea pig like I'd speculated? I didn't think so. It simply didn't ring true, because why, with all my wealth, would I participate in something so sketchy? And sketchy it

was, given that apartment was of the variety where you sold your organs and woke up in a bathtub full of ice.

The police, Harry. The goddamn police.

Right. I'd messed up somehow.

I was on the run.

But why the apartment?

Why the chair and the machine?

The fat guy, I thought. He was the key—or had been the key.

Bangladesh appeared at the table. My drink, I realized, was nearly empty. The guy had eyes like a hawk.

“Another, sir?”

“Please,” I said.

When he left, I checked my wristwatch again. 11:08. Beautiful Beth's time was up. Nevertheless, given I had another drink coming, and was still wired from the blow, I wasn't going anywhere.

So what had I been thinking about? Right. *Moby Dick*. So had that been his apartment? Unlikely. There were only two rooms. The one I had been in, and the one his body had been in. No bed anywhere, no shoes by the front door, no photos, no personal artifacts of any sort.

So it wasn't his residence. It was his shop or laboratory or whatever you wanted to call the place where he...

Where he what?

Performed underground medical procedures?

I swallowed, feeling momentarily ill.

Was that true? And did that mean I had a brain tumor? Dementia? Some other malign disease that doctors—legit

doctors—told me was inoperable?

But why would his death, whatever caused it, leave me in identity limbo? And why did I have a fear of the police? Surely not because I'd volunteered for some experimental operation? Moreover, where were the scalpels he would need to cut me open? The IV drip? All the other medical equipment...?

Fuck it, I thought decisively, draining my drink. Enough of this. Enough speculating. I needed to return to that ratty apartment, I needed to find out more about that machine and the dead guy. Not now. Not pissed out of my gourd. I'd do it first thing tomorrow morning—Vincent Vega on the can be damned.

Beth arrived at exactly 11:26 p.m. From my table overlooking the glitzy lobby I watched her sweep across the marble floor and glide up the palatial staircase to the Rose Club like Cinderella on the eve of the king's ball. This wasn't hyperbole. She really did look like a princess right then. She'd changed into a shapely off-the-shoulder red dress that accentuated her thin waist, decent bust, and delicate arms. She'd also pulled her blonde hair into a bun which sat atop her head like a bird's nest, lifting her sharp cheekbones and swan-like neck.

All for me?

I stood when she spotted me. I offered her a smile and a wave. When she reached the table I pecked her cheek. "You look absolutely stunning," I told her. It might have been the coke, or it might have been the adrenaline pumping through me

at the sight of her, but right then I didn't feel the effects of the ten or whatever drinks I'd guzzled. Warm and fuzzy inside, sure, but definitely clear-headed. "And you smell just as lovely," I added.

Beth smiled, though it was the smile of someone not yet comfortable in another's company. An elevator smile, I guess you could call it. "I'm sure you say that to all the girls you pick up at cigar bars," she said.

"Issey Miyake?" I said, surprising myself with the knowledge of the fragrance she wore.

"My, my, Harry," she said. "You continue to impress."

I pulled out her chair and said, "Please, sit."

She sat and glanced about the sultry atmosphere.

"I'm not a fan of the neon," I told her.

"You should come on a Wednesday night for the jazz."

"You've been here before?" I said, surprised.

"A few times."

Bangladesh came by and, after consulting with Beth, I ordered oysters, a cheese platter, and a bottle of one hundred fifty dollar champagne.

If Beth was impressed, she didn't let on.

"You said you've been here?" I said.

She had crossed her legs and was sitting rather stiffly. "That surprises you?"

"No—"

"Please, Harry. I'm a waitress. I know what you're thinking. Don't patronize me." She smiled and touched a finger to her forehead, almost the way people do when they've realized they've made a mistake.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Really. It’s just...I can’t believe I’m here with you. No offense. It has nothing to do with you. It’s me. I—I just don’t do things like this.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Accept invitations for drinks with strange men.”

“I may be a little eccentric, but strange is a bit harsh.”

“Maybe that’s it. Your sense of humor—it’s...corny.”

“Corny?” I said, raising an amused eyebrow.

“So corny it’s disarming. Please, take what I’m saying as a compliment.”

“I’ve never been more flattered.” I leaned forward on my seat. “Listen, Beth, I’m very happy you decided to join me.”

“I think I am too.”

“Just loosen up. We’ll have some fun.”

“This is the thing, Harry—and I know I must sound like such a nag—but I don’t know anything about you. You don’t know anything about me. I’ll loosen up, don’t worry. It might just take some time.” She glanced at the bar, as if wondering where the waiter was with the champagne.

Bangladesh arrived a moment later carrying the bottle of bubbly wrapped in a linen cloth. He showed us the label, then removed the cork expertly so it didn’t pop but rather sighed. He poured me a taster. I nodded. He filled Beth’s flute, then mine, then left the bottle in an ice bucket.

I raised my glass. “To strangers.”

Beth clinked. “To strangers.”

We sipped.

“Look,” I said, “I get it. You have this thing for not dating

strange men—”

“I don’t have a ‘thing.’ I simply stopped going out with men I don’t know.”

“So let’s break the ice then,” I said. “Get to know each other.”

“Truth or dare?” she said sarcastically.

“Three questions,” I said. “Anything you want to ask, ask away, and I will tell.”

“You sound like a genie in a bottle.” She crossed her legs again, this time placing the left thigh over the right. The dress was long enough I only caught a glimpse of her bare ankle, but I nevertheless felt myself get aroused. “What do you do, Harry? You never answered me at the bar.”

“Used to do,” I said, winging it. “I was a financial advisor. Started a brokerage firm in Dallas, then built a rental real estate portfolio. Sold it off last year and retired.” I offered a disarming grin. “I know, not the most interesting of professions. But I never had the 20/20 eyesight to become an astronaut.”

“Do you miss it, not working?”

“Sure.”

Bangladesh arrived with the oysters and the cheese platter. We nibbled and I refilled our champagne flutes. We spoke a bit about travel, hobbies, all that usual get-to-know-you jive. I did a fair job improvising. Mostly, however, I did the listening. I thought I could listen to Beth all night and not get bored.

At one point Beth asked, “So you’re not in New York for work?”

“Didn’t we agree on three questions?” I said. “I think this is something like your twentieth.”

“The ice is broken, Harry. I’m trying to see what’s lying beneath.”

“Fair enough.” I sat back, sipped the champagne, shrugged. “So what am I doing in New York?” *Good question, Beth—and one I should have anticipated and planned for.* “I’m doing what all retired men do,” I said, buying time.

“And what’s that?”

“Working—through my bucket list.”

“Last night you told me you’ve been to New York before for business.”

“For business,” I said, nodding. “But all I remember are the inside of conference rooms and hotels and airports. I wanted to do the touristy stuff.”

Beth sipped her champagne. She had applied red lipstick that added a fullness to her lips. She tucked an errand strand of blonde hair behind her left ear. She wore diamond or zirconia studs in each lobe. They matched the simple necklace looped around her slender neck. “Have you been to the Statue of Liberty yet?” she asked.

“Nope,” I said. “Would you care to join me?”

“You said you’re only in New York for a couple weeks.”

“That’s what I said. But that’s another great thing about being retired. You can sit on a tree stump in a forest for a month, if it suits your fancy.”

She glanced shyly at her champagne flute. “It might be nice if you stuck around for a while.”

“Goodness gracious, Beth! I think that might be the nicest thing you’ve said to me yet.”

She looked at me now—really looked. Her eyes pierced

mine. I almost had to look away. “You’re not married, are you, Harry?”

I laughed out loud, relieved. I hadn’t known what was coming, but this was manageable. “Wow,” I said.

“I’m sorry. But some men...”

I held up my left hand, wiggled my ring finger.

“It could be by your bathroom sink.”

“Would you like to come upstairs and check?”

“You are, aren’t you?”

“Married?” I took her hand across the table. “Beth, I’m not married. I’m not that type of guy.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Are you offering?”

“Harry, you’re an attractive middle-aged man. Most attractive middle-aged men are either married or lecherous bachelors. I’m being cautious, that’s all. I told you—”

“I’m not married, Beth, and I don’t have a girlfriend.” I released her hand. I was starting to feel as though I was being interrogated and decided I needed to take control of the conversation. “Now it’s my turn, Beth,” I said. “Tell me something about yourself.”

“I used to be a singer,” she said simply.

“Like an opera singer?”

She laughed, a wonderfully sweet sound. “No, I was in a punk rock band. We were called the Pink Gypsies. I shaved half my head and dyed the rest purple. Don’t laugh. We were good. I’m not just saying that. We almost signed with a major record label. But they pulled out literally on the day we were to sign the contract so they could sign some other band.”

“Anyone I’ve heard of?”

“Their first album flopped. The singer lived out of his van for a year before killing himself.”

“Jesus.”

“I didn’t know him.”

“You weren’t picked up by a different label?”

“We broke up—the band, I mean.”

“Why would you do that if you were talented enough to nearly sign with a major label?”

“This was like fifteen years ago, Harry. I was still a kid. We all were. We thought we had the world by the tail, you know. Then this happened—our manager calling us one morning to tell us we were dumped. Johnny—he was the bassist—he was shooting heroin. Everyone else in the band was doing everything from acid to ecstasy on a daily basis. We all had Mick Jagger egos. We started hating each other. It got to a point we couldn’t even get together for rehearsals, let alone put out a new demo tape. In other words, we were a mess. The record deal—had we scored it...who knows? It might have given us the motivation to get our shit together. Pardon my French. On the other hand, getting so close, then getting a ‘thanks but no thanks’...it just sort of tore us apart. Johnny got an offer from another band and left us. Then the drummer died.”

“Died?”

“Well, he came back to life. Speedball overdose. His heart stopped before he got an adrenaline shot. He went to rehab and we didn’t keep in touch. Then it was just Jamie and me. Jamie was the lead guitarist. We were best friends. Went to this all-

girl's school together, founded the band. We decided to give LA a shot, just the two of us. We went there knowing nobody, maybe a hundred bucks between us. But this wasn't the eighties. You couldn't just chat up someone and get a gig at The Troubadour, or The Roxy. We put together a new band, played a few no-name clubs, but...it was just over. That's how it is with bands. You either have that fire, or you don't. There's no in-between. Then Jamie was in a motorbike accident. Broke a bunch of bones. She was okay...eventually. Anyway, like I said, it was over. Us, the band. Jamie met a guy with a painting business. She stayed in LA. I returned to New York. I was thirty. I needed a job. I started working at the cigar bar." She shrugged. "And I've been there ever since. Eight lovely years." She glanced at her champagne flute with those sad, sexy eyes—and now I thought I understood where the pain came from.

It wasn't the not-making-it bit. A lot of people didn't achieve their dreams. It was the getting-so-close. That's what would keep you up at nights. A single record executive's decision, some dickhead who probably played the demo tapes to his kids for their opinions, and you're either Madonna or a cigar-bar waitress.

I said, "I'd love to hear you sing."

"My voice ain't what it used to be, honey," she said in a mock trashy accent.

"I'd still like to."

"Thanks, Harry. Maybe one day."

All this talking of squashed dreams was killing my high, and I could tell Beth wasn't thrilled to be reliving it all, so I

said to her, “Would you like to dance?”

“This isn’t exactly a disco. And I don’t table-dance in public.”

“Then let’s go find somewhere.” I stood and took her hand. “Come on, Beth. I promised you some fun, and we’re going to have it.”

CHAPTER 4

My nightmares were the stuff of nightmares—really bad ones. I don't remember them all, but the one right before I woke had me without a face. I mean, I had a nose, and eyes, and ears—but they were all smoothed over, like I'd been plastered in paper machete. I couldn't see, couldn't smell. But I could hear. I was in a room with a woman. She had me tied to a chair and she kept snipping off parts of me: fingers, toes, nipples. She threatened my penis a few times, but thankfully I woke before that happened.

I didn't jerk awake bathed in sweat. Didn't cry out like they do in movies. I simply opened my eyes and thanked God I'd only been dreaming.

A moment later, however, the dream was forgotten, replaced by memories of the previous day. They hit me with the force of a sledgehammer to the chest, a kaleidoscope of images: the machine with the wires, the dead guy, seeing my reflection in the Burger King mirror for the first time, Dr. Singh, shopping at Kenneth Cole—Beth!

Now I did sit up in the king bed abruptly. The white cotton linens to my left were a tangled mess, intertwined with the faux fur runner. On one pillow lay a long strand of blonde hair. I lifted the pillow to my nose and inhaled the faint trace of her fragrance.

So it had been real. Thank God for that.

“Beth?” I said, wondering whether she was in the bathroom. The sound of my gruff voice jarred me. I had gotten used to it the day before, but now it was almost as unfamiliar as the first time I’d heard it.

Beth didn’t reply.

“Harry Parker,” I said, hoping for some epiphany to my identity, some recollection of my past, anything. Nevertheless, the name still meant nothing. My memory didn’t magically return overnight.

But at least it didn’t disappear again either.

I swung my legs off the bed and rubbed my eyes. Given how much I’d drunk the night before, I felt surprisingly fresh. Physically at least. Mentally—well, shit, I was almost prepared to go straight to the minibar and start the day with a bottle of Scotch.

Beth. Where had she gone? Why hadn’t she woken me? Had she tried? Had I been too passed out?

I rubbed my eyes, remembering the sex. It had been pretty goddamn amazing, if I do say so myself. And it seemed Dr. Singh was right in regard to all that mumbo jumbo about different memories being stored in different parts of the brain. Because although Beth was the only woman I could recall ever having sex with, I definitely had not forgotten the tricks of the

trade. I had her moaning, squirming, scratching, whispering all night long—or at least for a couple hours until she fell asleep in my arms.

After the Rose Club we'd taken a taxi to a disco Beth had recommended. She knew the bouncer, we skipped the queue, and danced for a good hour or so. The place was packed, the music loud, everyone sweaty, everyone grinding. Beth's wall of caution came crumbling down, and when I invited her back to The Plaza around 1 a.m., she agreed without hesitation.

I looked around the empty suite.

So where the hell was she?

I stood, naked, and went to one of the windows. West Fifty-seventh was already filled with people marching about like ants in search of food.

I turned, stretching my arms above my head—and saw my wallet on the writing table.

“Aw, no,” I said, going to it. I opened the sleeve and practically swooned with relief. The money was all there. Had it been gone, I wouldn't have cared I was out the cash. I would have cared that Beth had taken it.

Right now she was the only real thing in my life, and I needed her.

I went to the bathroom, to relieve my bladder, and found a note on the marble vanity. Black pen on the beige hotel stationery: “You looked too adorable to wake. Tonight—my place?” And below this, an Upper East Side address.

“You bet, Beth,” I said, and ran the shower.

I put on a fresh suit, studied my reflection in the mirror—I still had trouble believing the stranger staring back was me—then called the concierge to arrange a taxi.

“The hotel’s Rolls Royce Ghost is currently available, Mr. Parker, if you would prefer,” he said.

“Just a taxi, please.”

“It’s complimentary for our guests.”

“A taxi, thanks.”

“Of course. For what time?”

“I’ll be down in ten.”

“Certainly. A taxi will be waiting for you, Mr. Parker.”

I hung up. A Rolls? Yeah, that would be discrete for what I was about to do.

I finished fixing myself up, collected *The New York Times* left in front of my door, then rode the elevator cab to the lobby.

The concierge—his nametag read “Ron”—was a young man with a smile as fake as a fresh-faced politician’s. He led me to the taxi waiting out front by the curb, I palmed him a ten, and he said, “Anything else you need, Mr. Parker, just let me know. Are you a Knicks fan?”

“Nope.”

Ron nodded agreeably. “Well, just let me know. That’s what I’m here for.”

“How about sending a couple bottles of Chivas Regal to my room?”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“How about a past?”

He frowned. “Excuse me, sir?”

I slid into the backseat of the taxi, closed the door on Ron, and told the driver to take me to Brooklyn.

Although I had no clue what the shitty apartment building that I woke up in the day before looked like, I recognized a dry-cleaning shop in which I had glimpsed some eastern European woman toiling behind a sewing machine. Only then did I pick out the building a little further down the street, and its black door.

“Do a loop around the block,” I told the driver. “I know it’s around here somewhere.”

The driver was Thai, spoke broken English, and had kept to himself for the last fifteen minutes. I wanted him to circle the block so I could make sure there were no cops or hit men staked out, waiting for me to return to the scene of whatever the crime might be.

All the cars parked along the curbs appeared to be empty.

When we were approaching the dry-cleaning shop for the second time, the driver said, “You see yet?”

“I think it’s that place there with the black door.” I pointed. “Can you pull up out front?”

He rolled to a stop directly in front of the building.

“I’m not going to be long,” I told him. “Two minutes at most. Can you wait right here for me?”

“I wait, no problem.”

I gave him a twenty as a deposit, got out of the taxi, and ducked into the building, where I paused at the bottom of the

staircase to listen.

I didn't hear anything.

I started up the steep, narrow steps. They creaked loudly. Anyone lying in wait for me would surely hear me coming, and I almost considered turning around and leaving. Almost. Because I needed answers. Were they worth my life? No. But I was being paranoid. Nobody was here. And it was just two minutes, in and out.

I continued up the steps and soon caught the first whiff of decay—a strange sweet scent, almost like cheap perfume, or a moldy apple.

When I reached the second floor I found Moby Dick in the same spot he'd been the day before, only now gravity had dragged the heavier red blood cells to the lowest parts of his body, leaving his face a ghostly white, and ugly purple splotches on the back of his neck and arms. The cloying stench emanating from the billions of bacterium eating him from the inside out nearly made me gag, but I steeled my stomach, covered my nose with the crook of my arm, and knelt next to him. Flies buzzed everywhere, searching for prime real estate to lay their adorable little maggots. Shooing them away, I patted down his pockets and retrieved a wallet and a smartphone, which I stuffed into my own pockets.

I went to the room with the *Dr. Who* machine. The machine was too large to take with me, so I flipped it over, searching for a label, a product number, something to give me a clue to its purpose or identity. Finding nothing except unremarkable black plastic and a series of heat vents, I committed the placement of every knob, every dial, every detail to memory. Then I

collected the laptop and returned to the main room. I dumped the laptop into the cardboard box in the corner, burying it beneath manila folders and other stationary so the taxi driver didn't think I was looting the place. I scooped the box into my arms and was about to leave when I hesitated. I glanced at the door that led to what I suspected was the bathroom.

I had to know.

Going to it, I shifted the box to one arm, twisted the bronze handle with my free hand, and toed open the door. No Vincent Vega on the shitter aiming a MAC-11 at my head. Just a white porcelain toilet with dried piss on the seat and a crusty sink affixed to the wall below a cracked mirror. On the dirty tile floor a cockroach almost the size of a small mouse lay on its back, its hair-thin legs and antennae twitching as it died a slow death.

Releasing the breath I hadn't even realized I'd been holding, I got the hell out of there.

Back in my suite at The Plaza I set the box on the bed and went through Moby Dick's wallet first. His name was Charles McCarthy. The countless leather sleeves were filled with receipts, grubby five and ten dollar notes, worn business cards, and, sheathed in plastic inserts, a photo of a woman who was likely his wife, and a photo of a child who was likely his son. Aside from half a dozen bank cards, there was a Macy's voucher, a coffee shop card with one hole-punch short of a free coffee, and a dozen other miscellaneous items. This made me

reflect on my wallet, which now seemed sterile in comparison. Where was all the miscellaneous junk that people kept that they didn't need?

Nevertheless, this thought came and went without further contemplation because I was too anxious to examine the other stuff in the box. I went through the reams of paper first, but was soon disheartened. The pages were crammed with nothing but mathematical equations and symbols that were as alien to me as a foreign language. Inside the manila folders were more pages, these covered in messy handwriting. They didn't compose a journal. Just notes, scribbles, none of which I could make sense of. Whoever had written them had done so in a broken stream of consciousness, mentioning a string of scientific nonsense in one sentence, then a reflection on life in the next. At the bottom of one page, underlined twice, was, "Knowing is knowing that you don't know." The fat guy was either a genius, a nutjob, or a philosopher—or perhaps all three.

I whipped the manila folder I'd been flipping through across the room in frustration. Loose leaf fluttered to the bed and the floor.

I didn't know what I had been expecting to find—a tell-all confession written by me and addressed to myself—but there was nothing of the sort.

I powered on the laptop—the battery held a full charge—though my initial optimism on the ride back in the taxi had already curdled into dark pessimism.

I scanned the desktop. There were the usual programs you find with any operating system, and a few I didn't recognize. I

opened the latter ones. The information that popped up was as meaningless as all the crap in the box.

Still, I wasn't about to give up. I would search through every file and folder on the computer until my fingers bled. First, however, I needed a stiff drink—badly. Ron the concierge was true to his word, and two bottles of Chivas Regal had been sitting on the writing table when I'd returned. I opened one, took a belt, went to the window—and contemplated smashing the glass with a chair and leaping to my death.

The thought was so startling I took an involuntary step backward.

Fuck, Harry, what's wrong with you? So you don't have a past. So you may never recover it. So what? That's worth ending your life over? People have it a lot worse than you, you cowardly son of a bitch. A lot worse. People have lost their legs in car accidents. People have had their faces burned off with acid by jealous exes. People have had their families murdered in front of their eyes maybe for no reason other than the fact the perpetrator was a sick bastard. People have been chewed in half by sharks and brain-zapped by lightning. And what's your problem? You can't remember the first girl you kissed, or whether you've ever been to Hawaii. Poor you. Poor Harry.

And by the way, have you already forgotten about that \$750,000 in your bank account? Go buy yourself a first-class ticket to the Philippines, buy a luxury hut on some tropical island, and spend your days and nights drinking all the whiskey you want, and fucking all the twenty-year-old girls you can get your dick up for.

I tipped the bottle to my mouth, ruminating on the island fantasy, when my eyes fell on the dead guy's smartphone. It rested on the bed, next to his wallet.

"Shit," I said, crossing the room quickly. I'd been so focused on the box and the laptop I hadn't considered checking the phone.

I snatched it up and shook it awake. However, it turned out to be brand new, or at least factory reset: no photographs, no videos, nothing in the calendar or other apps. No contacts. It was as though he'd bought it to use a few times before disposing of it.

And why would he do that, Harry? I thought, navigating to the call log. *To make calls that couldn't be traced back to him. Calls to the kind of people I would very much like to have a word with.*

According to the log, he had one missed call yesterday afternoon at 2:43 p.m.—or right about the time I'd rung the mystery number in my wallet from Grand Central.

"Jesus," I mumbled.

I scrolled through the other calls. Twenty-six in total over a three-day period. Thirteen incoming, thirteen outgoing.

And all to and from the same number.

CHAPTER 5

After several minutes of deliberation, I dialed the number. It was answered halfway through the second ring. “Charlie?” the voice on the other end of the line said. Male, hushed, the way you might speak while standing on a train and not wanting to disturb others. “Charlie?” the man repeated, louder. “Hey, Charlie, you there?”

“This isn’t Charlie,” I said.

“Barney!” the voice exclaimed.

I didn’t say anything. My heart spiked in my chest. My stomach seesawed.

He knew me.

Or did he? Because why was he calling me Barney?

“Goddamn, man,” he went on, “what the hell is going on? Where’s Charlie? Why haven’t you done it yet?”

“We need to talk,” I said.

“Did something happen? Something happened, right? What happened? Where’s Charlie? You know I can’t be talking to you. Why are you calling me from Charlie’s phone? What the

hell is up, Barn? I'm at work. I can't talk now—”

“Meet me in Central Park in thirty minutes.”

“Central Park? What are you talking about?”

“Thirty minutes. Out front the zoo. Wear a baseball cap.”

“I'm not meeting you in Central Park, Barn! I can't be seen with you! And what the heck are you talking about baseball caps? I don't even own a baseball cap.”

“Then I'll be at your work in fifteen minutes,” I said, bluffing. I had no idea where he worked.

“Are you crazy?” He was no longer speaking in a hushed voice. He was close to shouting. Maybe he'd stepped outside, or into his office and shut the door. “Don't you dare. You hear me, Barn? You show up here—that's the craziest idea I've ever heard. How do you think you'd even get in? One retina scan, there'll be a dozen guns pointed at your head in seconds. What's wrong with you? Calling here, calling *me*. Is Charlie there? Let me speak to him.”

“Charlie's dead.”

Silence.

“Dead?” the man repeated.

I said, “Central Park in thirty, or I come to you.”

A long pause. “Damn you, Barn.” Another pause, even longer. “Central Park. The zoo. But I'm not wearing any stupid hat.”

It was midafternoon, barely a cloud in the blue sky. The zoo was brimming with tourists and families and children. A safe

enough meeting spot as any, I thought. I didn't believe the guy on the phone was going to slit my throat. He didn't sound threatening. Scared, confused—but not threatening. Still, better to meet somewhere public.

I waited a hundred yards from the zoo entrance, partly obscured by a tree. I'd been lurking in the same spot for twenty minutes now, as it had only taken me ten to reach the zoo from The Plaza.

At five to noon—forty-five minutes since the phone call, fifteen minutes later than agreed upon—I thought I spotted the man I had spoken with. For starters, unlike the dads and boyfriends and out-of-towners, he was dressed in a gray business suit and blue necktie. Secondly, he checked his wristwatch a half dozen times in under two minutes, all the while looking this way and that.

He was relatively young, thirty-five or about, freshly shaven, cropped hair, a tanned complexion. He wore dark sunglasses and had the arrogant, impatient air of a Hollywood talent agent.

I left the tree and approached him. He noticed me when I was twenty feet away. He pushed himself off the zoo's low wrought-iron perimeter fence. When I stopped before him, he extended his hand, surprising me. I made myself shake it. Then, to my greater astonishment, he pulled me into an embrace and patted my back. "Sorry about Charlie, Barn." He released me and stepped back. "So what happened? Heart attack? Am I right?"

"I have no idea."

"Had to be," the man said, shaking his head. "What else,

right? Right?”

“I have no idea.”

“No idea? Goddamn it, Barn—you know the risks I’m taking seeing you. You gotta do better than ‘no idea.’ Tell me what the hell’s going on.”

I stared at him. *Me* tell *him* what was going on? I didn’t even know his name.

He snapped his fingers. “Hey, Barn, you there? You’re looking—”

“We need to talk.”

“You bet we do. Does anyone else know about Charlie? I haven’t heard a thing. All anyone knows, far as I’m aware, he’s still on sick leave.”

Was the man stalling? Waiting for backup—the cops?

I glanced about, half expecting to spot an undercover agent whispering into a wrist mike, or a steely eyed assassin watching us from behind a newspaper.

“Walk with me,” I said.

I started toward the zoo entrance. I had already purchased two adult tickets. The man hesitated, then followed. We passed through the gate and continued to the sea lions in the central garden area. I stopped in the middle of a bustling crowd of people, feeling less exposed.

“You still have Charlie’s phone, right?” the man said.

I nodded.

“You gotta get rid of it. Trash it.”

“Why?”

“Because my bloody number’s on it, that’s why!” He shook his head, rubbed his face. “Sorry, Barn. No disrespect—none at

all. This is just all too much. I thought it was a done deal... But Charlie dead... Jesus Christ. Heart attack, had to be. He still at the apartment?"

I nodded.

"I guess we can take care of that. Moving him. It's going to take a goddamn forklift, but we can get it done." He hesitated, thinking. "Okay, Barn, listen up. We can fix this. We go back to the apartment. We take a cab. I'll call Skip. He'll finish the procedure. We'll get Charlie out of there, make it look like—well, hell, we don't have to make it look like anything if it was a heart attack. We just got to figure out some place to leave him where he wouldn't have been discovered for a few days. But don't worry. Don't worry about a thing. We'll get it done. Three days you'll be in Dallas, and none of this will have ever happened."

None of this will have ever happened? I began walking again, my mind reeling. *None of this will have ever happened?* It was almost as if I were in some horror movie in which the director was snipping and cutting scenes, gluing them back together however he pleased. I stopped in front a penguin exhibit. Two dozen of the birds stood on the rock surrounding their dipping pool, their wings either tucked against their sides or flapping ineffectively. The man was still next to me, still talking. I barely heard him. My thoughts were too loud. The kids around us were too loud. Everything was too fucking loud.

I closed my eyes, searching for an inner anchor.

"Barn, hey, Barn—"

I snapped my eyes open again and seized the man by the lapels of his tailored suit, yanking him toward me so our faces

were inches apart.

“Who the fuck am I?” I said.

“Barn...?” His mouth dropped open, but he didn’t seem to know what to say. “Dammit, let go of me!”

“Why do you keep calling me Barney?”

“Barn, what’s— Oh God no.”

“Answer me!” I shook him for emphasis.

“Listen, Barn,” he said in a low voice, barely more than a whisper. “I get it. I think. What happened. I think I get it now. But Barn, let go, you’re making a scene.”

His sunglasses had slid down the bridge of his nose so I could see his eyes for the first time. They were brown, wide, frightened. I didn’t see anything in them that hinted at deception.

I released him.

“Goddamn, man,” he said, straightening his blazer, then looking about, offering a shit-happens grin to anyone who’d been watching us. He fingered his sunglasses back into place.

“Why do you keep calling me Barney?” I asked again.

“Because that’s your name, Barn,” he said, still using that hush-hush voice. He hooked an arm around my shoulder and led me along the path. “Your real name anyway. Now, look, you have to tell me everything that happened. Everything. Then I’ll explain what I can. But I have to know what’s happened.”

“How can I trust you?”

“Me?” He seemed surprised. “Barn, we’ve known each other for five years...” His face fell. “But you don’t have any memories of me, do you?”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Stan, Barn. My name’s Stan.”

“Let me see your ID.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Now.”

Chuckling to himself, the man slipped his wallet from the inside pocket of his blazer, passed me his driver’s license. Stanley Phillip Williams. The ID looked real enough. I handed it back.

“Now listen, Barn,” he said, tucking the wallet away, “you don’t have any memories of me—of anything about your past. Am I right?”

I nodded.

“You just woke up in a crappy old apartment?”

I nodded again.

“And Charlie?”

“On the floor. Dead.”

Stan shook his head sadly. Then, like a switch flipping, the pity left his voice. He became all business. “Okay, listen up, Barn. This is no big deal.” I could almost see his mind clicking, whirling, searching for solutions. “Like I said,” he went on, “Charlie dying, it’s a shame, a real goddamn shame, but we’ll deal with it. You want to know what’s going on—you’re going to have to trust me. I know I seem like a total stranger to you. But I’m not. You have to trust what I’m going to tell you. It’s going to blow your mind, but every word of it’s true. And afterward, we go back to the apartment, you and me. That’s the deal. You and me. We get this mess fixed up.”

“I’m all ears, Stan,” I said, and suddenly I wished I’d cho-

sen a whiskey bar as our meeting spot instead of the zoo. We passed a grizzly bear enclosure without stopping and continued along the meandering path.

“What it seems like to me, Barn,” the man named Stan said, “what it seems like, it seems like Charlie died before or just after he finished cleaning.”

I frowned. “Cleaning?”

“The...erasing part.”

“Of my memory.”

“Your episodic memory.”

“Why?”

“I’m not really sure how to tell you this, Barn...”

I squeezed his biceps, yanking him to a halt. “Listen to me, you son of a bitch. Stop fucking me around and tell me what the fuck is going on. I woke up in a chair yesterday morning with no memories of my life. *None*. I don’t know my mother’s name, or whether she’s alive. *I don’t know shit*. So you tell me why I was in that chair, and if you’re lying—”

Stan tugged his arm free, almost indignantly. “We were saving your life, Barn.”

I blinked in surprise.

“Saving my life?” I repeated. And a door deep inside me inched open, letting loose the fears of those inoperable diseases I’d imagined earlier. “What’s wrong with me?”

Stan shook his head. “Nothing—not physically, I mean.”

My relief lasted only a moment before the confusion and frustration returned in full force. “Who am I?” I demanded. “Who the hell am I?”

Stan gave me an ironic smile. He tucked his sunglasses into

the breast pocket of his blazer and held my eyes, as if seeing me, the real me. He said, “Your name is Barney Hunter, my friend. You’re a drunk and a part-time asshole, and you’re probably the most influential man of the twenty-first century.”

I stared at Stan, searching for a sign that what he was saying was a joke. But it wasn’t. I knew that. I *felt* that. For a moment the world canted. My knees wobbled. Stan slipped his arm around my waist to support my weight and led me to a bench next to a water fountain. I collapsed onto the wooden plank seat. He sat beside me. Across from us a snow leopard padded back and forth anxiously in its artificial environment.

“What are you talking about?” I said, and now I was the one speaking in little more than a whisper.

Stan produced a pack of Marlboros and lit up. He didn’t offer me one. I didn’t want one. I only smoked cigars. But he would know this, wouldn’t he, if he really was who he said he was?

“I’m still not sure where to begin,” Stan said, turning his head away from me as he blew smoke from his mouth.

“From the beginning,” I said.

“You and Charlie—”

“Dead Charlie?”

“Yeah, dead Charlie.” He glanced at me sadly. “Dead Charlie. That’s all he is to you, isn’t he? Dead Charlie?”

“I don’t know him from fly shit.”

“No, you don’t,” Stan said matter-of-factly, and perhaps

with a touch of anger. “Not anymore. But you two were as close as close got. You met at Stanford. Neuroscience students. Geniuses, the both of you. I know how that sounds, but I’m not using the word lightly. Before you finished your degrees, you were publishing research in *Nature* and other scientific journals.”

“Bullshit” was on the tip of my tongue. But my vanity and curiosity caused me to ask, “What kind of research?”

“The memory kind, to put it simply.” Stan inhaled a final drag, then crushed the cigarette out beneath the toe of his expensive monk-strap loafer. “Look, Barn,” he said. “Given what’s happened, I don’t know how to do this, so I’m just going to talk. You’re just going to listen. Then you decide for yourself if you believe me or not. Okay?”

I nodded.

Stan nodded also, as if satisfied with his decision about how to proceed. He shot another Marlboro from his pack and lit up. He took a long, pensive drag, then continued. “Ever since the beginning of rational thought—the ancient Greeks, whenever—people have been trying to figure out what exactly memories are. Plato compared them to impressions in a wax tablet. A decade ago scientists compared them to a biological hard drive. The metaphors changed over time obviously, but they’ve always had one thing in common: persistence. A memory is a recollection of something that happened, and once that something happened, once that recollection is formed, it stays that way, always. It’s why we trust our memories. They feel like snapshots of the past. At least, this is what we’ve believed for thousands of years—until you and Charlie proved

that none of it was true.”

“Not true?” I repeated. The craving for a drink was almost all-consuming. My hands, I noticed, were trembling. I clasped them together and pressed them onto my lap.

Stan took a drag, blew the smoke away from me, and said, “Memories *feel* persistent, Barn, but they’re not. They’re malleable, always changing.” He shook his head. “You’ve won a Nobel Prize, and here I am telling you about... You know, if you did an internet search of yourself—” He cut himself off, looked away again.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing,” he said. The cigarette had nearly burned to the filter. Stan had it pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “I’ve just—I think I’m just starting to realize how hard this is going to be for you to take in.”

There was something about the way he’d cut himself off that didn’t sit right with me. It was almost as if he’d slipped up. But he was talking, I didn’t want him to stop, so I pressed on and said, “So memories change. How?”

Stan waited until a mother pushing a baby carriage continued past us, then he flicked the butt of his smoke across the path. “Because,” he said, “the act of remembering changes the memory itself. Each time you recall an event, the cells in your brain are being triggered and fired. They build new connections and links—literally rewiring the circuitry of your mind. In other words, when you recall and reflect upon memories,

you're physically changing that memory. The entire structure of it is being altered in relation to the present moment, specifically the way you feel and what you're thinking at that moment."

"And you're saying I'm the most influential person of the twenty-first century because of this?" I said skeptically.

"Look, Barn, I'm not going to get into some molecular explanation. What would it matter anyway? It would make about as much sense to you as how the inside of a computer works. But in a nutshell you and Charlie discovered that the change in memories are facilitated by proteins in the brain. If those proteins don't exist, neither do the memories. And so you guys developed protein-inhibiting drugs that targeted specific proteins across the brain and, well, literally created the ability to erase specific memories. Still, it was mostly theory, all in the experimental stage. Mice, animals. Practical implications for humans were a ways off. But then the army got interested. They've been trying to block negative connections to the brain's emotional nexus for decades, to help soldiers deal with post-traumatic stress disorders. See, even though PTSD is created by trauma, it's really a disease of the memory. The problem isn't the trauma. Often the soldier's not even hurt. It's that the trauma can't be forgotten. Most memories, and the traumas associated with them, fade with time. Spot the family dog gets run over by a car, you cry for a week as a kid, but then you forget, or at least the memory of Spot doesn't hurt as much. You can thank evolution for that. A coping mechanism. But PTSD has always been different. The memories are too intense to fade."

“So...what...I work for the army?”

“Hell no,” Stan said. “That was ten years ago or so. You and Charlie were only contracted to them for three years. And with a blank check from the Pentagon, along with a team of the best scientists in the country, you perfected your work. The FDA gave the drugs you created the stamp of approval. And overnight you made PTSD as redundant as the measles.” He paused. “And in the bigger picture, you made the act of remembering a choice.”

A long silence followed that statement. My head felt ready to explode. How could this be possible? How could I be this man Stan was talking about? How could I be responsible for all this...this progress...and barely know what a neutron was?

I asked.

“After the success with the army,” Stan said, “you were getting grants up the gazoo from every investment firm imaginable. Charlie was a simple guy, content with the scientific recognition of his peers, academia. He wanted to keep working on PTSD and other mental illnesses. But you were always different. I don’t know how to put it. You were the Jobs to the Wozniak, I guess. You were the visionary. You had this idea of changing the world. And you did.”

“By figuring out how to erase bad memories?”

“Hardly,” Stan said. “You did much more than that. You founded a company which, within a year, was working on ways not only to erase bad memories but *enhance* them. And

then...well...everything snowballed from there. Soon Rewind was developing methods to add *new* memories all together.”

“Rewind...?”

“First company in history to be valued at more than a trillion dollars, my friend.”

“Rewind,” I said, repeating the name, but it meant nothing. Thinking about wandering around the city without a memory for the last forty-eight hours, the hell it had caused me, I said, “Why? Why would anyone want to erase their memories?”

“Because life’s ugly, brutish, and short. Isn’t that what they used to say? And it’s true. Most people are unhappy. They screw up all the time. Accidents happen. Loved ones die. You do bad stuff. This all causes guilt, regret, pain, unhappiness, suffering. Scientists are convinced that the first person who will live to one thousand years old is already alive today. Imagine one thousand years of unhappiness and suffering.” He hesitated. “Or imagine no suffering at all.” Two young children ran past us, followed by their father. Stan waited until they were out of earshot before adding, “Thanks to you, Barn, the conscious mind is no longer ruled by the unconscious, by memories that cause negative emotions such as fear and, as a byproduct, anxiety.”

I was staring at the pacing snow leopard but not seeing it. A thumping had started behind my eyes. My body felt light, almost as though it didn’t weigh anything. “It’s fake,” I said. “It’s all...fake. These memories, they’re not real...”

“Fake?” Stan seemed amused. “A memory is something that happened in the past, Barn. But the past no longer exists. All memories are fake. I’m going to paraphrase you here. The

mind's greatest magic trick is making us believe memories are real. They're as insubstantial as thoughts of the future are. All that matters is the present. Rewind not only lets people choose what they want to remember in the present, but it lets them become whoever they want to be in the present. You've allowed people to start their lives over."

I heard the click of his lighter, smelled burning tobacco. I rubbed my forehead where the thumping continued in tune with the beat of my pulse.

"Look, I'm not going to get philosophical on you, Barn," Stan said, exhaling a jet of smoke. "The ethics of your achievements have been debated for the last several years now. Sure, there are detractors. But the majority of people believe you've made life better for the human race."

For the human race. A laugh bubbled inside my chest, followed by another, and another. Soon I was in fits, wiping my eyes. Tears of pride, confusion, horror—I didn't know. I rested my elbows on my knees and covered my face with my hands. All the while I was wondering whether I was mad, whether this was all some schizophrenic delusion.

Stan was patting me on the shoulder, buddy-buddy, telling me words of reassurance.

Finally I got myself together and asked, "So how does it work?"

Stan flicked the butt of his cigarette to the same spot as the previous one. He shrugged. "There are more Rewind clinics than Starbucks around the country. You just walk in, you don't even need an appointment. You want a single memory cleaned—something embarrassing at school or work—no

problem. You want an enhancement—turn your deadbeat dad who abandoned you into a man who loved you dearly—no problem either. You want a completely new identity, you got that too. That, however, is a bit more complicated, and only for those who can afford it.”

So here we were, full circle, I thought, recalling how this conversation had started. “That’s what I was undergoing,” I said, more of a statement than a question. “I was getting a new identity.”

Stan nodded.

“But why? If I’m this...this...genius or whatever you’re making me out to be, why would I want to...rewind, flush my mind, my identity, my achievements, all down the toilet?”

Stan looked everywhere but at me. “Listen, Barn. I’ve told you all you need to know. The rest, it doesn’t matter. Now what we have do, we have go back to the apartment. Skip’s one of our best techs, and more importantly, you can trust him. He won’t speak a word of your new identity. He’ll finish what Charlie started. You’ll wake up in Dallas, but wake up right this time. You’ll have a complete past, present, an entire life. You’ll know everything from your favorite porn site to the codes for your overseas bank accounts—”

“I have overseas bank accounts?”

“What we’ve put in your Citibank account is spare change, my friend. Your new life, you’re going to love it.”

“Tell me why I would want a new life, Stan.”

“You don’t need to know that. You don’t want to.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

I stood. “See ya.”

Stan shot to his feet a second later. “Wait!” He gripped my arm. “Jesus Christ, Barn, you’ve always been a stubborn bastard.” Sweat beaded his forehead. “Why you’re doing this?” He shrugged. “For the same reason why everyone else does it.”

“I have traumatic memories. Sorry, Stan. I don’t buy that.”

“It’s true. But for you, Barn, there’s more to it.” He swallowed. “You’re in trouble. Big trouble. With the law.”

I wasn’t surprised by this revelation. In fact, it’s what I’d been waiting to hear. “What did I do?” I asked simply.

“I told you, Barn, you don’t need to—”

“Tell me!”

“Barn, I’m one of your best friends. Trust me when I tell you that you don’t want to know. It’s why you agreed to the procedure in the first place.”

“What if I don’t want to go through with ‘the procedure’ anymore?”

Stan was shaking his head. “Don’t you get it, my friend? Behind door number one is a life of pleasure. Behind door number two is a life in prison—haunted by memories that will cannibalize you from the inside out until you die an old, forgotten man.”

“Murder?” I stated. “That’s it, isn’t it? I murdered someone?”

Stan didn’t reply, but the look on his face told me it was true.

“Who?” I said. “My wife? Was I married? Did I murder my

wife?”

“Barn...”

I shook my head, causing the headache behind my eyes to flare. I rubbed my forehead. “I’ve been strolling around the city for the last day, Stan. I’m supposedly one of the most influential people of the twenty-first century, I’m a murderer to boot, and no one recognizes me?”

“Because you’ve already got your new face,” he said.

I started. “My new face?”

“Face transplant,” he said. He must have mistaken my expression of horror for one of surprise because he added, “It’s no big deal, Barn. Doctors have been doing head transplants for quadriplegics for years now. Charlie, it’s why he let himself go the way he did. Said he’d just get a head transplant one day, place his on a new young body. But he always had some excuse or another why he wouldn’t go through with it. Anyway, face transplants are routine. Once you secure a donor, you’re in and out in a few hours, and the lasers don’t leave any scars. Same with your voice box. Easy-peasy. We could have given you a voice like Sinatra, but you insisted on...well, what you got.”

I touched my face, plied the skin with my fingers, yanked my hands away in disgust.

It wasn’t mine. I was wearing something else’s face.

“I know, Barn,” Stan said, “it’s a lot to take in. Let’s just go back to the apartment, finish the rewind—”

I stumbled backward, away from him.

Stan frowned. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to look myself up on the internet.”

“Barn—”

“Why not?” I said. “If I’m getting my memory wiped again, why not know what I’ve done—everything?”

“Because...” Stan hesitated. “Because you might do something to yourself. After what happened...we had to watch you until you got into that chair. You were suicidal. You tried to kill yourself. Twice. I was the one who found you the second time. You’d slit your wrists.”

I glanced at them. Smooth as a baby’s bottom.

“Same guy who did your face,” Stan said.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I want this anymore.”

“Barn, you’ve already made the choice. It’s why you were in that chair in the first place.”

“I need time—”

“You’ve had time!” he snapped. “Eight months, to be exact. This was your best option. This or prison. No, there’s a third option now, I guess. Doing nothing. Remaining just like you are. And I don’t think that’s something you want, is it, Barn?”

“Why Dallas?” I said. “Why can’t I stay here in New York?”

“Our technology is near perfect. Near perfect. Ninety-ninety percent perfect. But sometimes a client’s memories come back. Impressions usually, nothing more. Maybe you read about your brother’s obituary in the paper, and something just...clicks. You think you know him, so you ring up his wife to pay your condolences, and things get a bit messy. It’s why we’ve started offering to relocate the clients who opt for a complete new identity. It’s a precaution so they don’t go

through, well, what I suppose you went through these past couple days. You chose Dallas yourself. Good climate, big place, easy to be anonymous.”

“I took the laptop.”

“What?”

“From the apartment,” I said. “I was trying to figure out who the hell I was. I took it, and a box of papers—”

“Sure, sure, no problem. Skip will bring everything he needs, don’t worry, don’t worry about any of that, Barn. It’ll be sorted. Now come on, we’ll grab a cab—”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Where?”

“At the apartment.”

Stan frowned. “We had a deal, Barn. You agreed, you and me—”

He stepped forward; I stepped backward.

“I’ll be there,” I said. “Six tomorrow morning. I just—I need some time on my own.”

“Barn—”

“Six. End of discussion.”

I turned and walked away.

When I reached a branching path, I glanced behind me. Stan remained by the bench twenty yards back, though now he was speaking on his phone.

I turned left down the new path until I was out of sight, then I ran.

CHAPTER 6

In the suite at The Plaza I grabbed a bottle of Chivas with one hand and flipped open the laptop with the other. I took a long, burning drink, then stared at the desktop. I must have remained standing there for at least a few minutes, because the androgynous face of the operating system's personal assistant appeared and asked me how it could be of help.

"I need information on a person," I said.

"What is the person's name?"

"Barney—" I bit my lip.

"Can you provide a surname?"

"Forget it."

"Is there anything else I can assist you with—?"

I slapped the screen shut, then fell backward onto the bed, arms spread eagle, still gripping the Chivas in one hand. My mind replayed everything Stanley Williams had told me. All the while I took swigs from the bottle and debated with myself the pros and cons of verifying the information for myself. On the one hand, of course, I would learn the truth about my past

and my influence in history—and who I murdered and why. On the other hand, I might find what I did so horrific I would...what? Kill myself?

Maybe. Because I was suicidal, wasn't I? Stan had said I'd tried to kill myself twice already, and the temptation to jump through the window over yonder had indeed crossed my mind just this afternoon...

These were the last thoughts before I fell into an exhausted, drunken sleep. I didn't remember closing my eyes, but when I opened them it was dark outside, and the room lights had dimmed themselves.

The bottle of Scotch lay on the bed next to me, empty. I glanced at the clock on the night table. It was eight thirty in the evening. I would have kept lying there, kept feeling sorry for myself, had my bladder not ached so badly. I got up and went to the bathroom. I avoided my reflection in the mirror—I didn't want to see the face that wasn't the one I was born with—and by doing so noticed the note Beth had left on the vanity.

I picked it up and read what she'd written in her quick, slanted script. Then I read it again. And again. The third time an emptiness filled me. Because I was going to go through with it, wasn't I? I was going to be at the decrepit apartment at 6 a.m. tomorrow. I was going to wipe my memory. Beautiful Beth with the sad eyes would become nothing but a... The word that came to me was "memory," but she wouldn't even be that, would she? She'd be nothing. As if she'd never existed.

Same went for me. Barney Hunter. I might not remember

my life, but I still had a sense of self. And regardless of whether or not I knew or liked that self, wiping my memory felt a bit like agreeing to be taken off life support, because everything this poor shmuck had been, and currently was, would be gone, cleaned, erased, forever.

As if I'd never existed.

I knocked on Beth's door an hour later. I had showered, dressed in a new suit, purchased two bottles of wine from a liquor store a short walk from The Plaza, and took a taxi to the address she'd left me. I knocked again, then stepped back on the small stoop, looking up at the two-story Victorian brownstone. All the lights were on inside.

A moment later Beth opened the front door. She was dressed casual-chic in tight jeans and a gray turtleneck over a white dress shirt, putting it up for debate whether she had just stepped out of a supermarket, or off a catwalk. She greeted me with a dazzling smile. "I wasn't sure you were going to come," she said.

"Sorry I'm late," I said. "I—"

"You're fine. Come in, please."

Beth stepped aside and I entered a small foyer. I had expected the house to be carved up into individual units, but it appeared she owned or rented the entire place. She led me through a cozy living room and a pink-walled dining room—both with twelve-foot ceilings and decorative crown moldings—to a spacious, modern chef's kitchen.

I handed her the gift bag that contained the two bottles of wine. “I wasn’t sure what was on the menu,” I said. “So I came prepared.”

“Just a salad and lasagna, I’m afraid. My mother’s recipe though. I hope you’ll like it.”

“Smells delicious,” I said, and it did. When was the last time I’d eaten something substantial?

Beth read the labels on both bottles, then set them on the center island. “Would you care for a glass? It’ll still be another half hour until the lasagna is ready.”

“Love one,” I said. “White, please.”

I would have preferred a Scotch, but who brought a bottle of Scotch to a romantic dinner date? I wasn’t going to ask Beth if she had anything harder than wine in the liquor cabinet either. The shower had sobered me up a fair bit. I’d also drunk about a liter of water before leaving the suite at the hotel. Consequently, I felt in control and didn’t need to make a mess of myself.

Not on the last night Beth and I would ever see each other.

This thought hammered me with regret, and I shoved it promptly from my mind.

Beth retrieved a corkscrew from a drawer, opened the Chardonnay, and poured two glasses, filling each a finger more than a standard drink.

“Cheers,” she said, raising her glass.

“Cheers,” I said, clinking.

“Umm... Should we go to the living room?” she asked.

“You’re the boss.”

She led me back the way we’d come and sat on a two-seat

Queen Anne sofa with white leather and black wood trim. I hesitated a moment, wondering if I should choose the armchair. I sat next to her.

“You have a beautiful home,” I said.

“Thanks, Harry.”

Harry. The name rattled me. I had already begun thinking of myself as Barney.

What other lies had I told her?

“Are you okay?” Beth was looking at me, a frown touching the corners of her mouth.

“Sorry,” I said, giving her a reassuring smile. “Just wondering if I’d remembered to bring the keycard to my room. Not that it matters. I can get another from the front desk.” I sipped the wine to stop babbling.

“See any interesting sites today?”

“Central Park Zoo.”

“You know, I’ve lived in this city my entire life, and I’ve only been there once.”

“The sea lions were great. Had beach balls and everything.”

“The best zoo I’ve ever been to was in San Diego. It’s—” She shook her head. “I apologize. This is silly.”

“What’s silly?” I asked.

“We’re talking about zoos, Harry.”

“They make the best small talk.”

“I’m just a bit...you know...” She stared into her wine.

Yes, I knew. She was nervous. She had a thing against dating strangers, and here I was, in her home, seeing her for the second time in as many days.

“You have roommates?” I asked, to change the topic.

“Roommates? Oh, you mean because of the house?”

“It’s a big place for one person.”

She smiled. “Thanks for being tactful, Harry, but I know you mean an *expensive* place for one person.”

“I was thinking that too.”

“It was a gift from my ex-husband.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You were married?”

“For three years. Signed a prenup, so the house is all I got in the divorce. It was a gift.”

“Nice gift.”

“He traveled a lot. Where we lived together, it always felt like his place. Fine when we were together, but when I was alone I wanted something more...homey, I guess the word is. So he bought this townhouse for me as a birthday present.”

“What did he do for a living?”

“He had his own business.” She pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Anyway—”

“He must have done pretty well for himself.”

“He did very well.”

“What was he into—?”

“He’s dead, Harry.”

I blinked. “Jesus, Beth. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t even know how we got onto him.”

“My fault,” I said quickly. “We should have stuck to zoos.”

She laughed at that, breaking the tension that had stolen over the conversation.

“How about you?” I said, eager to move on. “Do anything fun today?”

“I went to the supermarket to buy the ingredients for dinner.”

“That’s fun?”

“I enjoy grocery shopping. I really do. There’s something about a supermarket that’s calming.” She glanced at me sideways. “You think I’m an idiot, don’t you?”

“Beth, you’re one of the most beautiful, kindest women I know,” I said. And this wasn’t a wisecrack because of my lack of memory. I was being one-hundred percent sincere. “To be truthful,” I went on, “I really wouldn’t care if we talked about cows all night.”

Beth leaned close and kissed my cheek. “You’re a very sweet man, Harry.” She stood. “I’m going to check on the lasagna. Be right back.”

I watched her pass through the dining room, skirt the large spruce table, and disappear around the corner into the kitchen—all the while wondering to myself what the hell I was doing. I’d decided to see Beth a final time because I had been alone and scared in the suite and wanted to be with someone for my final night as “me.” I enjoyed her company the previous evening, and I knew if anybody could take my mind off what awaited me tomorrow morning, it would be her. And, yes, somewhere in the back of this depraved, selfish mind of mine, I thought maybe I could get her to sleep with me again.

And then what? Sneak out of her bed in the middle of the night. No note. No nothing. Just—gone.

I swished the wine around in my glass, then finished it off with one gulp.

Shit, I wasn’t a part-time asshole. I was a fulltime one.

I got up and made my way to the kitchen. Beth wasn't there.

I went to the fridge, to retrieve the bottle of Chardonnay, and noticed a photograph stuck to the door with a magnet. It was of a little boy, no older than six or seven. I plucked it free and examined it more closely.

“He was my son.”

I turned. Beth stood several feet behind me, at the mouth to the hallway. She'd likely been in the bathroom.

“Adorable,” I said, sticking the photograph back onto the fridge. I opened the stainless steel door and withdrew the Chardonnay. “Just looking for this. Top-up?”

“Please.”

I refilled both our glasses and we returned to the living room.

“Lasagna is nearly done,” she said. “Fifteen minutes.” She sat on the sofa.

“Wonderful,” I said. This time, however, I chose the armchair.

“So what's the plan for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” I said, poker-faced.

How could she know?

“Statue of Liberty? Empire State Building?”

“Right.” I swallowed. “I...um...”

“I don't start work until five. If you'd care for a tour guide, I'd be happy to show you around. And I promise, no boardrooms or airports.”

I smiled at her joke—and felt my heart break. Seeing her so bright, innocent, lovely, *caring* made me feel like scum, and I

knew I couldn't do this, couldn't go through with the evening, lead her on, leave her in the middle of the night without an explanation.

"Harry?" she said, concerned.

I cleared my throat. "There's something I have to tell you, Beth. I know I said I was going to be around New York for a while. But the truth is something has come up." I hesitated. "I have to leave tomorrow."

Her face remained stoic. Nevertheless, her eyes said it all. Surprise, confusion—and anger, lots of it. "For how long?" she said tightly.

"I'm not sure."

"That means a long time?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

"I'm sorry, Beth, I—"

She shook her head. "I knew it. I *knew* it."

"Beth..."

"I open up, I let myself feel again, trust again, and...and... Damn you, Harry!" Tears spilled from her eyes. She wiped them irritably and stood. "Excuse me."

She vanished into the kitchen.

I stood. "Beth?"

She didn't reply.

"Stupid," I mumbled to myself. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

I paced back and forth, wondering whether Beth was coming back, whether I should just leave, when I noticed for the first time the five framed photographs lining the fireplace mantle. They were all of the boy on the refrigerator door, her son. Smiling wildly while on a swing in autumn. Standing in

front of a Christmas tree holding a present almost as big as he was. Sitting at a table with what might have been chocolate cake on his face.

I picked up the largest photograph. The boy was plopped on a carpeted floor, still a toddler in this one, gripping a rubber He-Man figurine in his hand—

Bailey.

I almost dropped the photograph. I spun around, convinced Beth had returned and said the boy's name. The room was empty.

I looked again at the toddler.

Bailey.

Why did I know his name? Why did I feel like I knew him?

Suddenly, bizarrely, I was nauseous to the point I might be sick. I leaned forward against the mantle and took several deep breaths.

“Harry, I think maybe it's best if you left, if we just called it a night.”

I turned my head slightly, saw Beth in my peripheral vision. She was standing in the threshold to the dining room.

“Harry?”

I shook my head, no longer merely nauseous; I was woozy, disoriented, as if I'd been drugged.

“Your son,” I said, raising the photo of the toddler. “What happened to him?”

“Harry, please, you should just leave.”

I forced myself to stand straight and face her. “His name was Bailey.”

Beth blanched. “How do you know his name?”

“What happened to him?”

“*How do you know his name?*”

“He’s dead. How did he die?”

“Harry, I want you to leave. Now.”

“I need to know, Beth.”

“*You need to know?*” she said. “*You need to know about my son? How he died? Are you sick? What kind of question—?*”

But the rest of her words were drowned out in white noise. Beth’s living room disappeared, and I was in the nursery ward of a hospital, cradling a wrinkled, pink Bailey in my arms. Then I was pushing him from behind as he peddled his new Big Wheel along a sidewalk. Tobogganing with him down Pilgrim Hill in Central Park. Reading him bedtime stories with a flashlight in the dark. A dozen other memories.

“Tonka truck,” I said, exchanging the toddler photo for the Christmas one. “That’s what was in the present. A Tonka dump truck. He loved it—until he left it in the snow one winter and it rusted.”

Beth was backing away from me. She clapped her hands over her mouth and said something I couldn’t understand.

“What?” I said.

“You.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Barney?” she whispered. “Oh my God. *Barney...*”

I threw the photograph across the room into a wall. The glass shattered. The silver frame clattered to the floor. Beth yelped.

“What happened to Bailey, Beth?” I said, stepping toward

her.

“You’re dead,” she said.

“I seem to be very much not.”

Beth ran. I caught her in the kitchen and slammed her against the refrigerator. “What happened to Bailey, Beth?”

“Barney, please—”

I pressed my right forearm against her throat, choking her.

“What did you do to him, you fucking bitch?”

“You did!” she cried, her face turning a beat red. “You killed him, Barney! *You killed our son!*”

A new tsunami of memories stormed through me, these of Beth. Meeting her at the cigar bar for the first time, the real first time, while I was there with colleagues from Rewind. Dinners with her at expensive restaurants, often Japanese, because that was her favorite cuisine. Talking about having children one evening while strolling down Fifth Avenue. Entertaining friends at our Park Avenue penthouse.

Returning from an overseas business trip two days early, stepping from the elevator into the triplex. Going first to the wine room and selecting a fine champagne to share with Beth, to celebrate the latest deal I’d inked. Calling her name but receiving no answer. Checking the master bedroom, then the sitting room, then the gym and the spa. Taking the gallery stairs to the second floor. Hearing music coming from the library. Pushing open the door to find a fire glowing warmly in the fireplace. Beth naked on the bearskin rug in front of the fire, sleeping in the arms of a man half her age. Walking to them calmly and bashing the man’s head open with the bottle of wine. Beth waking and screaming and telling me to stop.

Chasing her through the ballroom, through the dining room, catching her in the foyer as she attempted to flee either to the upper or lower floors. Pummeling her with the bloody, broken bottle until Bailey appeared, crying, telling me to stop. Gripping the boy by his pajama top and shoving him away. Bailey flipping backward over the bannister and falling to the marble floor twenty feet below, breaking his neck, dying instantly.

Beth was yelling at me now, clawing at my face, trying to free herself. I leaned against her with all my strength.

“You made me do it,” I spat, seeing red.

She kept yelling, clawing.

I rammed my forearm harder into her throat.

She made a noise like she might retch.

“You did!” I repeated. “You!”

“You—” she croaked.

“You!” I shouted. “You made me do it! You ruined my life!”

Breathing hard, like I’d just run a mile, I released her. She doubled over coughing, gagging. I seized the bottle of Merlot by the neck, which was still on the kitchen’s island, and smashed it against the back of her skull. She dropped to her knees. I bashed her again and again, wine and blood painting the kitchen red.

I cleaned myself up in Beth’s bathroom the best I could and walked back to The Plaza. In my suite I opened the laptop, requested the personal assistant, and spent the rest of the night

and early hours of the morning learning about Barney Hunter. Everything Stanley Williams had told me turned out to be true. I was a genius. I revolutionized life in the twenty-first century. And I was also a coldblooded murderer. I'd killed the guy Beth had been sleeping with. I'd been charged and convicted with first-degree murder in absentia. Same with Beth and Bailey, convicted in absentia, though in Beth's case it had been attempted murder, and in Bailey's, second-degree murder.

Beth had dismissed the staff the night before the double homicide, no doubt so they wouldn't witness her affair. The first maid to arrive the following morning found the three bodies. Beth remained on life-support for two days before making a full recovery. She had also been villainized in the media. According to a "close source" in one story, this was the reason she'd ended up back at the cigar bar; she was friends with the owner, and he was the only person in town who would hire her.

Most photographs of Barney Hunter were of a middle-aged man with gray hair, eyeglasses, and unremarkable features. In one photo I noticed he had brown eyes while I—Harry Parker, at least—had blue eyes.

It had been eight months since I'd returned from Tokyo early to find Beth and her lover in the library. A week to the day, the police speculated I'd committed suicide. Security video footage showed me—wearing a rudimentary disguise—renting a power boat from the Chelsea Piers Maritime Center. The boat was later discovered abandoned in the middle of the Hudson River. Because my body was never recovered there has been an ongoing debate as to whether I was still alive or

not.

Most believed the latter. After all, I'd killed my own god-damn son, accident though it may have been.

At five in the morning I closed the laptop and took a long hot shower. I dressed in a fresh suit and tossed the bloodied one, along with all the other clothes I had purchased, into the plastic bags they had come in. Then I rang the concierge to order me a taxi. The bellhop loaded the waiting cab with my belongings—including the cardboard box and laptop—while I settled my bill in cash.

I arrived at the derelict Brooklyn apartment at 5.46 a.m. I opened the black door and stepped inside. Stan was sitting on the third step. He jumped to his feet when he saw me, an expression of immeasurable relief on his face.

“Thank God, Barn!” he exclaimed. “You came!”

“It's Harry—Harry Parker,” I said. “Let's get this over with.”

