

In This Room...

Did you know each time you recall a memory, the details stretch farther away from the truth? Time has a tendency to warp perception. That's what the doctor said. He said evocation is not static. People believe they know the specifics of how an event occurred, and they become so convinced; they are willing to bet their lives on it. This Ph.D. said recalling an event in precise detail is impossible. What you see comes from your impressions of hindsight, not from the original memory. The psychologist, or psychiatrist, said there are many reasons for this, though none are specific. Some people see what they want to see. Some remember the story the way they wish it happened, and when minor attributes escape, the gaps are filled with distorted variety. In all, this specialist, this whatever, said the brain is a big fat liar.

To uncover the truth, this doctor advised going a level deeper. Think back, think hard, not only about the big things but the little things about the little things—the smallest details of the smallest details. Go ahead. Give it a try. Take a trip down memory lane, and relive the worst moment of your life as though it was yesterday.

You remember a standoff, a serious and potentially deadly confrontation, an unwelcome invasion of sorts. You can hear the sound of boots scurrying through the dew-covered grass in the middle of the night. Not cowboy or fashion boots, we're talking about tactical boots, the tight-laced footwear of soldiers, or, in this case, the SWAT team—specially trained police officers hustling through the backyard of your home. You hear the swishing of polyester uniforms and the soft clanking of bulky accessories as they hasten across the lawn. They move quickly but undetected since the motion-activated floodlights mounted beneath the gutters of your house remain unlit. These urban soldiers carry rifles loaded with deadly ammunition, and right now, they're taking their places behind tree trunks, bushes, and fences, anything they consider to be protective cover. Silence falls, and you listen closely. You hear a woman's muffled voice from a radio, like someone covering a speaker with their hand to limit the volume.

She says, "Northwest corner. To the front and to the left."

Your curiosity compels you to peek through the blinds, where you see squad cars blocking the streets. The surrounding residents have evacuated, and there's a strategically placed sniper crouching behind the chimney on your neighbor's rooftop, waiting to catch a glimpse of your head through the crosshairs of his scope, confident he can bring this lengthy standoff to an end.

Outside your front door, another cop fastens the straps of his respirator and prepares to launch a canister of tear gas through your window. Did you know tear gas smells acidic, like vinegar? Did you know it's not so much a gas but more of an aerosolized fine powder, irritable to the skin and mucous membranes? If it gets in here and fills this room, your eyes will flood like leaking faucets and burn as though you've doused them with mace. Your nose will gush like the busted levee of a seemingly endless reservoir of snot. Your lungs will burn, and you will choke and gasp for air like some form of asthmatic punishment.

You're getting anxious, so you should take a moment to relax.

Take a deep breath and count backward from ten.

There's no reason to worry, right? You're safe inside this house, protected by layers of brick, wooden frames, and drywall. You know one thing is for sure: the cops can't shoot what they can't see. As long as you stay out of sight, everything will be okay. Unfortunately, safety is an illusion. It always has been. It turns out you're only as safe as your weakest barricade. The last thing standing between you and an intruder is a door. Some people feel by merely keeping it locked, the rest of the world stays contained outside, but a deadbolt means nothing when it comes to the pounding of a battering ram or the swift kick from a cop's boot to bust it open. As for the windows, they're nothing more than thin sheets of glass shielding you from nature's elements and weather, and the softest tap can break them into pieces.

You know there's a storm brewing, and right now, this moment is the calm beforehand. Those cops are becoming more impatient by the minute. They've been trying to get you to peacefully surrender for nearly five hours before they'll decide to use more invasive tactics. The negotiator calls your telephone. He's trying to get in

touch with you to see if he can accommodate your demands, but you ignore him because you have no demands. Everything you care about is gone, and there's nothing anyone can do to bring them back. He wants to talk you down and offer you a chance to get out of this intense situation unharmed and alive, but what's the point? Why go on like this? Each time your phone rings, the harsh tones echo louder inside your head like an ascending alarm. An ache pulses in your temple. You cover your ears to deafen the shrill sound as it becomes more and more unbearable.

The main concern during any SWAT standoff is the safety of everyone involved, but in your mind, sooner or later, whoever is in charge of this shit-show will lose patience and attempt to bring you down no matter what's at stake. Eventually, they'll send in everything they've got at their disposal so they can finally dispose of you.

Don't worry, though. You're in control, remember? The army of police staged around your home doesn't have a leg up on you. You feel somewhat immortal and somehow doubt their fancy toys will affect you. You've come this far, evading capture, and you're too smart to fall for their silly tricks. Then again, the more you think about it, the more you realize the truth. The more you fear, after all, you may not have the upper hand. Those cops outside, they're not leaving until this situation gets resolved. They won't give up until you're in custody or worse...dead.

If only there were some way to make them understand you're not a monster. Not all of this is your fault, not exactly. You've made a few mistakes. You tried your best to handle your affairs but simply lost control. You let the worst get the best of you. With a bit of luck, people will empathize once they hear your side of the story. You should probably do the right thing and surrender. Toss in the towel and throw your hands in the air. Otherwise, it's highly probable you will lose this battle with a small infantry of officers who've taken an oath to protect society from people like you. Maybe you shouldn't have done what you did in the first place. It's too bad you can't change the outcome now that your future is grim with the inevitable. You realize this, and it's terrifying.

No matter how much you wish to go back, you can't. In a short amount of time, the one place you will be going is to prison for the rest of your life. Once they have you in handcuffs, the police will eventually find the dead bodies on your property. A judge and jury will declare you guilty of second-degree murder, and, given the nature of your crimes plus the number of victims, there's no doubt the prosecutor will seek the death penalty. Did you know this state enforces lethal injection? To you, however, capital punishment sounds like a blessing. To you, there comes an idea of something more horrific than dying.

The same attorney who failed at getting you off with a plea of insanity will fight to keep the needle out of your arm with recurring appeals, but how many nights can you sleep with one eye open? How many years will you spend looking over your shoulder? How many corners will you hesitate to turn, fearful of who waits for you on the other side? Once your fellow prisoners find out what you did, oh boy...who knows what creative and torturous methods of sanction they'll come up with? From keeping you starved by knocking your meal tray to the dining hall floor to daily beat-downs and gang-rapes in the shower, make no mistake, those inmates will deliver the living hell you deserve. From the second the bars slam shut to the moment you find eternal peace, you will fully understand what it's like to be the victim.

So, what do you plan to do about it? What's your next move? Sneak out the back and run away? The cops have your home surrounded. Even if you could escape, where would you go? How long will you survive on your own, off the grid, hiding your face from everyone who crosses your path? You know what you did. You understand the difference between right and wrong. More importantly, you know the past will eventually catch up with you. You can run from the law, but you can't hide from yourself.

There is one option you can choose to avoid spending the rest of your days in a concrete cell. There's one plan you can execute to prevent the life of suffering you face. That's right...the Colt/.45 caliber revolver you have gripped in your hand, the gun loaded with six hollow-point bullets. Your thumb pulls back on the hammer, and you observe the cylinder rotate to the next loaded chamber. The clicking sound marks the split second you realize this shit just got real.

The anxiety nipping inside your chest won't go away. In fact, it's getting worse. Your hands feel clammy, and

a thin layer of cold sweat glistens across your brow. Suddenly, you feel weightless but also heavy, like a criminal astronaut floating through the vacuum of space while, at the same time, getting sucked into a black hole. As you shove the gun's barrel between your teeth, and the tip scrapes the roof of your mouth. The sharp pain makes your eyes water. Your heart pounds in the bottom of your throat. You can't swallow, and you can't stop shaking. Soon enough, the rest of your body goes numb because, like everyone else, it no longer wants anything to do with you.

Try to stay focused. Ask yourself simple questions. How did it come to this? What went wrong? Have you ever tasted metal before? Do you recognize the sensation of hard steel on your tongue? Is the idea of ending your own life anything like you imagined? All those trivial issues you faced before, all those times you thought you might be better off dead, they're laughable in the presence of this nightmare.

You wonder, but it's doubtful this will hurt. The tip of your index finger rests on the trigger, and if you squeeze it back any further, all of this goes away, fast, so quick, you won't even feel it. The brain can no longer interpret pain once it's been splattered across the wall. Your actions will be justified, and people will say you paid the price. They'll say you've squared your account with society. You've shed the blood of others, so it serves you right to shed your own. What other choice do you have? One way or another, you are going down. You know it, the police know it, everyone knows it, and there's no doubt about it: you've earned yourself a one-way ticket to hell. But wait a second. Take a moment to think this through.

Take a deep breath and count backward from ten.

Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Most issues promise a resolution no matter how desperate the circumstances may seem. Then again, there's nothing temporary about the retribution those cops plan to give you, not after what you've done. There's nothing short-term about spending your remaining years on death row, begging for your final day to arrive so you can escape the torment you've set in place. You realize this may not be the best plan after all.

In the room where you stand, there's a grandfather clock near the wall, and it begins to chime, letting you know the hour has arrived. Through blurry tears, you see the face, and both the long and short hands point to the Roman Numeral for twelve—XII—midnight. It's the dawn of a new day. A clean slate, but not in your case. You're not getting out that easily. It's time to make a decision. The longer you wait, the more nervous you become. With tears streaming down each cheek as you gag on a thick rod of metal, you wish someone had stopped you long before it came to this. You wish somebody had talked some sense into you, to convince you that what you did was wrong and what you are doing now is a very, *very* bad idea. What's left to say? There's no one else to blame for you landing yourself in this predicament. There's no one coming to the rescue. The people who loved you, who were there for you in stressful times, your friends and family, they're dead and gone. You know this because you killed them. You are the sole person responsible for their demise. More than anything, you want to go back in time and make different decisions, but guess what? We are way too late in the game for that.

As your surroundings become clear, you can't recall a time when reality has been so lucid. You anticipate the possibility that in a split second, the bullet will blast through your head and exit the back of your skull like a bloody, brainy bolt of electricity. With shaky hands, either you pull the trigger on purpose, or your trembling finger will accidentally do it for you. With sweaty palms, the gun might slip from your grasp, and then what? It might land on the floor hard enough to misfire and send a bullet whizzing through the ceiling. The cops might hear the shot and decide to move in. Then, you will have missed your chance to get out of this dire situation at your own will. The police will kick down the door and bust through the windows, and if you continue to pose a threat, they'll take you out faster than you can beg them not to.

Go ahead and close your eyes. Clear your mind. Don't think of anything. Let go of all you have ever lived for and squeeze the trigger. The bang is deafening. Your vision goes black. There's nothing, not anymore. No concept of time. No cognizance. No perception. You're dead, and you don't even know it.

Now, relax. Come back to life. Take the gun from your mouth and drop it to the floor. Forget the police. Pay no mind to the threat. Dismiss yourself of any anguish. If you're lucky, maybe this is all a scenario. Once you discover it may not be real, you'll sigh with relief. You might even laugh at yourself, knowing this horror never

happened. You tell yourself it's all fake, something like a dream, something make-believe. You persuade yourself this is nothing more than some vivid hell-scape your imagination came up with, and it's not how your world truly comes crashing down... *or is it?*

Like the doctor said: time has a tendency to warp perception, evocation is not static, and the brain is a big fat liar. Take a look around. If these walls could talk, you know they'd speak the truth. Unfortunately, you're all alone, and there is no one here to substantiate fact from fiction, so you believe what you want to believe. Then, it becomes clear; you can't confide in anything because sometimes, yesterday can be as uncertain as tomorrow. Sometimes, retrospect can be deceitful. So, when the outcome of your future relies on the past, do you trust what you remember or what really happened?

Take a deep breath and count backward from ten.

On the Front Porch...

Whoever said money can't buy happiness sure as shit never lived here. It's a rarity when the police get called to this suburban area, much less the SWAT Team. No one who lives in this upper-class neighborhood would believe anything awful could happen. Wealthy families inhabit this utopia with blissful ignorance. Here, you'll find a lifestyle crime is too poor to afford, where the elite, so-called pillars of the community, pretend to live their perfect lives in a pleasant dream, safe from any nightmarish riffraff.

Some of these people share a false sense of entitlement. They swallow deception from social media posts, filtered photographs, scripted reality television, magazine covers, and stories of celebrity fame. As for their children: every girl wants to be a supermodel, every boy, a success, and they will be, as long as their parents continue fronting the bill. These families live in a place where someone always holds the door, where crowds of the less fortunate spread apart to make way for the prosperous and beautiful. These self-proclaimed stars lavish themselves with impeccable fashion, dress in expensive *Gucci* and *Burberry* outfits, and decorate their homes with exquisite art. They check the time on their *Rolex* watches, drive around town in luxury edition *Mercedes-Benz* and sporty *Teslas*. They socialize by hosting parties with friends and colleagues and maintain their social stature by showing off their expensive toys. Invite them to your birthday, your wedding, your kid's graduation party, and, heaven forbid they have to grace you with their presence; they'll arrive with fake smiles and pretend to give a crap about anyone but themselves.

Regardless of how much you may envy these residents, no matter how well they profess, on the surface, not everything is as real as one might think. What others don't realize is that many of these people have shamelessly exchanged their souls for supremacy. Even though their pieces may seem to fit effortlessly together, it's nothing for them to spend a few extra bucks to reshape whatever is out of place. They have the means of tightening themselves to look healthier, lifting their skin to appear younger, or augmenting their body parts to fill some empty void with vanity. However, amongst them hides a well-known truth: The perfect life comes at a price; it comes with strings attached, it arrives packaged in darkness and shipped from the depths of hell. Material possessions made by demons with brand names in a fairytale where some live *horribly* ever after.

With all this said, not everyone who resides here is pretentious. Some choose not to let their humble heads swell. They feel fortunate and blessed to have what they do. Some worked hard and suffered losses in order to gain their rewards. Others were taught to never want for anything and always to be grateful because, at any time, the pleasant world surrounding them can easily crumble.

Between the two and three-story houses spread long yards of grass divided by borders of small tree lines and fences. At the naive age of twenty-five, Calvin Delacroix believes he has everything figured out. Here at 2702 Ironsmith Court, he waits alone on his front porch for a guest to arrive. Even though this meeting is informal, Calvin strives to look his best with slim jeans, a loosely buttoned dress shirt, a bronze tan, and stylish, tawny-brown hair.

Along the sidewalk, a middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Silver, come to a stop when the wife nudges her husband's arm and nods in Calvin's direction. Across the street, Mr. Lang fills his lawnmower with gasoline, and when he sees the Silver's with their pained expressions, with their backs are turned to Calvin to stay clear of the neighborhood misfit, Mr. Lang retreats to his garage, leaving his lawnmower unattended on the front lawn.

Their aversion goes unnoticed as Calvin is too busy thinking of how he got here. Not in a directional sense. He's not retracing the routes he took or the time wasted sitting in traffic. He's focused on the more significant questions. He thinks back, trying to recall what he's done throughout his life to achieve such failure. He thinks hard about what events led to his defeat. More importantly, he wonders where, oh, where did it all go wrong?

Daylight arches above this neighborhood as the wheels of a navy-blue Ford F-150 pickup truck come rolling into the driveway and squeal to a halt. A decal with the company name—*Graves' Northside Realty & Appraisal*—and a slogan beneath in smaller text—*'Moving you forward'* is printed on the side of the vehicle. The

engine falls silent near a white, remodeled, Colonial-style two-story home. With a restored exterior, crystal clear windows, and newly painted black shutters, this original structure is surrounded by a yard of freshly cut grass. The interior has been modernized with the exception of its initial foundation.

Calvin waits for the driver to step out. Wayne Graves is wearing attire within the budget of his blue-collar profession. Jeans. Polo shirt. Work boots. His age salts his neatly-trimmed beard and hair. His appointment at the Delacroix house is his most important stop of the day, and with a *Crest*-white smile, he approaches with a single key in hand and a clipboard tucked beneath his arm. Thick-framed reading glasses hang from a string around his neck, and he slides them to the bridge of his nose. He removes an ink pen from his breast pocket and scribbles on the sheet, but the pen needs a good shake before he can write ‘Delacroix appraisal’ at the top of the page.

“It’s about time,” he says. “Are you ready? I’m sure you have a million things you’d rather be doing, but time is of the essence.”

Wayne peers over the top of his frames, across the street, and over two houses to where the nosey neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Hill, watch from their window. When he waves hello, they scuffle to pull the curtains closed. He removes a packet of bubble gum from his pocket and tosses a piece in his mouth. He offers another to Calvin, who politely declines and hangs his head, spotting his dignity in the dirt.

With a hint of sarcasm, Wayne says, “They’re saints, I’m sure. Don’t mind them. Everyone has skeletons.”

Calvin stands, brushes the judgment from his pants, and cranes his neck to see down the road.

“Shouldn’t we wait for my family?”

Wayne pauses at the front door, and with a nervous slip of his fingers, the key falls and clangs near the doormat. He’s quick to retrieve it and asks, “Are they coming?”

Squinting at the setting sun, Calvin hopes relief will come as a passenger in his wife’s car once it turns the corner.

“Addelyn said she would meet us here.”

Producing a cell phone from his pocket, he scrolls through his contacts and chooses Addelyn’s name beside a heart-shaped emoji. He presses the call button, but the line goes straight to voicemail—“Leave a message after the beep.”

“Addy, where are you? Wayne is ready to go inside. Can you...” He sighs. “Can you call me back?”

The tip of the key touches the lock when Wayne’s eye catches the shimmer of something tiny and metal on the porch. With a swift but subtle motion, he kicks away a bullet’s empty shell-casing before Calvin has a chance to see it. Chewing his gum, he says, “You know, I don’t believe I’ve met your wife.”

Calvin expresses sincere, unfeigned bewilderment. Strange, considering Addelyn is a busty, blonde bombshell who, for most men, is hard to forget. More, because Wayne is the same realtor who sold the Delacroix’s this home last year.

“Of course, you’ve met her.”

The sudden breeze carries a scent of his wife’s perfume, a potent but sweet fragrance of Nashi pear, lotus flower, and balsa wood. Of all the senses, smell has the least resistant path to memory. Calvin’s thoughts derail to an overwhelming interlude of *déjà vu*—a familiar reminiscence of where he stands now, and the same place he stood a year ago.

It was the same time last autumn when you first met with us to give us a tour of the new house. Addelyn always dreamed of living in a home away from the city lights so she could gaze at the stars. Her face beamed when you told her she could see the Milky Way on a clear night. She held our baby daughter, Maddie, who cackled with a slobbery finger pointed at your truck. You walked onto the porch and, before you opened the door, you said, “It’s about time,” and asked, “Are you ready?”

First came the front foyer with a half-spiral staircase leading up toward the second floor. Spinning around like

Julie Andrews on mountainous terrain, Addelyn marveled at how elegant the vestibule appeared with its shiny Carrara marble floors, raised ceiling, and glimmering chandelier. She mentioned how she loved the smell of fresh paint and polish. You were saving the best feature for last and knew it took me everything I had not to ruin the surprise.

You shot me a wink before leading us through the hallway and said, “First thing’s first. Let me show you the basement; then, we’ll work our way upstairs.”

You rounded the corner and we followed you down a carpeted stairwell. When Addelyn first set foot in the basement, she commented on the spacious area, saying, “You could fit our whole apartment down here.”

We discussed furnishing the lower level with a bar, a backup refrigerator/freezer, and possibly a pool table. We decided on hardwood floors with area rugs, a recliner, and a sectional sofa. We imagined a high-resolution projector shining on the wall and a *Dolby Digital* surround sound system to make our own private movie theatre as a place to entertain guests or a second living space to spread out during the confinement of winter months.

You described the original floor plan as a single area and how your contractors built a divider to separate the basement into two rooms. The other half had fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling, mirrored walls, and plenty of space for a gym and tanning bed. In the corner, a wall section was left unfinished with exposed wooden beams, a stack of drywall, and a tub of paint.

Addelyn staggered and grabbed my arm when I told her, “This is where the sauna will go.”

“A sauna?”

I said, “That’s right...a Clearlight corner sauna, the kind with an infrared heat supply and basswood finish.”

Rather than return upstairs the same way we came, you showed us through the sliding patio door leading to the backyard and swimming pool. You pointed out the motion-activated floodlights mounted beneath the gutters. You showed us the picnic table left behind by the previous owners. Addelyn noticed a tree with a sturdy horizontal branch, the perfect height to hang a swing. Soon after, you walked us up the stone-edged path, around the side, to the driveway. You opened the two-car garage, and we entered the house through the laundry room and into the kitchen.

We explored the dining room, the living room, and you stated there was a half bath in the hallway in addition to a spare room we thought to be the ideal place for Maddie’s nursery. You asked if we planned to have more children, and we teased the idea of creating our own *Brady Bunch*; and since we were already blessed with a girl, we pinned our hopes on having a boy next time. We enlightened you with our dreams of Maddie growing up to be as beautiful and intelligent as her mother and a son who would become someone important and well-respected. Regardless of their success, we expressed our firm belief, even as a wealthy family, our children would work hard so they wouldn’t turn out to be spoiled brats. This reminded you of our recent tragedy and how I inherited my fortune, and you offered your condolences.

We returned to the foyer, and you continued the tour up the half-spiral staircase to the balcony on the second floor, where you revealed what you called a guest bedroom with a full guest bath across the hall. I noticed the panel on the ceiling, and you told me it had a sliding wooden ladder mounted to the inside in case I needed access to the attic. You showed us a smaller room I could use for a home office, and with Addelyn’s attention astray, I expressed my excitement for the grand finale with a silly, cheesy grin. Maddie noticed me over her mother’s shoulder and mimicked me by putting a finger to her lips to stay quiet. You stepped aside so I could lead us to the master bedroom, complete with its own full bath, and that’s when Addelyn laughed and covered her mouth.

“Oh my God, a Jacuzzi!” She turned to me and said, “You did good, sweetheart.” Then, she looked at you. “I’ve been wanting a hot tub since our prom in high school.”

You questioned the relevance, and I replied, “It’s a long story.” Not really long, per se, but too lengthy to share at the time. I held the baby while Addelyn examined the tub, tracing her finger along the smooth, off-white, terrazzo marble surface. She discovered an exposed console near the wall with disconnected wires and an open toolbox someone left behind.

She asked, “Is it not hooked up?”

You explained, “While installing the tub, the contractor found a water leak coming from a rusted fitting. Don’t worry; they’re sending someone out to replace it. Unfortunately, we can’t have the electricity connected until then. In the meantime, the standing shower works great.”

Addelyn expressed her understanding of the delay but confessed to her lack of patience by saying, “We need to make it a top priority.” Taking hold of Maddie, she grinned and said, “I can hardly wait.”

I kissed her cheek and said, “Violet Fane.”

She knew what it meant, but you didn’t, and the only clarification I offered was by telling you it’s something I learned from a very important person.

When the three (and a half) of us returned to the balcony and down the staircase, I asked Addelyn, in all, what she thought of the place.

She said, “It’s perfect,” and, “It takes my breath away.”

She added, “I love you,” and I replied with, “I love you,” because we never say, “I love you *too*.”

That’s when you opened the front door, and the sunlight nearly blinded us.

Now, shadows cover the front porch. Wayne observes his client. With a raised brow above his narrowing eyes, he’s not curious whether the story is true but rather astonished by how well Calvin recalls the events in precise detail.

“Are you sure?”

Calvin scoffs as if this guy might be kidding.

He asks, “Why wouldn’t I be? I remember like it was yesterday. I can’t believe *you* forgot.”

As if he knows something Calvin doesn’t, Wayne shrugs and makes cheap excuses to avert suspicion. He comes up with plausible reasons to explain his absentmindedness, such as, “It’s been a long time,” and “I’ve slept since then,” as well as, “It’s no surprise considering the number of clients I meet with on a daily basis.”

His attempts to defer the topic succeed as Calvin stretches once more to look down the street at a familiar car heading in his direction. As the vehicle moves closer, he can tell it’s not occupied by his wife and daughter, and his expectations untether.

“They must be running late. Addelyn won’t answer her phone while she’s driving, especially with Maddie in the back seat.”

The seconds of silence can be counted on one hand, broken by the sound of Wayne popping his gum and shoving the key into the lock. With the bolt unhinged, all it takes is a gentle push to enter the home, but he hesitates and focuses on his still fingers as they hover above the knob. He’s choosing his words carefully because the wrong phrase may ignite a fire he won’t be able to extinguish. He doesn’t want to say anything to upset Calvin. Yet, he knows preventing his distress might be out of his control.

With a slow and steady sigh, he says, “We’re not moving anything tonight. All we need to do is make a list of what goes and what stays.”

Calvin hears this, but he’s not listening. He’s oblivious to Wayne’s apprehension with a blank stare focused on a row of three bushes lining the rock bed to the right of the porch. Few flowers are left to wither away, and the petals, scattered along the grass, are crispy and frail. His head tilts to one side as though pulled by a bizarre observation, and he wonders if perhaps not every detail of his memory is accurate.

“These roses, they were white before. Now, they’re red.”

Wayne returns the key to his pocket. He doesn’t turn around but stares ahead with his nose a few inches from the door like someone closed it in his face.

He lowers his chin, indifferent to Calvin’s remark, and tells him, “They’ve always been red.”

Birds chirp as seconds tick by. Already forgetting his regard for the rose bushes, Calvin checks the time on his *Jaeger LeCoultre* wristwatch and peers at the base of the sun as it kisses the horizon.

“Addelyn, where are you?”

Strengthening his posture with his chest out and shoulders back, Wayne asks, “What do you say we get started?” He opens the door and steps aside so Calvin can lead the way. “Are you ready?”