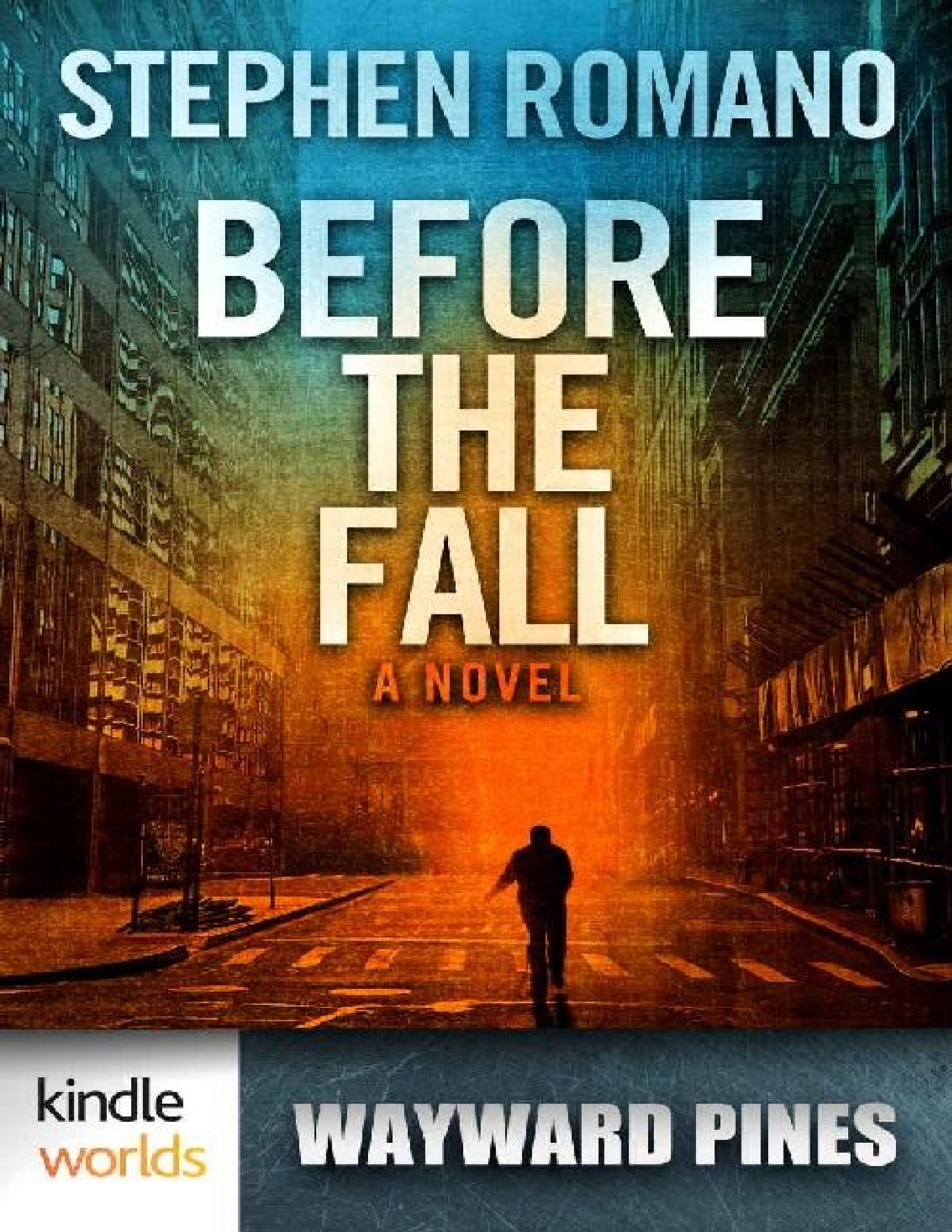

STEPHEN ROMANO
BEFORE THE FALL
A NOVEL
kindle worlds
WAYWARD PINES

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BEFORE THE FALL

Stephen Romano

Kindle Worlds

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for Herschel Berry
teenage strange and pretty poison

and
Rock
of course

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AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For one long surreal moment … he wonders if any of it was real.

If all that weird shit actually happened to him.

If those dreams he has every night—the ones he can't fully remember all the way—are part of it somehow.

They have to be.

But what does it matter now?

All he knows for sure is that this woman must go away from him.

He is killing her as surely as they are sharing airspace.

And soon—very soon—the whole world will be buried in the same grave.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it's just some nutty dream.

PART ONE

Street Jam

CHAPTER ONE

My bones are old and cranky tonight, and my feet are like worn-out rubber, but that's never any surprise when you push around everything you own in a shopping cart.

Some evenings just make the rubber a little thicker, that's all.

Then you remember you're still only 40 and you get to take stock of everything that makes you feel so much older—all those muscle memory aches and micro-twitches of fatigue running up the back of your legs, the tiny wheezing sounds you make sometimes when you breathe. You start actually *listening* to the weird rhythm of your own heart and wonder how much of it is normal. Then you start laughing because you're lost in a universe of infinite possibilities and who the hell knows what being *normal* even is. I think if God were to show up one day on earth—I mean really show up, gloves off and ready for the big showdown—it would be something so darn profound and unexpected that we'd never even know what hit us.

Who are we anyway, trying to comprehend something that big?

Most of us still live in *houses*, man.

Sometimes I'll get into these way-out philosophical raps with a few of the guys down at the Row, and we'll rail for hours about the societal niceties we've all turned our backs on, the shopping malls and electronic pick-up bars and whatever else that'll eventually dress up civilization for the next millennium—The Great Lie of Civilized Man to the Tenth Goddamn Power. You gotta know that no matter how organized and sophisticated it all seems on the surface, no matter how pure and righteous we pretend to make it deep down … well, in the end, we're still just living in caves.

And once you get rid of the cave …

Once you figure out the lie …

Once you're just a human goddamn being walking the earth …

… well, maybe you *are* a little closer to something that might be a cosmic understanding.

That's a different kind of truth that's *so far off* from anything like throwing up four walls, banging a few nails in place, building an outdoor deck, and carving a sunroof into the ceiling. You're just a creature of fragile flesh and tired bones locking yourself away in a room on some backwater hillbilly planet when you do that. And then you have a few kids and they're trapped in there with you. You get to live your whole life like a blind mole, eating Twinkies in front of a 50-inch flatscreen, and assigning names to things you don't really understand.

Oh, and you get to go on Twitter a lot, too.

I don't miss that, either.

Anyway … I'm no mystic guru or new-age fella or anything like that. Far from it. But whenever my bones make me feel old, my mind *does* tend to drift in the direction of all that metaphysical business. And I know what you're thinking—like, yeah, dude, it's easy for some random homeless schmuck to rail against living indoors where The Powers That Be can't see ya—but that's not it. Not at all. I thought about these things a lot before I ever went on the street. I thought about it when I was flying in helicopters, so far above so many houses, all of them on fire. I thought about it when I kicked in doors, one after the other, and heard a thousand screams from a thousand families, all of them shocked out of their own fragile realities by brute force. I thought about it for years after that, as I maintained my sanity, punishing criminals. And I thought about it most in the white hot moment of deep frenzy that happened just before the fall.

My fall.

My final escape from this fragile earth, so filled with lies.

So full of burning houses.

And now I just walk the earth. That's when you know you're really alive—redeemed in the face of pure truth. When you live outdoors, closer to God.

Whatever God really is.

I kind of hope I never find out.

I'm pretty sure if I ever did, it would be a big letdown.

• • •

So the cart is heavy tonight, and it's late and hot and I feel the rattle in my bones as I push everything I own into the back parking lot of the Hyde Park Bar and Grill. I'm rolling out from the cover of a really nice section of civilization,

just at the edge of about twelve square blocks of beautiful homes and lush yards and clean streets with oaks and elms and evergreens on either side, stretching across to meet each other in beautiful overhead arcs. You see these nice tree-lined neighborhoods in movies like *American Beauty*. Hyde Park is right near Guadalupe Street, which is the main downtown campus drag of Austin, of course. A lot of rich people live here. There's a bunch of churches in this 'hood. During the day, you can't be seen on the pavement in Hyde Park with your cart. Gotta keep that mostly on the Drag with the Dragworms. But at night, you can move around pretty well. Just keep your wheels oiled and your trajectory straight. Don't mess with anybody and you're cool. Act like you own the place—like you truly belong here. Which, of course, you do. In the cosmic sense.

But whatever.

At the east side of Hyde Park is this intersection—with lots of restaurants and a locally owned grocery store where everything costs way too much. The Hyde Park Bar and Grill has a juicy dumpster on Fridays. Next to that is Quack's Bakery and the Jazzmatazz laundry, where a lot of the college kids do their clothes. It's one of those little hole-in-the-wall, coin-op washes that rarely has an attendant on duty—just some ratty janitor kid named Beaver who shows up three times a week to empty the change machines and the washers, sweep the floor, and go back to smoking pot in his one-room apartment three blocks away on the outer edge of Hyde, where the poor linger just out of sight. The doors to this place automatically lock from the outside at midnight, but if you're already inside when that happens, you've got a place to sleep for the night.

If you jam something in the door, you have a place to stash your cart for an hour or two while you go get some after-hours business done.

It's Tuesday, and 11:55 p.m. by my beat-up Fred Flintstone watch.

I'm just in time.

Nobody ever washes on Tuesday, and Beaver won't check in for another three days. No security cams in this place, either. They have those little black orbs all over the ceiling, but that's all for show, just to discourage the local riff-raff from setting up camp. Nothing behind the orbs. Like black eyes gone blind. The beauty of this place is a lot more pure, though—nobody like me ever hits the Jazzmatazz for an overnighter because Hyde Park is generally considered off-limits to Dragworms.

So get bold and live outside the box.

You'll love yourself later.

I open the door and roll the cart in. The place is really, really small. Most one-room apartments are bigger. Two rows of washers and dryers and a couple of large wide tables in the middle for folding your clothes. A big picture window

looking out at the overpriced grocery store across the street, and an Italian bistro right next to it that's also way pricy. I went in there and had breadsticks once. They were four dollars. That was before the fall, of course. I never spend four dollars on anything, anymore.

In my cart is a bundle of laundry, all tied in a very specific series of knots, to maximize space. Undoing the knots is easy when you know the combination. It's like knowing the secret code on a Rubik's Cube.

I'm good at secret codes, man.

I made a living solving them for ten years before I tossed in the towel.

I can still see the whole city of Austin, Texas, sprawled out before me like a puzzle to be worked, all the streets and alleys and dumpsters and secret lives, all entangled in a beautiful working rhythm, all played out in thunder and silence.

I know it all by heart. I always will.

I untangle the knots in just a few seconds, toss the clothes in the nearest machine, use a special steel-plated slug to feed the coin op eight times—only costs two bucks to do your rags here. The slug clinks and clunks in a rolling pachinko rhythm as I fool the primitive technology over and over. It thinks it just ate two bucks and starts pouring water on my rags. I toss in some liquid detergent I've been keeping in an old Aquafina bottle. Found the stuff in one of my favorite dumpsters two weeks ago, the one just a few blocks from here, in Hancock Center. So many yummies there, just for the taking.

It disgusts me, of course, even as I live off the dregs.

What humanity has become, I mean.

I hate that we throw away so many things we need. That it's considered a public service to carry away our own garbage. To cover up the crime.

So many people, so lost.

Fuck the world.

Just as the wash cycle begins, the overhead lights go off. I like it when that happens. Makes it kind of dark and cozy in here, with the warm glow from a soda machine that sells canned water halfway filling the room. The overhead fans stop spinning, but the air conditioning stays on. That's damn good, because even late autumn nights in Austin can be scorching little bitches. When the lights go off and the fans stop, that means the door is locked from the outside. It's designed this way so that if you're still washing, you can leave in an hour (or whenever) once your dryer cycle is done. But you can't get back in this place unless you leave the door ajar.

I use an old ripped-up shoe I've been saving to do the trick.

Then I grab my working gear from the cart. Keep it in an old black backpack these days—more sundries from the dregs. Everything a pro needs.

I check the gear quickly, zip it up, and boogie.

Back into the neighborhood.

Twenty square blocks of richness.

I can still hear the washing machine cycling in my head, like music, even though it's long gone in just a minute.

• • •

Lots of nice, nice houses on Avenue F.

A real rich 'hood.

I wouldn't wanna live here.

Wouldn't wanna live anywhere, really … but we've covered that, right?

One of the nicest sections is about five blocks from the Jazzmatazz, deep in the civilized woods of Hyde Park, surrounded by trees. The houses are pretty, some small, some big, some sprawling, some runty. I walk through it slowly, traveling light without my cart. My feet glide soft, like I'm a ghost. Yeah. *Just* like I'm a ghost, man.

The darkness makes it all look shut down. Not a single light on in any of the homes. It's late, and the Normal World goes to sleep at ten. I would pity them all if I didn't have so much regret in my heart. If I wasn't filled with *so much goddamn …*

… no, man.

Back off from that.

It almost destroyed you once, never let it happen again.

Okay. Moving on.

Pretty soon, I'm standing in front of a real nice house on Avenue F. One of the finest in the 'hood, really—a giant wood frame monstrosity that takes up a huge portion of the block it sits on. It's gray with white trim and a big front deck, a three-story job. The lawn looks so soft and bountiful, it could be deep shag carpeting made from thin velvet.

The place screams:

I AM RICH SO PLEASE ROB ME.

Okay.

• • •

I do my ghost number around back, hop a three-foot fence, and the kitchen door is wide open. Imagine that. Don't even need my tools for this one. Still, I slip on my gloves from the kit and test the perimeter for heat signatures with my night-vision specs. Never can tell, right? And it feels comforting somehow to break out the old school—my snoop gear from a long-gone life. The batteries are still good, even after so many years.

The blacklight lens array tells me the coast is clear.

Just like back in the day.

Then I shoulder the pack and let myself into a kitchen three times the size of the laundromat I just left. It's dark in here mostly, but there's some light from the microwave readout and a few twinkles here and there, strange little glints off the surface of several large appliances, all chromed steel surfaces and polished handles. Long rows of cabinets and pantries, food prep stations and racks of equipment for making everything yummy and unnecessary.

Just beyond the kitchen is a short hallway.

At the end of the hallway is an open door that leads to a room.

The room glows with a soft orange light.

I head for it.

The room turns out to be a study, and the light is orange because of the lamps in there—two of them covered in antique wicker shades. Books on the walls, an expensive rug on the floor. The smell of a recent cigar, floating around the place like a dirty ghost. I follow the smell, like a man connecting the dots … to the desk against the far wall.

And the fella sitting behind it.

My heart doesn't freeze and my head stays cool.

Even when the fella opens the desk drawer.

Pulls out a gun.

And aims it right at me.

• • •

It's a pretty impressive weapon—9mm Ruger with a glasspack silencer that makes the barrel long and extra intimidating. I take two steps closer to the man behind the desk and I almost crack a smile at him.

He doesn't crack back.

The gun, aimed at my heart, tracks up to my forehead. I see past the long dark tunnel to nowhere—or *somewhere*—and fix on his eyes. Large blue orbs

full of resignation to the inevitable, set in the center of a face full of canyons and roads, all winding here and there and everywhere, across a pale pockmarked landscape. His hand shakes a little. He doesn't say a word. Finger on the trigger.

I face it on my feet.

Ready to find out what God really is.

• • •

But.

The gun falls from his grip … and hits the desk blotter with a muffled thud. He pushes it across to me, smiling. I take another step forward, pick up the gun.

Aim it back at him.

He says, in a low and gravelly voice:

"You look like shit, Joe. Even thinner than the last time I saw ya."

"Thanks," I tell him.

"For Christ's sake, help yourself to a sandwich before you leave."

"Will do. Thanks again."

"Hey … what are friends for?"

And then I shoot him in the head.

• • •

A 9mm is a pussy weapon by some standards, but it does the job, and with very little sound that will carry beyond this room, even after I put a few more in him, just to be on the safe side. Not much blood pumps out, either—it's mostly internal bleeding. He goes still and lies across his desk, lifeless. I try to imagine what his ghost would look like in this room, and I laugh out loud, obviously … because it's all part of something larger than I can comprehend. It's all so much bigger than just *us*. Of course it is.

That's why I have no problem with moments like this.

If you gotta go, you gotta go.

But don't let the monster out. Keep him safe. For when you need him …

—no. NEVER again, you hear me?

NEVER AT ALL.

I unscrew the silencer—the metal is still hot, but I'm wearing my snoop gloves so it's cool—and shove the gun in my right pants pocket. I always wear

baggy pants on the street, because you can hide anything like that. Plain black T-shirt and ratty flannel—nice and homeless and forgettable. No one will ever know I was here. They'll all look the other way and hope I don't beg them for change when they pass by.

Rag dolls like me are the truly *invisible men* of society.

Unless we get caught murdering someone important.

That's why you use a silencer. Which I set on the desk, next to Herb, no fingerprints. I'll take the gun with me, but the silencer will stay on the desk. That's something the cops'll never figure out. Just like they'll never figure out why there's dust all over the floor from several hundred locations in Austin—the traces I'm leaving here from my clothes, which haven't been washed in two months. Toss weird little monkey wrenches like that into their silly investigation and they all turn dumber than a housewife watching *American Idol*. Believe me, I know about these things.

Speaking of cops, nobody will even notice old Herbert is dead for at least 24 hours. The glasspack did its job that well. Four shots without a report carried. Perfect crime, baby.

That means I have plenty of time to make my exit.

Hours, really.

And so I raid the fridge on my way out, just like he told me to.

A dying man's wish ain't nothing to take lightly, after all.

• • •

It turns out to be good food—rich person's food. Haven't eaten this "well" in months. I spend nearly thirty minutes creating a double-decker ham and cheese—Swiss and honey-spiral—with two kinds of gourmet mustard. No mayo, that stuff is gross. But plenty of fresh lettuce and tomato, a thick layer of kosher Vlassic stackers and a few strips of crispy pre-fab soy bacon. I layer it all beautifully, get all the beats in the design right, the colors perfectly alternated, the flavors staggered in nice, neat waves. It's a damn work of art when I'm done. There's a beauty to making the perfect sandwich, but not much to eating it when you're in a hurry. I don't use plates or drink from glasses—nothing that would leave traces of my DNA, even after I washed the dishes. I make the sandwich right off the center marble prep table, still wearing my gloves, and then five big bites go down real fast. My body soaks up the calories like a sponge. And whatever my connection with the endless maelstrom of eternity actually is—

well, I think it's probably screaming that I really oughta eat like this more often. I take a second to listen for it … then the voice is gone. If it really *was* a voice.

Did God just make me a sandwich?

Hah. You asshole …

I find the envelope pinned on the freezer door with a Mickey Mouse Magnet. Lots of stuff up there, actually—the usual fridge door bric-a-brac. Postcards, sticky alphabet letters, the odd recipe card, one of them stained with chili. I hadn't turned on the lights, so none of the stuff really registered at first. I should have noticed the envelope sooner, I guess. But Herb knows I wasn't in this for the money anyway.

The envelope has my real name on it, of course.

Not many people know my name anymore.

Good.

The envelope isn't sealed and inside is the cash, along with a little note in jagged old man's handwriting:

Thanks, old friend.
You've spared me horrors I cannot easily describe.
Do me one last favor on your way out.
Let them know they've been in a fight.

—Herbert

I smile back in his direction.

The smartass bastard always had to have the last word, didn't he?

Let 'em know they've been in a fight.

One of our old jokes, from the Bad Time.

From before the fall.

Well, that's that, I guess. Better boogie on out of here. But first … gotta check the pantries. I need some sugar to get me through the next few days.

Sure enough … behind one of the big doors is a cache of every imaginable processed-food crime you can think of.

Boxes of Fig Newtons.

Oreos.

Twix.

Stacks of Twinkies and Zingers—which are exactly like Twinkies, only better because they have an extra layer of icing on them.

And bags of candy, from all over the world.

Mostly, Herb is—*was*—a fanatic for the truly sinful variety.

And rare stuff, too.

Holy shit, there's actually a case of PBMax in here. It's a peanut butter candy experiment created in the early 90s and laughed off the shelf about six months later. It's kind of like Take Five—you know, that thing they sell now with peanuts and peanut butter and caramel and pretzels and cookies, *five* ingredients, *one* heart attack, get it?—but PBMax is even purer in its atrocities against humanity. One of these two-inch squares contains more than a thousand calories, all of them empty and heavy as hell. It's basically just a thick plug of sugary crunchy peanut butter chocked full of nuts, covered in chocolate and slammed on a thick hunk of cookie. It's such a sin that nobody's even seen a box of these in more than twenty years.

Weird.

Maybe he's had them in the freezer.

Maybe they're bringing PBMax back, and Herb has the inside track from some Midwestern product-testing ground zero.

But whatever.

I'm out of there quick, with a bag of Chips Ahoy under one arm.

CHAPTER TWO

Pam rises from sleep, her Skype buzzing from the laptop. She was passed out on the couch again, her body and mind wrung out from so much nonstop work. She hardly sleeps anymore. Catnaps at odd hours. Like Thomas Edison used to do in his lab, because he knew that not being awake was a waste of time. She always thinks about Edison when she pulls herself out of these little mini-comas of hers. Thinks about how she would love to meet him. Wonders what he was really like. Nobody really knows, she thinks. Because the winners write the history books.

Fuckers.

She shakes it off quickly, rubbing her eyes, sitting up to face the pulsing screen, and the weird musical claxon of her incoming call.

It's her boss, of course.

He wants a progress report, like always.

She clicks the window open and sees his face, smiling. He's polite and benevolent. His voice is always calm and controlled.

She wonders how the hell he does that.

"There are only a few months left before we go into the mountain," he tells her. "New Years Eve 2013 is our final day in this world. You're cutting things awfully close, my dear. I need this project wrapped up soon."

She smiles and tells him not to worry.

Her guys are totally on the case.

The target is as good as theirs.

"Fine, my dear. I leave it in your hands. For now."

She loves the way he calls her *my dear*.

• • •

My bones are young and strong tonight, and my feet tap in time to the rhythm, as the boys jam it out in high style. The music is like some ancient jug band chugging away at the edge of a beggar's reality, infused with the dull bluesy strum of seven acoustic guitars, all of them slightly out of tune, and a drum circle that train wrecks into the melee, bringing some long-lost aboriginal edge to the whole glorious symphony.

I put the harp to my mouth and blow out a lead line that croaks across our slow-burn blues improv like a sad dog begging for treats.

The boys nod and smile their approval.

The sound of our jam rolls out across the 183 overpass at Airport Boulevard, where the ordinary world stops at the red light, just before getting on the freeway, or vanishing into the city. It's like we're the gatekeepers of reality, man. Guys who stand on the outside of humanity and sing the blues, ready to tell your fortune for just fifty cents. Cheap fortunes, after all, are the best. You know you're getting the truth when your soothsayer doesn't have a horse in the race.

The onlookers stand in awe and applaud every solo, like true connoisseurs. Austin is full of music lovers. They used to call this town the live music capital of the world, whatever that means. Whoever *they* are.

The crowd is big tonight—bigger than ever, really. I think there's been some press about the jam lately. I look out at them and see polished faces and perfect hair, fresh clothes washed within a week. I smell perfumes bought in boutique stores and cute little bars of soap, shaped like flowers and placed on frilly lace in pink bathrooms. I sense entire worldviews that could never understand the pure beauty of these moments we make, me and the boys. Our jam is strong and powerful tonight—more powerful than a million words you could ever speak in a true language. There's usually only five or six of us on Sundays. Tonight there's fifteen and a half—including all the drum circle guys.

The *half* is old Bird, of course.

He made the trip special from downtown, even though it's hell and a half getting around in that rusty wheelchair of his. Usually he's parked at his spot on the Row, doing the whole I-Was-a-Veteran-So-Give-Me-Your-Money thing. You know, one of those guys you see when you're walking out of a grocery store or an office building that you *never* wanna engage at close range.

We all do what we do to survive, nobody has to like it.

Bird is the main backbeat, of course—he's a lonely apparition who looks like layers of mud and beard, with eyes that barely see anything as he moves his sticks across a series of cardboard boxes, drumming away. His beat is precise and skilled, not like some of these other drum circle fellas, who hardly know how to play anything. Bird will tell you he was in a country rock band that

almost got famous in the 1970s and that he chucked it all at the starting gate, just before he could sign his life away on the dotted line. He'll tell you he did it and ended up on the street some twenty years later because the world was just too big for him. All he has left from his old life are his drumsticks. He's carried them since 1985.

Like I carry my tools with me still.

Like I carry the monster …

Deep inside and snarling on the surface …

About five of the guitar pickers in tonight's jam are what we call *Intersecters*—professional sign waggers who show up at stoplights and run the whole WILL WORK FOR FOOD scam. Kathie has the most original version of that I've ever seen.

Sweet Kathie.

She lost everything below her right knee in a car accident when she was twelve, and she still looks pretty hot as a twenty-two year old, freckled and sassy and busty—so she wraps up her rack in a sweaty, dirty tank top, ties her red hair back in a greasy checkered bandanna, lets her ass hang out of short shorts that are little more than tattered threads, and holds up a sign that says: ON MY LAST LEG, PLEASE HELP!

And she makes *bank*, man.

Most nights she works the concrete downtown by the Continental Club on Congress, and sometimes she can even afford a room across the street at the Austin Motel. Come to think of it, I know guys who live in actual houses and *pay rent* from the money they make wagging signs at those dummies at the red lights.

But whatever again.

Gotta do what you gotta do.

Gotta keep the monster from killing you, man …

Just concentrate on the jam …

Jimmy and Roy are the main guitar pickers. Me and them, we started this little musical experiment a year ago. There's a lot of talent on the street, and words gets out fast.

Roy is an old man, been out here longer than most people I know.

He's black but you almost can't tell, he's so covered in grime and soot and dust. Can't even figure out what he's wearing under all that. Everybody pretty much looks the same in the gutter anyway. He's angry about it, too. Thinks we live in a police state run by guys who don't care about anything but printing more money and looking good on TV. And I kinda have to agree with him. In fact, I'd go all in and say it's even worse than he thinks. But we all do what we

can to avoid thinking too much about it.

All do what we can to live in denial.

Live with the monster …

Jimmy is a skinny kid who lives mostly on the Row, panhandling all across downtown, making just enough money to sleep on the bus at night. Nobody knows anything else about him because he almost never says a word to anyone. Just plays the hell out of that old beat-up Alvarez classic guitar in his hands. Really *knows* the blues, man, just like Roy does. And he's white, so read what you will into that. I've known a lot of white guys who are just as good at getting the blues as anyone else. I'm not sure if I qualify—you know, in the *classic sense*—but I still blow a mean harp when I have to.

Harp, by the way, is how professionals refer to a harmonica.

Mouth harp, to be more exact. Dunno why we call it that—it sure doesn't sound like something you'd hear past the pearly gates, man. It's more like a dog howling. When you bring it to your mouth, you cup your hands in just such a way so that the high tinny vibrato is muffled and regulated and it drops everything a few octaves. Makes the pitch deep and booming.

At the end of a solo, I take a verse, making up the words as I go.

I'm thinking about old times today, so it comes out kinda cheesy.

Something about being a gunman and an outlaw.

My destination, hell.

The words roll across my lips and I forget them instantly, lost in the racing trance of the music. We've been playing this song for almost an hour.

All our lives, really.

My mind moves back over so many years, and they all ball up and flash-forward, striking into my skull like bullets. I can't ever stop it when this happens. Usually, the music is enough to keep it at bay. But tonight … the music wants me to remember.

They're playing my song, baby.

Our song.

• • •

I see a kid who was a teenage geek in school, back in the late 1980s, when the world was turning the dreamy lie of the love generation and the sequined sneer of the disco age into something even more embarrassing, as our world leaders conspired right out in the open to make everything expensive and

controversial. I see a kid who became a young man in Austin against every obstacle his redneck father threw at him, his mother watching sullenly from the sidelines like a dark ghost without a thing to say.

I see my father.

Dad.

The soldier, the tyrant, the man who tried to break me.

I see a young man who went into the Army just to shut him up.

I see the blues, baby.

Long and hard and painful.

And then …

The story of my life.

Before the fall.

After basic training they haul me into a dark room and give me an IQ test and say I'm a genius, but they don't need geniuses in the Army. They tell me there are two kinds of soldiers, two kinds of *people*, really. Those who serve and those who lead. They tell me freedom must be preserved at all cost. And by all cost, they mean *me*. I won't even remember the faces of those jerks later—the men who come in and out of that room and say those ominous things to me. It's all a blur that turns into another series of tests and orders and then a new base camp full of strange dudes who don't wear military uniforms. They let me know I am a part of something big, how important it all is, but they leave out all the details. I join a squad of other badasses like me, and after that, it's another big blur. Helicopters and heavy noise and guns made from the mightiest technology mankind can provide. My team moves in and out, out and in. We kill people and rescue people and God bless America. I am told to sign papers that swear me to secrecy, but I never know what we are really doing in all these weird foreign lands, filled with the smells of exotic spices and gasoline fumes.

It's the early 1990s when all this happens.

The time when America finally becomes the bad guy.

I work it all hard, without question, and I move forward.

Singing the blues the whole time.

Wanting out almost as fast as they put me in.

I am eighteen years old.

And one night … *one terrible, awful night* … it becomes too much. I watch the face of a child burn in the gasoline. The single most horrifying image I will ever try and fail to forget. It would be easy to lie to myself and say that the violence of it all is what makes my heart hurt so much, but the truth is much more pure and terrible: The burning face reminds me of myself, of the child I terminated so long ago, who scorched under the cruelness of his father. It

reminds me of the cold, unfeeling *thing* I've become. Of the war that still rages, that I will always be part of in some strange way, because freedom must be preserved at all cost.

I am that cost.

I am Casualty Zero, baby.

The people who don't wear military uniforms make not-so-veiled-threats when I return to base and tell them I have to quit. They tell me I can't quit, that I've signed my life away. But then I take a swing at someone important-looking, who may or may not be my superior officer. That does the trick. I am court-marshaled on the spot and given a discharge of the very dishonorable variety—the kind that means I will never be a human being again in the real world, no matter how much I try—but they never really break me. They knew I was a genius when they tested my IQ those many years ago, but they never expected me to be smart enough later to beat their crooked severance package.

I still make it back to Austin, and I still rebuild my life.

It's the late 1990s by now.

And I am too smart to starve.

I call on an old buddy who's gone way up the ladder owes me a favor from our three tours together and I call on him to help me get what I need. I manage to forge a new identity and I start working cases. Privately, of course. My old name goes away forever and ever.

Herbert makes sure of that.

He stands by me and says we can win.

We'll make sure they know they've been in a fight, buddy.

We'll show 'em all.

I work case after case, and the awful horror of the world is thrown into even sharper relief than ever before. I deal with single moms who've murdered their own mothers, rich divorcees who want alibis for sex crimes, multiple homicides and torture gigs, all on the same night. I track down monsters and I send them all to prison forever, where they are killed by other monsters. I see the rawest face of humanity burning in the gasoline, burning hotter than ever, blistering the skin of my soul in waves more profound and terrible than anything I ever could have witnessed during a simple sweep and clear on the front lines of some weird covert operation I hardly knew anything about. I escaped from their living hell, I beat their rigged game … but what did I get for it?

I got this.

The Terrible Lie of Civilized Man.

Somewhere in the horror, I meet you, baby. You are the woman who will become my wife. Your name is Marie. Your face is like freckled china. Your

smile like deep forgiveness. You are the beautiful prize that might've saved me. I rescue you and Amy and Chad from those bad people.

Bad people who never forget.

About anything.

And more than eight years later …

When we least expect it, baby …

Those people come back.

And that's when I meet the monster.

That's when the dark madness takes over.

When everything finally breaks me.

And then …

Fuck the world.

• • •

It's just now turning into midnight when the jam begins to wind down. We've lost more than half our drum circle. The crowd has thinned. The last few diehards are getting tired hands, and our souls are nearly sated. Old Bird is passed out in his wheelchair, blown. Roy and Jimmy are still fingering absent melodies. Kathie smokes a cigarette against one of the concrete support beams, getting hit on by one of the younger guys who was playing a kazoo earlier, during our impromptu version of Crosstown Traffic. She looks bored. He looks eager. A first-year kid. I can see he'll probably not make it long on the street. He'll go back to living in houses or he'll die in a ditch, starved. Kathie will live forever, always on her last leg.

The light from the city is the only thing that illuminates us, and we strum out our last few chords like phantoms half revealed … like ghosts who never really give up, wearing our souls as dust on faded skin.

I look up and I see the woman.

Coming towards us.

Pushing through what's left of the crowd, smiling.

She's not what you would call a raving beauty, but she'll do for now.

A big girl, a determined girl.

Long black hair, up in a bun, pale face set into a lazy chin, copper eyes that catch the dim, ever-changing lights coming from the nearby intersection in weird glowing bursts, like coins appearing and blinking off.

Cat's eyes, baby.

She’s wearing jeans and cowboy boots, a blue-and-pink button-up blouse that hangs off her big frame, giving spare flesh plenty of breathing room. She’s sexy in the way plus-sized schoolteachers were sexy when you were twelve and just figuring out what sex was. She has that sass, too. Never says a word. Just walks up and watches the jam wind down. Throws a few bucks into Jimmy’s open guitar case and looks me over. Makes eye contact with me a lot.

Oh boy.

I can see where this is going.

We end the last song and she claps politely, along with the ten others left watching.

We all take bows.

All except Bird, of course.

The big lady doesn’t leave, even when we announce that the jam is officially over and the remnants of the peanut gallery wander off. My guys get in a huddle as we divide the coins and bills from the guitar case—almost a hundred bucks tonight, and it’s understood that weekend warriors don’t get much. Just bus fare. You only collect a full share if you’ve been in the jam for at least one month and you keep coming back. First rule of Fight Club and all that. The only lifers tonight are me and Jimmy and Roy and Bird, so we do pretty well. Almost twenty bucks each.

A king’s goddamn ransom, baby.

That’s what Roy says anyway.

Then he slings his guitar on his back and wanders back into the city by way of Airport Boulevard, looking like a real Samurai Elvis. Only, you know, black.

Jimmy goes the other way, headed for the bus stop near the IHOP a few blocks away, his guitar cased and riding at his side like a dusty weapon.

Only, you know, not.

Bird just decomposes in his wheelchair, still passed out among cardboard boxes. I stuff his cash and coins in one of his greasy shirt pockets—it’s like burying treasure in mud. I decide to leave him there. Start walking back toward my shopping cart.

• • •

“Your friend looks bad,” the voice says, and I can tell it’s the big lady, her boots scrunching behind me in the gravel. “Aren’t you gonna wheel him out of here or whatever?”

I almost laugh. “What do you care?”

“Just seemed weird to me.” She sounds like she’s from New York or Baltimore, not a trace of a Texan accent. I don’t have one of those accents, either. It’s something I’ve always been proud of. I’ve never wanted to be like anyone in my family.

I keep on talking as I walk, throwing the words back over my shoulder. “So you think it’s weird that Bird is asleep or that I’m leaving him there?”

“That’s his name? Bird?”

“Yep.”

“He looks bad.”

“I’m not his mom. He’s a big boy. Anyway, he’ll be fine once he rests up.”

“He’s passed out, though. Someone could rob him, couldn’t they?”

“What do you want me to do, offer him a ride home?”

“Couldn’t you?”

“Don’t think I have enough room in my shopping cart, lady.”

“Aren’t you street jam guys supposed to look out for each other?”

“What’s someone like you know about street jam?”

“I know you guys do it every Sunday. I’ve talked to a lot of people who come here and watch. And I read that article in the *Austin Chronicle*. Seemed to me like you guys were sort of … I dunno, *tight* with each other?”

That makes me stop for a second, then turn on one heel with a scrunched up expression on my dirty face. “*Tight*?”

“You know, close. Like a family.”

“Ain’t no family. Just some guys who like to play, that’s all. Now if you’ll excuse me …”

I turn back to leave her there.

She freezes me again with:

“What’s your hurry, Joe Casey?”

• • •

Shit.

How the hell does she …

“You know I was lucky to find you here, Joe. Pretty amazed, too. You didn’t leave that many traces when you vanished. A professional always covers his tracks, after all. When a man wants to disappear forever, though, he should be a little more careful about the press. That article in the Chronicle had pictures, you

know.”

I just stand there with my back to her.

Fuming.

Dammit … the Austin goddamn Chronicle.

“So did they tell you about the pictures they took, Joe? Probably not, huh? The shots looked pretty candid. I was barely able to pick you out of the lineup, really. Thought it was a complete long shot, coming here like this. But it’s you alright. And I’m damn impressed.”

“By what?”

“You blow a mean harmonica.”

“Thanks.”

Keep your back to her, man.

Don’t engage.

This ain’t good.

“We need to talk, Joe. Let me buy you some pancakes.”

I turn my head slightly to see she’s jerking her thumb toward the IHOP just up the freeway. Shake my head at her. “Sorry. That’s a little too public. I haven’t had a shower in five or six days.”

“I’d buy that. Your flannel shirt looks like it could come to life and walk around like a zombie.”

“They wouldn’t let me in the front door of an IHOP.”

“They’ll let you in with me.”

“No thanks. I don’t like pancakes.”

She sighs, finally fed up.

Here it comes, man …

“We can do this simple or complicated, Joe. Simple is where we drink coffee and we talk like human beings with a mutual interest. Complicated is where I arrest you.”

She shows me a badge from her hip pocket. One of those laminates attached to a chain. Total pro. She was keeping her hole card handy for the big reveal.

God. Damn. *It.*

She hangs the chain around her neck and I see her silver star shining bright.

It goes real well with her cowboy boots.

“You’re going to arrest me? Why? For singing under a freeway?”

“For murder, Joe.”

“Everyone I ever killed was government-sponsored, lady. And it’s all ancient history. I was out years ago.”

“And what about two weeks ago? A guy named Herb Brentwood in Hyde Park? Shot dead at point blank range in his own study? Ring any bells?”

“No.”

“You’re a liar.”

“So arrest me. I won’t give you any trouble.”

“I don’t want to arrest you. I just want to ask you about it.”

“I didn’t do anything. I haven’t done anything since I left the Army.”

“That’s a lie, too. After your time as a soldier, you were the one of the best private investigators in Texas. That was a matter of public record. Your name was Trip Cooper then.”

Damn again.

She’s really good to know all that.

I decide to play it cool.

“Trip Cooper, huh? Where do you get all your information, lady?”

“None of your business. But your name *was* Trip. I know it for a fact.”

“Maybe that’s true. *Maybe*. But would you like to know what my name is now?”

“Can’t imagine.”

“My name is *mud*. I’m a goddamn bum, lady.”

She almost laughs.

Then draws another deep sigh, and:

“Look, Joe … it’s fine if you lie to me. I understand. I’m a cop and you’re a killer. That’s the way it usually works. But I know you knew Herb. I know you two were old friends. I know that he hired you to kill him. I just can’t figure out why. So we can talk like civilized people … or we can be official.”

She goes into her other pocket and brings out the handcuffs.

Smiles big.

“Either way, you get a free breakfast, Joe.”

CHAPTER THREE

I haven't been inside a place like this in years. IHOP is one of the reasons I turned my back on polite and decent society. And all the other reasons, of course. It's a multiple-choice question, really—pick an answer. Most of them fit.

We sit by the main window looking out at the parking lot where I stashed my shopping cart, so I can keep an eye on it. She walked with me the whole two blocks, making small talk about what it's like to be the way I am—you know, asking all those dumb questions you oughta be able to figure out yourself. When we passed Jimmy at the bus stop, she gave him a dollar and said he killed it tonight. He's still out there waiting, with the bill in his hand, guitar at his side.

She won't stop making all that annoying small talk. Been doing it since we sat down and she ordered half the breakfast menu. Asking me why. Asking me what the daily routine of a bum is. Like she doesn't deal with the homeless every day in her line of work.

My coffee steams in front of me, a never-ending cup, and I sip slowly, listening to her and tuning most of it out. There are five other people in the joint —an elderly black couple in opera clothes, two kids in ratty rock-and-roll garb, and a young neo-hippie woman with her head wrapped in a tie-dyed scarf reading a book, her food untouched. I can't help but keep one eye on those guys while the lady across from me makes all that pretend-friendly noise.

I was trained to do that. To keep one eye on everything.

Memorizing all the details.

Finally, she asks a question that almost makes sense:

"So … where did you learn to play the mouth harp like that?"

"You didn't call it a harmonica. I'm impressed."

"I'm an impressive chick. So …?"

"Learned in the Army. During basic training. It was on a base near Louisiana, and there were lots of crazy young dudes signed up. Most of 'em

washed out before we were three weeks in … but the hardasses who hung in there, they knew the blues."

"They taught you how to play?"

"No one can *teach you* how to play. You gotta have it in you all along. There used to be this New Orleans bar called Blue Tuesday. One of the guys took me there, right down in the French quarter. Name was Randy. He was seventeen, but he was going on forty. Got up on stage with all these old cranky black cats and just *blew it out*, man. I'd never seen anything like that. I was just eighteen myself. Anyway … that's where it started."

"And it ended on the street."

"You can't save the world forever."

"Fair enough. But most of us don't give up such a promising career to eat garbage."

"What do you know about all that?"

"Come, on, Joe. Are you really asking me that? You were a legend as a PI. There are files six feet deep on you. You made friends and enemies all over Texas, cracked cases nobody else ever came close to solving. You sent away some of the scariest deep south players I've ever seen. Real monsters."

"If you say so."

"All one has to do is look."

"So you looked. So what? That's just my PI record. Nobody ever knows why anybody eventually goes crazy, even when you come back from shitholes like Afghanistan."

"You went to a lot more places than that."

"If you say so."

"But you're right … none of those files had anything in there about Blue Tuesday. About the man behind the mayhem. I guess it can get pretty hairy."

"Look, lady … you accused me of murder twenty minutes ago. You said you were going to arrest me. And now you wanna talk about playing the harmonica? You'll forgive me if I also point out the very obvious and say this whole thing is bullshit. What do you want from me?"

She leans back and smiles at me.

"You do indignant very well, Joe."

"Ummm … thanks?"

"No, I mean it. I can tell you've been around the block. I respect that. More than you know, probably."

"So just start talking straight with me."

"This doesn't have to be so bad, Joe. We should be friends. A guy like you needs friends."

“Not anymore.”

“So those bums in the street jam and everyone else you come across, those are all just faces? You gave up attachments?”

She makes a mock-scary face when she says that.

Like, *Whatever, man*.

“You’ve heard this song before, lady.”

“Many, many times.”

“So why keep asking me stupid questions about it? Why pretend you wanna be my friend, when we have nothing in common?”

“We do have something in common.”

“Do you think that because I used to carry a license to bust bad guys? Because there’s some paper somewhere that says my name was Trip Cooper and I was a terror to the underworld? You ain’t got no idea who I really am, lady. *Not one damn idea*.”

“Okay, okay, so I don’t know anything. I’m just a bitchy cop with an eating disorder. And you’re a man I’ll never know. Happy now?”

“No. Not at all. I don’t want to be here with you. This place smells like lies.”

“That’s coffee.”

“My point exactly.”

“Funny.”

“Just get to the goddamn point already.”

“I told you already. I want information. I want to know why you killed Herb. What your *own reasons* were, I mean.”

“I never killed anybody by that name. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, now *that’s* bullshit, Mister Casey. I *know* you killed Herb. *Know it*. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t positive of that. I can even tie you to the crime scene if I want to. Make it stick, really goddamn officially.”

She gives me that smile again.

Twists it evilly.

“See, Joe … *I* do indignant really well, too. But I don’t want to do that. I’m not here to arrest you. I’m not even here to get a confession out of you. I need your help.”

“If you’re not going to arrest me, I’d like to leave now.”

“And miss out on the blueberry pancakes? Come on, Joe, stay awhile.”

She does the grin again, and it makes her fat face look smug and unattractive.

It means, *Sit right there or I bust you for vagrancy, then burn you at the stake for first-degree murder*.

Shit.

"Joe … no matter how much crap you throw my way, there's no way you'll ever convince me that you didn't murder Herbert. I know he had terminal cancer. I know he wanted to die. I know he paid you to come in his house and kill him. I know all that because he told me everything before he died. He told me all about you, too. How you were the invisible man on the street. How you could sneak up right behind a bad guy and gut him before he even knew what was happening. I mean that metaphorically, of course. He said you were the ultimate state-of-the-art, private dick, badass."

Yeah, he did.

It was his favorite thing to call me, when I was still on the gig.

Cases on top of cases.

Until the fall.

Don't tell her any of that.

This woman could be anyone.

"Herbert was a good man," the big lady says. "He was an honest man. You knew that about him. You two were very close. He was really philosophical about all the men he killed when he was still in the Special Forces. But he kept no secrets from me. Or anyone else he loved."

Oh no.

She can't be …

"Yeah, Joe. He was my dad."

• • •

The wave of it washes over me fast and I almost drown for a second. Moments like this are worth a thousand murders. Killing is easy, after all. Living is harder.

Don't tell her shit.

Keep your mouth shut, boy.

"I was a teenager when he went away to work for the Army," she says. "Then he got promoted and it all got crazier. He'd come back with all those wild stories about running the black ops for the FBI and CIA. Crashing third-world shitholes. Toppling regimes. He told me all kinds of tales, and I was never even sure how many of them were real. It was all so over the top. They order all those agents never to talk about what they do to anyone. He used to laugh about that. Never had a problem spilling everything. I think he needed that. Someone to

confess to. Did he ever tell you about me?"

He said he had a daughter. Said her name was Barbara. Never talked about her much. I never knew anything except how old she was.

Don't tell her shit.

You've already said too much.

"I can see your gears working, Joe. Talk to me."

No.

This is bad news.

"Joe … do you think I'm lying to you about who I am?"

No.

I can see Herbert in her face now, even with the fat.

It's her.

It's Barb.

But still.

"You could be anyone," I tell her. "That badge of yours might not even be real. And you aren't wearing a gun, either."

"Thought I'd keep things casual this morning."

"How were you planning on arresting me without a gun?"

"I have officers standing by. All I have to do is hit the SEND button on my cell. Right after I kick your ass, of course."

I have to smile at that.

Yeah, she could probably work me over real good—and then some.

"If you want hard proof, Joe, I can give you that. I'll give you details of any operation you ever did with Herb. He told me everything that went on in those wars. And I have a photographic memory. I *see* words."

"So do I."

"So ask me anything and I'll tell you everything."

I just look at her.

Unbelieving.

"Okay, Joe. Let me tell you why you left Special Forces. Not the reasons that are on the books. The real reason."

Christ.

She can't know.

She just can't …

"I'm talking about the child in the apartment building. The little boy. He couldn't have been more than eight years old. Dad told me all about how those guys burned the joint. They thought they got everyone out. It was an honest mistake. You went in and tried to save the boy and the roof collapsed. You walked out without a scratch. A miracle really. That's what Dad told me. But the

boy died screaming in the fire."

And I cried in Herbert's arms that night.

While the Zippo Squad torched the rest of the city.

It was the worst moment of my whole life, up until then.

The most terrible secret I'd ever kept, before the fall.

And Herbert told her everything.

All I can say is:

"I guess something like that could really fuck up your weekend."

• • •

"My father loved you, Joe."

"If you say so."

"Come on … you're still gonna stonewall me? Even after I've proven to you who I am? Even though I can tell you know anyway, just by looking at my face?"

"Even if any of those things were true, I'd never admit it to you. I'm not a fool. Anything I said to you in this room would be admissible as evidence."

"I told you. I'm not going to arrest you."

"I don't believe you."

"Fine, don't believe me. So we'll just sit here until you do."

The first round of food shows up just then. I saw the waitress coming ten seconds ago, with her armload of pancakes. She spreads them on the table, and the big lady gets to work. Piles on the butter and pours the syrup. Digs right in.

"Yummy," she says. "Blueberry is my favorite. You should have some, Joe."

"I told you I don't like pancakes."

I look at the buttermilk stack in front of me.

Realize how damn hungry I am, but I don't touch the food.

Really hate pancakes.

They remind me of being normal.

"I got my taste for sweets from dad," she says. "You probably know that. He was never happy unless he had a chocolate bar in his hand. I don't mind being fat, either. It's comfortable. And I still get laid a lot."

I bet she does.

Attitude, baby.

And big boobs.

"I went in the police academy just six years ago," she says. "I used all those

things my father taught me and made it stick. You were already a bum on the street when I did that. He probably never told you about my training. Before the Academy, I was going to be a journalist. But dad said I had too much bloodlust."

"That's a laugh. All journalists have bloodlust."

"Not like mine."

"If you say so."

"My father was still pretty young when the cancer got him. Just eight years older than you. He got sick last year and it turned him into an old man fast. He could barely get out of bed by the end, but he did it. Would sit in his study and write his letters to me. Dad never used email, you know. Said *paper* was the last truly secret method of sharing between humans. He said when the shit finally came down, all our newfangled technology would count for nothing—that we'd be writing notes to each other in the sand. I could have burned all those letters and there would never be a single word to incriminate you, Joe. But I didn't, and so here we are."

I smile at her.

Just a second.

"You don't call your father 'daddy.' I like that."

"Daddy is for fairies, Joe."

That's one of Herb's old lines.

Used to say it all the time.

Never let your kids call you 'daddy.' They'll grow up to be pussies.

She can tell I completely believe her now.

But I keep my mouth shut.

And, yeah, she totally notices.

"You're a cool one," she says. "Exactly like Herb always said. He showed me pictures of you when I was younger, and I thought you were pretty cool then, too. A really handsome guy. You kind of looked Italian. You've lost a lot of that now, but maybe it's just all the dirt on your face."

"Thanks."

"I'd still recognize you anywhere."

"If you say so."

"Dad said it amazed him that you ever went on the street. Became a bum. He told me that it broke his heart to see what happened to you in the end. How you gave up on everything. Said it was almost impossible to find you. But then he ran the ad and you responded."

Yeah.

My last tie with the feds.

You learn it when they turn you loose—about checking your hometown

paper for cyphers in the classifieds, once a year on a specific date. You have to do that in case they get in trouble or you have to go back in for some reason. When you pact with the FBI, they have you pretty much for life. Even if your own life eventually turns to dogshit and you give up on connections. Give up on everything.

I checked the classifieds in the Chronicle on August 12, 2013.

Almost exactly ten years after I went on the street in 2003.

And sure enough, there was Herb's message.

Later, I talked to him from a payphone on the Row.

Three weeks after that I visited his house at just past midnight and walked out with a bag of cookies, a wad of fifty grand, and a Ruger 9mil handgun. I ate the cookies, then threw the money and the gun into the river the next day.

And she knows I was there.

He gave her all the gory details.

Godammit, Herb.

"At first, he wanted *me* to kill him," she says. "That was weird. Your own dad asking you to put two in the back of his head, to end the suffering. I said I would never do that. I also said I would never go after the man he eventually hired to do it. I said that because I loved my father and thought he shouldn't suffer. Some people just don't have it in themselves to pull the trigger on their own, you know?"

I know.

None of us ever did.

"And that would have been that, Joe. I would have let it all go, unsolved. But there are other factors here. Something much bigger. I discovered it when I was going through my father's papers, after you killed him. In his last few letters to me, he started … *implying* things. Something he was a part of. And ashamed of. I couldn't figure out what any of it was at first. Then I did some digging and came up with … something really strange."

I narrow my eyes at her, as her thought trails off and almost dies on her lips.

I see two men enter the IHOP, just over her shoulder.

Men wearing long black coats.

She leans in close, almost whispering.

"Have you ever heard of a man named …"

The men bring shotguns out from their coats.

"*… Pilcher …*"

And, right then, the world gets blown straight to hell.

CHAPTER FOUR

You know that sound a shotgun always makes in the movies, right when a bad guy chambers the first round? That brassy metal-on-metal CHUNK that does its deep bass thunderboom in the bowels of the surround sound system, scaring the hell out of whoever is in the scene, just before the first shot goes off?

Let me tell you something about that scary sound, man.

It's *terrifying* in real life.

So when it happens in a public place, what you hear next is never the first shot.

You hear screaming.

Lots of it.

Always a woman, because men usually never scream in situations like this—they just choke it back like idiots and sit there in shock, their hands clutching coffee cups and forks, their pancakes half-eaten, while their women freak out because a big shotgun is about to cut them in half. This happens because a woman just knows *instinctively* when to scream for help. It's in their DNA, part of their maternal programming. And they really hit that upper register when they do it, too—that's also something most men don't have in them.

It's why they call ladies in horror movies *scream queens*.

The black woman in opera clothes is the first to cut loose as the shotgun racks. Her husband is next to her, frozen. And then the single lady with the paisley head scarf and the book starts screaming. The whole place gets really noisy, really fast. And then the gunman on the left opens up on the closet target.

Which is not a screamer at all, ironically.

It's the waitress, frozen next to the order counter, her arms full of plates—the rest of Big Barbara's breakfast order.

There is an explosion like the wrath of God, as the plates shatter and food explodes and blueberry compote smears with blood. Another boom and the

waitress explodes like a porcelain marionette. I see it happen almost in slow motion. I think I manage to scream something myself at this moment. I think I actually scream “GET DOWN!” as loud as I possibly can. And in the same moment, the other shotgun man CHUNKS his first round and blows away the girl with the book. What’s left of her paisley-scarfed head cracks against the window next to her booth.

This all happens in two seconds.

The three shots are so loud that they sound like one continuous lighting strike.

My ears shoot through with a terrible ice pick of tinnitus, pounded hard.

Barbara is spinning fast, stunned, not screaming.

Wishing she was armed.

The black couple in opera clothes try to throw themselves on the ground but get shredded in a terrible blast, the two gunmen moving forward like sentinels, blowing away everything in their line of sight. Like robots. Soldiers. I think it takes three more shots to turn the couple into hamburger, but I can’t tell now, because my training kicks in, and I’m pulling Barbara to the floor with me, and there’s a shattering of glass and more screaming and more thunder and what the hell is happening *shit shit DAMN* …

The fists of God slam down hard.

Black angels with shotguns telling the word.

I manage to yank the big lady under the table and I’m barely able to hold onto her as she struggles, yelling something at me …

And the two dark angels advance silently.

Zeroing in on their next target.

Which is us.

I see them march forward, black boots stomping through blood and shattered glass—bits of the restaurant they just destroyed cracking and crunching beneath them. The angel on the right has long crazy hair and a black beatnik cap and dark aviator shades. He’s chewing a toothpick. No expression on his face.

The angel to his left has smooth skin and glass eyes.

His mouth open to reveal that he has almost no teeth at all.

Bloody and awful in there, like what’s left of his soul.

Toothless draws a bead on me, lining up my eyeballs in his sights—but it doesn’t matter how accurate his shot is. They’re using the kind of ammunition that shreds the area. They’ve just proven that. The whole place is blown to hell.

And so are we.

In just two more seconds.

But one of the gunmen turns away when another scream pierces the air.

The two rock and roller kids, army-crawling along the floor.

Toothless and Shades spin with their shotguns, and an explosion bigger than all the rest cuts through my head, shattering the world in a giant megaphone kill-blast that cancels out everything else. The men are so close now, and the sound is so goddamn huge, that I imagine this is what it must be to hear the hellacious boom-crack of a universe being created—Another Big Goddamn Bang, baby, right in your face.

I look up and see that they are wearing earplugs.

Of course they are.

Just like I used to, when the gun was in my hand.

They get off one shot in the direction of the rock and roll kids before Barbara decides she has to do something and springs up in a half crouch, going for the nearest gunman's legs, which are just ten feet away from us now. I try to stop her—try to yell at her we can't do a thing about this, that some Big Bangs are inevitable, just lay down and die, lady—but she won't have that.

Not at all.

She tackles Toothless at the legs and his next shot hits the ceiling as he falls backwards and hits the floor. There's another big explosion. A lamp fixture disengages and crashes down on Shades, knocking him down in a big-time explosion of glass and chunks of plaster. The sound of the shotgun reverbs in my head one more time, making me more deaf …

Taking me back …

The explosion happens without warning, just as I enter the room.

I see the men with guns a second too late …

No.

Snap out of it, man. Stay in the here and now. The big girl just did the impossible. Help her. This is *Herbert's daughter*, you dumb shit …

Like my daughter, all those years ago …

They come in hard, blasting again and missing me again …

I can tell by the third shot that they are just shooting up my house to scare me—you know, shock and awe and all that shit …

SNAP OUT OF IT!

But I freeze, right there on the floor, deaf and dumb.

I look up to see Barbara struggling with Toothless, trying to get his gun away from him. Shades is stirring under the mess of twisted stucco and broken glass that fell on him. The two rock and roll kids are running for the door, the girl screaming all the way. She's a real scream queen, that one. I can't hear her. I can't hear anything.

The memories …

Crashing in, like the shotgun blasts …

They turn me over and spit in my face.

Tell me my wife and children are going to die tonight.

And I am going to watch …

The big woman almost has the gun wrenched away from Toothless when he manages to pump it again and the blast goes off just two feet from her eyes. She screams and staggers backwards, clutching her face, the powder burn blinding her, the pellets from the scatter load scraping across her skin like claws, the punishing thunder shattering her right eardrum like a fragile drum skin. And then the gun is swinging around in her direction again, the asshole struggling halfway to his feet. I jump for her, just as the next big shot goes off, and she takes it in the upper right shoulder. A bomb full of dark red stuff goes off. She stumbles back and cleans off a table, bringing the whole thing down in a rain of knives and forks and bottles of syrup.

In one long frozen moment, I see her blood splashed there, too, and I'm reminded in a very unfunny way that pancake syrup is what they use for blood in the movies.

Just like shotgun blasts never blind you or make you deaf in the movies.

Just like the lie that everything will work out.

A Hollywood ending.

Right in your face.

She goes stiff as she crumbles to the floor, almost dead. I throw myself right between her and Toothless. I look up into the smoking barrel of his shotgun. That long dark tunnel to nowhere … or *somewhere*.

He pumps the action.

And pulls the trigger.

Nothing happens.

I don't even hear the empty click because I'm deaf, my ears buzzing.

His face never changes. I see *something else* standing before me. Something I've never seen before. His soul gone, blasted away by deeper purpose—something so pure and terrible in its blind loyalty. Something like …

They drag me into the next room.

Marie is waiting for me.

So is her daughter—my daughter.

Amy.

I'm springing to my feet blindly, still caught in the past, as he turns the shotgun around and swings at me in a short arc with the stock, catching me right in the side of my head. I am cracked backwards, hitting the floor again. I barely see Shades getting up from under the smashed lighting fixture, charging out after

the rock and roll kids.

I try to get up and save them, too.

But then Toothless clobbers me one more time.

And all the lights go out.

• • •

Her grace …

Her smile …

NO, GOD, PLEASE, DON'T HURT HER …

• • •

… I come to in a rush of sound and pain. I get hit by the ten-ton wave of it, like the blowback on a supersonic jet fighter. It rips me from the black and pulls me into the room, and I'm still hearing your voice, baby … *I'm still seeing your smile …*

… no …

… come out of it …

… yes. Now.

The big lady is near me, lying in her own blood against the overturned table, like a big broken puppet. She isn't moving. Her shoulder is a mess and her face is clawed and bloody, one eye filled with deep red. My head is gushing blood. There is no screaming. I hear shotgun pops in the parking lot—far away now, like fireworks. I realize there's only been a few seconds lost on the clock, but in those few seconds, the bad guys slipped us. Toothless and Shades.

Left us here.

Left us for dead.

And Barbara is *very much* dead, it looks like. Motionless. Bloody. Half her right shoulder torn away, gushing. Her eyes straight ahead.

Barbara.

Herb's daughter.

I take a quick look around, and my head still won't get in the game. Still spiraling back over those old memories. Always happens when I'm this near the shit. That's why I had to leave forever, baby. You know that. Know that's how I honored you. How I died without really dying.

Because I knew there was a reason I was left alive …

Snap out of it.

Get out there and chase after those guys.

Find out who they are.

GET OUT THERE …

I move for the door, but something is suddenly grabbing me.

Fingers closing on my grimy flannel shirt sleeve.

"Don't leave me … *please* …"

The big girl. She's not dead yet. I look back and see that she's staring up at me with one good eye. Begging.

"Please … stay with me …"

I look back at the open door of the restaurant.

Look back at her.

Of course, Barbara.

Of course I'll stay with you.

• • •

She hardly moves, even when I get closer to her. The wounds are awful. Her shoulder and her face. She'll be going any second now, if her backup doesn't get here soon. I don't even see that her hand is digging in her right pants pocket for the cell, except when she brings it out painfully, offering the thing like a pathetic gift.

"The number's programmed … just hit the … SEND button …"

Her voice is distant. Drugged. Almost gone. I think I tell her something stupid like, *Hang in there*. I don't even know what I really say, but it's dumb like that. She stares up at me, the phone still in her hand.

"Make the call now, Joe … I don't have long …"

I want to ask her what just happened.

I want to know who those two guys were.

I can tell she has no idea.

I take the phone. It's a tiny, antiquated thing with a flip-up screen. I hit the red button marked SEND. Nobody answers. Goes straight to a cop-shop voice mail. It won't matter—cavalry's on the way. I hope.

Her next words tear through her throat. She hardly gets them to come out:

"Joe … I'm really his daughter, you know …"

I tell her I know she is.

"… and I know … you really killed him …"

I tell her of course I did.

"… find out why … Joe … please … for Herbert …"

But who are these people?

How much did you know, lady?

Why were they following you?

I think I ask all these questions, but she doesn't answer them. I hold her hand as she shivers, wanting her dad to be here, at the moment of her death. Wanting so many things she probably never had when she was still alive. After a long, long moment, I hear sirens start to close on the block. I tell her to hang in there again. She's almost dead. She'll die in just a few seconds.

And I hear her father's voice:

Find Pilcher, Joe.

Whoever the hell that is.

Find the people who did this.

Let them know they've been in a fight.

They come in hard, blasting again and missing him again …

He can tell by the third shot that they are just shooting up his house to scare him—you know, shock and awe and all that shit. But they're using lead plugs, not scattershell, and the big shot misses him, slamming into the wall just feet away like a roll of quarters fired from a cannon. It jars his senses and sends him to the floor.

One of them jams a knee into his back and cuffs his hands.

Turns him over and spits in his face.

Tells him his wife and child are going to die tonight.

And he is going to watch.

He knows better than to beg them for anything. These are hard men, haunted men. Men who kill for fun, just to silence the voices.

Men he sent away to prison for life.

He feels the first twitch of the fear in this moment—that terrible, unformed frenzy that has always wanted to break loose, that wanted to kill his father and rescue his mother. The beast that saw so many faces burn in the gasoline.

He feels it twitch inside him as he remembers Marie's face.

He pictures her in the place of all those children who burned.

He pictures her death, even as he flashes on their life.

He sees it all, like frozen frames in an antique zoetrope picture show, all frayed at the edges in faded sepia. Her loving grace. Her unwillingness to believe there was anything but goodness living in her man—the man who saved her daughter and son and created a new life for them. He hears her creamy voice in his ear.

Smells her pretty skin, clean and good.

Like bars of soap shaped like flowers on a frilly bathmat.

Her grace …

Her smile …

NO, GOD, PLEASE, DON'T HURT HER …

They drag him into the next room.

Marie is waiting for him.

So is her daughter—his daughter.

And their son, too. Chad.

They are together.

He wishes in this moment that they were not.

PART TWO

Miss Prescott

CHAPTER FIVE

Pam watches her screen like grim death.

Waits for the news.

It can't be good.

The police scanners in Austin are lighting up like pinball machines, and there's a lot of squawkback about some big shooting on the north side of town. The address they keep yelling about matches up with an IHOP on 183.

Goddammit.

If you assholes shot up a public place, you're both dead.

If you're not dead already.

Goddamn motorheads.

She reaches for her smokes before she remembers she's trying to quit. Realizes she *has* to quit. Some people actually have a choice. She doesn't.

Still, she lights one up.

Camel Blues.

Her favorite.

Even when she was still like Joe.

She'll be pushing her habit right down to the finish line, probably.

Just like all her fun little habits.

She hits his file one more time, sorts through a few highlights that were deemed important at the last meeting. It says that he's a combat shocker—that it should have been damn easy to take him. She knows the type. Has seen many of them in the last seven years. But sometimes the shockers pull weird shit. Sometimes they're just full of surprises. She flips to his pictures again, sorts through them. Finds the handsome photo, when he was still in the service. It doesn't quite match up with the shot from the Chronicle article, but then again, who ever looks like their old photos?

She sure as hell doesn't look like hers.

She feels older than she is—just twenty-one this year.

But she also feels alive.

She lets the smoke burn down to her knuckle and thinks of being older.

Just for a second.

Then goes back to staring at her screen.

You motorhead motherfuckers.

• • •

The break is just a second and a half of dark.

It happens in a weird slide, someone snipping the film loop of consciousness, and then all the lights in the world smear away to nothing. I feel the rough jolt of it down under, like a man falling into a shallow well. Then I hit the water and the cold, ice-hard sting slaps me in the face … *the shock pulling me back quickly* …

And I'm staring into the sun.

Hot. Burning.

My eyes …

I reach up with one palm out to block the light, squinting, and realize I am suddenly almost naked, except for something that seems like a thin layer of tissue paper covering my chest. A plastic band on my wrist. My arms exposed, holding back the terrible burn of the sun …

No, not the sun.

I risk another peek, and, sure enough, it's just a bright light. Fluorescent light. A disc hanging on the ceiling. Softness under my head and shoulders. Something is stuck in my arm and running to a tube.

I'm in a hospital bed, man.

And my head hurts like a son of a bitch.

I lay there a few minutes … or is it a few hours … and I try to take stock of what just happened to me. I was in the IHOP and Big Barbara was dying in my arms, just like back in the old days. So many guys died in my arms then. I died a lot, too. But what happened to the big lady was *at home*. Somebody brought the war right to my door. Which is scary as hell, because I don't have a door anymore. I was sitting in a goddamn pancake restaurant and two guys walked in and …

… *damn, my head hurts*.

Stinging. Burning.

Some sort of welling ache that lives in my upper temple.

Somebody get this goddamn light outta my eyes.

I keep one hand up, blocking the brightness, while I check for damage with my other hand, remembering what put me here. The guy got me good. At least twice with the butt of his badass pump shotgun—looked like a Mossberg 500. Could have killed me. Probably assumed he did kill me. I was probably dead on the floor with my brains bashed all over when the cops finally showed.

The way my head hurts right now, that wouldn't be too far off.

My fingers explore, and I find rough terrain.

Feels like there could be twenty or thirty stitches, right alongside my right eye, cutting across my forehead.

No bandage. Weird.

How long have I been here?

Could have been weeks, I guess.

Felt like one damn second.

Shit.

My eyes finally adjusting, I sit up and look around. I'm in some kind of communal ward, sealed off into my own partition behind a pink curtain. A couple of machines next to me, one of them wired to a pulse meter attached to my right middle finger. The tube in my arm runs to an IV drip, but the bag looks empty. What were they pumping me full of? Probably antibiotics. Something like that. After all, someone just stuffed my brains back in my head and sewed me shut …

I try to sit up.

It almost works.

The pain is only a little bit less than excruciating, but it's all in my head. Nobody shot me while I was out. What about the big lady? Barbara? Did she make it?

Herb …

That was really your daughter. She met me down in the most empty place on earth and we went to war together. And I blew it. I didn't protect her.

I owed you big time, Herb, and I failed.

I touch the rough stitches on my face again. Hideous. But I haven't been much for being pretty in the past ten years. I just need to be able to walk out of here. I just need to … *just need to* …

… *oh, man* …

The blackness seeps in again, the same oozing slide as before …

And suddenly I'm on my feet, with one hand on the curtain.

And someone is yelling at me.

And I black out again …

• • •

“Take it easy, mister. You had a rough time.”

It’s a woman’s voice, and I’m back in the bed.

That was really weird.

I’ve never blacked out like this, much less twice in one day. The light tries to blind me again and I throw up my arm again.

“Too bright …”

“Okay. How’s this?”

I hear a click, like someone’s fingers snapping, and the fluorescent disc blinks away, leaving me in half-darkness. It’s a huge relief.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her voice is gentle and smooth and young, and suddenly I see her there, next to me, her finger still on the light switch just above my head. Then the smell of her cheap perfume comes in. Makes her seem honest and quaint. She also seems quite beautiful, but I can’t be sure of anything right now. She smiles at me and replaces the empty plastic bag on the IV drip with a new one.

Before I even realize it, my hand is reaching for her:

“What’s that? What are you giving me?”

She smiles sweetly. “Motrin. For your pain. You were delirious just then, moaning that your head hurt really bad. You almost passed out on your feet.”

“I was on my feet?”

“You got out of bed and pulled out your IV. We frown on that sort of thing around here.” She smiles when she says it and gives me a mock scolding look, like a schoolteacher getting cute with a bad boy she really likes.

“I hardly remember that.”

“I don’t doubt it, mister. You had a close call. When they brought you in, I wasn’t sure you’d make it.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Somebody hit you really hard.”

“Yeah, I was there when it happened.”

“You’ll have dizzy spells for a bit. You’ll black out from time to time. But you’re no longer in critical condition. You’ll stabilize just fine.”

“How … how long … have I been here?”

“A while.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Several days.”

“Jesus.”

“Getting whacked on the head with a heavy object ain’t like the movies, mister. It can kill you if it’s done right.”

“Yeah, I know …”

“Have you been clubbed like that before?”

“No, but …”

“But you’re a tough guy? You’ve been in scrapes?”

“I’m a veteran.”

“Recently?”

“No … ancient history.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. But you looked like hell when they brought you in. Your clothes, I mean. You didn’t have any ID, either. Our guess was that you were a transient.”

“I hate that.”

“I don’t doubt it. Being homeless can wear on a man’s soul.”

“No, I don’t mean I hate being homeless. I mean I hate the word *transient*.”

“Why?”

“It’s a misnomer. The dictionary definition means a person staying somewhere for a short time. Look it up.”

“So isn’t that what you are?”

“No. I’m there permanently.”

“So you *are* homeless?”

“Yes.”

And now, the song and dance will begin.

If I’m not still in an ER, they’ll boot me for sure. In Texas they can’t turn us away if we need a hole patched, but if I’ve been in the ICU or anyplace else, they’ll start running a tab.

Another reason I left it all.

To hell with hospitals.

She only smiles at me again. “Everything will be fine, mister. Just you rest there. I’ll be back in a little while to get your signature on some papers, okay? Do you feel up to that?”

“Think so. If I don’t pass out again.”

“What’s your name?”

I think about it for a second.

I think of Herb.

Let them know they've been in a fight.

"Joe Casey," I tell her, and it's the first time I've said that in fifteen years.

• • •

The Motrin works its wonders on me, sleeting through my blood at the speed of mercy. A lot of people don't know it's nearly impossible to overdose on ibuprofen. That's why they sell it over the counter in 500-count bottles and why they're pumping thousands of milligrams into me by way of a cool saline solution. It's probably shit for your liver, but who cares when you've got a big stitched-up gash living in your head? They never give street cases like me the good stuff, like morphine or Dilaudid. We might be junkies or drugstore cowboys.

Another reason to hate doctors.

Junkies show up dying and they get turned in as criminals.

Shit.

I try to stay awake, but the drug has a weird effect. Not like a sleeping effect, but it blurs over me in shimmers that want to keep me down. Shimmers of relief, really. Maybe I can score some more of this Motrin shit when I get out of here.

When I get out of here.

It has to be soon, because I can't foot the bill. Has to be soon, because those were serious goddamn people back there. Assassins. Worse than that, even. Goons with a purpose. But the question is … who were they really after?

I try to think about it, but my head threatens to start hurting again.

I almost go under one more time.

• • •

She comes back I guess an hour later with a clipboard and starts asking me questions. Name, rank, and serial number. Food and drug allergies, marital status, favorite color. She sits patiently in a rollaway chair next to my bed and smiles a lot, politely scribbling my answers. I don't give her any real numbers. I tell her the Army hates me and won't foot the bill. None of it matters anyway. I ask her where my clothes are, and she says they were incinerated when I first came in. I make a weird face and ask if she's kidding. She just shrugs, then says something about the rags being so old, they never would have stood up to a real

wash, and that they were most likely teeming with parasites. Not to mention all the blood soaked into them. A flannel shirt with that much bad history is considered almost as much toxic waste as a dead body in places like this. They strip you down, give you a wrist band, and toss the dirty wrapper.

"Believe me, it's for the best," she says. "You'll be glad later."

"When I'm naked on the street, lady?"

"Um. Well …"

"What the heck am I supposed to wear out of here?"

"We gave you a nice hospital gown," she says, almost giggling.

I just stare at her, shaking my head, which still hurts.

She's *really* beautiful, now that I really look at her.

Kind of short and trim in the waist, blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, high cheekbones, and finely chiseled jawline—features that would look mean in an argument.

Sexy, in a nurse's outfit.

Which, in her case, is just a thin white overcoat over blue scrubs.

She still makes it look good.

I ask her what her name is and she taps her nametag, which I can't quite make out in the half-dark of my cubicle. Smiles and says:

"Nurse Crawford. Stephanie."

"You have violence in your family, Stephanie."

"Excuse me?"

"Your name. It's nice and bloody."

"Oh, you mean Saint Stephen?"

"Yeah. First martyr for Christianity. Stoned to death for busting on the Jews. In a lot of languages the word 'Stephen' literally translates as *crown of thorns*."

"You know a lot for a … transient."

She winks when she says that, like a teacher issuing her bad boy an A.

Then gets an afterthought and adds:

"Does that line usually work on the ladies?"

Was that a flirt?

Is this woman flirting with me?

"Ahh … no. Just an observation, Miss Crawford. My name is just as embarrassing."

"Joe was the father of Jesus."

Um. Not really.

She sees my scowl, smiles, and adds:

"*Foster* father, anyway."

And she winks again.

• • •

After the inquisition is done, I ask her for a mirror.

Have to see the damage, though I'm afraid to look at my face.

Lots of reasons for that.

She goes away for a few minutes and I try to think about stuff, but end up with a headache, even with the Motrin twinkling its magic in my bloodstream. Instead of piecing together what's happened to me, I find myself flashing on images of an angry mob tossing rocks at a bloody infidel wearing a spiky headband, screaming something about how their mothers are all so ugly. Joe Christ is there in the image, too, somewhere way in back, puffing on a reefer and saying, *Sorry, kid, that's life … and, anyway, they let you off easy. My kid got himself nailed to a tree.*

Snap out of this, Joe.

Get your head in the game.

You can't stay here.

Gotta get some clothes. Gotta check out of this place. *Gotta* …

… *whoooah … head rush.*

Blackness seeps in from all four sides, but I hang on to consciousness.

Barely.

Count your blessings, jerk. You're not nailed up yet.

• • •

I'm getting out of bed when Nurse Stephanie comes back. She makes some unhappy noise at me, sees my bare feet on the floor, my body levered at the edge of the mattress. She absolutely insists that I don't even think about standing up until the doctor has a look at me. I almost don't hear her voice when she says all that, I'm so woozy. I feel her soft hands on my shoulders, pushing me back. I think I tell her I must go. Think I say I'm not safe here, that I wouldn't even want to be here anyway if I wasn't hurt, that all hospitals are evil and we all live in caves and *goddammit, I'm NOT SAFE HERE …*

Then … right on cue:

"What makes you think you're not safe?"

A new voice.

A man's voice.

I see his shape behind the curtain, backlit by the harsh light out there in the

ward. It strikes me as a bizarre apparition, and I realize how isolated I feel. I don't even know what the rest of this hospital looks like, or even what hospital I'm in. Did I ask Nurse Stephanie that? Did she tell me?

I feel absurd, but I ask the shape in the curtain:

"Where am I?"

"Didn't someone tell you already?"

"Just woke up. Having … trouble."

"Don't doubt it. You were busted up pretty bad."

He walks over, as Nurse Stephanie pushes me back onto bed. I don't fight her too much. But I can't stay here.

The shape is a man. A cop in plainclothes. He's wearing his badge around his neck this time, and he's got a suit jacket pulled over a white shirt that looks dirty, half the buttons undone below his neck, revealing a wife-beater soaked through with sweat.

His face looks like nothing.

A total blankman.

"Take it easy, pardner. You had a rough one."

Texas twang in his delivery, which hits me as absurd for some reason. See, what they don't tell you everywhere else is that a *lot* of guys from Texas don't sound that way. It's mostly a silly lie, made up by TV shows like *Dallas*.

"I'm detective James Darr. The officer we found you with was a friend of mine. I know she was questioning you. Sorry to get right to it like this, but time is a factor here."

"How so?"

"We've got a mass shooting on our hands. It's been all over the news for the past forty-eight hours. You know how much media that attracts?"

"I thought mass shootings were business as usual in today's day and age."

"Not here. Not like this. We had to move you guys to a secure location after you arrived at Saint Appolina's Trauma Center. There was media all over that place."

"*Us* guys? Is … Barbara here?"

"She made it. Just barely. Still in ICU. Went though three emergency surgeries."

"Where is *here*, anyway?"

"Brackenridge Hospital. On the down low. You and officer Brentwood were admitted as John and Jane. Know what I mean?"

"I'd like to see Barbara."

"First I have to ask you some questions. I'm sure you understand."

"I dunno if I have any answers for you."

“Well, you can start by telling me what Officer Brentwood wanted to talk to you about.”

“Who says we were talking about anything?”

“Don’t bullshit me. The lady was my partner. I know she was investigating her father’s murder. I know your name is Joe Casey and you’re an ex-Army grunt. I know she had questions for you.”

“Then why weren’t you there?”

“I tried to be. She wanted to go this one alone. I guess you can see how that worked out. None of us are very happy about the situation, Mister Casey.”

“Neither am I.”

“I was including you in *none of us*, sir.”

“So, what? You think I tried to have her killed?”

“Did you?”

“Think whatever you want. I don’t care.”

“I think you *do* care. I think you and Barbara had something going on. Maybe you were her man on the street. Some kind of informant. I think you two pissed off the wrong people and they sent shooters after you. I think they shot up that whole joint to make it look like a random mass slaughter in *today’s day and age* …”

“You watch too many cop shows.”

“… and I also think those shooters are *still out there*, Mister Casey. See, pardner, usually these random killings are dead-end gigs. The shooters blow themselves away, or sit down in the blood and guts and wait for the cops to arrive. Whoever did you, Joe, took a powder before we could get there. Which means it was probably a pro hit. Which means they’ll figure out they missed their real targets sooner than later. Which
also means that you need my protection. Something big is happening here. Maybe something mafia. Barbara was on to it. And she may never regain consciousness. Doctors say it’s fifty-fifty. She’s basically out of the game, my friend, and so that means all I have is you. So you and me … we’re gonna get to the bottom of this shit …”

He leans right in, and I can tell that he hasn’t brushed his teeth in days.

Gets right in my face with it.

And adds the rimshot:

“… you dig?”

• • •

You gotta laugh at moments like this.

So I do.

His deep south, redneck drawl and the open shirt and his weird blank face, not to mention the dated beatnik tag—it all train-wrecks in my airspace and I find myself chuckle-heading so hard, it hurts. I'm laughing because I see a clown wearing plain clothes, dancing in front of me, spouting dialogue from a bad action movie, and I'm blown to hell on a hospital bed with no idea why it all happened. I'm laughing because there's a beautiful woman named after the first martyred saint standing next to us, wondering if she's doomed for hearing all this, making weird faces like, *This cannot really be real, can it?*

I'm laughing because it's all so goddamn funny.

The cop makes some more clown noise at me. Asks a few more questions. I tell him as much of the truth as I can get away with lying about. I don't talk about what me and the Big Lady were chewing over besides our pancakes. I keep my hole card handy, played right against my chest. I act the way you're supposed to act when you're this busted up, and it mostly works because I feel like shit anyway.

Inside, I'm screaming.

Herb … you wanted me to fight them.

Whoever *they* are.

But I left the world behind, not caring about anything. How can I be your champion now? Just look at me.

The woman screams on the bed.

She is the most beautiful woman on earth.

I beg them not to do it …

No. Not now.

Keep a lid on it.

Don't let the monster out.

The cop sees my face twitch and I think he asks me what I'm thinking, but I'm too deep in myself to answer him.

Nurse Stephanie turns to him with a warm, neutral expression. "Maybe he needs a minute, detective. Could you come back in a while?"

"I need him to talk to me now."

"He won't be talking to anyone if he's not allowed to recover."

"What's that mean?"

"It means he's lucky to have survived such a horrifying and physically traumatizing ordeal. Now, I know your investigation is important. But he'll be right here. You can wait right outside the curtain if you want to."

"Just a few minutes."

“Thank you, officer.”

“Do me a favor, honey, and find him some clothes.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Do better than that. I’m your boss right now. Dig?”

“I dig.”

She shows him out and draws the curtain. I can see his silhouette standing right outside, outlined in a dull fluorescent blue.

Nurse Stephanie comes back over to me with a silly little grin, shaking her head.

“I’m sorry about that, Joe. It all sounds so … scary.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t ask you to leave the room.”

“They never do that. They usually want one of us around, in case the patient gets upset and needs sedation or whatever.”

“Do you have a needle handy?”

She taps her instrument tray, right next to the bed, which I never noticed before.

Lots of fresh syringes, fully loaded.

And a hand mirror, which she picks up.

“You asked for this, Mister Casey. Do you still want it?”

“Yes.”

She brings the mirror in front of my face.

And I see what I look like for the first time in years.

• • •

Being homeless is like going into suspended animation. You give up everything you ever were and live only for the moment, day in and day out. It’s better than dying, which is why I did it in the first place … but you rot slowly on the inside. You freeze in time and never become anything else. At first it seems so overwhelming and big. Like you haven’t got a friend in the world, and you’re only here in this reality because something inside you just can’t pull the trigger to end it all. You drift for a few weeks, with just a few things in a backpack. You ride the bus a lot, because that puts an automatic roof over your head. You start figuring out which drivers are friendlies and which one are assholes. The friendlies will let you burn your 24-hour bus pass in one big sitting, so you can sleep. The assholes throw you off and call the transit cops. Then you start figuring out who you can trust, which is usually nobody. Then you start

memorizing the city, in ways you never did before. You run down every grid and every avenue and every corner. You learn where the cops look for us and where they turn a blind eye. You find places to sleep—in the parks, on the Greenbelt, near the rivers and lakes, and on the pavement, too. You get introduced to all the bums down on the Row, which is just one street in the dead center of downtown, lined with garbage and shopping carts and sleeping human bodies. Driftwood of every kind, piled up in layers.

You start to blend in. You find a way to survive.

You collect your tools, your clothes, you fish your dinner out of garbage cans and you pile it all up in your very own shopping cart. It all comes easy, when you have nothing left to lose. You've gone to the very rock bottom of your entire life and you might as well be dead. Nobody gives a shit about you or anyone else on this street.

And you don't care about that either.

Eventually, you forget that you ever had an identity to begin with. You catch dim reflections of your own face in store windows and in the dull metal surfaces of buildings and busses and cars, but you never think it's really you. Just some weird reflection that belongs to some other part of yourself, or a doppelganger that follows you around, taunting, just out of sight. Like a bad dream pushing its way into the world somehow, plenty pissed because you tried to push it out so long ago.

I once read a fairytale called *Birthday of the Infanta*, where a hunchbacked dwarf lived all the days of his life repulsed by his own weird shadow, thinking it was some monster trying to kill him … and then he fell in love with a princess, who laughed at him because he was funny and grotesque … and then he saw his reflection in a mirror one day and realized why she was laughing. Poor sad bastard dropped dead of a broken heart, right there in front of her.

And the princess said:

For the future, let those who come to play with me have no hearts.

I think about that a lot.

I think about that now.

As I see my face in the mirror.

See what you've done to her.

It's all your fault, Trip.

You could have had it all, but you had to go and BLOW IT …

My skin is clean, except for the stitch job, which is less hideous than I imagined. Then again, the lights are pretty low in here. It's like a black-and-red Frankenstein fissure, some silly makeup you buy at Halloween. The rest of me is clean. I mean, really, really clean. That blows my mind.

I see my face and it makes me cry.
One tear, down my cheek, which is clean.
All the dust and grime washed away by caring hands.
Holy shit, man.
It's me again.

• • •

I go around and around with the cop when he comes back. The nurse leaves for this part of the inquisition. It's all the same old noise, and there's a lot of veiled threats. He lightens up a few times, reminds me that the city of Austin is picking up the tab for my hospital stay. Asks me if I'm protecting anyone. Says I'm his only lead, because Big Barbara was on a private mission and she kept all the details in her pretty skull. He uses those words. *Pretty skull.*

Think the old boy has a crush on the lady.
Who could blame him, I guess.
She was a toughie.
Nice boobs, too.
Sorry, Herb.

The nurse comes back with a pair of black pants and a clean white shirt. Says they were donated by Goodwill. Thinks they'll fit me. Asks if there will be anything else, because it's almost midnight and her shift is up. The cop winks at her, and it's a disgusting deep-south flirt. I find myself left with a weird pang of irrational jealousy as Nurse Stephanie smiles at me and excuses herself, closing the curtain behind her.

I ask if I can see Barbara again.
He asks if we're gonna be friends now.
I tell him yes.
He says to get dressed.

• • •

I've seen a lot of dead guys up close, of course. Some of them were made that way by me, obviously. That's why it terrifies me a little bit that I can't tell if Big Barbara is alive or dead when the pale night nurse having a bad hair day lets us into her private room for a look. Barb's wrapped up in mummy bandages

from head to waist, her right arm in a cast with some sort of metal brace running through it. I hear the beep of her heart in electronic Morse code. Lots of machines around, telling the staff she's still breathing.

But I can't tell at all when I look at her.

Can't see any sign of life or death at all.

My bare feel cold, the floor beneath them ice. My skin, chilled, even with the new duds. I haven't felt this clean, this vulnerable, in forever. Like my mojo is gone.

It smells like evil things in here.

Like things he thought I could escape and outsmart …

No. Keep a lid on it.

Stay here.

You can do it.

The cop lets me go in the room by myself. Stands at the door and watches, but lets us have the room, me and Barb. I get closer and see her face, wrapped in gauze. Still can't tell if she's really alive. So I pretend she is.

I'm sorry, Barbara. So sorry this happened. I want to know, just like you did. I want to see the bad guys punished. But I don't know if I can do it. I don't think I have it in me. I'm a hunchbacked dwarf who died of a broken heart years ago.

I hate the world and I'm nothing.

I hear Herb, talking to me from another life:

You don't owe me anything. Always remember that.

I try to listen to the memory. Try to tell myself he would understand. But all I can think of is Herb's face, in the end. How he looked at me with such serenity, offering me a sandwich before I shot him. How I cried in his arms, years before that. And how he came back, many years later … to tell me I never owed him anything.

Darnell laughs again.

A terrible sound.

He says Sticky Charlie will be here soon with his box of magic …

No. Snap out of it. Just don't go there.

Suddenly, the cop is next to me, his Texas twang weird and bitter:

"I'm going to find whoever did this to her. Those bastards messed with the wrong lady, I can tell you that."

"What if I can't help you?"

"Then you can go back on the street. But not until I'm sure."

"Sure of what? That I can't help you?"

"Sure of a lot of things. Until then, consider yourself my guest. Feel like a hamburger?"

“Not hungry.”

I think about the IHOP again.

How I refused Barb’s offer, too.

I didn’t even want to be there with her.

Don’t even like pancakes.

“Well, I’m hungry enough to eat a frozen dog,” he says. “And you look like you could use a sandwich.”

I smile real big when he says that.

Herb … you always had to have the last word, didn’t you?

• • •

We walk back towards the elevator, past the nurse’s station, and a few of the ladies give us weird, dirty looks. They never like it when the ICU is invaded by guys who can walk right. Even with the big scar on my face, it’s pretty obvious I’m all in one piece. Barbara might not last the night. That’s what one of those bitter old women told us—the one with the bad hair day, who looks like she sees ghosts all the time. They talk to the dead in their sleep, I guess. Probably joke about it. Everything’s a joke, really.

If you tell it right.

In the elevator down, the cop grunts at me:

“You okay?”

“I think so. Head still hurts.”

“I’ll get you some aspirin.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I had a shopping cart parked outside of the restaurant when the shooting went down. It was full of important personal stuff. Some old gear. You guys grab that?”

“Maybe. I can look into it.”

“Great.”

Can I do this?

Can I really go back to being what I was?

Go back to being Joe Casey or Trip Cooper?

Then the door clunks open on the ward we rode up from, and there’s a guy in a suit walking towards us on the floor, stepping away from where my partition hangs open. Official looking fella, with a badge around his neck, his shiny shoes

doing a professional clop-clop-clop on the polished linoleum. I let out a big sigh.

Here we go again.

Only this time, I’m gonna get the inquisition in stereo.

I’m still thinking about what I’m gonna say when we step out of the elevator, walk towards the official-looking guy, and he pulls out his revolver and shoots the cop next to me, blowing him right off his feet.

CHAPTER SIX

Pam turns off her laptop and eases out of the chair in a sleek movement, imagining herself like a jungle cat as the muscles in her perfectly toned body snap and pump and straighten. She never paid much attention to caring for herself before everything started happening. Before the big change. She never saw herself as anything but a tool to get what she needed. Or trash to be abused and discarded.

It's an amazing thing when you fall in love with yourself for the first time. When you see the beauty that was always there. When you train yourself to be better than everyone else. Because you are privileged beyond all those ordinary people.

It took a while for her to figure that out.

She looks back and sees a willful and bitter child.

Someone once told her programming happens when you are just a few years old, that our adult mindsets and worldviews are fully shaped before we are ten. Someone told her that when she was nineteen. She remembers the words clearly but can't recall who said them to her. There were so many training groups, after all. So many speakers who had so much to say. She was carved from bitterness into something else. Something special and perfect. She was taught, really and finally, that she was a woman and that women can rule the world if they want to.

That's how she sees herself now.

As the ruler of many worlds.

She stretches a bit, aiming her arms skyward, feeling the tendons stretch and pop. She hates sitting. Field work is the best. But you always have to sit a lot and watch the screens. It's really important. They taught her that, too.

She takes a moment.

Tries to remember her old life.

That's important, too.

The boss said that to her on the first night.

Always remember where you came from. Because fools who have no respect for history—particularly their OWN history—will repeat their mistakes until the end of time.

And we have so little time left, my dear.

So she looks back.

Sees her mother and father.

Sees a world way too small for her.

Feels the punishing hand of her father, making her feel smaller.

Worthless.

Defeated.

Remember that, lady. Remember that monster. You outlived him, just like you'll outlive those two assholes tonight. Just like you'll outlive everyone else.

She thinks about smoking a cigarette.

But then thinks better of it.

These weird thoughts of immortality in the face of every memory that ever tried to keep her down … well, they always put the fear of God in her. Make her realize how far she's yet to go and how much she has to learn. If God knew she was still smoking, for example, he'd be very disappointed. It might even cost her a ticket to his kingdom. She has to quit, no doubt about that. There's not much time left.

She looks at her laptop screen, still glowing from the night's recon work. All those windows open, showing so many faces, in so many parts of the world. And just above the windows, the time and date bar, clicking down the days and hours and minutes and seconds. She reminds herself what time it is, like she always does. Reminds herself that she has to quit smoking before doomsday.

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Just a few months left.

She must be healthy when she arrives in God's lap.

When her work in this world is finally done.

She looks at the pack of cigarettes on the desk. Reaches over and crumples them. Tosses the wad into a small trash basket. Shivers for a few seconds in the chill breeze of the air conditioning. That's one thing she won't miss about Texas. The goddamn heat. It never turns winter here, not really. Just a little chill around Christmas time. Still damn hot in fall. Gotta run the AC at full blast all the time. She loves the cold. Can't wait to come home to it.

But first, business.

Always business.

She leaves the small office and heads down the hall. Her feet make no

sound, even with shoes on. She's wearing white socks and jogging pants and a black tank top, one size too small for her generous bustline. She's still sweaty from working out a few hours ago. All those crunches and pulls. She likes to sweat. Likes it a lot.

It's dark in the hallway because she doesn't turn on the light. She likes that, too. Dark and cold. She sees herself pushing through it like a cat. She imagines her eyes lighting up like red beacons in the blackness. Sees some amazing, primal creature, ready to spring. Tastes the fear living just beyond the next door. Her hand closes around the knob and she turns it slowly, savoring every second. Actually licks her lips, leaving them wet.

The door opens up, and it's dark in here, too. The room, lined with orange leather and vinyl. Her toys, hanging from rows of hooks in the walls. Elaborate stainless steel rigs, like weird exercise machines. Smells of ammonia and disinfectant on leather seat covers. The two men, chained to the orange wall with ballgags stuffed in their mouths.

On their knees.

Perfect victims.

She clicks on the switch and red light bathes them. She moves closer to the tall man—the one who's teeth she removed two weeks ago with a pair of rusty pliers when he didn't please her—and kneels in front of him.

His eyes, staring right into her.

Lovingly.

"Have you thought about what you've done? Are you very, very sorry?"

He wags his head up and down.

"You were sorry last time, too. And do you remember what I said then?"

His head doesn't move at all.

"Didn't I tell you it was your last chance to please me?"

His eyes, watering now.

Begging for it.

Pathetic.

"So I guess … I have to do what I have to do, don't I?"

She looks over at the second man, just a few feet away, his arms also lashed to the wall by cruel metal bracelets and short chains. His wrists bloody and awful. He's been trying to get loose, of course. Always a fighter, that one.

Toothless has no such marks.

He knew the name of his master, the second she spoke it to him.

He wants to say it to her now.

Wants to let her know that he loves her, even after everything.

That he always will, no matter what.

Please punish me. I am not worthy of you.

She smiles when he tries to make the words happen. Knows what he's trying to say, even though the sound is choked back into nothingness. Strokes his forehead with her perfect red fingernails, blowing a cool breeze into his face. Her cool breeze. Because every day of his life has been a gift.

From her.

Because she is the goddess.

"I guess you know that I appreciate the mayhem you two boys caused. I always *appreciate* mayhem. But it was unnecessary. Draws too much attention. And I wanted those two alive, not dead. I mean … what were you thinking?"

Toothless just stares into her.

Lovingly.

Not trying to fight at all.

She sees his answer and it almost disgusts her.

Smirks and shakes her head.

"I get it. Grist for the mill, right? That's just great."

She slaps him across the face, just a tap.

"Don't you know that everything in the world doesn't revolve around whatever pathetic thought pings around in that small brain of yours? *Damn* …"

Grabs him by his gagged mouth.

"… and now I have to adjust my plans. I have lots of extra work to do. Not that I won't enjoy it. In fact, I think I'll really miss being in rooms like this when everything is over. But I had such grand plans for you, kiddo. You were such a sweet boy when I found you. Now … look at where you've ended up. Look at how you've thrown your life away."

She moves to the wall and selects a cordless power drill. Heavier tools for tonight. Noisier tools. But no one will hear through these walls. She's made sure of that. They are far away from anyone who can hear.

God's orders, after all.

She feels so beautiful in this moment.

More powerful than any woman on earth.

Because she is.

And as she comes closer to Toothless with the drill, her finger squeezing a few quick bursts, her expression neutral and unchanging … he tries to smile.

Tries to let her know that he's not sorry.

That he wanted this.

You are my whole world, mistress. Take all of me.

Please.

• • •

The gun is silenced, but it still makes a big hard bark in the long ward, and the impact of the slug tearing into the cop standing next to me—officer James Darr—is rough and pounding, with a bizarre sort of after-plunge, like a stone hitting still water. There's not enough full-body impact to kick him anywhere, but the knockout reflex puts him on his back in two seconds, and his fallen body blocks the open elevator as the doors try to shut. I hover in one more second, seeing the barrel of the gun readjust its target priorities, aiming right between my eyes. I see the man's weird face just on the other side of the gun barrel—just a two-millisecond freeze-frame that marks him as a stone-cold pro, with black eyes and a hard mouth—just before he opens that mouth and speaks to me:

"Just you hold it right there, buddy. Don't fucking move."

I freeze, seeing my death, fixing on his eyes.

Then I realize he's holding me in the firing line.

Not shooting.

Something explodes hard, just to my right. My eardrum takes the impact badly, and I'm almost made deaf again as I instinctively I throw myself down, kissing the linoleum floor and sliding there. I expect the pain to come next—real, stabbing pain where the bullet might've gone in. But that never comes. What I get instead is a big, dumb wave of adrenalized shock, hitting me so fast and merciless that my whole face swells up with heat and pressure … as I look up to see:

Officer James Darr, his gun out of the shoulder holster, staggering up one knee, muttering silent curses I can't hear over the ringing in my skull, blood gushing out of the hole in his chest.

That was *his gun* going doing the big boom next to me.

He spits crimson and fires again, wildly, not able to aim at all because he can barely see through the pain—and his second shot also misses, just before the other guy scores his next bull's-eye. It's a big meaty hit this time, and detective James Darr takes it right between his pissed-off peepers, going down for good, his gun slipping from his fingers and sliding across the linoleum, just inches from me.

The man with the silenced pistol says something else I can't hear.

Yells at me not to move or something.

Not firing.

Just off to my right is an open door and an intersecting hallway. I can make it if this guy really doesn't want to shoot me. If I get up and run fast.

He’s just twenty feet from me now closing the gap, yelling at me not to move.

But I move anyway, grabbing the gun on the floor.

Marie kneels on the bed and cries to let me go.

Please just kill us and be done with it.

Just let my husband live …

No, snap out of it … stay focused …

RUN!

I hear the silenced pistol bark again in my direction, but nothing hits me. I almost feel the bullet zing through the air where I was just a second earlier, as I scramble to my feet, Darr’s gun still in my hands, heading for the open corridor, just ahead of me. Dark hallway, leading to a brightly lit room. Waiting room, maybe? *Gotta run NOW …*

I hear the gunman’s feet striking the floor behind me, walnut heels clopping like horseshoes, and I’m up and running, one eye back, not seeing him, expecting a bullet in my head any second now. I think I hear another shot, but I’m not knocked down by it. I keep running. Almost to the room. *Please god let me get to that room, goddammit …*

The wall bursts in a sharp jagged shower of painted brick chips next to me as I make the light at the end of the hall. A bullet whizzes by my face in a wild ricochet, and I see it strike a window in the waiting room, cracking a jagged spiderweb in the glass.

Someone screams.

It’s a woman.

I never find out who it is, because I’m charging across the ER main entrance waiting lobby now, the horseshoe clomps of the gunman’s shoes behind me, getting closer, halfway down the hall I just came through. I run for the open loading door, and the coolness on my skin from the hospital air conditioning is torched by Texas heat, washing over me in a fast swoop. An ambulance parked in the *cul de sac*. No people around, everybody on break. Hard movement in the glassed off lobby just behind me—Horseshoe Man coming after me.

Can’t think … gotta run … holy shit …

My legs pump into action all on their own—haven’t run this hard in years. My head hurts. The hot air punishes me. I can barely breathe. I almost stumble and fall, tripping slightly, but I keep on moving. My bare feet slap hot tarmac like a man sprinting through scorching coals …

Something blinds me, and a vulture screeches.

Tires on pavement.

A car slamming to a halt, just feet from me.

The face of a woman just on the other side of the blinding lights.

I realize in a fast surreal jolt that I'm in a parking lot now and someone almost ran me over. The hospital, just a few dozen yards behind me. Horseshoe Man charging out of the ER lobby entrance, waving his gun, yelling something I still can't hear.

The woman at the wheel of the car is throwing up her hands, also yelling something. I realize the gun is still in my hand. I realize who she is. It's the nurse —Nurse Stephanie.

Horseshoe Man, just feet away now.

Coming on hard.

Yelling.

Gotta do SOMETHING …

I aim the gun at the woman. Her hands stay in the air. I yell at her to open the door, motioning to the passenger's side.

Horseshoe Man, just ten feet away now, planting his feet on the tarmac, drawing down on the woman.

The door comes open and I jump in. The inside of her car smells new and piney, mixed with the sharp scent of her cheap drugstore perfume.

I yell at her to floor it.

Horseshoe Man's gun explodes its silenced load just as we lurch forward, and the bullet smashes through her back passenger's window. Three more shots miss us entirely. A fourth punches one of the tires flat in a terrifying BOOM, but she keeps the car on the road, as I yell at her to *drive drive DRIVE …*

I expect the back window to explode open next. I expect Nurse Stephanie's head to detonate with a new crimson eye drilled from the back. But it never happens. We whip around a corner and roll out into Red River Street, thumping along in a lopsided roar, one tire blown and dragging us weirdly sideways, leaving the hospital and Horseshoe Man way back there.

I realize she's crying softly.

"Please … don't hurt me …"

The gun is still in my hand, aimed at her.

That's why she's still driving.

I just took a goddamn nurse hostage.

How the hell did this happen?

Who the hell am I?

What the hell just happened back there?

• • •

I tell her to calm down, that I'm not going to shoot her, and I guess it doesn't work because she's still really freaking out. I keep working on it, tell her to drive us somewhere, stay moving, not gonna shoot you, please get a grip on yourself.

Still doesn't work.

She's a real scream queen, this one.

The car lurches lopsided, the blown tire flapping below us, but she keeps it at a steady 45 miles per. Adrenaline jacks into me again. My head hurts so bad now, and blood is dripping down my head and into my mouth. It doesn't taste very salty. I'm reminded in a dull, matter-of-fact kind of way that I haven't eaten very well since the ham and cheese sandwich at Herb's place, and that was weeks ago. Not much salt in my blood.

How terrible.

You fucking asshole …

She starts to cool down as we cruise into the Hyde Park area, along 45th. This ain't very far from the 183 freeway IHOP where the cops picked me up. Nor far from Herb's place either. Fearful symmetry. Then again, Austin's a pretty small big city.

I ask if her place is very far.

She doesn't say anything at first, starts calming down, her eyes on the street in front of her. She's really beautiful, even with her face wet and red like it is.

I ask her again how far her place is.

"I'd … rather not go there."

"Are you married? Do you live with someone?"

She doesn't say anything.

"Please answer me, Stephanie. Both our lives are in danger."

She doesn't answer. Paralyzed with fear.

But I can tell what the answer is.

She's a single girl—a working girl.

And she lives near here.

In Hyde Park.

• • •

We pull into her driveway at just past one in the morning. The tire is shredded now, and we're grinding metal on pavement. It's a small green house on Avenue K. She shuts off the engine, looks over at me slowly. Eyes the gun, still in my hand. Shaking.

“What now?” she says.

I feel like a monster when she says that.

I feel the cold weight of the weapon—snubnosed revolver, close-combat special. Just like old times. I snap open the cylinder and empty the four remaining bullets into the palm of my hand. Pocket them, along with the spent shells. Show her the empty gun.

“You’re not my prisoner, lady. Just let me get out here.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Take my chances.”

“That man back there … he was trying to shoot both of us.”

“No, just you. He didn’t want to kill me at all. Was just trying to stop me from running out of there and you were my ride. Really sorry about that.”

“Why is this happening? What …”

“Look, whatever it is, you aren’t my prisoner. I’m sorry you had to get involved. I was acting on adrenaline. Wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“You’re bleeding. Your stitches …”

“Whatever. I’ll take care of it.”

I start to open the car door. Gotta get out of here. Get as far away from this woman as I can. Gotta—

“Come inside with me. Let me take a look at your head.”

She says that with remarkable calm, her face still red and wet—like a strong little girl steeling herself against monsters in the closet. Someone wise beyond her years.

“I can’t involve you anymore, Stephanie.”

“Involve me with *what*?”

“Look, thanks for your help. I need to—”

“Please come inside. We have to call the police. At least let me put a bandage on your head.”

“A second ago, you were my hostage. You were screaming your head off. Now you want to give me a bandage?”

“I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t thinking clearly either.”

Unbelievable.

Woman gets pulled right into the shit by a man waving a revolver in her face—and suddenly *she’s* the one apologizing?

“We have to call the police,” she says. “I know you’re in some kind of trouble, but I also heard what that policeman said when he was questioning you. I know you’re probably not the bad guy.”

“Probably?”

“Come inside. Let me look at you and I’ll call the police.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth. I’ll tell them you’re the good guy.”

Good guy?

Shit.

• • •

The house is small, just a one-bedroom affair with a tiny little kitchenette annexed to a fairly spacious living room. Not a lot of stuff on the walls. Flatscreen TV, 40 inches of it, DVD player in a small platform shelf holding it up. A framed poster of Tom Waits taking up most of one wall. A small shelf with some little trinkets on it: porcelain figurines of animals and stuff. A few chairs and a couch, which I sink into.

Smells like cherry candles in here.

Why didn’t I notice that until I sat down?

She lets her purse fall to the hardwood floor with a weak little clunk and puts her hands on her hips, sighing.

“Your stitches need to be cleaned. Looks like someone hit you again.”

“Don’t think so. I hit the floor back there.”

“Let me get some stuff from the bathroom. I’ll be just a minute.”

She vanishes around a corner, into a short hallway. I hear a click and see a light blink on down that way. Hear a medicine cabinet open, and the shuffling of stuff a nurse might have in her home first-aid kit.

I realize I’m still holding the gun in my hand. I set it on the glass coffee table. Take the bullets out of my pocket and set them next to the gun. Arrange them neatly, flat side down. Something not right about this …

Something about the gun.

My head hurts too much to figure out what it is.

Damn, man.

• • •

The peroxide is like acid on my face, but it hurts a lot less than the gash. I don’t even wince when she lays it on me. Her sharp, cheap perfume is closer than ever, mixing with her own natural pheromones. She smells like scared sweat and fresh flowers.

“Sorry. I know this hurts a little. But you’ll love me later.”

“If you say so.”

“Tough guy, huh?”

“More like a bum.”

“I would never have guessed you were homeless in your new clothes. You clean up nicely.”

“Thanks.”

“I think you have a mild concussion also. That’s really bad when you get it in the face. Bruised ribs are agony also, but you can get brain damage from a blow to the head like that.”

“Yep.”

“Looks to me like the blow glanced off your forehead. A dead-on shot might’ve killed you.”

“He hit me twice. I remember that.”

“You’re lucky to remember anything.”

This is so absurd. Like we’re back in the ward, just talking about it. Like we weren’t both just running out of there under fire.

I find myself smiling sadly.

“I really should go, Stephanie. I might be endangering your life.”

“I’m going to call the police as soon as I’m done patching you up. They’ll protect us. They’ll figure out what’s going on.”

“They didn’t protect us back *there*. That cop you were talking about a minute ago? He’s dead now. That guy who was shooting at us killed him.”

“Is that true? Jesus, are you kidding me?” She pulls away from her work for just a second, looking at me with wide, terrified eyes.

I grab her hands gently, look right in her face.

“Look, I don’t know what the hell is really going on, but I don’t feel safe around cops right now. And I don’t feel safe here, either. And—”

—and then—

—my eyes fall on the revolver sitting there on the coffee table—

—*and it hits me.*

Like a bullet to the head.

I see it in sharp, terrible relief: the scratched metal plating of the snubnose, its cool, hard lines organizing themselves into a killing shape. And the space just above the trigger-guard where the serial numbers are supposed to be.

Only the serial numbers are sanded off.

That was Officer James Darr’s weapon.

An illegal weapon, purchased off the books.

He was taking me back down to the ward to meet his partner.

His partner, who opened fire on us, right then and there.

They were both bad guys.

• • •

"You can't call the cops," I tell her, and I can see the panic starting to well again in her face.

"Why, Joe? What are you saying to me?"

"I'm saying I've really fucked up your weekend and I'm sorry, but I have to get out of here now … and you have to come with me."

"I don't understand …"

"Neither do I. Not exactly. I need some time to work out what's really going on. But I've just figured out part of it, Stephanie, and it's not good."

"What? Goddammit, Joe …"

"Big Barbara was onto some kind of conspiracy, I think. Something her father was involved in. She tried to run down some leads, and whoever she was onto tried to have her killed. When that didn't work out, they went after her in the hospital."

"And what about you and me?"

"I think we're kind of caught in the middle. I think James Darr thought I knew something—or maybe the big lady said something to me. I think they were planning on sweating it out of me however they could. Darr was trying to do that by winning my confidence. My guess is that his partner didn't see it that way. Maybe there was some bigger beef between them. But whatever it really is, it's serious enough for goons to blow each other away in a *public hospital* … and that means bad things are coming down on both of us."

"So what now?'

"We have to get out of this house. If it's really dirty cops we're running from, this is the first place they'll come looking for us."

"You said they want you, not me."

"Not anymore. They'll check the hospital records, figure out you helped me get out of there, and maybe even tag your cell phone. Do you have a laptop?"

"Yes, but …"

"Grab it. Leave your phone. We have to move fast."

"Joe … this is crazy …"

"I know it is. I'm sorry."

I look deep into her eyes when I say that.

I see how beautiful she really is.

And I see Herbert staring back at me.

Okay, you bastard.

I don't have any choice now.

Guess I have to be your champion, after all.

"Get the laptop," I tell her. "And some clothes and whatever. Find me a pair of shoes, if you can. Five minutes and we're outta here."

"Joe … I'm really scared."

I put my hands on her shoulders.

She is so, so beautiful.

Like everything I ever turned my back on.

Everything that mattered.

So long ago.

"I'll get us out of this somehow, Stephanie. I swear to God I will."

CHAPTER SEVEN

In 2,000 years, here's what nobody will ever remember about Miss Prescott.

She's one of those kids who just missed out on the eighties—born in 1991 and mad as hell about it. That's because the 90s are a weird time to be a child, especially if you come from a broken home. Nothing looks like anything anymore. Styles and fashions are beginning to blur away into illegibility, the lines between battlements much harder to see. Someone very wise will tell her later that this sort of thing happens at the end of every century. He'll also tell her that the end of this particular century is a great twilight moment for all of humanity. It's the time when media bubbles are exploding like never before. When fractal equations are brought out of the abyss of creation, spurring on the most fantastic advances that post-modern consumer society has ever seen. When personal computers and cellular telephones will become household items that even the poorest American families will own.

And the real horror of it all?

Nobody will even notice it's happening.

They'll be all amazed for about three seconds and then go back to living in the 90s.

By the time our girl is ten years old, the millennium has finally ended, and there seem to be no countries anymore. No more good guys or bad guys. No limiters on anything. There is total sensory overload in everything that happens. Her father talked about how the World Trade Organization was taking over the planet—how the politicians and white-collar business pirates were running wild unprecedented scams right out in the open—but that seems like a lifetime ago, and our girl has grown up damn fast.

Politics, pop culture, music, and movies—she's seen it all reach critical mass and go back to zero. The taste-makers and presidents and everyone else riding the wave, they're all products of some bizarre new future that sneaks up on us

every day and tells the new generation not to trust anyone or give a damn about anything.

By the year 2000, our girl has been abused by her father many times.

Her father is Arnold Prescott, a man of great wealth and even some power.

He runs several companies, all revolving around stock trading.

So our girl lives a life of privilege.

But abuse is the price she pays.

She doesn't even think it's weird or strange or bad because that's just the way kids are *supposed* to live … until someone tells her that it's *not* the way kids are supposed to live. "Abuse" is what they call it when she unwittingly turns her father in, coming to school one day with a face beaten black.

"Abuse" is an easy word.

A safe word.

But the truth under the surface is much dirtier.

The teacher who sees her face is named Mister Francis Carter. He's a young idealist. He looks out for his kids. Uses lots of *safe words* that day. And when the cops haul her rich daddy off, that same teacher asks if she has a place to stay. Child protective services won't get around to abducting her for at least three or four weeks, the way things run in the failing Chicago public infrastructure … and so the teacher offers.

Mister Carter is a concerned man with a sweet voice.

He's been our girl's teacher for three years, since her transfer to American Middle School Chicago, several years ahead of her classmates because she's smarter than most girls her age.

She is just 10, but a very early bloomer.

Beautiful and developed.

She got her period when she was just 9.

Kind of freaky, really.

It made her Daddy crazy and her mother look the other way.

But Daddy loses everything when the arrest happens. Faces the music and goes down hard. His own daughter testifies against him in court. Her mother watches with dead eyes in a room that smells like old paper and bad aftershave, as her little girl sticks the knife in and dooms the family to oblivion.

Mister Carter, who took her in, convinced her to do it.

The counselors convinced her to do it.

"Abuse" is such an ugly word.

The IRS looks into daddy and finds a lot more than that, though. They close like avenging angels and burn him at the stake. Mommy hits the booze, then the harder stuff, and she becomes a stripper at the end of the day, burned out and

sagging on a hot neon stage, surrounded by jeering plasticized frat boys and laughing donkey-voiced Johns with beer guts. Daddy goes to prison, where very bad things happen to him. Justice is served, and revenge is sweet.

And little Miss Prescott's reward for destroying her family is more abuse.

She first goes into a foster home run by the church and experiences horrors she would not easily be able to describe—even later, when she is all grown up.

"Abuse" becomes a word she laughs at.

She runs away from that awful place when she is 11, shows up on the doorstep of Mister Carter, the teacher who showed her such kindness … and she screams at him that he ruined her life. That he is the one who made her go to hell. That there is no such thing as justice and she hates him and hates everything and fuck the world.

She collapses, all cried-out, on his couch, and he calls the cops again.

Of course he does.

The fucker.

When they drag her away, she screams at him that he's just like all the rest, that he's a cruel, awful monster and she'll get back at him one day.

The poor guy has no idea what to say or do.

Mister Carter prays to God for guidance and forgiveness.

That's the same God that told him to seek justice for that poor little girl in the first place, by the way.

She goes back to the nuns and the priests and it's even worse, now that she's a "runner." That's what they call kids who try to escape from the house. "Runners." It strikes her as really silly—terminology from some bad science fiction novel. But, then again, that's what her life has become. Bad science fiction. The world around her is imploding into a computer, the face of everything mutating so fast that nobody even sees it happening—but she walks through the strange days in slow motion, sizing everything up, seeing things that kids twice her age could never have imagined when they were buying vinyl record albums and slotting 8-tracks into their stereos, smoking weed in the back of some psychedelic party van or dayglow teen club. She sees that she's living in a *very* scary future, all run by invisible bad guys, and from now on … she has to be damn smart about how she operates.

She is 12 and a half when she runs again.

It happens on the night when one of the counselors has at her in the bunk room after lights out.

He comes in there right in front of the others. They all shut up and listen, never saying a word. She knocks him out and steals his keys. She knows how to knock people out and steal their keys now because she's a year and a half older

and wiser.

A year and a half is a lifetime to a child.

She goes on the street again, and this time she stays off the radar. Gets a lot smarter. She comes up with ways to survive that are pathologically brilliant, especially for a 13-year-old runaway. She has many edges, many assets, and they all work. One of them is her beauty. Another is her youth. She can blend in at high schools and on college campuses during certain times of day and nobody is ever the wiser. That's how she feeds herself most of the time, hanging out at food courts and study halls. She even makes friends with a few people, spins elaborate lies about who she really is, what she is studying, what's on her iPhone this week. She hooks up with boys who buy her dinner and take her to shows. She gets them drunk and rolls them for cash and credit cards. Sometimes there's a pervert who wants to hurt her, but she always turns that bad business right around. Turns it back on them. Most of them love it. She learns how to break into empty houses that are up for sale and shitty motels without good locks on the doors. She figures out where the best spots on campus are to pitch her backpack for the night. Knows all about which dumpsters are juiciest and what restaurants throw out the best stuff.

She is 14 years old when she seriously considers becoming a high-end call girl.

She could do it. She's tough enough now. Her sins are scabbed over—her hands trained. And she's gorgeous beyond her years.

At least a decade and a half beyond.

She's thinking about all this behind a dumpster at Northwestern University of Chicago, wondering how the hell she ever ended up in such a damn transitional state, pondering the future and what it means to live in that future …

… when God finally speaks to her.

She doesn't know he's God, of course. Not right then. Just thinks he's another pervo who wants her to blow him for treats.

He tells her that she should never assume where someone else is coming from.

He gives her two hundred dollars in cash and says he can clean her up and get her a room and give her work. He says she shouldn't smoke cigarettes because it's really bad for her. He says he's a scientist … but that can't be true.

He says to come meet him at the Drake Hotel, and she's almost sure she knows what that means—but this is what she just asked the universe for, after all.

She wanted to be high end.

She wanted to be off the street.

She’s damn sick of eating garbage and pretending to be hip among kids who have no idea who she really is. She’d rather get paid for that.

The pretending, not the eating garbage part.

At the Drake Hotel, her room is sumptuous and sprawling—three rooms, actually. A pink-plush bedroom suite attached to a marble rainforest shower and a study area, all traced in elegant brass and chromium steel and track lighting. The city of Chicago is spread before her like a jewel mine and a light show, framed beautifully in one giant window that dominates nearly an entire wall. It feels like another world.

Which, of course, it is.

God comes to see her after she’s ordered everything on the room service menu and eaten nearly all of it. He says she looks much better now. Says she looks sated, in a way that makes her beautiful. He is a youngish man, but much older in his eyes—a man of deep purpose and understanding that goes so far beyond anything she’s ever seen or known before. So far beyond the hurting that was done to her. By monsters.

He is not a monster.

He will become God.

He explains how this will happen. He sits across a table filled with empty plates and sips a glass of wine and tells her she must stop smoking. She listens to every word he says and soaks up the information. She doesn’t even remember after the first hour or so that she once thought he invited her here to blow him. Doesn’t even remember the woman she expected to be a year from now, giving away her assets for the highest possible price. All she hears is his voice. His plan. His brilliant scheme that will allow them all to become the rulers of the earth.

It’s still bad science fiction—even more now.

More than ever.

But she believes his every word. She joins him on his quest. She follows him without question. He is not an abuser.

He is God.

So Miss Prescott ventures into her new life. For three years she learns the ropes. Discovers what terrible fate awaits the entire human race. How she will become a part of saving humanity. It makes her heart burn and her skin glow with a powerful lust. With an abandon that makes her forget she was ever a victim of anyone.

It makes her into a woman, finally.

And she towers above all other women.

After the first year, she has proved herself to be her boss’s second most

valuable ally. The first is a man, of course. But second banana is good, too. Comes with many perks. Like the moment when her boss takes her into an office and explains that she's become very special in his eyes. That she must now go and find others like her. He says she knows where to look for them because she comes from the same place. She is pathological like they are. And those people are *our people*, he says. Those are the people who will embrace what we have to offer. Who will take the most awesome leap of faith.

And you may do your job *your way*.

That means you can play.

You can sate your desires.

You must use your power.

Because when the future comes—the *real* future, not this artificially processed, computer-enhanced hallucination we are all living in now—we will be the rulers of it.

We will be the makers of it.

And the makers of the future must be ruthless.

She hones herself into a fighting machine, becomes addicted to the workout routines and the endless spying. The vetting and recruiting. The ongoing search for *just the right man*. She makes her body strong while she weaves her network across the entire country, here and there and everywhere. It amazes her how easy it is in today's day and age. Amazes her how little people understand about the world they live in. How simple it is to spy on all of them. Even those who live off the grid.

This was the world she was born into.

The analog age is not even a memory for her.

The battlements are almost invisible now.

Everything goes out of style the second it's invented. People fool themselves into believing they are special by typing things on the Internet, but what they are really doing is killing themselves. Exposing every secret. All she has to do is press a button, dial up a number … and they all appear at her fingertips. To be seen and ruled over. And she's become the woman she always wanted to be, her tastes exotic and terrible. She will be a soldier for the next millennium. And the millennium after that. And after that. *And* …

She never quite manages to give up smoking, though.

That's a toughie.

Something that harkens back to her hard youth.

The past that still mocks her.

And speaking of all that …

On the night of July 26, 2011, she celebrates her 19th birthday in a very

special way. She does it by abducting Mister Francis Carter from his home, chaining him to a wall, and beating him with a length of rubber tube until he is dead.

It's a wonderful, painful, delicious blur.

Just before her old teacher checks out, she cradles his face in her hands and says he'll never again destroy another life, the way he destroyed hers. She tells him the sick irony of this moment really turns her on, and it makes her heart swell with authentic happiness to have him like this, to see what a miserable failure he's become. Never married. No kids. Shitty job, counseling clueless rugrats. She will outlive him, like she will outlive all the others on her list. She gets right in his face and licks blood off his lower lip and says he shoulda minded his own goddamn business.

Never assume where someone else is coming from, baby.

Like all the others, who are dead also.

Her mother, whom she found drunk in a bar.

Her father, whom she pulled from prison to have a word with.

All unfinished business.

All done with now.

Because soon—very soon—there won't be time for anything.

Only the future, my dear.

Only the future.

• • •

It's amazing how fast I get back into the groove.

Covering all these bases, checking every corner, trying to figure all the available angles. I was the best at doing this ten years ago. Times change fast, but the mind is still the best weapon.

Heh. Sly Stallone said that in *Rambo*.

Define irony.

First thing, I get the tire on her car switched out. She's got a spare handy in the trunk, and the rim isn't quite decimated by our drive from the hospital—she lives pretty close to Brackenridge, actually. I notice for the first time that her car is a Lexus from a few years back. Sleek lines and dark purple paint flake. Nice for a working girl.

Once the tire is switched, I ditch the blown rubber in her recycling bin, then take care of the passenger's window. Just knock out the rest of the glass so no

one will see us traveling with a spider web. Cops notice things like that. At a glance, they'll think the window is just rolled down. Good.

Nurse Stephanie changes into civilian clothes—white wifebeater under a black sports blazer and tight stonewashed jeans. Gorgeous, really.

Finds me an old pair of Converse sneakers.

They're a half size too small for my feet but I tough it out.

We decide to bring her phone with us, then toss it off the bridge as we cross the river on Congress Avenue, headed for the Austin Motel.

Anyone tracking her can go take a swim, man.

I toss the gun, too.

Just to be on the safe side.

Or not.

• • •

Its 3:00 in the morning when she checks us in. You can still pay cash here, and they never ask for photo ID in this place.

Lots of … umm, *transients* in this 'hood.

• • •

Congress is one of the famous avenues in this city. A string of tacky dives, food trucks, hot spots. It leads right through downtown and ends at the capitol building. The Austin Motel perches in a weird slant among all this inner city jive, two rows of run-down rooms, remodeled a few times but still barely alive—like a guy who had so many facelifts that he started looking like modern art.

Our room is small and the bed is soft. I land there, and Nurse Stephanie paces the floor, looking really nervous. She doesn't say a word for almost ten minutes.

I sit up at the edge of the bed and mark her silence.

Just waiting for her to say the words.

And then … finally:

"I can't stay here with you. This is completely crazy. I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

"You're in danger, that's why. We're both in danger."

"Then how can we be sure we're safe *here*? This place is right in the middle

of the city."

"Did you show those guys an ID when you checked us in?"

"No. The guy thought I was a hooker, I think."

"You don't look like a hooker."

"Thanks."

"Look, if you didn't hand them plastic or an ID, we're okay, I think."

"I can't *do this*, Joe. I don't even know who the hell you are."

"Fair enough, lady. If you wanna bail, that's fine. Obviously, I get it. But I'm telling you, it isn't safe out there for us. Those guys are looking for you right now. They've probably run a make on your car, too."

"How do we get around that little problem?"

"We don't. Not just yet. I'll think of something."

"How can you just sit there and act all cool like that? You don't have any idea who *I am*, either!"

"I know you're a nurse at the bad end of a double shift. I know you offered to help a complete stranger after he practically abducted you, and you're going on about three hours sleep in 24 and you aren't anywhere near your right mind. Am I far off on any of that?"

"Pretty close, mister."

"I also know you have no reason to believe anything I'm saying to you about anything. So you can grab your keys and leave me here. I told you before you're not my prisoner."

"I'm so tired … I can hardly stand up."

"So lie down."

"*This is NUTS! I can't … I …*"

She goes light in the head and I have to move fast to catch her fall.

• • •

I put her in the bed and check her pulse.

Erratic rhythms, speeding hard.

She's done for a while.

I slip off her shoes, run a cloth through the faucet and cover her forehead with it. Her eyes do juggling acts behind their lids. Then it tapers off … and she's down deep.

Maybe it's better this way. She'll get some much needed rest, then we'll go our separate ways in the morning. The sun'll be up in a few hours. Maybe I can

get some rest, too. I'll get back on the street and see what I can drum up. Gotta slip the cops also. They'll be looking for a guy like me.

But what's their game?

What was Big Barbara trying to ask me?

Something about a man named Pilcher.

Something scary enough to goose cops into killing each other.

I grab the laptop from the lady's bag and unfold the sucker, sitting down in a rickety chair … and I start clicking the keys.

• • •

Haven't done this in ages. Almost ten years worth of ages. But I've kept up with a few wrinkles since 2003. How America Online faded out and Google took over everything. How My Space was blown away by … well, everyone. Technology gets better every few months, but you never lose your edge for checking things out—not when you learned past a certain year. Kinda makes you feel sorry for the PIs out there who started their training in the 60s and 70s. Hell, even the 80s was a pretty primitive moment in history.

Which might explain why there are so many old men in the world who have no idea how to cover their tracks in the newfangled techno-future.

I'm amazed, though, that it all comes back to me so easily.

I turned away from all of it.

Turned away from everything.

And now, here I am again.

Hooray for me.

• • •

My one lead is a man named Gerald Henson.

No relation to the Muppet guy.

He's a young fellow who writes for *The Austin Chronicle*. He wrote the article about street jam. That's about all I know about him, but a quick search reveals that he's all over the web. Blogs a lot. Political columns and local business scandal reports. Breaks national news every now and then. Lives on the Internet. Twitter's a big deal now, apparently, and he's got over 20,000 followers. No Facebook page. Most of the radicals in the free press turned their

backs on Facebook a few years ago, when all their corporate evil came out in the open. Then again, Twitter is run by dudes who are just as evil, no doubt. It's just that nobody's caught them yet.

Or maybe they have.

I'm a little behind the times, after all.

Henson came around the Row a lot and interviewed a few of the guys when I wasn't looking. Haven't actually seen the article he wrote about us until just now. It's on the Chronicle website, punched up with all the photos their guy took on the down-low. The big lady was right—they're terrible shots. Fuzzy and far away, like camera phone pics. That means Henson was putting his piece together against the protestations of at least two or three of us. The guy never even bothered to talk to me.

Maybe I intimated him by reputation?

A lot of journalists are real pussies when you take away their typewriters.

Especially the ones who tweet 50 times a day.

My fingers fly fast and I get an email address on the guy. Create a quick Google account under the name John Wilkes Booth and click off an instant message request, with a note that says just this:

Street Jam gone bad. Acknowledge.

And I wait.

It's just now 4:00 in the morning.

A half hour later, and I'm damn tired.

My head hurts.

I look over and see Nurse Stephanie, motionless and beautiful, scared shitless, even in her paralyzed dream state.

I need to sleep soon … but I don't know if I'll ever sleep again.

• • •

His reply comes in just as I'm about to give up.

It's 5:01.

Who are you?

Henson must be an insomniac. Or a very early riser.

I take a deep breath. Type slowly:

Man on the street. Looking for answers.

He's right back in my face with:

Scary questions. Street jam only tip of iceberg. Who are you?

I think about our situation really carefully. They could track this Wi-Fi signal, whoever *they* are. And this could be much bigger than anything I've seen before.

Can't let him know who I am.

Not just yet.

I keep it fairly general:

Seen some rough shit. Want to talk. Need information in return.

After a long pause, he writes:

You'll go on record? IHOP?

I click back:

Maybe. Depends.

Him: *On what?*

Me: *What you can give me.*

Him: *What do you need to know?*

Me: *Why is street jam only tip of iceberg?*

Him: *Scary question. Need assurances.*

Me: *Like what?*

Him: *WHO ARE YOU?*

I crack my knuckles.

Breathe deep.

Then hit him hard:

Was right there when it went down. Need to know why.

A long pause.

Almost a whole minute.

Then he's back with:

What's the safe word?

Damn, man. He really *was* our man on the street, wasn't he? Street jam boys all know the 'safe word,' which keeps us insulated from outsiders when someone's messing with the crew. Gotta have *something*. Even if it's just a word. Technically a silly question with a sillier answer. The goat flies upside-down and all that other dumbass secret agent shit.

I must gamble everything here.

If he knows the code, I could gain his trust completely.

Then again, how do I trust *him*?

I could be clicking to anyone.

So … to hell with it.

I type:

Duck, you sucker.

He types back:

Ducks can't fly.

That's it. Dunno who told him about that, but it means there's at least a fifty percent change he's legit.

Or not.

After another long pause:

Is this Joe Casey? AKA Trip Cooper?

What?

How did he …

Wanted to interview you. Was told you would beat me up.

I have to smile.

I know exactly who would have told him that.

So I ask him:

Who told you that?

Quickly without hesitation:

Three from street jam. Roy, Bird, Jimmy.

That's a bit of a shock. So I say:

Jimmy never talks to anyone. Roy and Bird will say anything. Crazy dudes.

Two minutes pass.

The little bar says he's still typing a message.

Must be a whopper.

Bird said strange woman was coming around, asking questions about you. Said something weird was going down. I asked Jimmy and Roy about it and they got real quiet. Asked me for some money and then told me to piss off.

I get in there fast:

Was the woman a cop? Barbara Brentwood?

He types another whopper.

It comes in a whole minute later.

No. But I did talk to Barbara. Street jam article originally about something much bigger. Something going on with the bums. Was looking into it. Was asking scary questions, getting scary answers.

He lets it hang there.

Knows he's got the hook in.

I take it:

What was going on? What was the scary answer? Who was woman?

A long pause.

Almost three minutes before:

Don't know her name. Very sexy, very serious. Few nights before publication, beautiful woman visited office. Said she wanted to give me money to edit story. Said it would be worth my while if I left out certain things. She made it very

clear that there were more than just a few bucks on the line. My health on the line, too, get me? Went along with her. Was paid $100,000. Now six people are dead in IHOP. Two cops dead in hospital. Barb Brentwood in critical condition. Bad effing news, Joe.

Holy shit.

Does this mean my boys were in on it, too?

The guys in the jam … informing for some woman spook?

If that's true … if that's really true … then the shooters at the IHOP weren't just after Big Barbara that morning. They were after *me*, too. And not just because of what I might've known. Something else—something that goes back much further. Something from an old case maybe? Or …

Herb.

Of course.

I type back:

The name Pilcher mean anything to you?

He's back even faster:

Yes. Bad. Hear the name, you'd better watch your back.

Me: *Why?*

Him: *Scary questions, scary answers.*

Me: *Why are you telling me this? I could be anyone.*

Long pause.

Then:

I don't think you're anyone. Think you're someone. Think you're Joe Casey. Want an interview. On the record.

I'm not the only one gambling everything here.

Maybe he'll go all in.

I lay it right on the line:

What was the scary answer to your scary question?

A long pause.

Then he starts dealing.

Maybe I'll talk. If you grant interview. Meet me. Face to face.

I let him sweat before I make the date:

Dumpster at 9th and San Antonio. Downtown. 11PM.

• • •

I lie down next to Nurse Stephanie. Bed feels soft and weird. The hospital

was the first bed I'd slept in almost 10 years, and this one is old and smelly and sleazy, like a waystation between worlds.

I think it over, and the whole thing is nuts, no matter how I come at it: That kid is either the most bumbling amateur journalist on earth or he just likes to live dangerously. Knows I could be anybody but thinks I'm somebody—thinks it's enough to bet his life on. Knows he could be sitting on a story with six or seven figs to the right people. Or maybe he just wants to blow the whistle on …

… whatever it is.

Either way, I'm taking my life in my hands by even considering a meet.

But I still have to get down to the Row and talk to the boys.

The Row is just three blocks from 9th and San Antonio.

That's where we'll have the showdown.

One way or another.

I close my eyes and try to picture the scene a dozen different ways: Cops pulling up and busting us, bad guys running up and pulling iron … or maybe just a crazy young emo journalist walking in, all by himself, armed with nothing but his scruffy good looks and a digital recorder. None of these scenarios come in all that clearly.

I can't see the future like I used to be able to.

Probably because I don't want to.

I think of Big Barbara and everything she said to me in the IHOP. How her father was ashamed of something big he was involved in. Something about this Pilcher fella. How she never got to tell me anything else. She knew more. Maybe. And now she might die because of it. If she's not already dead, hooked up to a life blipper in a dark hospital room.

Herb. What did you tell her before you died?

That's the one piece of the puzzle that just doesn't fit. Something I'm not seeing because my mind is clouded. Because I've been in suspended animation for ten years.

Since 2003, when …

Darnell sees that hatred on my face and he laughs.

Rich, mahogany rolls of elegant laughter …

No.

Go away from me … GET BACK.

I hear a murmur in the dark, my eyes still closed … and suddenly slim fingers are stroking against my chest, the smell of cherry candles and womanly pheromones enveloping me. I open my eyes … and I see Stephanie as she's rolling over, coming in for some instinctive dreaming cuddle, still murmuring, out for the count.

But needing, even in sleep.

The way we all need something, *especially* when we sleep.

I'm reminded of that as her breath blows against my cheek. Reminded of so many nights alone on the pavement. So much pain, put away forever …

While he's still laughing, Darnell says he's going to make the children watch what happens in the next hour.

So there will be no illusions.

So everyone will be on the same page …

No.

That's gone now.

And the monster, too.

You're keeping it all at bay.

You're a grown man now.

She cuddles closer, mashed tightly against me, and I find that I want to kiss her now … but I can't. She is so goddamn beautiful and there are so many things I need in this moment. But I am not a man anymore. I'm just a bum.

She opens her eyes and sees me, just inches from her.

• • •

She snaps out of whatever dream she was having and recoils, almost terrified.

"I'm sorry … I didn't …"

It's a groggy tumble of words that almost makes no sense. I'm relieved and let down all at once. Relieved because she's no longer so close to me.

Let down because of the same thing.

"It's okay, Stephanie. You were just dreaming."

"I … must've passed out."

"Yeah. Take it easy. No one's gonna hurt you."

"I didn't think … you would hurt me. Just … startled, I guess."

"Well … that's understandable."

"We didn't … I mean …"

What, lady?

Did we actually *sleep together*?

"… no, that's silly. I'm sorry, Joe. I'm really out of it."

She looks over at the clock on the bedside table.

"Shit, just 6:30. Barely slept."

“You should try to sleep some more. It’ll help.”

“You promise to behave?”

She sort of smiles when she says that. Almost a flirt again. Put it down to fatigue. I tell her I promise to behave. She smiles sadly at me.

Then settles back into my arms.

“Hold me. Please.”

• • •

My arms are around her.

Tangled up together, the two of us.

Her strong natural scent, on me now like a second set of memories—of summers in the park and nights in bars, all by herself. Cherry candles and wildflowers wrapped up in the sweet sweat of a lonely working girl.

She murmurs again … and I find that I want her.

How long could I feel this way and not act on it?

Why would I want to be this close to anyone, ever?

For any reason.

I can feel the same question coming from her, through the shivers in her body, through the quickness in her breath … and then she’s looking in my eyes, so close now. Too close just to be friendly. Too close for anything.

I pull away, but her lips find mine anyway.

She has no idea what she’s doing and neither do I. She’s half asleep and acting on some sort of base instinct, half-leftover from some terrifying dream she just had. And I am that terrifying dream. So it’s perfect, isn’t it? Her kiss is lonely and searching, full of bitter cherries and eager hope. She smells sweet, like kindness. Desperate, like children. We are *both* children, she and I. We both need this, and we don’t have any idea what it means. Just that it *is*. Just that we *are*.

Marie kneels on the bed and cries for Darnell to let me go.

Please just kill us and be done with it.

Just let my husband live …

No, Marie.

You are gone forever and I can’t make you come back.

Let me have this now.

Let me be with this woman.

Please.

My arms fold around Stephanie and the old memories fade away to nothing, the monster roaring somewhere way down deep. Not dead, not banished forever … but down there. Somewhere. Where neither of us can see it or hear it. Where it can't see us or hear us. We roll through the beauty and the horror of the moment, fight through it, kiss through it … and it all comes so easy after that. Easy as silk on skin. Easy as breath on breath.

We are naked and searching, ever forward, into the hot, desperate morning.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pam likes the way he plays chess.

He's smarter than anyone she's ever gone after.

She wouldn't have thought he'd still have it in him—or at least she didn't think so before the game actually began. His files are deep, but of course that's all just on paper. When it comes down to performing in the real world, things can be very different. The mark will choke and die in the field. She's seen dozens do just that, just shy of the finish line. And hundreds more, burned out even faster, during the early vetting process.

She says all that to her boss, and he says to call the game.

"There's not enough time to go the distance with this one," he tells her. "We'll just work with what we've got."

She loves the sound of his voice.

But she still tells him *no*.

And at first, her boss is very unhappy with that—thinks she's being fiery and willful, like she was in the beginning, when he was first telling her about all this, when she was still just a child eating garbage. And he reminds her of that. Reminds her who the boss is and that she'd better fall in line. He says it very angrily.

"I'm not being willful, sir. I just know this guy is our man."

She has no doubt in her mind—he's definitely the one they've truly been looking for all this time. Now all she has to do is move him through the rest of the maze. See if he's smart enough to work it. She knows he will.

"He's got the *stare*," she says. "That haunted shit that gives you the edge. He's got something these others don't have. He has a *philosophy*. That's what makes him dangerous."

Which means the monster lives in him, too.

Like it lives in her.

“That’s what we need to make this whole thing work, sir. Just let me at him. I can do this. If it doesn’t work, we’ll throw in the towel. A few more days won’t matter at all in the big scheme.”

He shifts his weight in the chair and steeples his hands at his chin, looking worried. But calm. Always so inhumanly calm, even when he’s being angry.

How the hell does he do that?

“We are coming down to the wire, my dear. I need you at the mountain. Your little six-month field trip to the heart of Texas has borne some fascinating fruit, but the team can take it from here. Come home. I need you more than they do.”

She smiles at his face on her Skype screen—he’s always like a father figure, especially when he’s frustrated. She’s never feared him like her other fathers. But she wants to please him. Wants to make his vision a reality. He taught her to respect something that doesn’t hurt you, and it was a lesson that made her love him. Would make her die for him if she had to. And she figures one day she will.

She could die right now and be happy.

Seven years, becoming a woman.

Seven years playing chess with so many hopefuls.

But now … they are down to the wire. Down to the last man standing. She’s betting it all that her chosen mark will come through for them.

She tells her boss to trust her.

His face doesn’t change when she says all that—like it almost never changes when those hard decisions are on the table. She can’t imagine how he pulls that off. She wonders how he really unwinds, after all the bad business comes down. Wonders what he does when he is alone and nobody else is looking. She asked Arnold Pope once if he’d ever seen the old man lose it for any reason. And Pope just gave a big shrug with those big shoulders and kind of grunted, like, *We all lose it sometimes, lady … but how the boss loses it on his own time ain’t none of our business.*

And who cares anyway?

So she stares at the boss’s face on the screen, waiting for her answer.

If he orders her directly to stop the game, she’ll have to do it.

She can’t defy him, not really.

She can only try to persuade him.

Finally … he nods.

“Okay, my dear. Do what you do. But this is the last gasp. The team will be able to finish with what they have in any event … but if you come up with something better in forty-eight hours … that’ll be a gold star for you, I suppose. But after two days, my dear, that’s it. I need you to come home.”

She loves the sound of his voice.

Loves how he calls her *my dear* and it doesn't sound sleazy.

It's benevolent.

Like maybe God is supposed to sound.

But he won't be God for another 2,000 years.

She looks forward to that.

Like she looks forward to this one final game.

"Thank you, David. You won't regret this. I promise."

"I had better not. Oh, and one last thing. Did you tie up those two loose ends we discussed? Your team from the IHOP?"

"Yes."

"They give you any trouble?"

"No more than usual."

"I worry that you enjoy your work too much at times … but then again, I need ruthlessness on my side. And if one doesn't enjoy one's work, after all … it's just a job, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"There must be no traces. You've been careful?"

"Of course."

"You're also efficient, my dear. In the very *essence of the word,* of course. I am privileged to work with a young lady such as yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

And when she smiles, he can read her completely.

Can read her love for him.

Her devotion to the higher good.

Her desire to murder every human being on the planet.

This world that failed us.

All of us.

He nods his head again and smiles at her.

"Go quickly, my dear. Time is wasting."

She turns off the Skype and gets back to the hospital feeds.

The employee records at Brackenridge.

Closing in, baby.

• • •

She's asleep when the sun goes down again, at 8:00 p.m.

I can't sleep at all.

Don’t think I’ll ever sleep again.

I stare out the window, through a crack in the blinds, and watch Congress Avenue carefully. I’m still naked and my skin still tingles from what we did together, she and I. But I have to put it out of my mind for now. Can’t look back there, have to look out at the street. Look for repeat walkers and bystanders—guys who might be on stakeout, watching this place. I’m still really worried about the make on her car giving us away. We can’t drive it anymore, that’s for sure. The shooter who blew out the tire could have easily read the license number.

Gotta do the meet with Henson old school.

Gotta get back on the pavement—let my feet do the walking.

It’s something I’m really experienced with, after all.

But, damn … all my gear was in my shopping cart. Every damn gadget I ever used back in the day, and all my special tricks for survival on the street. The steel-plated quarters for making calls and tricking vending machines, my never-ending bus pass, forged by one of the best hackers I ever met. My snoop toys, too. Damn.

I’m back to zero, playing with just my hands.

And the girl.

Jesus creeping shit, how did I get a *nurse* involved in this?

And how did we ever do … what we just did?

Because you’re a bad man, man. Because you’re running and desperate and you pulled her right into it without a second thought. And then you ripped off her clothes the second she showed you weakness …

Shut up. I did what I did. She could have bailed any time she wanted.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that, asshole.

Just shut up.

• • •

It’s almost 10:00 p.m. when she stirs and sits up.

She looks like an angel, naked under the covers.

Looks over at me.

“How’s your head, Joe?”

I have to smile at that.

Crazy man abducts her right from her job and hides her out from the cops, then makes love to her when she’s half awake … and her first question after she

finally gets some sleep is how's *my* head?

"My head hurts like a son of a bitch."

"I brought some ibuprofen. Prescription grade pills. Thousand milligrams each."

"Thanks. But I need a clear mind. There's something I gotta go do. And I want you to wait here while I do it."

"I'm not staying here by myself. I'm going with you."

"I can't put you in any more danger. I'm really sorry I got you into all this."

"I'm sorry, too."

She looks at herself, naked.

Wags her head.

"I guess we both made a few mistakes, huh?"

I wag mine, too.

Not sure what to say.

"You were … very beautiful, Joe. Not sure if that's because I was half awake, or really afraid or what … but …"

"You don't have to say that."

"I want to. I … need to." She looks up and smiles at me. "You were right, of course. About me flirting with you, back at the hospital. Think that's why I helped you later. Why I didn't want to leave you. It's crazy."

"Maybe."

"I haven't … *been* with anyone in a long time. A very long time. Doing what I do is demanding and lonely. There's not much time for a personal life."

"You're very attractive. I'm sure you've had offers."

"Sometimes. Usually from married men, though. Doctors."

"I think an affair with a married man probably makes more sense than … this."

"I don't know *what* makes sense now. I think it's something in your eyes, Joe. Something very sad. Something angry. I'm a very angry person also."

"I wouldn't have thought that. Why?"

"I had a rough childhood. It doesn't matter anyway. What about you? What's your anger all about?"

"I had a rough childhood. And it matters a lot."

She almost laughs when I say that.

I make a silly face at her, like, *Just kidding, sweetie*.

But she knows I'm serious, that we are somehow kindred spirits.

That everything matters anyway.

No …

Leave her here.

Leave her BEHIND.

Don't get her killed, like you did HER …

"This is so crazy," she says. "I feel … cut loose somehow. Is that what it's like with you, Joe? When you don't have a home to call your own?"

"Everyone has a home. Even the homeless. You just adjust to being cut loose, is all."

"Tell me about it."

"There's not much time. I have to go soon."

"Then I'm coming with you." She smiles sadly, gets up, and grabs her purse. "You can tell me on the way."

• • •

The Row stinks badly tonight.

It's hot, too, and the humidity makes everything worse.

You'd think most of the boys would be used to it by now, but most of them still complain. I hear it all from every set of lungs as I walk along the edge of everything. How the pavement is like a hot grill. How the air is so thick you can eat it like dirty pudding. How the sun bakes all our brains all like blueberry muffins, baby. And there are lots of new faces. Haven't been up this way in a few months. Things always change fast around here.

I feel goddamn naked without my shopping cart.

Clean, too, compared to the Grunge-Dudes and Dragworms all around me.

I feel like someone sprung from hell, who touched the beaches of heaven just moments ago … and loved it … but now he's back, walking on shores made of garbage, wearing a clean white shirt.

I keep thinking about her.

Hoping she'll be okay where I left her.

Hoping this works, whatever the hell it is.

I make the block twice, and it's snake eyes both times. Jimmy usually has a spot at the corner of Brazos and 7th, but he ain't there. Roy's usual place is vacant, too. Katie ain't around either. But that's not what bothers me …

No, not at all.

What puts the fear of God in me now is that Bird is missing too.

Nobody's seen him in days.

Days, man.

That's not just unusual—it's really goddamn impossible.

See, Bird is in a wheelchair. He can hardly move around, much less pick and choose his spot on earth. He's got one place he usually lands, and that's right here. Street jam once a month only. The rest of the time he decomposes in a garbage heap piled up in the dead center of the Row—a spot he fought for years ago when he still had legs. His carts are still there … but no Bird.

And nobody has seen him in days.

Which can only mean one thing.

Probably.

It's just minutes 'till 11:00 p.m.

Gotta see a man about a horse.

Okay.

Let's do this.

• • •

The Dumpster at 9th and San Antonio is parked behind an old building that used to have a café and some office suites in it. It's all abandoned now, crusty and chipped and plastered with FOR LEASE signs and gang tags. You never see those spray can punks when they do their silly business, even if you live here. They're like ghost dogs, pissing on territory.

The alley behind the building is empty. Dumpster slouching there like a giant tombstone. There's never anything good in the damn thing. Tonight, I expect to see some kind of kid journalist standing next to it. But nothing. Nobody. It's half past 11. He would have waited.

I take a look around.

I feel the hot breeze on my face.

Feel the terrible burn of a million eyes on me.

Really wish I still had that unmarked revolver.

Damn.

Henson … did you come early and bail when I wasn't right on time? Or did you know better than to come at all?

Either way, I can't stay here long.

I have to wrap this up.

Have to …

• • •

A sudden chill ices me hard.
Like the breath of a dead man blown directly into my bones.
I know this feeling.
Know it all too well.
I throw back the lid of the Dumpster and take a look.

• • •

Right there, on top of the black bags of garbage, is a dismembered hand.
A hand holding a digital recorder.

• • •

I run four blocks, back to where Stephanie is waiting in our brand new car, just around the corner of 11th and Lavaca. She asks me how it went. Her voice is rattled, full of panic. I know just how she feels.

The car smells old and dirty—a late 90s Mazda with peeling red paint. I picked a junk heap parked outside the Continental, the kind that's real easy to hotwire the old-fashioned way. Just crack the plastic and twist the wires. She couldn't believe it when I just walked over there and did that. Said it made her feel like an outlaw.

Now she sees the digital recorder in my hand, flecked with blood.

Now, she starts figuring it out.

She asks me one more time how it went … and she's horrified, before I even hit the PLAY button.

• • •

His voice, out of breath, but loud and clear:

"This is a message for Joe Casey. I'm being followed and I don't know how long I have, so I have to make this fast. You wanted to know about what's happening, but I'm still not exactly sure. I can tell you what I do know, and it's not good. These people are monsters. They'll do whatever it takes to protect their interests, and their interests are big. Everything points to it. They've got major money behind them. Splinter cells all over the country. It all has to do with some

kind of big scientific experiment. But they're also stockpiling food and weapons. These are the details I was paid to keep quiet. But I haven't been able to stop. It's just too big to walk away from. I talked to a man last week who was one of their pack rats. He said he's been stocking up canned goods for more than thirty years …"

A crashing, just out of range of the mic.

"… Joe, if you hear this recording, you have to get your people on this. I know you're ex Special Forces and I know you still have connections inside the FBI. You have to blow the whistle … millions of people … you have to …"

The crashing, coming close.

"… dammit … get your hands … off …"

A terrible struggle now.

The sound of fists on flesh, bones cracking.

I hear the recorder hit the floor.

And then … someone picks it up again.

Speaks right into the mic.

A man's voice.

Deep and cruel.

"Yeah, Joe … let's get this party started, huh?"

• • •

The next part of the recording goes on for ten minutes. It's also really clear. The latest goddamn technology, no doubt. They don't gag him, so he can scream a lot. At least two guys working him over. Sounds like they're in an enclosed space. Maybe the kid ran into his house? They wouldn't have been able to take their time like this if it was on the street.

Good Christ, they're torturing this poor kid just for fun.

They're not even asking him any questions.

Is this what happened to Bird and Jimmy and Roy?

It crackles right through the tiny speaker on the digital recorder, and we listen to the whole bloody thing. I see Stephanie's face go from horrified to numb in just a few minutes. She sees my face go from zero to nothing the entire time. I can't flinch. Can't let this damn thing get to me. Have to figure out who these people are. I have to blow the whistle, just like the kid said. Have to find out …

Finally, the kid stops screaming.

There is a horrible silence just a few seconds before the recording ends.

The man's cruel voice is the last thing we hear.

Right against the mic:

"Your leads are growing cold, Joe. Think about it."

• • •

Christ.

They're playing with me.

This whole thing is some sick game.

They knew I was talking to Henson. They knew exactly when our meeting would be. They even know my damn *name*. Which means my worst fear about all this is pretty much confirmed: They had Henson's email tapped. They could be watching us right now. They probably are. They just want to see what my next move is.

A big scientific experiment? What the hell does that even mean?

"Drive," I tell her. "Get us out of here."

She twists the wire and the engine starts.

I expect us to be dead in just a few seconds.

• • •

But that never happens, either.

Six blocks away, almost to capitol building, I look back and there's no car following us. We make a lot of turns through downtown, and still nothing back there. I start itemizing all the other ways those bad guys could be keeping watch on us—all the methods modern spooks use, and I just can't figure it out. Are they letting us run so they can cut us down? Can they possibly be following us from some satellite?

We ditch the car in a lot full of new rides, and I get us a new one fast.

No time to stand on ceremony—I just smash the window of a beat-to-shit Toyota that looks like it just dragged itself out of 1975 and twist the wire.

This time, I'm driving.

Stephanie stays remarkably calm through all this.

Like she's resigned to the inevitable.

I have one last move I can make.

One last lead.

Which was really my first lead.

Herb.

• • •

Just inside the dark expensive forests of Hyde Park I pull the car up to a corner and shut the engine off.

“We walk from here,” I tell her.

“Where to? My house?”

“No. About ten blocks, dead center of the neighborhood. Avenue F. We can walk around in the dark with nobody checking us out. That is if they aren’t already following us.”

“Do you think they are?”

“Could be. But if that’s the case … we’re dead anyway.”

“That makes me feel really great, Joe.”

“I’m … sorry …”

She puts a hand on my lips.

Making special contact.

“Don’t ever apologize to me again, Joe. I’m here because I want to be. My old life is over, for better or worse.”

That’s messed up.

So goddamn messed up.

What do you even call that?

Stockholm? Osmosis? Some kind of bizarre death wish?

“Stephanie … we might die, just like that kid. You heard what they did to him. Just because I’m ready to face that, it don’t mean you are.”

“Doesn’t.”

“What?”

“You said it wrong. ‘It *doesn’t* mean you are’ is the correct grammar.”

I have to shake my head and smile, too.

That has all the absurdity of a French poodle giving an alley cat dating tips.

But …

“Stephanie … I …”

“Tell me later. If we get out of this.”

“There might not be a later.”

“Then I don’t want to know.”

She opens her door, gets out, and looks back in at me:

"Let's be outlaws."

• • •

We get to Herb's house on Avenue F in just seven minutes. It's not up for sale yet. Big Barbara must not have wanted to get rid of the place so soon. We walk into the driveway and Stephanie has the same look on her face.

"So I guess I forgot to ask you, Joe. What exactly *are* we doing here?"

I wink at her:

"Shopping for candy."

• • •

I explain it to her, as we boogie around the place, into the backyard.

"PBMax. I should have known it meant something when I was here last time. A box of candy from the early 90s in his pantry. Which means it's been in storage for 20 years. Which means these sickos have been running their sick game for much longer than that, just like the poor kid said."

"So your friend was a part of this whole thing from the start, whatever it is?"

"Yeah, exactly. I think it's why he wanted to die. Even kept his only daughter in the dark about everything. Told her he had cancer."

But it was really some kind of scientific experiment.

The kind that requires lots of canned food.

"So the guy had some old candy in his pantry? What does that really prove?"

"It could prove that before Herb died, this house was somehow a way station for provisions. And maybe it still is."

• • •

"This is so bad," she says, smiling just after I break the nearest back window.

She says that because she expects an alarm to start screaming and the cops to come running—but, see, that only works when the guy who owns the house is still alive. When he's dead, and the property reverts to his next of kin, what

happens is that they don’t wanna pay the electric bill. Which means no alarms.

Which allows us to come right into Herb’s bedroom.

Still, she keeps making scared noises.

Keeps saying this is so bad.

I would agree with her if I wasn’t so goddamn scared myself.

• • •

We spread out along the bottom floor of the place and check every surface. Look in every nook and cranny. Even check out the kitchen again. All the candy and treats are gone. It’s really hot in here, and we’re sweating like pigs after just a few minutes.

Fortunately, it doesn’t take too long to find what I’m after.

It turns out to be in the basement, which is also real hot—so hot, it’s almost unbearable.

But we tough it out.

And the answer is here.

It had to be, all along.

I was betting my life on it, like Herb was betting his.

• • •

In the center of the broiling concrete bunker is a wooden desk, sitting on a dusty imported throw rug of some kind—looks vaguely middle-eastern.

We pull back the desk and the rug.

There’s a thin sheet of plastic covering a four-foot square in the floor.

Almost blends right in with the concrete.

But it doesn’t.

“And there it is,” I tell her.

• • •

We peel away the plastic and find a thick steel trap-door with a combination lock set into the polished surface. Even though I’m dying from the heat, I have to grin.

“Genius, Herb. You’re a goddamn genius.”

She almost grins back. “Why’s that?”

“This floor is solid concrete, and so are the walls on all sides of us. Probably supported by steel girders, too. Anyone trying to get into Herb’s safe without the combination would have to blow the door with a huge amount of dynamite or C-4, which would bring the whole basement down, and then the house on top of it.”

“So your friend must have been hiding something important.”

“Highly likely. And not just candy.”

She leans in and kisses me on the cheek, sweat pouring down her face. Smiles bigger than ever—like a little girl having Christmas.

That’s … really weird.

“I was just thinking of something,” she says.

“What’s that?”

“I was thinking of an old movie I saw a long time ago. It was that one with Kathleen Turner where she’s a romance novelist. She was searching for an emerald in a cave with her boyfriend, and at one point she looks over at him and smiles and says ‘I can’t believe I’m here, digging for treasure with you.’ That was so romantic. So outlaw. I always wanted a moment like that.”

“Well … I’m not sure if this qualifies, but …”

“Oh yeah, it does.”

She looks right into my eyes.

“You’re the best time I’ve ever had, Joe.”

Kisses me again, this time on the lips, lightly.

Then says:

“Now how are we gonna get this motherfucker open?”

• • •

I tell her I know exactly what the combination is.

It’s an old cypher trick of ours.

Me and Herb did it many times on the job.

Let them know they’ve been in a fight.

Herb left the note and the box of candy, knowing damn well I would figure it out. And if I’m right, the first letter of each word in the sentence should correspond to their places in the alphabet:

12-20-11-20-2-9-1-6

No one else ever would have figured that out.

And the combination works like a charm.

Click.

The door is heavy as hell, just like I expected it to be. Hundreds of pounds, sealing up the secret below tighter than hell. We both have to put our backs into it. Blessed coolness emerges from below, washing over both of us in a billow of frozen air and dim blue light, as we finally get it open.

The door crashes back with a sound like a meteor.

• • •

Down a flight of stone steps, the chamber below is cavernous and freezing. Walled on all sides by concrete. Has to be at least six feet thick. Big, the way you think of football fields as big. So it turns out there's a reason this house takes up such a big chunk of the block it sits on. The damn basement is so huge it could store enough food to starve out doomsday, and there are boxes and boxes stacked up, everywhere I look, in mazes that seem to go on for a quarter mile in every direction, lit up in low-key blue bursts by miners lights and odd lines of fluorescent tubing, which blinked on the second we opened the door. It's probably way below zero in here, and cool cascades of what looks like liquid ice flow down from ceiling ducts, pouring over the precious booty. It all has to be on a separate power grid from the rest of the house. Maybe a private generator. Would have to be to last so long.

"What is this?" she says, shivering in the sudden freeze.

"Don't you get it? Herb knew he was facing doomsday. They must've told his father years ago, before we were even in the service together. His family has been putting all this shit away forever. And Herb left it all to me."

I run my hand along the cardboard boxes, walking down the main aisle.

"Why put it all in your hands?" she says, falling in step behind me, just a few paces.

"Because whatever these people are doing, it must be bad news. He didn't wanna take the coward's way out unless he had a champion. And maybe he really was dying of cancer, who knows? That's the part I can't really figure out all the way."

The light dims towards the end of the aisle.

I pull a box from the top of the stack and throw it on the frozen concrete.

On the box is stenciled, in tiny letters:

1999 MAIN STREET
WAYWARD PINES, IDAHO
83401

"Wayward Pines," I say. "Ever heard of that town before?"
"No," she tells me.
"I've never been to Idaho."
"Neither have I."
"Maybe we should plan a trip there."
"Maybe."
Her voice, cold and distant now, like something frozen.
I ignore it, shivering, the sweat on my body starting to ice.
I tear open the box and realize it was vacuum sealed.
There's Twinkies inside, fresh as harvest day.
Of course.

• • •

Just ahead, at the end of the long corridor of boxes is an open area, walled in concrete, with a row of black metal filing cabinets covered with ice. There's just enough room for us to squeeze in and take a look.

The cabinets are unlocked, all six of them.

The pull-out drawers are all dated, back to 1970.

They all contain papers and files and photos.

Profiles on hundreds of people.

We move through them quickly, and pretty soon I'm seeing shipping manifests, bills of lading, things that look like memos to a head office.

The name of the town comes up hundreds of times.

Wayward Pines.

As we get closer to today's date, the paper trail thins. Lots of handwritten memos now, some pages typed the old-fashioned way. Herb's MO. The man never owned a computer in his life, even as the ultimate superspook.

The last filing cabinet is almost empty, except for the first pull-out drawer, which is labeled ominously:

THE CANCER PROJECT.

• • •

Well, it sure gets my attention.

Have a feeling that's the idea.

It's a creepy joke … and here comes the punchline.

Inside the pull-out drawer are MRI scans, doctor's reports, bills from hospitals, and a thick file of letters, written in longhand. I look closer and realize that most of the letters are actually crappy Xeroxes. They're all from Herbert, addressed to his daughter. He made copies before he sent them, probably using a home fax machine, based on all the lines and smears. The letters all talk about his sickness. They ask for Barbara's forgiveness. All the things you say to your daughter when you're battling something you won't beat. I scan them and I see pretty much everything the big lady was talking about.

He never mentions Wayward Pines once.

Talks about working for the man named Pilcher exactly twice.

Herb's last black-bag operation, involving hundreds of people, all of them being spied on and vetted for some purpose he never discloses.

Talks about how it rots his soul to be what he is.

A superspook with superpowers.

And no soul left to lose.

It's all very cryptic—he never talks details. But he brings up the name. Pilcher. Says that Pilcher has been his boss for 17 years and that's about it. Which could mean anything, really. But he mentions my name a few times, too. Tells his daughter he loves her a lot and that everything he's ever done has been for the good of humanity. But you can tell this is all a front of some sort. He's hiding something major, just like Henson said.

And Barbara saw right through it.

These letters set her right the hell off.

And after he was found dead, she came right the hell to me.

Just like he knew she probably would.

• • •

And, sure enough.

The last letter is not a Xerox.

It's dated just a few weeks ago.

It's not addressed to her.

• • •

Joe,

If you are reading this, then you've managed to figure out a few things. But since you are here, I might as well come completely clean. After all, you deserve it. Your detective work would have been admirable, getting as far as this letter. I hope my daughter has not come with you. This letter is for your eyes, not hers. I left the key to this stockpile of information in your hands, Joe, because I am sparing my daughter from all these horrors, and because I am ashamed of my lies and half-truths to her. My shame is something that will live long after I die, and I guess I've made a sort of peace with that. The larger truth that I'm leaving it with you, Joe, because I know you'll appreciate the gravity of what I am going to explain to you now, and I hope with all of my heart that it will wake you up from the trance you've been in for the last ten years. It truly saddens me to see what you've become. Because what you've become is what everyone else has become in this thing we call the civilized world. People have gone to sleep on their feet. They don't want real answers to anything. They crave stimulation and entertainment and release from true responsibility, not a true solution to the problems that plague us as a species. We've been fooled into accepting a belief system that robs us of our very birthright as human beings.

The man I've mentioned before, the one named Pilcher, knows this. And he's had enough of it, just like I have. The difference is that what he plans to do is the equivalent of treating dandruff by decapitation.

And I am having you murder me because I cannot go through with it, Joe.

I do not have cancer. I never did.

The lab reports and hospital records and other things you will find in these files are not real, but elaborate and expensive forgeries, purchased by Pilcher's organization in order to cover the trail and provide a reasonable alibi for my eventual so-called death.

I've done much more than this also.

I've been a part of a great machine that has reached out all across the world and brought back other true believers. These people have done deals with every imaginable government agency to make it happen. FBI, CIA, even the United States Secret Service. It still sickens me that all anyone really needs these days to bring about the end of the world is cold hard cash. And a few true believers. It's a terrifying equation that would have made the ancient Pharaohs lust for such power. I'm talking about the absolute, unlimited ability to wipe out every human soul on the planet, Joe.

What is that all worth to one man in the end?
A lifetime of regret, an eternity in hell?
I am fine with only one of these options.
In this basement, you will find the evidence of everything I am explaining to you now. The names and the faces. The plans we hatched and executed. And much, much more. What was not recorded, I wrote down in detailed reports. Every meeting I sat in. Every experiment I was a part of. Everything that was ever said to me at any time. I wrote it all down on paper, and put that paper here, in case a day like this ever came. Because the lie of post-modern man is a terrible lie—that we've become electronic gods, with all of our secrets stored in some non-existent information cloud. That cloud will burst in any event. Humanity must be allowed to come back to its purest state. But not this way. Not the way Pilcher wants to do it. We can't let them. It's the most awful sin ever imagined by anyone.
Bring these files to the right people, Joe.
Stop this thing from happening.
Come out of your coma and wake up the rest of the world.
Please.

Your friend,
Herbert

• • •

I lean against the filing cabinet, almost frozen solid.
I can feel Stephanie's breath on my neck.
I am stunned where I stand, almost unable to move.
Finally, I manage to say:
"This is crazy."
"Yes, Joe. It is."
And I almost don't even register the change in her voice before she lunges at me from behind.

• • •

In one half-second, I spin, almost not fast enough, and her blow carries itself through open space, just to my right, so fast that I feel it slice my own frozen

breath as I spin in a half circle, reaching out to catch her arm in the next half-second. I hear and smell and feel her shocked grunt as my hands clamp down on her wrist and upper bicep, and I am amazed that my training kicks in so instinctively—but it turns out she's trained also. She reacts almost inhumanly fast.

In one more second she's jabbed me in the stomach and torn herself away, coming out in front of me in a classic kung-fu attack crouch.

One foot aimed forward.

Perfect.

Professional.

Smiling.

I almost find myself smiling back at her.

"I was counting the seconds, lady. You must've known I was on to you."

"Actually, I didn't."

She swipes at me while her words are still hanging in the frozen air between us, and I manage to duck all three punches before the fourth nails me center well up, almost in the throat. It's a love tap, but it knocks me for a loop. Pain explodes through my upper body. My ribs hold. My knees buckle.

She's a badass.

I wasn't expecting this.

All I knew was that she was full of shit.

She sees me stagger back and smiles again, hopping in place like a boxer. "So tell me, honey … what exactly *did* give me away? I'd like to know. For future reference and all …"

She swipes again while talking, but the trick doesn't work this time. Telegraphs her next move and I duck it. She sails through the air as I bounce off the wall of filing cabinets and back deeper into the box-lined catacombs. Keeps coming at me, relentless. Still smiling. Her face, smug and horrible.

Not Nurse Stephanie anymore.

Not at all.

"You started laying it on pretty thick," I tell her, suddenly out of breath, the pain from that last jab just now starting to register, the chilled air almost blinding now. "You were pretty convincing at the hotel, even after you threw yourself at me … but …"

"Oh come on, Joe. It was *fun*—"

She swipes again and I duck her again.

Just testing me.

"Your body is trained," I manage to get out, my breath doing double laps in my lungs, frozen fire starting to creep in. "I noticed that when we slept together.

And ‘*you’re the best time I’ve ever had*’? That was pretty over the top. Did you really think I would buy it?”

“You *were* buying it, Joe. All men buy it. Even a haunted man like you.”

And with that, the honeymoon is over.

And I mean *over*, baby.

Her snide vanity vanishes completely as she comes in, much harder now. I have to use everything I’ve got to fight her in this small space, and I get the shit knocked out of me for my trouble. I see the blur of her right fist as it pile-drives my stomach. The whip of her spinning wheelkick as it swipes my legs, putting me right on my back. The plunging blur of her right foot as it slams down fast for the kill, coming in right on top of me. I can’t roll out of the way when she does that because the aisle between the rows of boxes she’s backed me into is way too narrow, so I reach up and try to deflect her descent with both hands, slapping palms and fingers against her ankle. It barely stops the killer stomp and I feel the gnashing tendons of her well-honed muscles under my palms. I feel the terrible hatred coursing through her blood. The white hot desire to punish, to destroy … it’s almost overwhelming …

Darnell’s face, like a demon in the dark room …

Like everything that hurts …

Rolling mahogany laughter …

NO!

I throw her off me with everything I’ve got and come up on two feet.

Come up fast and hard.

Okay, you bitch.

She stumbles back and turns her fall into an expert tuck-and-roll as I press the attack. No more talking. No more bullshit.

Gotta end this fast and figure out what she—

Something white hot and ice cold happens to me in the next second. I feel a laser beam slice my skull. And then she’s a blur again, hammering back and forth across my face. I smell her cheap flowery perfume again and it mixes with my blood. I drop to my knees, almost paralyzed by the pain, blood sheeting down my temple.

And she stands over me, bouncing in place.

“It would be lots better if you just let me take you, Joe. You’ve been a good soldier and led us right to the prize. Nobody else on earth would have known the combination to get through that cement wall. But you’re in no shape to fight me now. How’s your head?”

I touch up there and feel the torn stitches.

The gash, reopened.

Sheets of oozing agony shimmering her image into freezing neon waves.

"I won't hurt you anymore, Joe. Just let me take you."

Have to get up.

Have to get up now …

"And, incidentally, I thought '*You're the best time I ever had*' was pretty good. I liked that movie. It was very girl-power. Would you like to know what happened to the woman who wrote that movie?"

I try to move for her while she's still talking.

To match her sneakiness, her ferocity.

But she bitch-slaps me again and I fall to one knee.

In terrible pain now—my head about to explode.

"She's dead. The writer of that movie, I mean. Her macho stuntman boyfriend rolled her brand-new Porsche and killed her back in 1985. Isn't that … *just like a man*?"

You're the best time I've ever had …

Best time I've ever had …

Never been anybody's … best time … before …

"That's it, Joe. Stay down. Save the fight for later. You're about to pass out anyway. It's all pretty much over. For now."

Best time …

Time …

"Oh, and by the way, we haven't been properly introduced. My name isn't really Stephanie, you know. It's Miss Prescott …"

The girl screams my name.

I race towards my own death.

It's all pretty much over …

"… but you can call me Pam."

They bring him into the room.

Marie waits for him, her arms tied behind her back, on her knees in the center of the bed. She's crying for them not to hurt Joe. Begging them to stop and please let her man go. Do whatever you want to me, but leave him alone.

He thinks that's such an awful joke.

Still trying to save him, even in this moment.

He loves her for it.

But this is the moment when his love will turn against him.

When everything that was good just a few hours earlier will explode.

It smells like evil things in here.

Like things he thought he could escape and outsmart.

The two children, Amy and Chad, are near the window, also hogtied with their hands behind them. Also crying, but not with sounds he can clearly detect. Silently, please, so the neighbors can't hear, or we'll do very bad things to both of you. They've been instructed. They've been readied.

They sob silently so the neighbors can't hear.

He sees two other men hold guns to the children's heads.

They look like nothing.

Blank soldiers, on the front lines, like all the rest.

Sitting in the bed is the man who threatened him just one week ago.

Darnell Washington.

King of the monsters.

He came personally.

He leans against the headboard, relaxing casually, his ebony skin a dark contrast to the white-trash punks he's always got doing his dirty work. Darnell once said that true power was controlling everything that ever kept you down—like the Kennedys kept us down, like the mafia keeps us down, all of them dirty white boys with silver spoons and plenty of bullets. It's easy to know what makes it all tick, baby.

Easier, still, to bring the hate.

His big voice booms in the room.

Strong and hearty, like beef stew.

Meaty.

He says he is going to tie Joe's wife to the ceiling by her wrists and let Sticky

Charlie go to work on her. After they've had a chance to talk, of course. After Joe agrees to hand over his evidence files. After Joe agrees to be lapdog for the Organization. All of the bad blood between them will go away, and all will be forgotten. All at a price, of course.

Joe is the best there is at busting bad guys, after all.

Bust them for ME, Darnell says.

Joe hears the words, and the pit of his stomach tangles with so many terrible emotions. He wants to smash Darnell and Sticky Charlie. Wants to erase them from human memory. Wants to piss on the graves of their fathers.

Darnell sees that hatred on his face, and he laughs.

Rich, mahogany rolls of elegant laughter.

While he's still laughing, Darnell says he's going to make the children watch what happens in the next hour.

So there will be no illusions.

So everyone will be on the same page.

Marie kneels on the bed and cries to let her kids go.

Please just kill us and be done with it.

Just let my children live.

Don't do this.

Darnell laughs again.

A terrible sound.

He says Sticky Charlie will be here soon with his box of magic.

The toys, just for kids—and grown-ups, too.

Just enough time for us to have our talk.

Darnell motions to the goons holding the kids, and they drag the kids over. Joe tries to do something, but he is held fast by the guys behind him and pain shoots through his arms and legs and body.

Darnell takes Amy in his arms while Chad watches.

First blood, Darnell says.

Watch closely.

There will be a quiz later.

The girl screams Joe's name.

Joe sees himself racing towards his own death.

It's all pretty much over.

And that's when the world explodes …

PART THREE

Monsters

CHAPTER NINE

I swim for the surface, the dark pulling me down and down.

Marie … are you still there?

Did I really save you?

I fight against it, trying to see her face again.

Trying to beat the monster, like I always did before.

Like I always do now.

Marie … Amy … Chad …

In one last burst, I break the surface.

Plunging up from the depths.

The smell of ammonia and rubber greets me.

• • •

"Hey, hey, handsome. How are we today?"

She stands just feet away from me. Black leather pants and military camouflage tank top. Her professional curves displayed. Wanting me to look.

Her smile, a serpentine whiplash.

Terrible.

"You should be much better now. In the head, I mean. We patched you up again and pumped you full of the good stuff. Have to keep you nice and healthy, don't we?"

She moves closer.

My arms and legs feel stiff and bound.

"After all … that's what a good nurse does best, right?"

Winks.

Then she leans in and licks my chin quickly, playfully. She still smells like cherries, only now the cherries are sour. Like bad candy. My arms are bound to a rubber wall, hands above my head, shackled in steel. My feet touch the floor, bare, like the rest of my body. It's cold in here, and my skin shivers. She runs her fingers along my chest, long red nails dragging in a loving trace over my heart.

Keeps smiling.

Terribly.

"How are we feeling? *Here*, I mean. Where it matters."

My heart. All that's left when the badness comes down.

I shake off the mire of sleep and try to clear my throat.

No sound comes out.

"It's probably a little early to answer me. But don't worry, baby. We'll be chatting up a storm in no time. I want to know what's on that very interesting mind of yours."

I bet you do. You always did.

Bitch.

"So while you're kind of … getting it together, I guess … let me tell you a fun little story. I'll try to make it as interesting as when it was first told to me. But I have to warn you in advance that this sort of thing isn't usually my department. I'm what they call a *doer*, not a *teller*. I get in there and I make things happen for guys who spin these yarns much better than me. But what the hell, right?"

I try to move my arms.

It's about as effective as willing down a steel wall.

"Oh yeah … sorry about that, Joe. I can't have you getting all violent on me again, can I? You're in my special place, and you won't be escaping. But I won't be throwing any more of those wicked rabbit punches, either. Gotta admit, I wasn't expecting you to be so scrappy. I thought ten or fifteen years as a civilian might've softened you up a little … but then again, that's the whole reason you were chosen in the first place. Your tenacious nature. Your inability to give up. The way you've held on to life all these years, even as a grungy shadow on the concrete. I have to tell you that not only do I admire your spirit … but I think it will come in handy. Would you like to know what I mean by that?"

Sure.

Why not?

It's all pretty much over anyway.

Damn.

"Okay, goodie! Then let's get back to my story. It's a real doozy, and I think you'll like it a lot."

My throat finally clears, and a noise bubbles to the surface through my disgust. Kind of sounds like the word "*doozy*" thrown back to her as a question—the way you do sometimes when you've just heard something that just seems … well, dumb.

Her face lights up when I say the word. "Oh, hey there! You're already talking! So cool!"

I try to make another word happen, but it's not happening.

"And yes … it's a *dooooozy*, baby. I like that expression. It's kind of dated and ironic. I like the old school, don't you?"

More garbage comes up from my throat.

I think I was trying to say "doesn't everyone?"

She doesn't understand me at all.

Makes a weird face.

"Whatever you say, baby. Let's move on."

She starts to pace in a small circle.

I notice the rest of the room for the first time.

It's a chamber of horrors.

All the walls are made out of the same orange rubber I'm handcuffed to. Lots of spaces for lots of other bodies, all around. But the spaces are vacant. We're the only ones here. Weird bondage racks all around the room in strange configurations, constructed like metal spider webs in various spots. Some of them look like modded exercise machines, others look like bare metal frames, designed to hold a victim in place through elaborate chains and leather straps.

One entire wall is dominated by rows of equipment. Everything from riding crops to what look like power tools. My eyes adjust on one of the rows, and, yeah, sure enough—she's got circular saws and cordless drills hanging up there.

Horrifying, really.

If that's your thing.

The floor is raw concrete and there's a drain in the center. Some blood washed up in the grate, swirling there. I see a hose coiled against another wall.

Last stop, Joe.

You're officially screwed.

Again.

• • •

She sees me checking out all the gear, takes a little look around, smirking.

Then comes back at me with the knowing grin of an imp, cocks her head thoughtfully. Takes a deep breath. Smiles sweetly. And lays her story on me finally.

It's nothing I would have expected.

At all.

• • •

"So have you ever thought about *traveling through time,* Joe? About what it would be like to go hundreds of years into the future or the past? I used to think about that a lot when I was younger. I would read books about history and wonder what all those people were really like. Because history is only written by the winners, right? You can't ever *really know* what went on because nobody who is alive right now was actually there to see it. That sort of makes learning about our past as members of the human race really frustrating. Or at least that's the way it was for me, when I was in school. My teachers always said I used to ask too many questions. You know, leave history to the winners."

She gets closer to me.

Gets really in my face.

"Well … *fuck that*, Joe. I wanna know for sure. Just like you always wanted to know for sure when you played Sherlock Holmes all those times, back in the day."

She gets a thought that makes her head tilt playfully.

"Incidentally, baby, who *was* your favorite fictional detective when you were a kid? Was it Holmes? Or Mike Hammer? Sam Spade, maybe? Mine was always Nancy Drew. I read all those books, too, when I was growing up. Of course, I had to grow up a lot faster than most kids … but I digress … where were we?"

I cough again, and this time the noise makes sense.

I say:

"Baby Boy Burke."

"Um … excuse me?"

"That's my favorite fictional detective."

"Baby Boy Burke? Never heard of that one, Joe."

"You should have. He's a lot like me."

"I'll see about getting the books. Who wrote them?"

"Andrew Vachss. You'd like the guy. He's a lawyer who specializes in child abuse cases. Wrote the Burke books on the side, between trials."

“Why would you think I’d like an author like that?”

“Because someone hurt you as a kid. Really hurt you badly.”

“I guess I wasn’t the only one feeling empathy back there in that motel room.”

“You were playing me, I was reading you.”

“Whatever you say, smart guy.”

She winks at me again, keeping it light. But I can see it on her, drawn big and broad and bad, like childish sidewalk art: The terror of her childhood. Escaping into history. Reading Nancy Drew. Trapped by everything.

“Anyway, Joe, *my story* …”

She starts pacing again.

“… so what if someone was to walk up to you one day and say that you really *could* travel in time? That you could reach out and be a part of history? That you could become one of those winners who gets to write the books? Wouldn’t that be *something*?”

Yeah.

Something.

She sees me rolling my eyes and waves a finger.

“Now, now, baby … let’s keep an open mind. Anything’s possible when we dare to dream.”

Yeah.

Right.

“See, it turns out, Joe, that time travel *is possible*. But it has some rules. Those things Einstein and all those other galactic party-poopers warned us about. You can’t go backwards in history because it’s already happened. Time is linear, and two objects of the same mass cannot occupy the same spot on that line. Simple logic, really. But … if you thought about how to do it … I mean, *really gave it some thought* in a linear way … well, you might be able to travel *forward* in time.”

My voice cracks. “The future hasn’t happened at all. It’s the same thing as the past being history.”

“Very good, baby. Now you’re getting into the spirit of things. Truth is, it’s not possible to go *either way* in history, not in the step-into-a-time-machine way that you see in all those movies.”

“So what the hell are you—”

“Don’t rush me. Rest those vocal chords. You’re going to need all your air in just a while.”

She winks.

“So … let’s put on our Nancy Drew hats and figure this thing out. How does

one travel *forward in time*, when time travel is theoretically impossible? Well it turns out the answer has been right on the table all along. Because of just what you said: The future *hasn't happened yet*. But, thinking along *those lines*, we're all technically traveling into the future every day of our lives, aren't we? If someone could figure out how to stay alive long enough, you could keep doing it forever, couldn't you? Remember how Buck Rogers traveled five hundred years into the future, Joe? He was frozen as a young man, and woke up later as the oldest man on earth. Simple as that."

"That's not really time travel."

"It would be to the sleeper. You wouldn't even notice the break if it was done right. You'd go under, maybe have a few freaky dreams … and then, presto."

"You're talking about *suspended animation*, not actual—"

"Exactly, Joe! You've totally got it!"

She leans in and licks my ear this time.

Winks again.

"You're just so goddamn smart, aren't you, baby? Gold stars all around. Suspended animation is *exactly* what I'm talking about."

So …

Oh no.

Oh Jesus.

"Ahhhh … I can see your brain working overtime, now. You're just burning up that Nancy Drew hat now, aren't you?"

This can't be real.

What she's saying just can't actually be happening.

But that kid Henson knew something big was going down.

Something damn huge with big money behind it.

A scientific experiment.

"You can't be seriously saying to me …"

"Oh yes, that's exactly what I'm saying, Joe! The people I work with have figured all this shit out, and in just a few months, the shit's all happening. We're stepping into the time machine."

She gets right in my face again.

Sour cherries, dead serious now.

"And we're going two thousand years into the future."

• • •

It takes a whole minute for the gravity of everything to kick in.

But then it does.

I get past the first vale of incredulity—the same kind of paralyzed idiot-response that keeps most people from eliminating the impossible, to find whatever remains, which must be the truth. And I realize it *must be the truth*.

This is what's big enough to kill all those people.

Big enough to wire up a conspiracy so huge, it reaches everywhere.

On the street, in hospitals.

Herb.

I see it all now.

Like a grid that makes absolute sense.

Completely terrifying sense.

"They put me charge of finding people like you, Joe. Because that's where I come from. The poor and disenfranchised are always a lot quicker to join up when they have so little to lose. Think about that for a second. Say you're a bum on the street and some rich fella walks up and offers you the keys to paradise? You'd take the goddamn keys, just like I took the goddamn keys."

"So why not just offer me the *goddamn keys*, lady? Why all this elaborate cloak and dagger shit?"

"Ooooh, well now that's the *real* question, isn't it?"

She shivers dramatically and licks her lips like a little girl.

"This is the part I always loved best in the Nancy Drew books, by the way. I don't know how Baby Boy Burke does it … but when the cases get cracked at the end of all the Nancy Drew stories, the bad guy runs down his evil scheme, or Nancy explains it all … and everything comes together. You see how it all fits. It's all so cool when that happens. You see the overlogic and it all locks into place. So here we are, baby. And here we go."

She kisses me again, only in the air this time.

Gets back to pacing around.

"As you know already, your friend Herbert *was* with us a long while. In many ways. I knew him well. Really surprised me when he cracked and had himself killed. We knew it was you who pulled the trigger, but for a long time we had no idea why you did it. We also knew that Herb had to be stacking up info somewhere about what we were up to, because that big bitch was investigating his death and asking around about some very important people."

"Pilcher."

"That's right, honey … *Pilcher*. David Pilcher. That's my boss. He was working with your boy Herbert directly. Just like you read in the letter. His whole fake cancer thing. It was something very important to our project.

Something only a few people in the organization actually know about. And when I say a few people—I mean, *three goddamn people*, honey. That's me, David, and another man named Arnold Pope. Incidentally, Arnold was the scary voice you heard on Henson's recorder. He does really good work, doesn't he?"

Yeah.

Just like Darnell Washington.

The monster I've kept down for so long …

She sees me going away to the memories, and I feel her slap me.

"Stay with us, Joe. Don't space out now. I know you're a haunted man, but we can't have you unfocused during the big reveal, can we?"

What …

Did she just read my mind?

"Yeah, I know all about what happened to you, too. I have a thick file. I've read your hospital psych reports, studied the case logs. I've even had a look at the records that were sealed by the federal Witness Protection Program. You were a bad boy, and you paid big time. I know that's why you went on the street. For your wife and your children. I know about Darnell Washington and the Organization. Know what they did to you and how you escaped. I know that Herbert helped wire it all up for you. It's what made you a perfect *replacement* for Herbert, really. David never agreed with me about that at first. He said it was a little too perfect. But I said we could make it work."

How could she have known all that?

How much money and power is this David Pilcher guy worth?

How …

"I'd been watching you on the street for weeks, after Herbert first contacted you through the classifieds. I was intrigued by you. I activated our deep moles to keep tabs. Jimmy and Roy. And old Bird, too. Those are all *my guys*. You kind of had that figured out, too. Real homeless people promised a ride to the future, if they just reported in on a daily basis. We had your every move pegged. But when Herb's daughter started prying her big face into everything, I knew it had to mean that Herb had left more than a few loose ends. I knew maybe you were privy to a few of them. So I decided to bring you in …"

Her face gets angry now.

She fumes a little.

I'm ashamed to admit it makes her sexy as hell.

"… but those shooters of mine blew the whole thing. They went into the IHOP blasting, instead of just being cool. They were supposed to play the part of spooks and throw you two in an unmarked van. We were going to interrogate you in separate rooms and then maybe work you and Barbara into the family like

the others. But those two idiots … they went in shooting. And would you like to know why?"

No.

Doesn't matter, after all.

But tell me anyway.

"Because they were *my slaves*, honey. And they liked what I did to them when they made mistakes a little too much. A week earlier, I handed out some pretty radical punishments. But they wanted more than just a few missing teeth this time. They wanted me to *annihilate them*. So they pulled a boner so big, I'd have no choice but to castrate the both of them with a rusty spoon. How the hell do you like that?"

I don't like it.

At all.

"So you wanna know what I did to them, Joe? Right here in this room? Would you like to know what dreadful awful punishment I laid on those two glassy-eyed excuses for humanity?"

She gets close and smiles big again.

Motions to the nearby rack of power tools.

And she says:

"Nothing. I did *nothing* to them."

I stare back at her, not sure of what to say.

"Don't believe me, Joe? I probably wouldn't either, being in your position and all. But it's very true …"

She goes over to the rack.

Pulls a cordless power drill from its place.

Cradles it lovingly in both hands.

Comes back over to me.

Hits the trigger three times rapidly—the sound, like a whining sweet air blast in my skull, just inches away.

"*Scary*, isn't it, Joe. You can get a lot from someone in your position by just *showing* them a piece of hardware like this. I'll miss my special room when I leave Texas. I've really enjoyed working here. It's therapeutic. But when a crazy sick boy *begs you for it* …"

The drill, right in my face now.

Quick bursts.

"… well, that's just no fun at all, is it?"

She lowers the drill.

Revealing only her winking smile.

"So I let the sick boy hope for a few minutes, then put away my tools and

shot him dead. Then I shot the other kid, too. Entirely without ceremony. They were both begging me to hurt them the whole damn time, too. Pathetic."

She walks back to the rack.

Replaces the drill carefully.

"After that, I knew I had to be really careful. I knew what hospital you were in, and how easy it would be to go there and take a nurse's place. I even had three days to plan the whole thing while you were dead to the world. I checked the records at Brackenridge, wired it all up. The whole thing came off beautifully. We eased you awake slowly, threw some shit your way about Big Barbara … then sprung the trap."

"All that shit at the hospital …"

"Yep. That was all us. I needed to gain your confidence and knew you wouldn't trust cops, so I wrote a scenario where you would escape from them and run for your life, then get in Nurse Stephanie's car. My boys routed you right into that parking lot, where I was waiting for you."

"That can't be true. It's too perfect …"

"Perfect, my ass. I had to blow away one of my best guys to really sell it. Poor Officer Darr. And after that, baby … it was all role playing. I really got into it. Wanted to see how your mind worked, up close. See if you'd follow the trail, which you did. See what you knew and what you could find out. You were so fast on your feet. That bit when you nailed Darr as one of ours through the unmarked revolver was brilliant."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I have to admit, Pam. You were pretty good, too. Was that the real Nurse Stephanie's apartment we went to? Were you wearing her perfume?"

"Naturally."

"What did you do with her?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Probably not."

"It *was* fun, Joe. All of it. When it came down, you were a real man. A passionate man."

She walks back over to me.

Puts her hands on her hips.

"We've been looking for a few good, passionate men."

• • •

It washes over me again, and I have to laugh this time.

So they had my number from the start.

Me and Herb.

That just leaves one question.

The big question.

"So Herbert joined your secret police force, huh? He ascended to some glorious rank inside your weird time travel cult, whatever the hell it is?"

"Yep. Mostly, his job was finding new recruits. At first anyway. You read Herb's confession right there in the letter."

She smiles like the devil.

I hang my head a second, my upper arms burning.

"He also said something about the end of the world."

"He did, didn't he?"

"You people are insane."

"Totally."

"I'm not kidding, lady. I think you're all batshit crazy. This whole thing is full of holes."

"Are you a scientist?"

"No."

"Then shut the fuck up. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Whatever, lady."

"You should leave the real think-tank work to people much smarter than us. Because you and me—we're *doers*. We get things done for the bright boys. Anyway, it doesn't matter what you think. David says the collapse of the human genome is inevitable in any event. We'll wake up a couple of thousand years from now, and the human race of today will have torn itself apart. We'll be the masters of the world tomorrow."

She's right.

By then, everything that's happening now—it'll all be the stuff of legends and bad religions. If anyone is even left to tell the tale.

Anyone at all.

She organizes her grin into something even more sinister, seeing that I'm almost convinced. It's awful and final.

"It's hard to make people believe in the possibility of becoming God, baby. But some people get it. That kid Gerald Henson, for instance—he almost had the whole thing figured out. He was watching the street jam bums like a hawk. He made his biggest mistake when he agreed to meet you, though. We had his G-mail tagged. So we used him to lead you back to Herb's basement."

"You knew about his stash all along. Just needed me to open the door for

you.”

“Exactly, baby.”

“Nice touch with the severed hand.”

“I thought so. You like that?”

“Gotta hand it to you.”

“Ooooohh, let’s hear it for the smartie boy!”

“Why didn’t you just blow up the house? Would have been simpler.”

“And louder. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re also sneaky fuckers. Big explosions in places like Hyde Park tend to attract lots of attention.”

God damn.

I mean, god fucking DAMN.

I shake my head, almost going limp in the chains.

“Look, just get on with it. If you’re going to torture me …”

“Why on earth would I want to torture such a smart boy? Especially when he’s so good in the sack …”

She makes a quick grab for my lower regions. Holds the package for a few seconds. I expect her to lick my face again, but it never happens.

She just hovers there, her hand on the goods, almost whispering:

“You *will* join us, smartie boy. You’ll go down in history. You’ll touch the lives of billions of people. You’ll become immortal. And two thousand and fifty years from now, your legacy will still be known. You’ll be known as the hero of Wayward Pines. *Wayward Joe*, baby. Won’t that be nice?”

“If you say so.”

She smiles sweetly, her face suddenly softer.

“You know … I *could* have really fallen for you, Joe. Maybe in some other life, where things could have been a little bit different. Maybe we would have met each other in some shitty blues bar and I would have heard you play the harp and our eyes might have met across the smoke and the blue lights … and it would have been magic.”

“Oh, please …”

“I mean it. Just because I tricked you, it doesn’t mean the passion wasn’t real.”

“If you say so.”

“I have nothing to gain by lying to you now, Joe.”

“So what? So we had a good roll in the hay. And now I’m chained to a rubber wall. Tell me something, Pam—does this approach usually work out for you?”

“Smartie.”

“You’re just a sick bitch. And you don’t even know why. You’ve been taken

in by con men who want the world to end. Because you want to smash something. You want slaves. You're angry and deluded."

"Maybe you're right. But maybe angry is a *good thing*. Maybe we have to get our hands dirty to save ourselves."

"That doesn't even make sense, Pam."

"Think what you want. But I wanted *you* from the second I saw your pictures. From the second I read about you. I wondered what kind of lover you would be. How your rhythms would match up with the ebb and flow of your life's story. How easy it might be to seduce you … or make you think we needed each other. That doesn't happen a lot. And for someone like me … that really is a kind of love. I only wish it could have happened in some other life. Because in the life we're in now, there's just an ending. Where Nancy Drew tells on the bad guys, and the book closes."

"You're forgetting one thing, though."

"What's that, handsome?"

"At the end of every mystery novel, when the plot unfolds … what happens next is that the good guys always win."

"You're right about that, Joe. You are."

She leans forward and kisses me.

Gently.

Lovingly.

Like Nurse Stephanie once did it.

Then she pulls away and speaks softly:

"But this time *we're* the good guys. That's the big difference to our ending. You won't get away and blow the whistle. You won't miraculously escape from certain death and kill a bunch of bad guys and save the girl and emerge triumphant. Because if you did that, we wouldn't get to be rulers of the future. And the future needs to be ruled. By real heroes. By fighters."

"You still don't make any sense to me, Pam. Even if what you're telling me is true."

"I don't have to make sense. I'm a crazy bitch, remember?"

A wicked smile spreading across her face.

Terrible.

Final.

Beautiful.

"And you're a fighter, Joe. I like the way you fight. Like you fought Darnell. Like you fought yourself all those years, to keep the monster down."

Her hand comes out of nowhere, and I see the wooden paddle.

It hits the upper meat of my right shoulder in a bolt of lightning.

The pain is almost unbearable.
“Fight it, Joe. Fight hard.”
Then it hits me again.
Ouch.
She’s laughing now.
And the laugher follows me all the way down.
Into the black.
Fight me, Joe.
Fight …
me …

CHAPTER TEN

The explosion happens hard and fast.

It comes with such brutal force and surprise that it knocks him right off his feet.

He has no idea what's happening at first.

He feels the cool breeze from outside and splinters of glass scrape by his skin, the window shattering in a big-time blowout that puts the big two goons who were holding their guns on the kids right on their backs, blood oozing from bullet holes, their faces scrawled with dumb shock. They have no idea what's hit them, no idea what's happening, even as they flop on the ground like electrified fish, doing one last spastic twitch of the death nerve.

Darnell knows exactly what's happening.

He lets go of Amy and grabs the woman, who is still tied up, and throws her in front of him like a shield as the whole room detonates. It's a sudden maelstrom of gunfire and flying glass, invisible bullets flying everywhere, ripping up the place. It lasts for just five or six seconds, but it's the longest, most surreal six seconds Joe has ever experienced. He registers the whole thing in strobe-light blurs. Little bits and pieces, like flickers of human movement and flying debris showing up in millisecond tracer-burns.

He sees his wife screaming in the center of it.

Darnell holding the gun to her head.

The children throwing themselves on the floor, screaming.

Joe sees red laser beams cut through the room, choosing their targets.

The bad guys all fall down dead.

The bullets just miss the good guys.

Darnell screams that he's going to kill the woman, his rich meaty voice telling them all to back off now or her brains will hit the ceiling.

Joe just stands there in a fog as he watches the whole terrible scene unfold,

wondering what just happened. It's like someone just hit the room with a nightmare gun, and suddenly nothing makes any sense at all.

The FBI strike team pours in from every direction.

Crashing through the windows.

Aiming right at Darnell, who still holds the gun to Marie's face.

Back off now, you goddamn pigs.

Joe sees it all happen in slow motion.

Knows Darnell can't win, not with the whole building surrounded by feds.

They've been saved, but he knows Darnell will do it, just to spite him.

Knows he will kill the woman.

Joe puts up a feeble hand to stop him as the FBI guys close the noose from all sides, their laser beams fighting for space in the center of his forehead.

They are telling him to drop the woman.

Let her go now.

Do it or we will shoot you.

Darnell looks right at Joe and tells him he is dead.

No matter what happens, man, you are DEAD, Joe.

You brought the cops, you betrayed my trust.

You should have just let me torture your woman to death in front of your kids' terrified eyes. Should have let it all happen the way nature intended it.

NOW YOU'RE DEAD.

But it turns out Darnell's not an idiot, either.

He lets the girl go.

Lets the blacksuits arrest him.

It's all a blur after that.

Joe is holding his wife, Darnell down on the ground in cuffs.

The kids, still crying deep in shock.

But alive.

Somehow … alive.

The whole house turns into a crime scene in the aftermath, red and blue lights bathing everything, overlapping voices, sirens closing from every direction, cop cars and FBI wagons and EMS vehicles all fighting for space in the street and the yard.

In the center of it all, Joe holds his family close.

Herbert has his hand on his shoulder, still in his FBI blacks.

Says they were lucky.

This could have all gone down much worse.

Says he is sorry his guys charged in like that, but sometimes things get hairy and you gotta move fast.

Joe says it will be much worse.
He saw Darnell's face when they hauled him off and knows it.
Darnell will be back on the street in days.
Joe and his family will be dead within weeks.
No matter how many guys with guns stand next to them.
Herbert says yeah, he knows.
But they can still fix it.
They can fix everything.

• • •

I move in and out of the blackness.
I can tell she's beating me pretty badly, but I don't feel much of it.
Just hear her laughing.
And every now and then, she kisses me, too.
I think I even fight her, just like she wants me to, but I can't be sure exactly. I keep losing consciousness and slipping under immense pools of inky nothingness. I have a feeling of being moved around in the ink. Of other voices.
Telling me I'm a real fighter.
Saying I'm the perfect specimen.
Whatever the hell that means.
And finally …
I go into the *dream* …

• • •

Darnell is in the dream, of course.
He hovers there with the gun, saying I cheated him.
His voice is rich and dark, and he laughs like he always did.
Says I cheated him, but he had the last laugh.
I tell him this is getting really old.
Why are you here, man?
Why do you haunt me?
Haven't you taken enough?
He says enough is never enough. I should know that, right? I gave up All Good Things to go down in the zero. I protected the most important people in my

life with everything I had left.

He laughs again and says I'm full of shit. It never would have happened if I hadn't been Cap'n goddamn Ahab in the first place. If I hadn't held on to a dream.

Or a nightmare.

Everything swirls in waves.

I can't find my way to shore.

I work hard to fight my way home.

Something peels back … like a curtain …

Darnell is gone …

• • •

… and I see another man, standing in a labyrinth of cold metal.

I've never seen this man's face before.

The man has a face I almost recognize.

He looks like someone's dad.

Maybe my dad.

He winks at me with a reassuring smile and says:

"I envy your journey, Joe. I really do. Welcome to the future."

• • •

I wake up, drowning.

Washed up in waves.

Choking back the years, and the dream.

It fades almost instantly, burning away … *and away* …

I look up and see the hose, just a few seconds before she hits me with it again, and the water blasts over my bruised skin. I don't feel the pain. Not at all. The water feels nice, actually. A soothing massage, just above a deep welling hotness.

Am I drugged?

Does it matter?

"Rise and shine," she says.

And I realize I'm no longer chained to the wall.

I'm not even in the orange S&M room anymore.

I'm still naked, but as I look up through the sheets of water, I see that I've awakened in a featureless black cubicle. It still has a drain in the floor, and some blood still swirls there—from my head, I think—but that bitter smell of latex and ammonia is gone. And my wrists are not shackled. I'm lying prone on the concrete floor, near the center of the room. Near the drain, which swirls with bloody water.

She shuts the hose off and tosses me a towel.

"Sleep good?"

I sit up, leaning against one of the back walls. I towel my face carefully, working around the stitches. No pain at all. I feel strong, really.

"I asked you a question, Joe. Did you sleep good?"

She just stands above me with the hose, one hand on her hip. Looking down on her handiwork. Just behind her is a door with a barred window in it. Blackness beyond the bars. Probably locked up tight. I focus on it intently for just a few seconds.

Then I focus on her.

She's dressed in something that almost looks like an SS uniform now. Black jacket and leather riding pants. Boots with a high shine on them, beaded with water from the hose. A white shirt, buttoned almost to the neck, peeking out from under the jacket. A belt on her hip, with something that looks like a .45 revolver, tucked in tight to a holster. A taser hanging from her other hip, strapped to the same belt. The look is ominous. Intimidating. But in a really silly, obvious way.

Makes me laugh under my breath.

Part of me wants to spring up and strangle the life from this ridiculous bitch. But what's the use? I have a feeling the torture stuff is over anyway.

Have a feeling that what comes next is gonna be a lot worse.

Or I wouldn't still be alive.

I should try to fight her. Should try to knock her down and get the hell out of here. They plan to do something bad to me. Trouble is, I have no idea where here is. Or what's on the other side of that locked door.

Still … I feel strong.

Re-invigorated.

My whole body a corded mass of infinite possibility.

That's so goddamn strange.

So I answer her question.

"I slept okay. How about you?"

She aims one of her fifty-watt woman-in-charge smirks at me.

"Like a baby."

“So … you think I could get some clothes any time soon, Pam?”

“Maybe. If you play nice.”

“Great.”

She holds out her hands and smiles, presenting herself to me.

“Like *my* new clothes? It’s my Ilsa look.”

“Sorry?”

“You know *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*? It’s a movie.”

“Never saw that one.”

“It’s my favorite. One of those Nazi exploitation films. Such a weird genre of motion picture, I always thought. Kinda creepy. I always wondered who those producers thought their audience actually was.”

“The world’s full of sick people.”

“Indubitably.”

She shows off again, this time turning around to give me the total package. The black jacket and leather hugs her perfectly.

Still, it looks like a stupid Halloween costume.

“Gotta admit, I make it look good, though, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“Oh, come on, Joe … you’re not still mad about our little lover’s quarrel, are you? I admit, I get a little worked up sometimes. And I sincerely apologize. Hope you’re feeling better.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ve been out of it for a while.”

“How long?”

“A long, long while. A real crash and burn. You needed the rest at any rate.”

“A *long, long while* …?”

“Yeah, I know. It seemed like just a few minutes, didn’t it? It’s a strange thing when that happens. When your body just gives up the ghost and you blink off for a few weeks or a month or a year.”

“How long was I asleep, Pam? How long exactly?”

“In good time. But don’t worry, we’ve taken very good care of you at any rate. In fact … if my people are telling me the truth about your numbers … you should feel like twice the man you *ever* were before.”

She lets the hose fall from her hand.

Kneels down to look me in the eyes.

“Feel that, Joe? The way your muscles are sort of infused with heat right now? The way your bruises seem to feed back into your nervous system, giving you strength? You could probably take me barehanded right now. Wanna go for it?”

“You want me to fight you again?”

“Why not? You deserve some revenge. I tied you to a wall and beat you senseless, didn’t I?”

“I guess you had your reasons.”

“Oh come on, baby. Take a free shot. I won’t even hit you back.”

“I’d still be your prisoner.”

“Good point.”

“And you’d just tie me to the wall again.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not playing your sick game, Pam. That’s all this is. Just some sick game.”

“Games have rules, honey.”

And she reaches out and touches my scarred face.

Touches the gash gently.

I realize it’s just a heavy scar now—no stitches anymore.

“Healing well. You’re coming along, Joe. I truly apologize for our little spat. It wasn’t my intention to punish you. It’s all part of the program. But I suspect you’ve kind of figured that out by now.”

“It’s hard to figure out anything when you’re chained to a wall.”

“You’re not chained anymore.”

“Am I supposed to say thank you?”

She rises to her feet and offers her hand.

“Come on, Joe. Stretch those legs. Let’s take a little walk.”

• • •

I keep my eye on her gun the whole time. The taser is a nasty reminder, too, of who’s in charge here. She walks slowly to the door. Knocks on it. A deep metal clunk in the wall, and the door opens from the other side. A big guy in black stands in a long hallway. Looks like he’s ten feet tall, barely crammed in the corridor.

She looks back at me and sees that I’m still sitting.

Raises her eyebrow, motioning to the hallway with a coy little nod.

“It’s cold in here, Pam. Can I get some clothes?”

“In good time. I wanna show you something first.”

Her hand drifts to the sidearm.

She gives me a mock scolding look.

Is she imitating Ilsa?

Whatever.

• • •

I get up from my crouch and feel my whole body snap into place. Feel really great. Even the cold air wafting in from the corridor is invigorating in some strange way. This is so wrong on so many levels. Makes no sense. I should be a paralyzed wreck from the beating she gave me. But I feel like a new man.

Did they shoot me full of something when I was asleep?

No … I don't feel drugged up either.

I just feel … great.

So I take a few tentative steps towards her.

She moves aside and lets me walk into the corridor first, following the big guy. Then she falls in step behind me. I can hear her leather crackling just at the nape of my neck and her high heel boots clocking on the cement. My own feet freeze a little at a time because the floor is so clammy. Feels like I'm walking on someone's grave.

Of course I am.

On either side of us in the narrow corridor are doors, like the one I just came through. Like jail cells, each with small open barred windows.

The cell I just came through was right at the dead end of the corridor.

About a hundred yards ahead is a juncture that leads off to the left and right.

The big guy in front of me is not dressed in the same uniform. He's got on something that makes him look like a spook. Black suit and tie. He's a pale giant, and bald, too. More bad Halloween theatrics. This shit is getting thick, man.

"What is this place, Pam?"

She giggles in my ear. "If I told you that, it would spoil the surprise, now wouldn't it?"

Great.

I've been abducted by the white trash Gestapo and I'm being led to my doom by Lurch from *The Addams Family*.

• • •

She stops at one of the doorways, halfway down the hall.

There's a little plate just below the open barred window that says:

SUBJECT 66

"What's that mean? Subject 66?"

"Nothing, baby. Old data. There's a new resident in the room now. He just came in last week. You're just in time to see the show. In fact, we woke you up special, just to see."

She uses a key and clicks it in the lock.

Opens the door.

"Go right in, Joe."

• • •

He's more a ghost than ever before, consumed by the filth of his old lives, which are still there in grimy, grungy layers. His hair is a matted mess. His eyes like strange ruby jewels, peeking out from mounds of dirt. I once listened to the words this man made and even believed some of them. He was my friend for years, in a way that would be difficult to describe to anyone who hasn't actually been there. Anyone who hasn't seen what losing everything can truly to do someone. How it can make him a monster. How it can mute his deepest soul into something that betrays the very essence of humanity.

But who knows what any of us could have done?

We were dead the second we hit the street, after all.

Anything else about the human soul would be mad speculation in the face of our own phantom apocalypse.

But there's something else in him now.

Something that was never there before.

His eyes … like living rubies now … oozing something terrible.

Literally *oozing*.

I see him there, in the center of the room and I can't believe it. Pam comes up behind me, her hand on the gun. She sees my teeth gritting. Sees my disgust when I see his eyes.

His eyes, oozing out into his flesh.

"Bird," I say. "For god's sake … what have they done to you?"

• • •

He sees me finally. Something that looks like it could be a smile carves itself into the space where his beard consumes everything … and when he opens his mouth to speak, the sound that comes out is … *inhuman*.

It's a wail, like a wolf, but not quite alive.

Some dying monster, stuck in a wheelchair.

His whole body vibrates when he makes the sound, the chair rattling, shuddering in some unstable conniption fit. I can tell he recognizes me, that he's freaking out because he sees me standing here naked in front of him with my dick hanging out. And the scream begins to gurgle into something less abstract. Starts to mutate and roll out as weird language, as he raises one arm and points a dusty finger at me.

"Youuuuuu … ."

He wrenches up and out of the chair, falling on the floor at my feet, writhing in pain, still screaming, but wordlessly again. I can see something pulsing under the dusty clothes now. Like a strange boiling beneath the surface of a fragile skin.

What the hell …?

"Back up, Joe. Here's where it starts getting freaky."

Pam's voice, right behind me.

Her hands pull me back away from Bird, as he flops and screams.

Something explodes up through him. Something wet and awful, that seems to combine with flesh as it bursts. A stream of weird tissue and membranous gore. It emerges in a jagged splatter-pattern, frozen in mid-air as it comes, solidifying for just one quick second … and then another tendril blasts out to join it. And another. And then ten more. Twenty more. Like stalks of some spidery substance, sluicing outward, all merging together …

His screaming picks up heat now.

Literally.

The sound becomes heat in the room.

And the heat seems to be sucked up by the strange explosion of liquid gore, as it finally collapses on itself, rolling like blobs on top of blobs. His clothes and his hair and his fingernails all join the transformation, swelling out towards critical mass.

"Come on, Joe. Time to go."

She pulls me back through the door and slams it closed behind us.

Through the window, I see the whole bloody mess go supernova.

A screaming explosion of humanity that paints the whole inside of the cell with all the colors of a hellish rainbow.

• • •

"What did you do to him? *What the hell did you do to him*?"

"He's better off now, Joe. Believe me."

"That's no answer. Is that what was in store for Herbert? Is that the cancer that was eating him alive?"

"In a way. It travels by physical contact, from host to host."

"Physical contact? Are you kidding me?"

"Don't worry, Joe … you and I are safe. We all are really. We've been immunized to the gene. Mister Bird, however, was not."

"You just *killed him*. Let him die …"

"Why not? He was a piece of driftwood. Nobody will miss him."

"Then why show me? What the hell was the point of making me watch that?"

"We have our reasons. You don't have to like it. Mister Bird is a test subject, of course. Like all of your street-jam friends. Come over here. Look."

She moves to another locked steel doorway.

I look through the window and I see Jimmy and Roy.

Together again.

• • •

They lie on the floor in spasms of pain, half-wasted blurs of weird flesh. They are naked, and I can see through their skin like it's translucent rubber. Their eyes are intense and red, like Bird's were. But the transformation is different.

Slower.

Pam whispers in my ear: "See how much better the gene mutation is working with them? They haven't given up on life the way Mister Bird had. They're fighters, like you. Roy, especially, with all his anger towards humanity. So they won't just explode, like Bird. They will evolve into a being that has never existed before. A creature of rage and hate."

They scream silently, tears in their eyes.

They roll and boil.

They were promised a key to paradise.

And they took that key.

But what they got was this.

They were turned into monsters.

• • •

All I can think of to say is:

"Damnation."

"You're in shock, Joe. That's normal. It's quite a sight to see, I know. The first time I saw what the gene corruption could do, I was pretty freaked out myself."

I get a grip and tear myself away from the window, backing away from Pam.

"So is that what you're planning to do to *me*?"

She smiles coyly. "Now why on earth would we want to do that, Joe?"

"Pam … for God's sake …"

"Do you have any idea how *insane* you sound right now, Joe?"

"You can't get away with this … *you people are crazy* …"

"No, Joe. *You're* crazy. You're an aimless, homeless bum who plays harmonica on street corners and spins weird philosophy to anyone who will listen. You can either go back to that life … or you can man up and realize that you have no control at all over what is happening here. You've cashed in your chips and we're running the table. Do I make myself clear?"

I feel like someone just gutted me. Like the wind has all left my body all at once. I feel the ground vanish and I fall on my knees, wracked with sudden nausea. It takes me in a hard swoop, and my head goes light.

This is insane.

This can't be happening.

But I see it all, ahead of me, just like I see Bird and Jimmy and Roy in those rooms, rolling into a weird half-exploded mess of genetically accelerated nonsense …

Something that would have taken billions of dollars to invent.

And plenty of insane minds to implement.

Minds like Pam's.

I see it all happening.

And I hear a voice, somewhere in the back of my mind.

Like some half remembered dream:

The apocalypse that will wipe the slate clean … will happen very quickly … almost overnight …

The voice.

Like a distant radio signal, half-remembered.

Going now … *fading away* …

Pam, right in front of me in the hall.

The big Lurch-looking dude, right behind me.

She is smiling weirdly.

“Now get up off that floor, Joe. We have things to do.”

• • •

Down one of the intersecting corridors, we come to an open doorway leading to a white room that looks a lot cleaner than anything else in this place. There are a few racks of medical supplies, instrument trays on rollers, an examination table in the center of the room, and a stack of folded clothes sitting on it. Black pants, black shirt, black hospital loafers. Everything’s black with these characters.

Of course it is.

Pam motions to the table. “Have a seat, baby. The doc needs to have a look at you before you can get dressed.”

“The doc?”

The big guy in the suit takes a step forward and says in a giant’s deep voice: “Yes. Please hop up on the table. We’ll get this over quickly and painlessly.”

I have to laugh again.

So Lurch finally went to medical school, huh?

I can still see the face of Bird, destroyed in a mess of weird flesh. It’s all I can think about in this moment.

Is that going to happen to me now?

Pam rests her hand on the revolver as I size the big guy up.

“Better let him check you out, Joe. Let’s not take any chances.”

• • •

I let him get on with it. Hop up on the table, just like he said to. He goes through the motions quickly. Runs some scans on my body with some weird hand-held device. Takes my pulse, draws some blood, gets a hold of my family jewels and tells me to cough. You know, the whole doctor routine. Only the guy’s hands are so big that when he grabs my nuts, it feels like some enormous

clammy monster swallowing up the goods.

Feels weird as hell.

Pam giggles and licks her lips when it happens.

“Hang in there, champ. You’re doing great.”

“So what’s he looking for? Night blindness?”

“Trust us. It’s all in the name of science.”

“So, Pam … did *you* have to go through all this when you were immunized to the virus?”

“Something like that. They never grabbed my balls though.”

“Wonder why. Yours are so big, Miss Prescott.”

“Still a smartie boy. I kind of love that. Fearless.”

“If I started crying, what good would it do?”

“Fair enough, baby. Fair enough.”

The big guy puts away his last instrument—some strange cylindrical item he was using to look my eyes over with—then he turns to the lady and nods.

“Okay, champ,” she says. “That’s it. You can get dressed now.”

I look her over carefully.

My eyes moving to the gun on her hip, then to the taser.

The big guy is unarmed.

“I see your brain working again,” she says. “You’d better not make me regret taking the cuffs off, Joe.”

I nod slowly.

Okay.

We’ll just see.

I move slowly to the pile of clothes. Slip on the pants carefully, one slow leg at a time. She watches me with laser-guided eyes. Looks at my body with that vague knowing smirk.

I slip on the shoes next. Not saying a word.

The shirt last, coming over my head and shoulders.

She won’t expect me to make my move now.

Not while I can’t even see her.

I take one half step in her direction, while the shirt is still over my face, and I hear her jackbooted feet shuffle slightly … and the click of metal-on-metal just seconds before I launch myself at the sound of her shocked breath.

• • •

I get to her in the quarter-second the shirt comes away from my face, and I see the gun come up quickly, the hammer back hard, and she's smiling, right behind the dead bang of the barrel, aimed exactly between my eyes, just inches away. And I put everything I've got into this one damn moment. All my training, all my mettle … every last ounce of *fight* that she seems to love so much and get so far off on …

… and it works.

My hand slaps the gun from her grip and it flies through the air, as I follow through with my blow and smack her good and hard, right in the mouth. I sense the falling weapon at the corner of my eye as it tumbles end over end. I catch one weird white-hot freeze-frame of the hammer on the gun, still back, ready to be fired, ready to explode, ready to blow everything all to hell the second it hits the floor.

And I panic in that millisecond.

It's all the distraction Pam needs.

She recoils from my slap to her face and comes back with something harder: A chop to my neck that drops me to one knee.

And the gun hits the floor.

• • •

The impact jolts the trigger and the bullet blasts off, ricocheting in the small room like a crazy insect. I feel the shot almost slice my right ear, my skull pounding in the sudden incredible burst of sound. Pam screams at the same second, as the shot finally smashes through the big guy's skull, sending his next thought all over the place. He falls backwards like a tree … and I'm up in a flash, delivering a wicked uppercut to Pam's lower jaw that stuns her again, and she flies backwards, stumbling against the wall.

I dive for the floor and grab the pistol.

The hot barrel burns me as I fumble with the thing, finally getting it pointed in the right direction.

Right at her.

She hangs there, frozen on the wall, about to bounce back at me.

Still smirking.

"You won't shoot me, will you, Joe? Not after all we've meant to each other?"

Her mocking tone makes that particular statement into the worst joke ever.

I aim between her eyes.

She tenses like a coiled spring—ready.

"To hell with you," I tell her.

"We're already there, honey. Haven't you been paying attention?"

I pull the trigger and the shot is like a bomb, making us both deaf. She recoils instinctively as the slug tears into the wall just to her right, spraying debris everywhere. I fire again and miss her again. The shots are so loud, they're like one long, punishing crack of thunder, shooting through our heads. She almost hits the floor, and I almost fire again, taking dead aim right at her head …

But I can't …

I can't kill her …

Why can't I kill her?

I turn and break for the open hallway.

• • •

Stupid, man. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

Should have blown her head off.

Should have shot her dead.

I looked her right in the eye and I choked …

We're already in hell, baby …

Haven't you been paying attention …

Strobe-blasts flicker through my head. Screams. Wet, popping sounds, like flesh in a meat grinder …

Metal on metal

SCREAMING …

DARNELL …

Get a grip.

Don't lose it.

Gotta run.

I listen for her big boots behind me as I make the end of the intersecting hallway. No alarms go off, no sirens or claxons alerting the bad guys to my escape. A door at the far end of the corridor gives easily and I fly through it. Then there's another hall, much wider, with greasy windows slotted on one side that allow sunlight through in strange oozes. Like a warehouse. Some kind of dingy off-the-radar scum complex. Probably miles from civilization. Can't think about that. Have to get out of here. Have to move faster. *I have to warn everyone*

…

But does humanity want to be warned, baby?

Go ahead and run.

Go ahead and escape from us.

YOU'LL NEVER BE FREE, BABY …

Shut up shut up shut up …

There's an elevator at the end of the corridor.

It only goes up.

It's a big freight job, with a wood and steel door that rolls upward into the wall. I get it open fast. Slam it down hard behind me. Hit the lever that takes the car up.

The gun is sweaty in my hand.

The air gets hotter as the car slowly ascends.

Pam, still in my head.

Mocking everything.

You wouldn't shoot me, would you? Not after everything we've meant to one another? WOULD YOU, Joe?

SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP …

The car clunks to a halt.

First floor.

Could be anything out there.

Anything at all, baby.

Are you ready to find out?

JUST TAKE THE LEAP.

Just shut UP, you evil bitch.

I stand there with both feet on the ground, the big revolver aimed right at the door. I draw in five deep breaths, trying to calm myself. I have four shots left. I'll need every one of them. Especially the last bullet.

Can't let these bastards take me.

They'll lock me in a cell and make me like those others. They'll transform me into a monster. It's so goddamn absurd. But it can't be anything but the truth. My head is racing so goddamn fast. Pam's face keeps strobe-blasting in my head. Her voice is laughing at me and telling me the bad guys will win this one. Nancy Drew and Baby Boy Burke are helpless to stop us. I have no choice but to go out blasting because they *just can't do this to us … not ANY OF US …*

I'm ready, you bastards.

Come and get it.

The last bullet is for me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Herbert tells them they have to disappear, all of them.

Darnell Washington will beat the rap easily enough, even caught red-handed in a room full of hostages, with a gun pointed right at the head of a screaming woman.

He's that connected.

He can make anything go away.

He will kill Joe and his family for messing with him for sure.

Joe has to vanish in the breeze.

Has to fall off the face of the Earth, and his wife has to fall with him.

His kids, too.

Both of them.

Herbert can make it all happen, because he's more connected than Joe ever imagined. He's got deep black-ops contacts, all holdovers from the war. He's been a secret agent with the feds for years, a mole inside the army. He does black-bag deals all the time with federal sub-agencies and all the superspooks that line up behind them. Joe has known about it for years. It's why Joe knew Herbert was his only chance to get out of his own bedroom alive, when Darnell came for him. It's why he knows Herbert is their only chance now.

Joe sits in an office with three mean looking Texas Marshals, all armed with shotguns, and Herbert explains that these men are agents for the federal Witness Protection Program.

He says these men will make them disappear, for a price.

All he has to do is hand over his files about Darnell's monster club.

Everything he's collected in his investigation.

These are the files Darnell was going to murder his whole family to possess. All the surveillance records, the names and faces, the deep background on every member of his dirty little club. The worst scumbags on earth, all cataloged and

itemized down the line.

It's what Joe does best after all.

He's been sitting on top of this bust for almost eight years.

It's been his life's work, the destruction of this ruthless gang of child molesters.

The Organization.

Herbert knows that Joe started the gig when a woman named Marie came to him all those years ago and told him about Darnell Washington and his network of drug dealers and kidnappers. Said she knew her own children were being sold to the highest bidder, right here in Austin. Said she would pay anything to get them back.

The woman became Joe's wife.

Her kids became his kids.

And he never stopped.

He dug deeper, he worked harder.

It became his obsession.

He was Cap'n Ahab.

Soon, he would send that cold monster straight to hell.

But monsters fight when you try to kill them.

They get really mad and they do bad things to you.

Herbert is Joe's only shot at survival now, and they both know it. The deal is, they are protected, no matter what happens. Even if Darnell beats the rap … which he will, of course … Joe and his family will still have to come under guard for the rest of their lives. They will be protected from monsters. But Joe knows this can only really end one way. Knows what he has done. Knows that he has truly lost everything, even though he is winning the war.

Joe looks at his wife's face.

She won't even look back at him.

She hates him now.

Because their children were put back in that room.

Because Joe went after that monster.

Because he looked into the abyss and lost himself.

And that monster almost killed them all.

Joe begs her to look in his eyes.

Begs her to understand what has to happen now.

She won't even speak to him.

• • •

I expect the world to end.

But, of course, it doesn't.

Today's been just one big surprise after another.

The elevator door rumbles open on … nothing.

It appears to be an empty warehouse. Hot and full of dust. Dim light beaming in weakly through scummy broken windows. Garbage and dirt and broken furniture, all scattered around the wide open space. I pause for just one moment and aim the gun around, looking for trouble.

Just … nothing.

No one.

This place is abandoned as hell.

What lies below is pure horror.

But it's perfect subterfuge up top.

Have to be careful … but I have to move fast, too.

The room, full of metal and wire.

Pam's voice, right at my ear, gentle like my most secret lover.

Fight, Joe.

Never give up.

The flashes burn through my head.

I hear her voice and see her face—the kind, scared Nurse Stephanie and the wicked, sadistic Pam Prescott—and they both tell me the same story. Tell me of a world that will be built thousands of years in the future, after the fall of humanity. A garden of Eden, populated by the chosen few, who went into some kind of cryogenic sleep and woke up ready to rule whatever was left. A brave new world, fought for and killed for and preserved at the cost of so much and so many.

It slams into me like a train.

How long was I really asleep?

Why wasn't I still chained to that orange wall when she blasted me awake with the fire-hose. *And the wound on my forehead* …

I reach up and touch the wound.

It's hardly there now.

My head doesn't even hurt, not like it did before.

Did they really do it?

Did she knock me out and put me in the time machine?

Is that really what's happening here?

The panic of it all seeps in on me, doing slow waves at first, then rushing like crushing surf. I fight against the feelings, try to steel myself, but it's all so much bigger than me. Something that only the very strong could ever accept and

survive. Herb knew it. He couldn't face it. He was their champion, one of many.

I wonder what happened to the rest of them?

Did others like Herb go crazy and kill themselves?

Because they couldn't walk through the door …

The open chamber smells like old rotten wood and dust from years gone by. Outside, I can see trees and sunlight. If I walk there, will I see the new world?

Or am I the destroyer of the world?

Welcome to the future, baby.

Let's get it on …

I walk for the nearest exit, which is a wide open arc that looks like it used to be some kind of loading dock. I walk very slowly at first. Then start to run. Faster. I blow out into the fresh air for what seems like the first time in years, my feet hitting gravel in a full-on sprint. The air is clean and amazing and hits me, strong and piney, and I almost fall over. But I keep moving. Faster and faster. Running through this gravel-lined parking lot without any cars in it. Stumbling into an open road that snakes through a winding series of curves and dips, lined by trees on all sides. Trees everywhere, in fact. Like I've walked into a vast, spewing wilderness, split down the middle by a single ribbon of dull gray taffy—tarmac that goes on for miles and miles. It could be Texas, it could be Idaho. It could be anywhere at all. I run harder, my legs stronger than they've ever been, my entire body energized by the desperate need to know where the hell I am.

But what am I running towards?

Is there any city left on earth?

And why isn't she following me?

Why isn't anyone following me?

Don't think about that now. You're alive, that's all that matters. Get the hell out of here. Follow the road. Back to town.

You can outrun it all.

You can win, finally.

And if you're in the future, long after the collapse of everything you ever knew, it won't matter. You'll find other people and tell them about that world that existed long ago. That amazing, cruel, cold-hard world you left behind, that you turned your back on, because you thought you had no choice. You'll tell them you realize now that you were wrong to do that—to turn your back—because turning your back means you lose everything but pavement, and your life loses all meaning and stretches away to some black, fuzzy infinity, just like this dull gray road that seems to go on forever. You'll tell them about the songs that were sung by blues cats in the 20th century and about the art that was made on the streets of Texas in the 21st. You'll let them all know that it was *that art*

and *those songs* that allowed you to maintain a shred of sanity in a world gone wild, just below the radar of a society that was sick and ready to die all on its own, without any help from madmen with time machines or big sharp sticks or what the hell ever. You'll tell them stories of the cruelness that mankind was capable of and the kindness that lurked just out of sight.

You'll tell them, man.

You'll tell them never to be like I was.

You'll let them know that every day they live from now on is a great and beautiful gift, and to turn your backs on it is the sin of all sins.

This will be my religion, this will be my gospel.

This will be what I teach the people of this strange new world.

I can still see the mutant face of Bird, corrupted and boiled down, splattered apart in a meaningless spray, plastered all over the place … and it makes me run faster now. Makes me strong enough to get the hell out of here. Infuses my muscles with a burning need to pound my feet against this never-ending stretch of pavement.

Run faster. Back to town.

Whatever town is there.

Maybe it's still Austin.

Maybe I haven't gone with the time travelers.

But I don't care anymore, Pam.

I looked in your face and I went to the edge of everything with you, and all I know now is that I want to live, I want to fight. I want to be a part of this world. Whatever world it is. I don't wasn't to waste it. I want to use it. I want to preach to everybody. I want to get back to my corner and sing the blues for whoever will listen. I want to have a life and a family and a place called home, because home is so very important, even to the homeless. I have to see your face again, Marie. I have to tell you that I still love you. I have to let you know that we don't have much time. I have to honor our family with everything I have.

I can't just give up again.

I made it out.

I beat those bastards.

I'm running down the road.

To freedom.

Oh please, God, let me get back to town, wherever that truly is. I swear I'll start again. I won't blow it this time. I'll run into another dark night, which will become a bright night, filled with the wonder of everything that sane and rational adults know when they've grown up all the way. When they've turned their backs on madness and shame and guilt and loss. When they realize, really and

finally, that there is something left on this earth worth fighting for.

And that's us.

All of us.

Everywhere.

Even the worst of us.

They will all be a part of my new revolution, my next religion. They will all know the names and faces of the men and women that tried to destroy us. We will march forward and show the bad guys we mean business. We can win, after all. I know we can. Those bastards, whoever they are … *wherever they are* …

And when we win, I'll look into *her face* again.

Pam's face.

I'll see that terrible smile again and know I beat her in the end.

And she'll kiss me and try to fool me.

But I won't be fooled.

I will be reborn.

Just have to make it back.

Please, God, let me make it back …

PART FOUR

Wayward Joe

Herbert takes Joe in the next room.

Joe says what he wants.

Herbert says he is crazy.

But Joe still says this is what he wants.

He must do right by his woman and her children. Even though they are not his kids. Even though he is not their real father.

He put them all in danger and now the monster is coming after them.

They must be safe.

And the only way to make sure of that …

The only way to really and TRULY make sure …

… is for him to give up everything.

He must give them up.

He gave them up years ago, when he went after Darnell Washington.

When he saved them the first time.

When the obsession became so great that it canceled out everything else.

Now he must honor that obsession in a different way.

He must let Marie go into her new life.

Marie must never see him again.

He still remembers the day they first met … how gentle and special she was. How sad and beautiful the wetness on Marie's cheek was—like pressing his hand to the soft beach of heaven. How she eventually fell into his arms. How it all seemed so much like destiny. The life they shared, for just a few brief years. Before work intruded.

She won't even speak to him now.

She will only speak to Herbert, and she says her husband is no better than the other monsters—those awful men who almost tortured her to death.

She won't be married to scum like that.

She is done with Joe.

And he must let her go.

So that's what happens.

Joe never even says goodbye.

He shakes Herb's hand and walks out the door.

Says he will be in debt to Herb for the rest of his life.

Whenever you need me, no matter what, I will be there.

Herb says that Joe doesn't owe him anything.

Just check the classifieds every six months, just in case.

Joe says okay.

And then he loses everything.

Everything in the face of being a monster.

His first night on the street, he thinks about Marie. Her softness. Her loving grace. He imagines she is here with him, on the cold, hard concrete. Loving him like she always did. But it's a lie. Like so much else.

What is really here with him is the monster.

Darnell Washington.

The monster who took everything.

Who made him into this inhuman thing.

Joe feels nothing but rage in these moments.

He doesn't even think about his wife, safe and free, living her new life under the protection of federal agents. Doesn't even imagine what that new life looks like. It's too painful to imagine. He focuses only on the rage.

He hears Darnell laughing at him.

It follows him down and down, endlessly.

In his dreams, in his waking life.

Even when he plays the blues with his weird buddies, who all turn out to be spies later, and then weird monsters, real monsters, the kind that drip slime and howl at the moon.

He is never free of Darnell's rolling meaty laughter.

This is his last battle.

His endless fight.

He never gives up on it.

He expects Darnell to find him one day on the street and kill him, but that never happens.

Darnell never shows up to collect.

But he is always here, laughing.

Always the monster.

Keep it down.

Don't let it out.

Fight …

• • •

… and the dream always shifts and changes right at this point. It's always the same shift. Always the same weird variation. Because it's not really a dream. It's a memory that I never get to have when I am awake. They made sure of that. Pumped me full of something. I will forget everything I am seeing now in just a few minutes. So I'm holding on with everything I've got. Holding on to this memory.

Or maybe it's just a dream.

Who knows, really?

Pam has just finished beating me senseless with a big wooden paddle. I can still smell her womanly pheromones and her cheap perfume. She brings me into the chamber full of metal things. They sit me down in a chair that gleams with chromium steel. There are men in black suits all over the place, like sentinels without faces. An apparatus of coiled wire and gleaming sharpness descends from the ceiling, enveloping me. I feel my body invaded by chemicals and steel.

Pam coos in my ear, like my most secret lover.

Because that's what she is.

That's what she's always been.

My secret lover, my shameful reward, my last bit of everything …

… like Marie should have been.

"It's going to be okay," she says. "You are going to be immortal. Just like I promised. Won't that be nice?"

I tell her she's a psycho bitch, and she smiles and kisses my nose.

"Sticks and stones, baby."

And then the man is coming towards me with his toys. I've seen him many times in this memory. But I will forget it soon.

"I guess I need no real introduction, do I?" he says. "It's wonderful to finally meet, Joe. I've heard so much about you. Pamela has been your champion."

In that what you call it when someone beats you nearly to death?

A champion?

He sees my face turn un-amused and smiles benevolently. He looks like someone's father. Like my father.

His voice, calm and benevolent:

“I can see that you and Pam have gotten to know one another quite intimately. She can be a . . . well, let’s face it, a rather cruel mistress, yes? But you’ll be happy to know it’s all for a good cause. We’ve gone through so many candidates for this process, and it was beginning to look rather bleak. But, Joe … Pam … I’m a big enough man to admit when I’ve been wrong. And I was very wrong about you. I was so wrong, in fact, that I wanted to be here to supervise the process personally. I flew in from the mountain at the very last minute. So here we are.”

He brings over his toys.

Needles and surgical gear.

He is surrounded by nurses in white and men in black.

“You see, Joe … the process has a lot to do with the human will, which is so damn easy to break. Herbert was our first man on this table. He passed all the tests with flying colors. We made sure that everyone in the real world would think he had cancer. Covered all our tracks. It was going so well. But in the end he was a coward. Wasn’t ready to face up to the final curtain, so to speak. Even left behind all that paper when he died, to expose us. Hence, dear Pam’s deception. If there was even a remote chance that someone—anyone—could ever get into that house over the next 2,000 years and open that concrete bunker . . . well, it was just not a chance any of us were willing to take. But you know that already.”

He starts putting together a terrible steel device.

Something like a syringe with multiple points.

Holds up a plastic cartridge and shows it to me.

“See this? I’m holding billions of dollars in my hand right here. It’s been designed especially for you, now that we know you are our man. It will go directly into your blood and your muscle groups. It will make you stronger than you’ve ever been in your life. It will act on your own specific set of neural and psychological impulses, which will, in turn, become a mutation of your cells. You will become unlike any other human being walking this earth.”

He slaps the cartridge into the device.

It snaps together with a great metal click.

“This will be injected directly into your heart. It will be pretty painful. But you will not remember any of this. And then …”

He gets very close.

Pam is very close.

We are like a family in this moment.

A terrible screwed up dysfunctional bunch of assholes, about to set loose the most awful thing ever invented on the human race.

"… and then, Joe … you will be ready for the second part of the process. That's the big machine that hovers over you now. More billions, all just for you. How many men can say that? That billions of dollars were spent on making them into something special? Kind of reminds me of that old TV show. The Six Million Dollar Man. *Only adjusted for inflation. Six million is just a down payment on insurance these days."*

His smile, benevolent, not snarky or lusty or even weirdly loving like Pam's.

A beautiful smile.

A benign and fatherly smile.

Like God's smile.

"In a way … YOU are a down payment on insurance, Joe. You yourself. A down payment on the future of the human race. You will carry our little creation forward. Into the world. You will touch one person at a time, and they will go and touch other people. The seed will grow in all of you. And that seed will accelerate the failing genome of humanity into a terrible new life form … and that life form will be the combined essence of all that is evil and awful in this world. All the pollution, the war, the insanity that makes us fall as a species. All of that will create a genetic mutation that will cause the entire human race to rip itself apart. It will be a feeding frenzy and a bloodbath. Those we leave behind will live to see it happen. Will live to see the apocalypse that will wipe the slate clean. It will happen very quickly. Almost overnight. In just a few years. Some of our early test specimens have succumbed much quicker than others to the mutation … but, as I said, it all depends on the subject. Pam has selected some special men to be here with us for the final trials. Friends of yours, I believe. They'll be the first to shake hands with you, Joe. So we can see if our little billion dollar project actually works …"

He stands back and I see them standing there.

Bird and Jimmy and Roy.

Standing there with drugged faces, hands in cuffs.

"They are ready to be sacrificed for the new world, Joe. They're really the perfect trial bodies, just like you are the perfect specimen. When we are done with our work on you, they will touch your flesh, breathe your air. And we will see how long it takes for them to become monsters. We'll just see. And you'll see, too."

Bird stares at me with glass eyes.

He is lost humanity wearing a dirty, fleshy disguise.

I will wake up weeks from now and see his glass eyes turn red with the sickness.

I've seen it already.

Like all this is happening at once.

And there's nothing I can do about any of it.

"The fall of humanity won't be pretty, Joe. Neither I nor Pam will be around to witness it …"

He strokes my face.

Smiles like God.

"… but in two thousand years, Pam and I will see a new planet earth. A planet long since risen from the bloody ashes. We will build a garden. We will welcome our children home. We will go forth and rebuild, over the long-rotted bones of the human race. And you will know, in the dreams you will have, in the days before the fall . . . that you were the carrier of humanity's final merciful end. That you were a god who walked among men. The ONLY god who ever walked among men."

I try to ask him why.

Try to open my mouth and beg him not to do this.

But he hits me with the big steel needle.

It's like being turned inside out.

Pain beyond anything, just like he said.

But it's a distant pain, a long-ago pain, like a radio signal reaching me from very far away. A memory of something terrible. Like the pressure of an alien heat, pressing hard against the electrified chambers of my mind …

And he's still talking, as the strength invades my blood, funneling right into my heart.

He's still smiling.

The way God smiles when he's happy.

"Your body is accepting the final injections beautifully. You are the perfect specimen. The perfect carrier. Soon, we'll show you the door. We'll let you walk right out of here. You'll go among the masses and spread the word. And you won't even know why. Our process acts on the mind, like I said. And the mind can only take so much. You'll remember my voice in dreams, but the dreams will also make you forget. Kind of like a mental tapeworm, eating away in circles … until you'll have nothing much left. But we all make sacrifices, don't we?"

Now, he's very close.

So close, I feel his breath, which smells like this dream.

Which smells like me.

"You will walk among men as a god. I envy your journey, Joe. I really do. Welcome to the future."

And the last thing I see before I go all the way down …

… before the fall …

… is her face.
Pam's face.
And I love her in this moment.
But it doesn't last long.
Nothing ever does.

• • •

My bones feel old and tired, but that's never any surprise when you happen to be carrying the end of the world in your blood. Or something in your blood. What was it again? I'm losing it … *fading* …

Fading …

"Hey, Joe."

I hear her voice just before I wake up.

I try to hold onto the dream …

Try like hell …

But of course I can't.

I stir under the cardboard boxes, shuffling around on gravel.

I look up to see her face.

I can't believe it's her.

She's as big as she ever was, all full of tired resolve, her right arm partially encased in some kind of steel brace. She's dressed pretty sharp for someone who was nearly dead the last time I saw her. A flak jacket and black jeans. Heavy gun belt on her hip, bristling with cop-shop hardware. Glock special, baton and tear gas, extra clips. Shotgun over her other shoulder. Her face is partially covered by a black eye patch, half-illuminated in the weak glare of the tiny campfires, which is the only light around. Everywhere else it's dark. Dark as midnight, which seems to last forever these days.

She looks down at me and says, again:

"Hey, Joe."

Like I didn't hear her the first time.

"Barbara," I say. And then I wonder if I'm dreaming again.

She smiles down at me. "In the flesh. All two hundred pounds of me."

"Wow."

"So … you're back to the street jam, huh?"

"Yeah. Trying to stay off the grid."

"That's a laugh. No more grids these days."

“Guess you’re right.”

“I’m glad you’re still alive, Joe. Glad I was able to find you. I thought you were gone for good.”

“Just on vacation.”

“Obviously. I wanted to ask you a few questions about what happened. But it’s been a long time since all that. My priorities have changed pretty radically. So have everyone’s.”

I shuffle awake, sitting up. My clothes hang on my body in rags, like always. My body is strong, like never before. Stronger every day.

But what was I just thinking about?

Was it a dream?

Losing it so fast.

My mind, going in waves, I think.

My body is strong, but my mind is gone.

Heh.

There’s some blues lyrics for you.

“This place sucks,” she says, taking a look around the bizarre tent city. Most of us call it Little Austin. Lots of guys living in boxes, weird forts made out of old rags. All of it hiding out under the 183 overpass. Smashed cars and trucks all over the place. Fires burning in the street. Some of the guys have been sick lately. Some kind of bug going around. Typical. I dream about that a lot, I think … but I never remember the dreams.

Then I always think about Pam.

I think about those monsters.

I think about Bird.

I want to tear those bastards apart.

But I can’t focus on it long.

Fading … *fading* …

All I can still remember is running down that road, thinking I might be in some strange new world. But I really wasn’t, of course. I was just outside of the city I’ve spent most of my life in. It was good to come home. I ran and I ran, and then I got to town and started yelling about what had happened, about Pam and her people and the monsters. I was arrested and tossed in a holding cell for *disturbing the peace*.

There’s a joke for you.

I sat in that cell and thought about everything for a long time.

Thought about my flight from the bad guys and my time with Nurse Stephanie. That terrible defeat, down in a refrigerated crypt of secrets and the smug face of Pam, right in my gunsight at the end of it all. Thought about her

words, so final and true, just before the shit hit the fan. *The bad guys win this time, baby. Nancy Drew loses.*

I don't know how long I sat there in that jail cell, pondering it all. But then, maybe a million years later, I was back on the street. And the city around me was filled with chaos and fire. It was only then that I realized why I never shot the bitch when I had the chance. I never could have killed Pam. It would have made me just like her.

Then again, who am I kidding?

I don't know much of anything these days.

My mind, fading in rough, awful waves, every time I have the dream …

"Have you been downtown lately, Joe? It's gotten really bad. Public executions. The capitol building has become like a butcher shop. Really awful."

"I stay on my side of the fence these days. No point in fighting the inevitable anymore."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means … nothing."

And I really mean that.

There's no point in fighting what you can't even keep in your mind.

What you can't even remember.

"I thought you'd be dead for sure, Joe. All my friends are gone now. Most of them died from the sickness. Everyone else, they're all crazy. People are becoming savages. Crazies. The whole damn city's on fire. Been going on for a year now."

"Yeah."

"There's no gasoline anymore, no electricity in most of the cities. Some of the bigger gangs have been trading for food and water and power. It's one big clusterfuck. And you're still just sitting there?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"Pretty pathetic, Joe."

"Didn't we have this conversation before?"

"Yeah. A year ago. In an IHOP. Right before some guys tried to murder us. Just a few months before everything started going crazy."

"You were in a coma, Barbara. They said you weren't gonna make it."

"They said wrong."

I look at her long and hard. I wonder if she's really on the level. Haven't trusted the ground under my feet for so long. Everything has been so crazy. And my mind hardly works right anymore.

So I take a deep breath.

And blow out my cares about any of it.

“So how have you survived, Barbara?”

She bounces the shotgun on her shoulder. “Very carefully, Joe. I’ve got a compound in the woods, miles outside the main city. My father’s old place. Used to spend summers with him there. It’s got a bomb shelter with tons of food and water and gasoline.”

“Government guys are always ready for the end of the world.”

“Yeah.”

“Careful, though, lady. Someone might kill you for all that gas.”

“I guess maybe you have the right idea, Joe. Just sit on the pavement and wait it out while the mud people rise up and kill each other.”

“Mud people?”

“Just an expression.”

“What’s it mean? People like me?”

“No. But you *do* look like shit, Joe. Look like half a man.”

“Maybe I’m tired of talking about it.”

“Well … if I was still a cop, I might take issue with that. But …”

“So how many people have you shot today, Barb? Just to move around in the city? How far have you gone to survive?”

“Pretty far.”

“Is it worth it?”

“I think so. Some of us have to live, Joe.”

“I used to think that. And then the world ended.”

And maybe it was all because of me.

She sees my face, full of confused regret.

She sighs, and I see that her face is dirty and raw.

Full of scars.

“You know, Joe … they’re reporting some really crazy stuff all over the world, what little filters down to us. I mean, now that most of the satellites have come down.”

“What are they reporting?”

“Gatherings. Millions and millions of people. Celebrations of life. Uninfected people. People who are pure and untouched by this—whatever *this* is that’s wiping us out now. Turning us into *those things*. They’re willing to stand against it, even if it means they die *en masse*. They haven’t given up on hope.”

“That won’t last, Barb.”

“I would have expected you to say that.”

“Then you would have been proud of me a year ago. I think there was a moment right then where I *did* have hope, just like those other guys. Some really amazing surge that moved me forward. But nobody wanted to hear anything a

bum had to say. They turned away from me, like I used to turn away from them. That's probably the biggest tragedy of this thing we call civilization. Nobody ever listens to the people who matter, and the people who matter just get really pissed off."

"You're saying you mattered a year ago?"

"Maybe I did. Can't really remember as much now. My mind is fuzzy."

"Maybe you have the sickness."

Yeah. Maybe I do.

Maybe I was the first person ever to have it.

Or maybe I'm just a bum.

A wayward soul, heading for someplace, never knowing where.

Heh.

Wayward Joe.

"You wanna fight all this, Barbara? You wanna be the savior of the entire human race? Is that really what you want?"

"Maybe. If it was possible."

"Have you ever heard of a town called Wayward Pines? In Idaho?"

"No."

"Your father knew about it. Before he died. I remember that much."

Her eyes almost light up.

She shakes her head, incredulous.

"Maybe we should check it out, Joe. The two of us."

"Not me. I have to stay here."

"Why?"

"Because … well, I'm not sure. I just know I have to."

"So you're putting it all in my hands?"

"Maybe. Whatever *it* is. But if you want some real advice, Barbara, I'll give it to you for free."

"What's that?"

"Go home. Forget about saving the world. Forget about Wayward Pines. Go enjoy your life for what little time you have left. Go back to your bomb shelter. You've got no idea how lucky you are."

She doesn't reply to me. Just stares at me, blinking. And I can see the stern resolve of her father, superimposed right over her face. Her uncompromising force. Her brute mission. To learn the truth, at any cost.

"Wayward Pines," she whispers, letting out a sigh, gazing around the little tent city. "I think I'll look into it."

Yes, she will.

She'll go there, to ground zero.

She'll find those people, sleeping in their time machine.

She'll take it to the mountain.

I shake my head, and I try not to imagine what rough roads lay ahead for this woman. I try to imagine a nice happy ending for her and for me. A warm bed and a family. A few songs scratched out on an ancient turntable. The blues, long and sweet, sung until the end of time.

She sees me go away to it for a moment and smiles.

"You hungry, Joe? I could buy you some pancakes before I hit the road."

We both gotta laugh.

But no, of course not.

Who wants to go through all that again?

For one long surreal moment … I wonder if any of it really was real. If all that weird shit actually happened to me. If those dreams I have every night—the ones that I can't ever remember all the way—are part of it somehow.

They have to be.

But what does it matter now?

All I know for sure is that this woman must go away from me.

I am killing her as surely as we are sharing airspace.

And soon—very soon—the whole world will be buried in the same grave.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it's just some nutty dream.

"No thanks," I tell her. "I don't like pancakes."

AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have to admit the truth.

When I first heard about this whole Kindle Worlds thing, my immediate reaction was something smarmy and dismissive like, *Oh, how cute—an authorized fan fiction platform. Um. Good luck with that, guys.* I honestly never expected to be writing anything here. A professional always has better things to do than make up stuff based on *other peoples' novels*, right? (Picture, if you will, a snobby appreciator of fine wine rumpling his nose and looking down on that which is so far beneath him, with a hearty, educated sigh of: "*Ewwwww*.")

But then my agent told me that he was looking into getting me a paying gig at Amazon. And, well, the gig turned out to be a story for the Wayward Pines Kindle Worlds series.

Open mouth. Insert foot.

Another embarrassing admission is that I had never actually read Blake Crouch's fine novel *Pines*, or its even finer follow-up *Wayward*, before this gig was on the table. So I read them both real fast. In one sitting, actually. The stuff was just that good.

(My butt still hurts, Blake. Thanks.)

Mister Crouch is the real deal—a fella who's paid his dues and published some fine fiction in the horror and thriller genres. We have the same agent, but he's much further along in the mainstream game than I am. *Pines* has been wildly successful. As I write this, M. Night Shyamalan is directing the pilot episode of the *Wayward Pines* TV series and I couldn't be more tickled about it. All of which got me even more excited to write the tale you just finished reading. I started *really thinking* about what I could do. About the characters that intrigued me the most and what was truly compelling about the backstory to the novels.

The more I thought about it, the more ambitious I got.

That's usually my first mistake.

But then I hit on a *real idea*. Something that would truly *add something* to the mythology and not just be "straight-ahead" fan fiction. I thought maybe I could write a longer work that would be almost self-contained in the *present day*—in Texas, even—using the conspiracy of Wayward Pines as a sinister backbeat to the whole affair. And I thought I could have a revelation at the end of my story at least somewhat reasonably comparable to the heavy twist at the climax of Blake's original novel. It all came about as I pondered those scary monsters who menaced the town of Wayward Pines in the future and what their *true origins* might actually be in the present. I started imagining a much darker and more definitive kick-off to the end of humanity.

And then Joe came in and took over the show.

I hope he's been worth your time.

He is, after all, the father of all those scary monsters.

My first goal was to speak with my editor at Amazon, the awesome Caroline Carr, and to Blake himself, about the weird direction I wanted to go in and the dark new twist I planned on adding to the cannon. They both signed off enthusiastically. My next goal was to write the damn thing as fast as I could—just put the throttle down hard and blast off. This would fit with the whole experimental nature of the Kindle Worlds ideal. In a way it's almost like slam poetry, brought out of the abyss in a fast artistic frenzy, slapped on the page for better or worse, without looking back. No long periods of rewrite, no elaborate edit passes. Just a big bad monster, shot right from the hip in one crazy marathon spree. This would be fun as hell, but no small order, because I planned to do a book-length novella, and not just a 10,000-word short story.

But I did it.

A hair over 55,000 words in just six days.

(Not counting this rather windy acknowledgment section, of course.)

I usually write pretty fast, but *Before the Fall* was a new record.

What this ultimately means is that, from the moment my contract was signed, to the minute this thing appeared for sale on Amazon Kindle, the entire gestation period for the project was just under three months—about a tenth of the industry norm.

Welcome to the future, indeed.

So I hope you've enjoyed the book as much as I've enjoyed writing it. This is a dark work, inspired by a dark world, but I hope we've had a few gallows laughs along the way. Also, I hope maybe you've lost a few of your assumptions about those guys you see every day sleeping under freeways and waving signs for quarters. Joe Casey is a very real reflection of the society we live in, a

fictional composite character based on actual homeless people with stories not unlike the ones you've read here. Moreover—and this is the most important part—I hope that whatever it is that Joe has said or done, he's also inspired *you*, dear reader, to blast off on your own slam experiment. Because at the end of the day, that's what this is all about. Giving the fans room to re-interpret and run wild, creating new worlds. Blake himself is really jazzed about the possible new directions and characters that will come as a result of this grand Kindle experiment, and I have to admit I am, too. After all, I'm a fan myself.

Finally, a few words of thanks:

Many thanks to Blake for letting us play.

To Caroline, who is awesome. Period.

(Her name is pronounced "Carolyn," by the way, if you ever get to meet her. She says it was a joke played on her by mom and dad.)

To Bird and Jimmy and Roy and Kathie and Stephanie, who, like Joe, are also very real people in a very real world.

To Joe Fay and Casey Fay, who didn't mind.

To Franny, Jahnke, and Jack Carr (no relation to Caroline) for valuable Johnny-on-the-spot edits, also in record time.

To my dad, who never got to be my IR on this one because it was written and edited so damn fast, but what the hell—he's still my dad, so I gotta thank him.

To Eric Red, for *Gunman's Blues*.

To anyone else I should be thanking. (Your name here,)

To David J. Schow, who gets thanked a lot on pages like this one, because he inspired several generations with not only his superior stories, but his uncanny abilities with visceral storytelling *tools*.

(As is often the case with my work, there is at least one direct homage to Schow in this book. If you can find it, consider yourself inducted (or abducted) into the SplatterNerd Hall of Fame.)

And to my ever-suffering agent, David Hale Smith, for putting the gig on the table. And for dealing with the Monster.

On a final note, astute readers may have noticed that the evil hatchet lady of Blake's original novels not only gets an entire history here, but also a last name. Like many characters in *Before The Fall*, that last name is a tribute to an actual living person, whom I worked with many years ago as a director of audiobooks. The "real" Pam Prescott is a beautiful and talented actress of many shades. I hope she forgives me for naming such a deranged psycho bitch after her. That's one peculiar trait that many dark fiction writers have in common: We sometimes name our blackest characters after the people we love best. Irony.

Gotta love it.

Ever forward.

Stephen Romano
August 13, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



STEPHEN ROMANO is an acclaimed multi-media artist, whose unique jack-of-all-trades approach to the genres of horror, crime fiction, sci-fi and exploitation has produced innovative, award-winning work. He is an accomplished author, screenwriter and illustrator. His short stories, novels and comic books have garnered critical acclaim from some of the most respected authors and media sources in the world. He is the author of RESURRECTION EXPRESS, a high octane thriller novel from Gallery Books and Pocket Books at Simon and Schuster, now in development as a major motion picture from the producer of the billion dollar RUSH HOUR franchise. Stephen is also the co-author of BLACK LIGHT, a supernatural suspense novel from Mulholland Books at Little Brown and Company, on which he collaborated with top Hollywood

screenwriters Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstan of the billion dollar SAW franchise. Stephen was also the writer of INCIDENT ON AND OFF A MOUNTAIN ROAD for Showtime's Emmy Award-winning MASTERS OF HORROR cable series, directed by the legendary Don Coscarelli of PHANTASM and BUBBA HO-TEP fame. Romano's well-documented passion for sleaze cinema and exploitation film culminated in the ground-breaking illustrated novel SHOCK FESTIVAL in 2008, and placed Romano highly in demand as an accomplished visual stylist in the mode of exploitation film art. Since the book's release, Romano has designed film campaigns for theatrical releases, DVD covers and promotional artwork, including Sam Raimi's THE EVIL DEAD. He lives in Austin, Texas.

SHOCK FESTIVAL was awarded BEST BOOK OF 2008 by RUE MORGUE MAGAZINE and BOOK OF THE MONTH in October of 2008 by FANGORIA MAGAZINE Stephen Romano was nominated in 2010 for a Rondo Hatton award for his blu-ray commentaries for the motion picture STARCRASH.