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Thank you for reading.

Guy



PS. I am a God-fearing man, but my novels tend to go their own way...

Although this one does not contain excessive violence or sexuality, it does include adult themes—violent situations and light erotica—and is intended for mature readers.



# a feeble drift

*Book One of the Fugue Trilogy*



Guy Orgambide

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## Chapter 1

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October 4, Year 1.

*“Father of three vanishes at train station — Sunday, late afternoon — Richard Keiffer, 37, an account manager at Meryll’s Associates was returning home from a picnic in the Bay Area with his wife Alana and their children—Jessica, 13, Anne, 11, and Gregory, 10. As the family proceeded through a corridor of the train station, Mrs. Keiffer noticed that her husband was no longer walking behind them. She first thought that he might have stopped by the bathrooms or the newspaper stand, but over an hour went by without any sign of him. Several paging calls remained unanswered and a search of the station by the security crew did not yield any clue about Keiffer’s vanishing. Both his wife and colleagues portrayed him as a quiet and balanced individual, and could not suggest any explanation to his disappearance.”*

I cut out the newspaper article, folded it, and slipped it into my shirt pocket. I never meant to *vanish*. I just recall Alana’s voice fading into the background noise of the station as I drifted into a branching corridor. When I walked out of the station, a brisk fall breeze nearly brought me back to my senses but the twilight sky ended up pulling me further away. I never paused, walking with a hypnotic pace as a late ‘90s night closed down on a docile prey.

My trek ended nearly three hours later, leaving me infused with the mental acuity that comes with physical exhaustion. Only a few houses on the street were still lit; ours was one of them. Alana’s car was parked in the driveway, facing the street. She was ready to storm out of the house and drive to the hospital or the police station, whichever might call first. She managed turbulences with the same clinical efficiency as she did daily routine.

Right across the street stood the tall narrow house of the *van Dressels*, another ordinary couple with whom we had developed a form of friendship based more on proximity than true affinity. The wives would plan Friday night barbecues and after-mass potlucks as they would have a hostile corporate takeover. Their husbands would politely tag along, trading back issues of *Sports Illustrated* and reviewing a week of six o’clock news with the solemnity of two samurais just returned from a long journey. Now that I thought of it, the makers of the corny ‘50s ads for Coca-Cola would probably have loved to meet us all.

The *van Dressels* were gone for a few days; enjoying their annual trip to Reno where they would lose with great despair a few handfuls of quarters before returning enchanted. As always before leaving, they had given us the alarm code—it never changed—as well as a spare key, which I had forgotten to take out of my wallet. I walked to the back of their house, made it inside without as much as a chill, and deactivated the alarm. I prepared a sandwich

by the fridge light, as I used to do at home during the late-night insomnia that had long provided me with a parallel life a mere flight of stairs away from my family. It took me a while to feel my way around the living room furniture, but I finally made it to the staircase. Once upstairs, I worked my way to a bedroom facing the street and sat in the dark by the window. I snatched a bite from my sandwich, and looked down at our house. It only took Alana a few minutes to appear behind the living room window. She stood there frozen, staring into the orange glow of the street. I knew that she would wait up for me all night. As far back as I could remember, each of us had always known exactly where the other was.

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I had seen Alana for the first time from the top of my bike, just a few days after the training wheels had come off, as she stepped out of a moving truck parked in front of the farmhouse across the dirt road from ours. The sight of her troubled me so much that I started heading downhill without a thought for the handbrakes that my father had not had a chance to fix.

Alana first saw me through the spokes of my front wheel, as I struggled to ignore the gruesome pain arising from my butt. Not exactly the daredevil impression I had been shooting for, but along with my dignity, I had managed to break the ice. The next day, she agreed to come with me to the magic source, half a mile into the nearby forest. There, I introduced her to my dear friend Ernest. Ernest was fat and spent most of his time making bubbles with his saliva, but to my great surprise, as soon as Alana saw him, she grabbed him and planted a vigorous kiss right on his mouth. I did not quite get her explanations about a bewitched prince charming, but if the girl was able to kiss a toad on the mouth, she sure was worthy of a free ride in my world.

For the years that followed, we turned over the stones of an enchanting world together; some with excitement, others with anxiety, but always together. Our parents had grown very close and treated each other's child as their own. To this day, I don't have a single childhood memory that doesn't include soft seasons, green spaces, Alana, my parents, and hers.

I sensed that the change had come the day my father stopped me on the front porch as I was heading to Alana's home with my pajamas under the arm. He struggled with an unusual embarrassment to explain that I was now too big for slumber parties at Alana's. I only understood that sudden change of mind two or three years later, when puberty brought along some much-needed clues. At that time, I started noticing that Alana's delicate facial features were somewhat thickening, but that was not the thickening that intrigued me the most...

High school soon came along. The asphalt of the nearest town replaced the dirt playground of the middle school down the road and smothered the

clarity and exclusivity of our friendship. Other characters entered our space, such as the suave Don Bartley, a newcomer from somewhere up north, rebranded *Don Giovanni* by the herd of squealing girls with whom Alana was now spending most of her time. Don was fascinated by the singular resistance of Alana to his otherwise unchallenged aura. I had grown my own infatuation with Lydia Hampshire, not the prettiest girl in school, but whose tantalizing *thickenings* turned each of my math classes into a cosmic adventure.

Despite the intensity and confusion of those years, Alana and I still managed to sit under the porch from time to time to share the bits and pieces of the grown-up world that we had collected along the way. And even though we did not understand much of each other anymore, we kept our paths crossing as a tribute to our short past together.

Don Giovanni finally got to paste on the gas tank of his red moped one more Betty Boop sticker, this one with Alana's name scribbled on it. On my end, I almost passed out the night I finally got to touch down on Lydia's twin planets after months of embarrassing launches. After a short while, we all broke up, got into other test rides, and then broke up again. Alana and I shared too many kiddie memories to get close that way, but since we both ended the senior year without a designated mate, we agreed to go to the prom together. That night, we celebrated the survival of our friendship through the whirlwind of four years of exhilarating and vain intensity. When I escorted her to the front steps of her home at the end of the evening, our parents' houses were asleep, but the curtains of their bedrooms could not help but wobble under the faint light of the half moon. They froze when we kissed each other good night on the cheeks and parted.

The college years never brought Alana and me back to the limpid friendship of our childhood, but we still managed to meet for lunch once or twice a week, usually bringing along other friends. We enjoyed each of our meetings, but there never was any ambiguity about the nature of our relationship.

They say that alcohol delivers you from the wisdom of the past and the pledges to the future. The morning after the crazy Halloween party of our senior year, we realized with a terrible embarrassment that *they* were quite right.

We got married on a rainy February Sunday, only a few weeks after a surprise engagement announced at the end of Christmas dinner. The news had propelled Alana's mother into a silly natural high, and my father had hugged me for the first time since I had made that horribly lucky, yet valid touchdown at one of those dreadful junior varsity football games during which I was hardly ever called onto the field.

A week after the wedding, we moved into a small apartment less than a mile from campus and took the time to get to know each other again before

Alana brought our first child to the world, a month after our graduation ceremony. Six months after our engagement...

Within a few weeks of graduation, I landed a job with a financial firm in San Francisco and we crossed for the first time the boundaries of our southern playground, leaving behind us a fully-consummated childhood and heading toward a steady-handed future.

Our first years as a family were times of numb happiness. Since the day I had fallen from my bike upon seeing Alana for the first time, I had always felt quite clumsy around her. I admired her ability to find a proper answer to any problem and the right attitude under any circumstance. As her husband and father of our children, I tried hard to fit within her crystalline world. I now played house with the same application and enthusiasm that she had shown in *playing fort* years earlier.

After the arrival of our third child, Alana decided that it was time for her to go back to work. She managed to land a position at the firm where I was employed and from there on, also merged with my workdays. On our commute back from the office, she would often lean against the passenger window, close her eyes, and rest for a few minutes before we would pick up the kids. These were the only times when I could look straight at her without feeling a little intimidated. Her thin blond hair had darkened over the years and she had kept a few extra pounds after the pregnancies, but she had never ceased to be the girl who had made me fall from my bike. Though late at night I could not always brush off the thought that Alana had been caught up by the grown-ups' world while I had never stopped running down our sunny trails, I knew I had to feel blessed. I was married to my best friend.

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Alana was still immobile behind the window. By now, she had understood that there would not be a silly explanation to my disappearance. We faced off for a long moment, hidden from one another by a skinny coat of night that the street lights could not peel off the houses. When she walked away, I stared for a while at the empty window frame, and then looked up. At first, I found comfort in the fact that the lights in the kids' bedrooms were off, but I quickly realized that soon the day would come again and bring the children back into the new world I had thrown them in—a world from which their father had removed himself. What started as a shiver soon took on a life of its own. When the first vomiting spasm hit, I staggered out of the room and down the stairs, slammed the door open, and stormed out.

I ran with the erratic course of a drunk goose until exhaustion smothered the nausea. I could not tell for how long I had been wandering in unknown streets when I noticed a soft beam of yellow light opening the sidewalk to my footsteps. I turned around to face a long car trailing behind me. It came to a full stop a few yards down the otherwise deserted and dimly

lit street. Its passengers stepped out, leaving the doors wide open. I stared at the cold glare of the headlights for a few seconds and then headed toward them. I could hear the cynical tone of their voices but could not make out the actual words.

I walked right through them, which seemed to throw off their routine for an instant, then started kicking and punching their car with a senseless fury. I knew I had found my escape when the cascade of blows that followed only reached my brain as numb waves. I could feel the warmth of the blood running down my face, but the pain never came. I remember my legs liquefying and the deadened shock of my skull on the pavement, but even though I never lost consciousness, I don't recall my assailants leaving the scene.

As soon as I regained control of my breathing, I curled up and rolled to end up on my knees, my hands flattened on the cold cement. My mind had cleared up—as if the hoodlums had somehow punched me out of my possession— and it urged me not to let a police patrol find me on that sidewalk.

I staggered across a long stretch of wild lawn toward a narrow alley, between two wooden houses. The alley was lit enough for me to spot a rectangular hole cut into the side wall of one of the homes, just above the ground. Craving for a shelter, I approached it, kneeled, and hauled my body, head first, through the hole. My extended arms broke the fall, but as soon as my body lay flat on the ground, I passed out.

## Chapter 2

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October 5, Year 1.

A poking sensation dragged me out of a pit of mad dreams, only to bring me onto an even weirder stage. I opened my eyes on a shaft of white light diving over me and onto the cement a few feet away. An unsettling glow that enveloped a woman in a dark bathroom robe and oversized slippers ending with hippopotamus heads. She pointed at me a gun so small that it only added to the eccentricity of the apparition.

“Don't fucking move!” she said.

The injunction slapped away most of my drowsiness. I looked more carefully at the woman's face and realized that she was black and younger than in my initial perception.

“Please don't be afraid, I'm not dangerous, I just fell here,” I said.

“You just fell into this neighborhood and then you just fell into my basement?! Stand up!”

I struggled to gather my thoughts before answering with all the poise I could put together.

“My name is Richard—Richard Keiffer. Last night I got lost and I was assaulted nearby. I didn't mean to intrude in your house; I just hid here—”

“White folks don't get lost in this neighborhood. They wouldn't even drive near it. Whatever your story is, you'd better get the hell out of this house. Get up! I won't tell you again; this is not a toy!” she said, waving the gun.

I proceeded to move my back up against the wall, awakening a radiant pain in almost all parts of my body. When my head entered the beam of light descending from the basement window, the woman took a step back as the belligerent expression on her face faded out.

“Oh Lord...” She paused for a long moment. “Why did you have to come here?”

Even a simple movement such as lifting my arm required a tremendous effort, and when my hand finally touched my face, all I could feel was a grainy coat of dry blood covering numb bulges.

“I'll be okay; if I could just rest here for a few hours.”

“You don't need rest; you need a doctor and... to leave this house.”

“Just a few hours, that's all I'm asking for. I'm not hurt all that bad.”

She had instinctively lowered the gun and was staring at me, scrutinizing every square-inch of my face.

“Just stay there, right there in that spot, and keep your hands where I can see them.”

She walked backward to the staircase a few yards away, her eyes locked on my hands. She hurried up the stairs, and disappeared inside the house. I was convinced that she was going to get her husband, but after a short

moment, she came back alone. I instinctively spread my arms open. She was still holding the gun in one hand; in the other she carried a metallic blue box. She put down the box a few feet away from me and laid on it two bananas and a can of soda that she pulled out of the pocket of her robe.

"This is a first aid kit. Try to fix yourself up, then go; you know the way," she said, her eyes pointing at the basement window. "I have to go to work. Don't even think about getting inside the house; there are three locks on that door. Just leave before nightfall."

I was too tired to negotiate. She climbed the stairs backward, closed the door behind her, and made sure I could hear her engage the locks. I kept my back flat against the wall. After a few minutes, children voices started dripping some life into the gloomy underground. I must have been standing underneath the kitchen since they were complaining about the brand of cereals while the voice of my reluctant hostess was pressing them to hurry up with their breakfast. I listened eagerly; that early morning family routine fed me with a soothing sentiment of normality. Just above my head, a door and three locks away, the world was still in fine order.

I felt a void after they left the house. For a while, the life above had lifted me out of my condition, but I was now rapidly sinking back into it. I took a few steps away from the wall and although the pain nauseated me, everything seemed to be functional. I knelt by the first aid box, ate a banana, and drank the can of soda in one stride.

When I opened the blue box, I avoided the reflection of the small mirror affixed under the lid. I soaked cotton balls with an antiseptic solution and started running them on my face. I was relieved to see them return with only dark brown stains and the pungent scent of the antiseptic perked me up. When I finally found the courage to face the mirror, I was able to recognize myself. My lips and the contours of my eyes were swollen, and my face was shaded with purple and yellowish patches. The shapes and colors were altered, but it was still me.

I stood up and proceeded to walk around the almost empty basement, not so much to loosen up my sore limbs than in an attempt to reactivate my mind. I navigated around several drying racks, most of them holding colorful children clothes, white socks, and bleached towels.

A shorter rack—on which were laid several items of female underwear—held my eyes, and by a bizarre twist, the sight of these intimate garments ignited my thinking. Why hadn't she called the police? Had the roles been reversed, I would not have hesitated for one second. But then, of course, the roles were not reversed. A beat up white executive in the basement of a woman's house deep inside a tough black neighborhood... Bringing in the police was unlikely to be the easiest way out for her. Even though she could not readily turn to the police, that was not the reason why I was still here. She could have forced me out. Her gun may have been small, but it was real.

I was still here because her instinctive reaction had been one of pity and at this point, the pity of that stranger was more vital to me than the love of my children. She belonged to a world that scared me but now was as much mine as any other. Although I did not know the first thing about her, she was the only person whose presence I inhabited. I lay down on the floor, my head on a rolled up rug—waiting on her.

## Chapter 3

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October 5, Year 1.

The squeaking of the wooden ceiling pulled me out of a dreamless sleep. The night had already descended, and only the glare of the streetlights was coming through the window. It felt as if my daily cycle had been turned upside down and I was now to live at night with only brief bouts of consciousness during daylight.

They were all back; the children and her. They were going through a similar routine as in the morning. Amidst the rattling of plates and silverware, I could now distinguish three separate children's voices teasing each other in waves that receded only for a few seconds in response to the periodic calls to order from their mother. That familiar cocktail of sounds reminded me that it was dinner time at home, too. I shook my head to jolt away the mental picture that thought brought along. I focused back on the lively exchanges of the siblings and their mother, trying to discern at least a few traits of her personality in preparation for our next face off. She was delivering a fine balance of discipline and affection in her control of the children, embracing two roles in the same play. She was running the show with great application, and I understood that it would not be easy for me to disrupt it by my extended presence in the house.

The excitement of dinner was followed by a quiet homework session only punctuated by sounds of kitchenware and running water. The discussions were restricted to brief exchanges of questions and answers between the children and the mother. The end of the study session was signaled by the rumble of chairs on the floor, followed by a total silence. She was probably putting the children to bed upstairs. A thick tension clawed at the pit of my stomach. I sat down by the side of the staircase with my arms wrapped around my knees, attempting to put together in my mind words to oppose to her wrath when she would find out that I had not left. I knew that the first seconds of the confrontation would probably determine its issue, but my efforts only generated a hodge-podge of lame excuses.

I was so absorbed by that mental exercise that I did not hear the locks disengaging. Light poured down the stairs; I instinctively jumped to my feet. That brusque stretch brought my head just a foot away from her hands. Through the spindles of the staircase, I saw the startled expression on her face. I heard the shot a second before I felt the pain. My body folded under the blow, forcing me to squat. An intense burning sensation on the left side of my stomach immediately took over.

After a long, uncertain stare at the cement floor, to conjure the fear more than the actual pain, I lifted my head. She had not left. She now sat on the top stair, back to the wall, left hand wrapped around her forehead, a look of

sheer panic in her eyes, locked on me. Her right arm was extended, still pointing the gun in my direction.

"Please, put the gun down," I said, my voice so serene that it took even me by surprise. It seemed to stir some life in her eyes, even though her posture was frozen. I stood up, my hand clutched to the side of my stomach, and walked slowly to the bottom of the staircase. Her head followed my movement but the gun was still pointed at the spot from which I had moved.

"You can let go of the gun, now; it's over," I said. "It was my fault; I didn't mean to scare you. I have no intention of harming you or your children. I have three kids of my own, you know, two girls and one boy, probably around the same age as yours."

I spoke fast, intuitively trying to prime back her reasoning. After I sat down sideways on the bottom stair, she let her arm down. Her first words seemed to come from a very distant place.

"Oh, Lord... I have to call the police."

I opened my jacket and lifted up my shirt. Where I had expected to find a bloody wound, I saw a constellation of red dots instead, with tiny blood smears surrounding them. As I ran my fingers over the dots, I felt the sharp edges of small pieces of metal encrusted in the skin. The gun was probably one of those low impact self-defense pistols shooting small metal splinters, and my jacket had slowed down the projectiles.

"Wait! I don't think it's too serious. There might not be a need to call the police. Why don't you go check on the kids and make sure that they are not on their way down here?"

I sensed that I had to take control; her momentary disarray might be the only opening I would get. She stared at me for a long moment, then stood up like an automaton, walked inside the house, and locked the door behind her. I was not sure of what she would do once she walked out of the scene. I just hoped that the sight of her kids would bring her back to her senses.

I walked to the meager light descending from the basement window, took off my jacket, and tried to pull out a few of the splinters with trembling hands. The emotional aftermath of the events to which I had been submitted over the past twenty-four hours was now hitting me hard. My life had always been quite protected. The only violence in my neighborhood had come through the TV screen and I always found a warm comfort in turning it off at the end of the evening. I always thought that I would fall apart like a sissy when confronted by threatening situations—but I had not—yet.

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When the basement door finally opened—very slowly—the woman held on to the knob as she took a step in.

"Are you there?" she asked.

The tone of the question sounded more like *Are you still alive?*

"Yes, I'm here," I replied, and walked back to the bottom of the staircase for her to see me.

"How bad is it?"

"It burns pretty bad, but I think I'll be okay if I can remove the splinters from my skin and disinfect the cuts. I could use some tweezers and a bright light."

She scrutinized my face again for a long moment before replying with a wary voice.

"Can you climb the stairs?"

She was no longer holding the gun, but the right pocket of her apron was distended by a heavy object. I stepped on the stairs one at the time, not so much because of the pain than to avoid another clumsy move.

She walked backward, a few steps ahead of me, into a short corridor that led to a brightly illuminated room. As I entered it, a smell of bakery enhanced my feeling of deliverance from the underground. The kitchen was small and packed with weary appliances, a white wood table, and unmatched chairs, but the colorful children drawings on the walls, the magnets on the fridge, and the neatly ordered cans and boxes on the shelves of the open pantry dispensed an atmosphere of safety. I sat down and laid my hands flat on the flowery plastic cloth covering the table. The woman left the room and returned a short moment later with a pair of metal tweezers, a flask of a yellow solution, and a roll of gauze.

"Are you sure you can take care of it?" she asked.

"I think so..."

My answer had been automatic, but I felt anything but sure that my nerves would stand a new challenge. I had never been very courageous in dealing with injuries, let alone trying to fix them myself.

She probably read my apprehension, as she pulled a glass and a bottle of whiskey from the top shelf of a closet. She poured a large volume of the liquor into the glass, and pushed it across the table.

"This might help," she said.

The soft burn of the alcohol on my empty stomach relaxed me almost instantly. I opened my shirt and proceeded to grab the small pieces of metal, pulling them out in brisk strokes, and laying them on a paper napkin. Each extraction generated a sharp, short-lived pain, accompanied by little pearls of blood rolling out of the emptied cuts. I was growing stronger by the moment, heartened by the familiar lift of the liquor. I raised my head as I pulled the last splinter out. I had left her standing across the table, looking at the procedure, but she was now sitting down, her face lustrous with sweat. One elbow on the table, her forehead lodged into her open hand, she stared at the table cloth while taking deep breaths through her nose. I pushed the glass of whiskey back toward her.

"This might help..." I said with a tentative smile.

Her face relaxed for a brief instant upon hearing the echo of her own words. As she sipped the remaining liquor, I soaked a piece of gauze with the yellow antiseptic and ran it in circles over the small wounds that had already stopped leaking blood. I repeated that operation several times, just to push back the moment when I would have to leave. When I finally closed my shirt, our eyes crossed briefly. We were both already at the end of our respective communication lines.

"I'd appreciate it if you would let me use the bathroom," I said, uneasy.

She nodded and led the way out of the kitchen, facing me all along. Halfway through a narrow corridor, she opened a side door and turned on the light of the bathroom from the outside. She stepped back further down the corridor, blocking the way to the living room. I closed the bathroom door behind me. The reflection of my face in the brightly lit mirror sobered me instantly. The bruises and bumps were now further enhanced by thin red vessels fragmenting my eyes and a short, rough beard. The entire front of my shirt was soiled with large brown streaks of blood, dirt, and grass. In little more than a day, I had been turned from a neatly groomed suburban father into a grotesque bum.

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When I came out of the bathroom, she escorted me back to the kitchen. I headed with resignation to the corridor leading to the basement, but her voice held me back.

"Do you need to eat...?"

I turned around thinking that her judgment might be impaired by the effects of the whiskey, but her face was still and closed. I nodded instinctively. She motioned me to sit down, then pulled out a sauce pan from the fridge, placed it on a burner, and proceeded to stir continuously its contents as a way to divert the tension underlined by the silence that had fallen on the kitchen. I could not help looking at her. My parents had raised me in an ambiguous "all men are born equal, but separate" and "respect all, but love your own" philosophy. I had never really reconsidered it more than any other parental guidelines dealing with personal hygiene, religion, or respect for the flag. In college as well as at work, my interactions with African-Americans had always been cordial but neatly cordoned off. I had this vague impression that at the end of the day, they would retire into the rituals of their world while I would retire into the rituals of mine. It seemed in the right order of things, and I had no curiosity for their life after hours.

A sweet smell brought me out of my reflections as she poured a large portion of stew into a white plate. She slid the plate in front of me, then brought a glass of water and two slices of bread.

"Thank you. It smells great," I said.

I knew that sounded too casual but I was afraid of leaving the safe trail of ordinary words. I started devouring the meal, dunking large pieces of bread into the rich sauce. The woman watched me with intensity all along but waited until I finished eating to break the silence.

"Are the police looking for you?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe...? I'm not a criminal," I replied.

"I saw your picture in the paper tonight; you vanished *for no apparent reason.*"

She had emphasized the last words with a suspicious tone of voice.

"I wish I could explain, but I don't know what happened."

"You remember that you have three kids, so don't tell me you've got amnesia!"

"No, I don't. I know exactly who I am, where I live, where I work—but... I can't go back."

Without warning, an expression of anger remodeled her face.

"Oh my, how did I not think of that? You can't go back! Your wife and kids are probably worried sick at home. You break into my house, putting my children and me at risk. You almost turned me into a murderer. But you simply can't go back. And—of course—this is all because your educated mind is playing the depression game?!"

She had raised her voice; her hands were tightly clasped on the table.

"It's not a game. I've been almost killed twice in twenty-four hours. I feel like crap knowing what I'm doing to my family, but I can't return to them!"

I had spoken louder, too, sensing it was an important battle to be fought if I did not want to end up on a hostile street in the middle of the night. Her wrath did not weaken one bit.

"Listen, I have three small kids and I work two jobs to support them, so spare me the story of the little breakdown of the white man with the three-hundred-dollar sports jacket. The father of my children walked out one evening to buy potato chips at the corner store before Monday Night Football. He never returned. Well, I guess he, too, must just have realized that he *couldn't* go back home."

I could have hit myself. I had not heard a male voice in the house since my intrusion. She had turned her face away and stared at the kitchen window. The day had been a serious trial for her nerves, too. That short exchange had only lasted a few seconds but it had left both of us angry and uncertain about each other again. It had drained off the control that she had shown earlier, and splashed me with the crude reality of the damage I had caused in just a day. I tried to reconnect, but with little hope.

"Do you know whether your husband is still alive?"

She did not reply immediately and proceeded to put away the stew.

"Since you care so much," she said with acrimony, "I heard that he moved down South to start all over. Is that where you're headed too?"

"Last Train to Georgia..." I said without thinking.

She looked at me with such animosity that I instinctively leaned back. She grabbed my plate brusquely, took it to the sink, and stood there, her back turned to me.

"You can stay here until tomorrow night," she said after a long moment, her voice in check again. "My sister is using my car tonight, but tomorrow after dark, I'll drive you out of the neighborhood. Now, go back to the basement. I don't want my children or anyone else to see you here. Tomorrow, the kids will go to school, but I'll be here, it's my day off. I'll let you in to use the bathroom."

I moved my hand behind my back; she stepped back. I raised my arm to reassure her.

"Please, I'd just like to pay you for your trouble."

When I reached again for my wallet, I realized that the back pocket of my pants was empty.

"I'm sorry. They took my wallet."

She shook her head sideways to indicate that it did not make any difference.

"Stay here; I'll get you a sleeping bag."

She left the room for a short moment and returned to hand me the bag rolled around a pillow. I walked back into the basement; she locked the door behind me.

I could not fall asleep. The idea of having to leave the house tormented me. My sole vital sign at that point was still to be a mole in that woman's present.

## Chapter 4

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October 6, Year 1.

I woke up early. The house was still silent and the light coming through the window was as crystalline as the fresh air of the autumn morning. The soreness of my body had somewhat receded, and my lips and eyelids moved freely again. My main concern was the wound from the shot. I lifted my shirt with apprehension, but the area, still brown from the antiseptic, did not appear swollen or infected. In fact, it only yielded a mild pain when I ran my fingers over it. Other than that, it looked and felt like an older wound already.

I sat down at the bottom of the staircase, awaiting the first signs of life on the ground floor. They came in the form of a tumbling of bare feet on the wood, accompanied by the frantic screams of the children chasing each other. Their mother's voice summoned them to the kitchen table, and I again became a silent witness to the morning routine, feeling now more like a remote limb of the family than an intruder.

When they left the kitchen, I went back to the first aid kit still lying in the middle of the basement and cleaned my face using antibacterial towelettes. A look in the mirror confirmed that the swelling had gone down and the bruises had lightened up; my face was reclaiming its natural territory by absorbing these incongruities.

More than an hour elapsed before I heard the children run out of the house with excitement. I walked by the window and stood in the light until the basement door finally opened.

"You can come up," said my hostess before disappearing right back inside.

I joined her in the kitchen. When I entered the room, she stared at the side of my stomach.

"How's the wound?" she asked, without emotion.

"It's okay. It doesn't hurt much, it's only irritated," I replied.

She nodded and looked away.

"I have coffee, cereal, and scrambled eggs," she said, setting the food on the table.

"That'll be great, thank you."

I ate in silence while she washed the dishes, turning her back to me for the first time. The night had absorbed the tension of the evening and to an outside viewer, we may have looked just like another couple at breakfast time—an odd couple.

I finished the eggs and brought my plate to the sink.

"I heard you with the kids; you're doing a great job."

"I have to. I'm the only chance they'll get."

"I'm glad my being here hasn't affected them. I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I've caused you; I'm grateful for—"

"Don't thank me. I didn't have a choice. Calling the police wasn't necessary, and throwing you out at night in this neighborhood wasn't an option."

"Throwing me out would've been an option for most people in the same situation."

She remained silent for a few seconds and then replied with a tone of voice intentionally unemotional.

"Why isn't going home an option for you?"

I had not expected the matter to come back so soon, but I had prepared myself for a second chance.

"You're raising three children and working two jobs," I said. "Have you ever been seized, even for an instant, by the urge of leaving it all behind, no matter what the cost?"

She turned around, took off her apron, and wiped her hands. The look in her eyes was tense but not angry.

"Urges don't run my life," she said calmly.

"But you do know that one, don't you?"

She looked straight at me for a second before putting the clean dishes into the cupboard. I was about to apologize for pushing the issue when she started talking as she piled glasses on a shelf.

"When my husband left us, I was scared and angry. I could barely deal with the loss, let alone figure out how I would take care of a baby and two young kids on my own. I felt trapped, and running away from it all was all I could think about. That thought made me sick but no matter how hard I tried to clear it out, it would just bounce right back in."

"How did you get rid of it?"

"I never did. I'll just beat it every day for as long as I can. That's how I have carried on for the past four years. For the kids..."

"But every single night, you have the same fantasy about leaving and reclaiming your life, don't you?"

She abruptly pulled her hands out of the sink and went back to the cupboard. She would never answer, but she didn't have to. Every night for years, we had been running down the same forbidden trail, and at this very moment we met for the first time. The preset spirals that ran our lives had nothing in common but the escape route.

"We have the same daydreams," I insisted.

She turned to face me.

"They are not the same. Mine are just that, *daydreams*! I've never accepted them. I may need them sometimes at the end of my days to find peace, but I will never let them take over my life. Two days ago you started living your fantasy, just as my husband did!"

"No. I never accepted it either. Two days ago, *for no apparent reason* and without warning, it took over. I never planned—or even decided on an impulse—to desert my wife and children. Just thinking about it makes me sick. I know it seems easy for me to go back home, apologize, call it an accident and slip back into the loop. But it's not an accident, and it's not a temporary depression."

She did not reply; she just stared at me, as to give me a last chance to explain myself. I continued.

"Like you, at night, I often had the feeling that I had loved my family, my wife, my children to the point of losing myself into them," I said, trying to put together some clues for the first time since the beginning of the ordeal. "Over the past twenty years, day after day, I was asked to make the choices and decisions of a responsible adult, even though inside I never felt that I had a chance to grow up. I tried my best, though, to always make the choice or the decision that was expected of me. That's how I picked the right job, married the right woman, and became the right father. As a result, I always had the respect and affection of the people I loved, and that gave me the impression that I was running the right life."

I paused for a moment, collecting my thoughts.

"My life was pointing north when my heart still yearned for western frontiers," I continued. "I was conscious that, year after year, I had been diluting my essence and chipping away at my dreams, but I was not unhappy. And I would never—*never*—have seriously considered quitting it all. For the past two days, the thought of what I'm doing to my family has torn me apart, but I need to understand what's happening to me right now before I can even think of returning to them."

I had spoken without reserve or illusion. No matter what I said, each of my sentences ended in a silent *And then, I walked away from my wife and kids...* Even I could hear it. She started clearing the table with slow movements.

"What will happen to your children?" she asked.

"My wife is a lawyer. Financially, they're not at risk."

"I didn't mean *financially*."

"I know..."

I walked to the window. Over the past two days, I had been slapped so many times by the thought that I could stop the sorrow of my children just by taking a cab home. Every time, I had felt that it was going to destroy what was left of my sanity, but every time I had been able to absorb it using the excuse that within a few hours, I would probably find my way back.

She stepped out of the kitchen; I was washing the dish and silverware that I had used when she returned holding a pair of jeans, a sweater, and a box of laundry detergent.

“Wherever you decide to go, you can't go like that,” she said. “You can take a shower and wash your clothes in the laundry room—next door to the bathroom—and put these on while they dry.”

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I took a long, very hot shower. On a bathroom shelf, I found awkward disposable razors supposed to, according to the wrapping, leave my legs smooth and silky. They did not live up to that promise on my two-day-old beard but the shave refreshed my look a bit. As I slipped into the jeans and sweater, I thought for an instant of their original owner; an estranged husband and father. He had preceded me on the same alternate trail but had not left any markers along the way. The thought that he may never have found what he was looking for, despite having sacrificed his family for it, scared me. I faced the mirror before leaving the bathroom and fixed my hair with meticulous care. There was no vanity in that application. I just needed to look like a human again.

When I walked back into the kitchen, she noticed the change by a rapid scan but did not comment on it. She was ironing the children's garments that I had seen in the basement. I instinctively noted that she had not included her underwear to the pile of clothes sitting on a chair. She picked up a wool jacket from the pile and slipped into it. The house was cold; the brilliant autumn sun had been laid to rest by a uniform blanket of dark clouds, and a northern wind was throwing the dead leaves in the backyard into spasmodic twirls.

“We turned off the gas furnace for the summer, and now it won't start again,” she said. “The company is asking for a hundred dollars just to have someone come and look at it. God knows how much they'll charge to fix it.”

She had just mentioned that as a way to disrupt the silence, but I jumped into the opening.

“I could take a look at it. When I was a student, I took a summer job in a plumbing company and installing heaters was part of the work.”

She was skeptical but nevertheless accompanied me to the basement and showed me how the furnace was supposed to operate.

For the rest of the morning, I engaged in a heroic battle with the heater. That job was my only chance to give her something more than a stupid string of thanks. Using a toolset I had seen earlier under the staircase, I disassembled all of the parts that could be taken apart with the frenzy of a mad scientist and cleaned them to a shine. I had no idea of what their function might be; I had omitted to mention that the summer job in question consisted in cleaning the premises after the plumbing installation was completed. I nevertheless succeeded in putting back all the pieces together thanks to a thorough labeling with stickers of different colors that I had found in the toolbox. I screwed back the cover into place with anxiety and

after a pause resolved to engage into the multiple step process required to start up the furnace. The last step in the manual was called *Ignition* but after I had completed it, the only ignition that occurred was that of my frustration. I stood defeated, staring with hatred at the big block of dead metal, dreading the task of bringing to my hostess the pitiful outcome of my efforts.

As I finally started heading toward the staircase, a timid whistling crept through the silence of the basement. I rushed back, and just as I pushed my ear against the cover of the heater, a sudden whoosh erupted inside, and a fan kicked in somewhere over the furnace. I pulled the front cover back off and was greeted by several rows of blue flames now pointing their tips to a heat exchanger. I affixed the cover back into place, jumped back, and engaged into a silly pantomime in the fashion of a football player who has just scored the decisive touchdown in the last seconds of the Super Bowl. I noticed her only a good half-minute into my performance, and froze. She was leaning against the frame of the basement door, her arms crossed on the chest, a faint smile softening her face for the first time. She did not seem in a hurry to put a term to my embarrassment.

"Your moves are okay for a white guy," she said while descending the stairs. "But what about the furnace?"

I walked back to the object of my mechanical prowess.

"I think I fixed it. I'll keep an eye on it for the rest of the day, but it seems to be running now."

She hesitated for an instant.

"That's good news; I didn't have the money to fix it right away, and the kids had to sleep with sweaters on. Thanks."

Her voice was measured, but for the first time since she had found me in that basement, she seemed relaxed. My ridiculous exhibition had probably more to do with it than the fact that I had fixed the heater. I had just lost most of my potential as dangerous maniac by gaining a serious credit as a fool.

The first warm waves already oozed into the kitchen by the time we walked back up. While I washed my hands in the sink, she started dressing the table and set down two plates, one at the end of the table and one to the side.

We would not be sitting face to face, but we would both be sitting at the table.

## Chapter 5

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October 6, Year 1.

We stayed at the table for over an hour. I had initiated a prudent conversation on topics in which we could easily relate: jobs and children. She was on the defensive but attentive, as if seeking remote clues to the vanishing of her husband in me. She held a full-time job as a preschool teacher and spent a large part of the weekends working the cash register at a convenience store nearby while her sister would watch over the kids. All aspects of her life were governed by an unconditional dedication to her children, whose safety she could only ensure inside the house.

"...in your world, you worry about your kids not performing in school as well as you'd like them to. Here, we have to worry about them making it back from school unharmed. Each morning, I have to make a call on whether my children's education is worth taking a chance with their lives."

I had seen many news broadcasts reporting on the violence in inner city streets or schools; I had heard about children killing children, and read the shocking statistics. I would be appalled by these reports but only for a moment, as if I had passed through a drive-in movie theater, witnessed a few gory scenes on the screen, and promptly returned to the real world. I never made the effort of trying to relate these reports to real people loving real children. On the other hand, if I were to see on the news scenes of riots occurring in the same neighborhoods, I would be shocked. It was the same violence coming through the same TV screen, but riots could spill over into my world, whereas even though I felt sorry for the people living in violent neighborhoods, I knew all too well that I would never be one of them.

Since the beginning of the discussion, her application in trying to open a line of communication between us had been as keen as mine, albeit for different reasons. When she asked me about my origins, I answered without reserve.

"I grew up on a farm in Alabama and went to a small college about a hundred miles from home. I moved here only after graduation."

"I see..."

She stood up and started piling the dirty dishes in the sink without a word. Her sudden change of attitude puzzled me for a few seconds. Then I figured it out.

"Hey, wait a minute! I grew up in a Southern countryside, but that doesn't automatically put me in a KKK lodge, you know."

"No, but that's got to help," she said, suddenly sarcastic.

"I can't believe this! You couldn't possibly fall for a stupid cliché like that."

She swung around.

“Cliché?! You broke into my house not even two days ago, and you already have the pretention of telling me what is or what's not a cliché?! Take a good look at me: I'm the best cliché you'll ever get to see. I'm a thirty-two-year-old Black woman with three kids, two jobs, and zero husband! Take a walk outside and look around you; at the corner, down the street, you'll find kids ready to take a life before they even know how to bring one into this world. You'll see folks sneaking into basements—husbands, mothers, teenagers—oh, not by *accident* like you, but because they know that's the only place where they'll finally get a chance to feel alive in the haze of gray smoke. All clichés to you, right? So easy to dismiss when they're just clichés. Well, I have a news flash for you: real people are trapped in clichés. White clichés hurt me ever since they made me understand I was black; black clichés hurt me ever since they told me how I *should* be black! But I'm sure your parents forgot to tell you about things like that.”

I pushed my chair back in a loud rattle and stood up.

“You don't know the first damn thing about my parents! They were very decent people. Yes, as I grew up, I understood that they believed that blacks and whites were too different to let their lives mix but they never taught me anything but respect for all, no matter how different. Can you honestly say your parents never told you something similar?”

“They did, but because they *had* to. Like I have to prepare my children to live in a world where sooner or later a clerk in a shop or a colleague at work will make them feel that they don't belong there.”

“Well, my parents also probably felt they had to—to prevent me from getting caught up in that same world by crossing the line.”

“And you never felt it was worth a second thought, right?”

“Not until you offered me food when I couldn't ask for it. How about you? Would you have let a white man live in your house unless you were forced to?”

“Why should I have?”

“Yeah, why? That's also how I felt about black folks. I had nothing against them. But why complicate life, right? Both our parents just wanted it to be easier for us.”

“So I guess this house is the last place they would've wanted you sneaking into last night, right?”

She was still tense, but the tone of her voice had softened a bit. I took the opening.

“Oh, you couldn't be more wrong,” I said with a snobbish tone of voice, “they couldn't have wished me another hostess as resourceful as to shoot you one minute and serve you a fantastic stew the next!”

She hesitated for a few seconds, then shook her head and let out a half-smile.

“Don't push it; the stew is gone, but I still have some bullets left.”

She brought the plates to the sink and started washing them. When she turned on the radio, I recognized the tune; *You're All I Need to Get by*—almost ironic.

"Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, Motown, 1968. Do I get to take off my red scarf now?"

She turned around and replied with gentle irony.

"You have to be kidding; even rednecks know that. "

"Well, try me then."

"That's okay. You listen to classic R&B?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Since my teenage years, I've always had a passion for R&B, from the early Motown artists to Anita or Luther today."

"But you admitted earlier that you never had a close African-American friend. How can you know so much about black music and be so removed from those who create it?"

"I never thought of it that way. R&B has always been for me like a sophisticated dish in a French restaurant. I'd truly enjoy it, but I wouldn't feel the need of knowing how it was prepared in the kitchen, or where the ingredients came from."

"Well, you made it into the kitchen, even if you had to *fall* into it."

She turned around and resumed washing the dishes. I took a cloth and wiped the dishes as she piled them on the counter. Standing so close to her felt strange; I assumed that a similar feeling also kept her silent. When we finished, I sat back at the table and looked at her while she served us both some coffee. My perception of her had changed. She was not as much a black woman anymore as she was a young woman, mother of three children. The dark complexion of her skin enhanced the intensity of her golden eyes. Her nose and lips were wider than Alana's but as evenly designed and in harmony with her face.

I had always evaluated the beauty of the facial features of Black or Asian women by pasting them mentally on a white face. Now that I thought of it, it made as much sense as trying to appreciate a Gauguin painting by cutting it into pieces and laying down some of them over a Manet. I was so absorbed in the contemplation of her face that I did not realize that she was looking back at me. I brusquely lowered my eyes.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to stare at you."

"You seem to be doing many things you don't mean..."

Her voice was firm but not hostile. I gladly diverted from the matter.

"Could I take a look at yesterday's paper?"

She stepped out for a few seconds and returned with the newspaper. She handed it to me and left the room. The article on my disappearance was in the *Local News Briefs* section.

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As I inserted the clipping of the article in my shirt pocket, she returned with the day's edition of the newspaper, still folded inside an address ring. There was no further mention of my vanishing and that, somehow, brought me relief. As if fading out from the news meant starting to fade back into normality.

I folded back the paper and discretely read the address tag. Her name was Tashia Johnson, and her address indicated a street branching from the central artery of the Cantero district. I recalled her words about white people and this neighborhood. She was right; no white person would engage that far into it by chance. At work, we would even warn our out-of-town clients on the hazards of driving by this part of the city. My house was at least five miles from here. I had a hard time believing that I had wandered so far the night of my breakdown; I had a retrospective chill just thinking about it. I discretely pocketed the address tag.

Tashia had resumed her ironing in silence, and I was left wondering what thoughts might be running through her mind. I took a few steps around the kitchen and noticed a phone book on a corner stool. It had been left open at the *KEH-KEL* page. I went back to the table and sat opposite her.

"What stopped you from calling my wife?"

Although the question was more abrupt than I would have wanted, she did not show any surprise and continued ironing for a short moment before replying.

"I couldn't sleep last night. I came back to the kitchen and sat for a long time looking at her name in the phone book, trying to figure out what was worse: letting her believe you might be dead or seriously injured somewhere, or sending someone back to her who didn't want to go back. In your current state of mind, you could only continue to hurt her. I didn't want to be responsible for that. I don't think I've ever ceased to love my husband, but for a long time now I've been praying for him never to return. I've chosen the pain of losing him over the torture of wondering when he'll leave again. Last night, I guess I made the same choice for your wife."

I remained silent, conscious that I had forced her into making that decision for my whole family. A decision whose consequences she endured every day. She started ironing a shirt but I noticed that she was ironing the same sleeve over and over with an absent look on her face. After a dozen passes on the sleeve, she stopped, picked up a pile of ironed clothes and left the room in haste. I sensed that something was wrong but hesitated to follow her outside the kitchen's boundaries. I finally decided to go after her and saw the clothes scattered on the corridor floor.

When I walked into the living room, she was sitting on the sofa, back locked straight, hands clutched to the seat cushions, shoulders shaken by silent pulses. She had not noticed my entrance. Although my instinct pushed me to retreat toward the kitchen, I walked to the couch, sat by her side, and put my hands on her shoulders. She pushed me back without anger, so I just

sat by her for several minutes as her crying spasms finally came out before gradually subsiding. She finally slid to the other end of the couch, wiping her face with flat hands, and regained her composure.

"I'm just tired..." she whispered.

I knew that she did not just refer to the usual challenges of her days. By crashing into her life, I had enhanced the weight of each of her daily burdens. I had dragged back in the tormenting shadow of her husband, driven her to shoot a bloody vagrant, and threatened by my presence the safety of her children. I had even forced her to decide whether my children should be given back their father. I was the catalyst for her collapse. To put an end to the silence, I voiced one of the random thoughts bouncing in my mind.

"Have you ever considered taking a new companion?"

She took a deep breath and answered without looking at me.

"Men always think that's the ultimate solution for a single mother. Anyway, when you have three kids, the only companions you get are those who make sure to leave before the children wake up. All that matters now is that I see my children through and out of this place. Afterward, maybe I'll have a chance of my own again."

I took her hands and helped her up. She walked back to the corridor, picked up the clothes, looked straight ahead as she passed by me and went up a staircase by the end of the living room. I decided to check on the furnace. It was running fine. There lay at least one thing I could fix.

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Shortly after I returned to the kitchen, I heard knocks at the front door. Tashia burst back into the room.

"Someone is at the door. Get back in the basement."

"Are you going to open the door?"

"It's probably my sister."

I rushed back to the basement and settled by the door, leaving it ajar. I heard the front door locks disengaging but no voices. I was getting edgy when I felt a push on the basement door.

"There wasn't anybody at the door. Only this," Tashia said, looking down at a white envelope in her hand. Her voice was altered but I could not figure out what emotion caused the change.

"What is it?"

"It's for you."

I looked at the envelope with disbelief, then at her, but she, too, seemed to search for the same explanation on my face.

"For *me*? That's impossible!" I said. "How could anybody know where to reach me when even I didn't know exactly where I was until a few minutes ago?!"

I was looking at her so with such intensity that she read my silent question.

"If I had called somebody, it would've been your wife; I didn't," she said.

Her voice was cutting, and I believed her, but something too odd was going on, and I was not the one who had brought it about this time. She handed me the envelope.

"Why don't you just open it," she said, aggravated.

I took a long look at the handwriting of my first and last names on the envelope but could not recognize it. When I shook out the contents onto my hand, a plane ticket and a passport fell out. The same stupefaction appeared on both our faces. I walked back to the kitchen to sit down. She followed me and stood by the table, an inquisitive expression on her face. I was quite sure now that she did not have anything to do with this, but that certitude only added to my confusion. I tried to regroup my thoughts by examining the documents. The ticket was issued by a major American airline. It was a one-way ticket to a city named Shannon, in Ireland, via JFK. The departing flight was scheduled for seven in the evening, that very day. There was no indication of the actual purchaser and the ticket had been bought directly from the airline.

I started turning the pages of the passport which seemed official until I saw my picture under a name that was not mine: *Kevin Cronin*. The street address corresponded to my neighborhood, just two blocks down from my actual house. My date and place of birth were correct. The picture was the exact one I had on my real passport and several other official documents. I looked back at the plane ticket with more attention; it, too, was made out to the name of Kevin Cronin. I lifted my head and looked straight at Tashia.

"Listen, I know how strange all this must seem, but you have to believe me, I have no idea of what's happening. This is a ticket for a place in Ireland of which I've never heard, and the passport is a fake with my picture on it."

"What are you going to do?"

Her voice had turned frigid. She was feeling a threat again, maybe not from me but definitely from something going on around me.

"I'll leave your house," I said, eager to reassure her, and then stood up.

"Are you going to take that plane?" she asked.

The question hit me. In my initial confusion, I had not realized that the ticket and the passport had been sent to me for that purpose.

"Could I have a drink?"

She set a glass and the bottle of whiskey back on the table, then walked out of the kitchen.

In the midst of all the commotion, I was not in an optimal state of mind to make a decision that could determine my life to come. Yet, it did not take me very long. Looking at it simply, I did not have that many options. I had already prepared my words when Tashia walked back into the kitchen.

“Yes, I’ll take that plane. I don’t know who sent me that ticket; I don’t know why they want me to go there. But here, I have no money, no belongings, and I’m unable to reenter what used to be my world. At least by taking that plane, I may have a chance to understand what is really going on.”

The expression on Tashia’s face suggested that she believed me, or at least tried to.

“I’ll take you to the airport. I’ll ask my sister to pick up the kids from school and watch them until I return,” she said.

She turned around, grabbed the phone and started dialing a number. I looked at her for a few seconds, but she did not look back.

Slipping back into my damp clothes set my body in harmony with my mind—very uneasy. Tashia already had a coat on when I returned to the kitchen.

“I know you’d have preferred not having me come out of your house in broad daylight; I hope it won’t cause you any trouble,” I said.

“That’s okay. I’ll pull the car up to the side of the house. You can go out through the back door and walk around. Just make sure you lock the door behind you.”

As she drove out of Cantero, I looked at its spectacle of sorrow with an unexpected melancholy. I wasn’t leaving a rugged hideout; I was leaving a shelter and a woman who had given me a chance when I had managed to throw all of mine away.

On the way to the airport, I asked Tashia to swing by my neighborhood. I wanted to know where the address written on the passport was—*29 Pine Grove*. I guided her through the familiar streets, making sure to avoid passing in front of my house. Pine Grove Street was bordered by two strings of elegant houses with large front yards, but between the numbers 27 and 31 was an empty lot only adorned with a tilted mail box bearing a 29 in hastily painted letters. That did not surprise me.

We did not talk until we reached the airport. She parked in front of the departure hall in the *Unloading Only* area and kept the engine running. For a little while, we both looked straight ahead. A honking horn behind us signaled that it was time.

“Tashia...”

She turned to me, surprised to hear her name carried by my voice.

“Thank you,” I said.

She nodded. I needed to see in her eyes that she, too, might be losing something at that moment. It was not there for me to see. I closed the door and watched her car fade away.

I had just been plucked from another world.

## Chapter 6

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March 11, Year 2.

"Kevin, do you have a minute?"

"Yes, of course, come in."

I had expected that visit all day and made an effort to hide my anxiety as the director of Human Resources stepped into my office.

"As you know," he said, "your trial period ends next week. We've reviewed your performance at the board meeting this morning. Your achievements over the past three months are quite impressive. Your supervisor and your colleagues have also commended you for your professional attitude. We have therefore decided to make your appointment with us permanent. This will only translate into a small raise but if you keep up the good work, I have no doubt that you'll soon find your way up. Congratulations and welcome to *Detroit Mutual Bank*."

I shook the director's hand and thanked him with the most formal words I knew. Happy hour had come early that Friday and I worked with a frenzied enthusiasm for the rest of the afternoon. On my way home, the scenery looked alive and congenial, as if the city itself had accepted me after several months of probation. As soon as I entered my apartment, I lit a cigarette and walked to the window to stare at the brilliant snow flurries that dashed the air between the gray pavement and the somber skies.

Today, I had anchored my life back—Kevin Cronin's life. It had been my one and only purpose since I had landed in Detroit on a frigid late October afternoon.

That day, I had returned to the States as I had left them—with a false passport as sole belonging and credential—but I was driven by a determination that I had never known before. I had checked into a homeless shelter overcrowded with men whose distress I used to fear, but were now native species of my new ecosystem. I had soon gained the trust of the shelter's employees by displaying an amicable attitude and helping around.

About a week after my arrival, I had convinced one of the secretaries to let me use her computer while she was at lunch, arguing that it would help me find a job. I had developed solid computer skills over the years at Merryl's Associates, and after only three short noon sessions on the shelter's computer, I had forged half a dozen fake credentials; a birth certificate, two college diplomas in accounting and finance, and two letters of recommendation from enthusiastic—though imaginary—past employers. I had taken these materials to a small temp agency, betting on the fact that they would have much more interest in placing me rapidly for their benefit than in thoroughly checking my credentials.

Two weeks later, I had walked for the first time into the *Detroit Mutual Bank*, wearing a used suit, purchased along with two others, from a Salvation Army store. The entry-level job was very easy in light of my actual qualifications, but I had thrown myself into it, using each of my assignments as a stepping stone to improve the existing work procedures. I had been informed on the first day that the contract might be converted to a permanent position, and that perspective was vital to me. In the bus or while lying down on my bunk bed at the shelter, I would plan every detail and every social interaction to be carried out during the next day of work. After only a few weeks, I had found myself demonstrating new computer tricks and programs to my colleagues, in the most appropriate team spirit. I also paid great attention not to disturb the hierarchic organization of the department by an over-aggressive attitude. I had played the game for a long time, in what now seemed another life, but never with such zeal.

After receiving my first month's salary, I had been able to get a month to month lease in a decent apartment complex only a few minutes away from the bank. My apartment was small and run down. Since I could not yet afford any furniture, I had to sleep on an inflatable camping mattress, but after the lack of privacy that I had suffered at the shelter, I walked back home every night with a joyful anticipation. Trivial tasks such as grocery shopping or making use of my tiny kitchen brought me a cheerful sentiment of regained control.

I did not care about the rugged standards of that lifestyle; actually, its simplicity provided a healing contrast with the violent confusion that had thrown me on that shore. I would have felt almost at peace if it had not been for the shame that had become my most faithful companion. Only three days after disappearing from my wife and children's life, I had embarked on a journey whose surges had burnt my connections to them. My guilt had reconfigured into shame. I knew that my family was still suffering and hoping, but for the time being, the best I could do was to survive away from them.

Over the following weeks, I bought a few pieces of used furniture, repainted the apartment, obtained a driver's license as Kevin Cronin without raising any suspicion from the state employees, and purchased a weary Oldsmobile. With each of these materialistic achievements, my mind itself started planting roots into that new life. I even noticed the marks of interest of one of the female clerks at the grocery store, but ignored them. I had managed to land a substitute life but my shame was a vigilant reminder that I had no other rights than the basic ones.

Nevertheless, my life was slowly growing back and with it, a virgin faith.

## Chapter 7

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April 17, Year 2.

I was the proud owner of a small TV for only a few days but had already made it a habit of crashing on the sofa for half an hour, right after returning from work, to catch re-runs of *Taxi*. I enjoyed the old sitcom. I could easily merge with its cast of eclectic characters down on their luck but driven by the same illusion that their day job was only the waiting room of greater destinies.

On a frigid and snowy spring evening, I was heading to the kitchen during the commercial break when three firm knocks on the door stopped me. I took a mental bet before turning back: *Sixty-five percent chance that it's a neighbor raising funds for some cause, twenty percent for the Mormons or Jehovah's witnesses, fourteen percent that it's a door-to-door salesperson, and one percent for the police.* That pretty much covered the spectrum of my prospective visitors. I opened the door to an attractive woman in her early thirties in business attire and holding a small leather bag.

*Saleswoman, probably insurance,* I thought.

"Mr. Cronin?"

I nodded; she responded with a polite smile.

"Hi. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure, come in."

Since I had moved into that apartment, I had made it a point to give salespersons and missionaries of all sorts the opportunity to do their jobs. Although brief, my trip into the outskirts of society had raised my tolerance level, or I was just lonely after hours. The woman sat on the sofa with some rigidity while I pulled a chair from the kitchen area.

"My name is Yuan Miller." It suited her face, a balanced blend of Asian and Caucasian features. "I work for the *Chicago Daily* newspaper and I'm investigating a case of simultaneous disappearances—"

The juxtaposition of *newspaper* and *disappearances* hit me hard in the pit of the stomach. She had not gone beyond those words and stared at my face with an unsettling intensity. She had clearly played one of her best cards up-front and was measuring its effects. I had no idea of the expression on my face at that moment but I managed to produce a composed voice.

"I'm not sure I understand..."

"About six months ago," the woman said, "I was doing some research on the Internet for the preparation of an article dealing with seasonal variations of homelessness. At some point, I was mining a database dedicated to the posting of missing person reports by their families, and one morning, a colleague mentioned the disappearance—two days earlier—of a priest in a Chicago suburb. I entered the date as a keyword to retrieve the

corresponding posting, and I did retrieve it, along with six other records of disappearances on that very same day, *October 4<sup>th</sup>*."

She had emphasized the date and now stared at me again in silence, waiting for a response.

"And...?" I replied, adopting a casual tone of conversation, "there are several thousand news reports of missing persons each year, right? So what's so surprising about several of them occurring on the same day?"

"You're right; the surprising part is not that seven or so persons would be reported missing on the same day. Them all being *happy people* is."

The expression sounded silly, but it drove her point home; she knew more than I had anticipated. I did not reply; she pushed on.

"Out of curiosity, I read each of these seven postings, which included a personality profile of the missing individuals. Although the descriptions were quite superficial, these profiles appeared very different from those of most other cases reported in the database. I followed up on that first impression by contacting the families, friends, and colleagues of each of the seven missing persons. I found out that the victims all had stable jobs, most of them a harmonious family life, and plans for the future. Not one had financial difficulties, a serious disease, family conflicts, nor had a criminal history of any kind, and none associated with alternative religious groups. There was no evidence that any of them had ever experienced depression or even irrational behavior before their disappearance. These characteristics were in total contrast with the ones that explain most cases of missing persons. They were very normal people, and they all lived in safe environments and in different parts of the United States, which bring the odds of their being the victims of simultaneous criminal acts down to almost zero."

Her cold rationale made me increasingly edgy and I struggled to affect an expression of surprise.

"Did they know each other, or did they have anything in common?" I asked, brushing off an imaginary piece of lint from my pants.

"I've not been able to establish any link between them—or any common pattern that may explain their drifting away."

She pulled out a wrinkled sheet of paper from her leather bag and started reading from it out loud.

"—Gary Roesler, 45, chemist, married, two children, Philadelphia. Had just been promoted to research director in his company. He took out the trash after dinner as usual and didn't return.

—Marcia Espinoza, 59, manager of a flower shop, widowed, four children, Kansas City. Was a volunteer English teacher in an evening school for Hispanic immigrants and was only one week away from embarking on a Mediterranean cruise. She walked out of the store in front of several customers without any explanation.

—Marvin Fowler, 29, a state employee, married, two children, Atlanta. Had bought a home five months earlier and was spending most of his free time building a glass house extension to host the weekly rehearsals of his gospel choir. His wife found the electric saw still running in the garage when she came back from work, radio still playing loud, but no trace of her husband.

—Brian Reed, 31, an independent carpenter, single, Colorado Springs. Was engaged to be married at the end of the year and the loan he had requested from an online banking agency to develop his business had come through in August. He rented a car, even though he owned two, and vanished with it. The car was found intact in a natural area only a few miles from the rental agency.

—Linda Fong, 34, a data entry operator, married, Portland, Oregon. Her life revolved around her son Thomas Jr., who had been accepted to a very exclusive private high school. She dropped him off on her way to work like every weekday since classes had started, but never picked him up at the end of the day.

—Anthony Roselli, 43, priest of a large Catholic church in Chicago. Walked off the stage during a televised fundraising that he had spent the previous three months organizing, left the phone off the hook, in the middle of a call with a contributor.”

Without stopping her recitation, she reached inside her bag and pulled out a smaller piece of paper that she slowly raised in front of my face, printed side toward me.

“—Richard Keiffer, 37, account manager, married, three children, San Francisco. Had already invited all his colleagues to a large reception for the renewal of his wedding vows scheduled for October 27<sup>th</sup>...”

She did not make any effort to look at my face hindered from her by the paper that she kept holding with an extended arm. It was a *Missing Person* flyer with my real name in bold letters, my photograph, and a small paragraph describing my physical features and the outfit I was wearing on the day of my drift. Since she had begun her recitation of names, I had mentally braced myself in anticipation of hearing mine, but the crude reality of the flyer got to me. She had played a cat-and-mouse game with a surgical strategy and I was now left waiting for her to lay down the rules of a brand-new game. She dropped her arm and looked at my hands, clasped on my lap.

“You made one single mistake that connected me to you; the driver’s license,” she said while putting away the flyer.

“What about my license?” I replied instinctively.

“You didn’t get it under your real name, I know, but you went through the proper channels to obtain it, and it went on record with your real picture on it. You may not know it but the day after your disappearance, your wallet was found in an alley and returned to the police, then to your wife.

"You spoke to my wife...?"

"No, she never agreed to see me, and neither did any of your relatives," said Yuan. "A police officer told me about the wallet. The money and credit cards were missing, but several official documents were still in it, including your driver's license. I gambled on the fact that you were still alive and that, based on the very proper lifestyle you had led up to your disappearance, you wouldn't have the first idea of how to get an illegal driver's license. I have a close friend in a federal agency who has direct access to the database that centralizes all records relative to driver license applications nationwide. I've spent a couple of hours on his computer every weekend over the past three months, screening the thousands of driver's licenses issued weekly throughout the U.S., searching for your face on the picture IDs and hoping that sooner or later you'd walk through that channel. You finally did, just a few days ago."

*And I had felt so proud of my adventurous tricking of the state employee with the fake passport.* I shook my head, growing edgy.

"Why in the world did you go to so much trouble to locate me? I'm not a celebrity or a high profile criminal. The story of my disappearance together with those of the other *happy people* would at best make a blurb on the *Odd News* section of a newspaper."

The young woman stood up, walked to the window, and looked outside for a moment before turning around.

"The other six individuals were found within hours of their vanishing, only a short distance from the site of their disappearance. All were alive. All were physically intact. All were... *mentally destroyed.*"

I got thrown back into the same dreadful confusion that had rocked my sanity just a few months earlier. At that time, I had learned the names of the other six *happy people* and discovered that we had all been the actors of the same play. I had often wondered since what might have happened to them. Yuan Miller had just cut me off from them.

"They were prostrated," she continued, "their eyes had a blind stare and they didn't talk or respond to any form of communication. All were examined by medical experts who didn't find any indication of physical alteration. They've now all been returned to their families but haven't shown any sign of mental recovery for the past six months. Within only three days last autumn, six balanced and focused individuals were turned into living shells of human beings. You're the only one who made it through."

"What makes you think there's a connection between these persons and me? We just happened to be reported missing on the same day; that's all."

"People *like you* don't *disappear*. They may fantasize about it when they get bored or depressed, but they've never had the chance to grow the strength it takes to make the jump, or the cruelty it takes to leave their loved ones behind."

Again, she was far too right. I had daydreamed about escaping back to my own trails for years but not once had I thought that I might have the breach of conscience necessary to take the first step away. My drift on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October had been anything but the result of a conscious decision.

"Well, it happened for me and I'm afraid I won't be of any assistance in solving the case of these six disappearances," I said, entrenched into what I already knew to be a doomed post.

"Seven, Mr. Keiffer. *Seven* disappearances. All I need to know is the detail of what happened to you on—and after—October 4<sup>th</sup>. My investigation over the past months has remained sterile because I couldn't get any information from the other victims. I've been fired by my paper for refusing to pull out of this case. I will not stop now and I will not stop *here*."

She realized that her voice had turned vindictive and pitched a softer tone.

"You're what I've been looking for; the only one of this group of vanished people who can help me figure out what happened to them. You're it for me."

"I'm sorry about your job, but there's nothing I can do for you. Look at me: I have nothing in common with the other victims. I left because I wanted to. I'm not a part of your case." I stood up. "Now I'll have to ask you to leave."

Her face turned livid; she replied with a glacial tone of voice.

"You may want to reconsider your position; by a simple phone call, I could have you arrested for living under a false identity, or inform your family of your whereabouts."

She was clearly uncomfortable working her way through the threats and for the first time since the beginning of the meeting, I found myself having the upper hand.

"Yes, you could have me arrested, but that would not benefit your investigation in any way. I have not committed any crime other than using a false passport that was given to me. I have no prior conviction; I would probably get off with a few months of probation. As for calling my family, you would hurt them in vain, because there's nothing for them to find here but more pain. I live every day with the shame of not being with them; there isn't much you can add to that."

I walked to the front door and opened it. She stood frozen by the window with an adrenaline-driven breathing, as one preparing for a physical confrontation. She knew that she had lost her grip in the last moments of the battle but could not resolve to retreat.

"Please, don't force me to push you out," I said. "I understand that you had bet a lot on this meeting, but you have to believe me, there's nothing I can do to help you."

She did not react at all; she just kept staring at me with the panicked eyes of one trapped by a fire and whose life depends on finding a way out

in a matter of seconds. I approached her and took her arm; she docilely walked along. She did not turn around as I closed the apartment door behind her.

## Chapter 8

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April 17, Year 2.

I had watched her leave through the front door's peep-hole, but for more than an hour I kept pacing between the living room and the bedroom, sticking my eye to the peep-hole at every trip. On several occasions, I ended up sitting on the carpet, my back against the wall, but I stood right up each time. Even though I was too agitated to think clearly, I sensed that it could not be over. There was too much at stake for each of us in this confrontation. I was troubled by the news that she had brought along pertaining to the six other persons who had lost their world on the very same day as I had, and I was now afraid of her threat of calling my family. In the midst of the argument, I thought that I had shown her the vanity of that menace, but what if she called Alana anyway, out of spite? I coped on a daily basis with the torment of existing two-thousand miles away from my family but I had never contemplated the possibility of opening my door to Alana.

The descending darkness and the fact that the woman had not returned helped settle me down a bit. I walked to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. My second-floor apartment overlooked a parking lot tucked between the building and a long row of pine trees bordering a skinny river soiled with blocks of half-melted ice. I stared for a moment through the small window behind the sink. It was still freezing outside and the street lights were wrapped into cylinders of snow flurries.

Somehow, I was not surprised when my eyes landed on her. She stood immobile, a few feet away from the building, looking up at another window of my apartment. She had probably been standing there since I had seen her out. Her only protection against the freezing temperatures was a light raincoat. Her shoulders and dark hair were covered in snow. *The woman was out of her freaking mind! How long was she going to stay there? What did she expect me to do...? Run down and rescue her from her foolishness?!* Her stand disoriented me well beyond anger. I started cooking dinner—trying to ignore her presence—but she might as well have been standing in the middle of the room; she had managed to trap me inside my apartment. I turned off the burner leaving a steak half-cooked in the frying pan, switched off the kitchen lights and sat down in the dark on the window sill.

As time dragged over the mutual stalking of two shadows, I finally realized that she would not move until she passed out. I put my coat on and walked to her in the parking lot.

"Come back inside," I said, my anger in check.

With her eyes locked on my window, she seemed petrified. I had to put my arm around her shoulders to push her all the way back up to the apartment. Once we got in, I took off her raincoat, sat her down on the sofa, and covered her with a wool blanket.

"You can hear me, can't you?" I said, raising my voice.

She nodded with an absent look on her face. She was now shivering frantically, and I was concerned that the warmth of the apartment might not be enough to reverse her condition.

"Would you like me to drive you to a hospital?"

She shook her head to reject the offer and kept staring down at the blanket. She had defeated me, but she seemed broken by the effort that it had required.

"How about a hotel?"

She shook her head even more vigorously. I did not attempt to coerce her into leaving because even if I were to be successful on account of her momentary disarray, I was pretty sure she would be back the next day.

"Listen, you don't look good at all. I can't have you pass out in my apartment. If you don't want to leave, you'll have to drink something hot, get out of these clothes, and take a hot shower to warm up your body. Do you understand?"

She did not reply and kept looking down. To diffuse the tension, I went to the kitchen and prepared very hot lemon tea, sweetened with a spoonful of honey and spiked with a generous dose of brown rum—an old family recipe to fight colds. She was able to hold the cup by herself and I walked away when she started taking small sips. Hopefully, it would at least bring her sense back. Her silence scared me; it denied me any clue regarding her state of mind and most importantly how she might act when she regained some vitality. I peeked at her several times from the kitchen until she put the empty cup down on the carpet.

"Did that help?" I asked, approaching her.

"Yes."

Her voice was flimsy, and the shivering had not stopped.

"If I help you to the bathroom, will you be able to take care of yourself? You can lock the door and shower for as long as you need. I'll give you some dry clothes."

She was clearly hesitant but did not push back. I went to the closet to grab a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, a wool sweater, and white socks; I placed them on the bathroom sink along with a clean towel. She let me help her walk to the bathroom, and I heard her engage the lock as I walked back to the kitchen. I was not sure at all that I had done the right thing. *What if she fainted after locking herself in? What if she had a nervous breakdown in response to being trapped in the bathroom of a man whose life she was a threat?* I worried for several minutes until I finally heard the shower running.

I resumed my preparation of dinner and threw a second steak in the pan. After setting the table, I sat down on the sofa with a drink, trying to figure out a strategy to adopt when she returned.

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I heard the bathroom door opening but did not move. She walked by the sofa without a look at me, hesitated for a brief instant, and sat at the table. Her face and ears were red as a result of the hot/cold treatment that they had endured, and the oversized clothes further contributed to a child-like appearance.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Fine," she replied, with a stilted attitude, staring at the window right in front of her.

She was obviously uncomfortable with a situation that she had striven to generate. I was myself disoriented by these circumstances, stirring tormentor and victim in an odd intimacy, and I was not even sure whom was whom anymore.

"Okay, listen, I know that this isn't comfortable for either one of us, but we are, at least for the moment, stuck together in this situation. We might as well eat something. I made steak and pasta," I said, finishing my drink.

She finally turned her eyes to me and spoke with a suspicious tone of voice.

"Why are you doing this?"

I jumped to my feet.

"Why?! What do you think this is? The heavenly date I've been expecting all my life?! Why?! Because you're not giving me a damn choice! If I send you back out there, you may be crazy enough to stand under my window until you freeze to death!"

My reply had echoed all around the apartment. Yuan instinctively stood up; I did not do anything to reassure her. Her eyes followed me as I headed to the kitchen area. I returned with the dishes of meat and pasta, slammed them on the table, and sat down across from her.

"Here! Make up your mind. You eat, or you leave. Feel free to pick up either one of the steaks; that way your odds of getting poisoned will be cut in half."

I did not enjoy my rudeness but at least I no longer had to deal with finding the proper attitude. I was sending the ball to her side of the court. After all, it had been her game since the beginning. She sat down at the table, picked up a steak, laid it on her plate and stared at it for several seconds.

"What if the poison is in the pasta?"

I looked at her with disbelief, but a tentative smile on her face made me aware that she had just tried a joke.

"In that case, we'll both find an easy way out of this."

I had replied without smiling while eating a forkful of pasta, but my anger had wound down. We ate in silence, both pretty well aware of the vanity of small talk under the circumstances. I eventually broke the silence with an abrupt question.

"In your world, is an article in a newspaper worth wrecking someone's chance at a normal life?"

She looked around the room and answered without hesitation.

"Normal for whom? You, or the ones who love you? What makes it worth abandoning a family, *in your world*?"

She had recovered her edge. Over the past hour, I had worked at revitalizing a nerve whose sole function was to conduct static discharges to my mind.

"I didn't end up here by choice, and I have no intention of explaining myself to you," I replied.

"If it wasn't by choice, just tell me that whatever brought you here will never happen to somebody else, and I'll leave you alone."

At first, I thought that this was a poor maneuver. The simplicity of the argument was inconsistent with her determination to get a hot story. I stopped eating, walked to the living room, and proceeded to fix myself another drink while trying to figure out what she was getting at. It hit me quite suddenly. For the first time since the beginning of the whole ordeal, I realized that I might have a responsibility to prevent the nightmare that I had endured from affecting other people's lives in the future. The beast at its core had been annihilated, but I had never considered that it may have left seeds behind. I had always believed that the victims of unspeakable crimes—such as rape—who hid their horror, carried some responsibility in the subsequent offenses of their assailant. I never thought for a second that I might be placed in a similar position one day. I finally replied, but only to buy time.

"What makes you think that you *could* prevent it from happening again?"

"I don't hope for that much, but crimes are much less likely to recur if they have been exposed. By keeping them confidential, you make the choice of protecting yourself at the cost of other people's lives. Part of my job is to stand up for these other people..."

I didn't hear the rest of her answer. I stood up, pulled the glass door opening to the narrow balcony, stepped out, and slid the door closed behind me. The contrast in temperature was shocking. I lit a cigarette to challenge the blizzard, staring at the orange glare of the city lights reflecting on the low ceiling of night clouds. I stayed out for a long time, but I was not really thinking; I had already realized that I would have little or no choice when I had stepped outside.

Again, in a matter of hours, my life had been shaken hard enough for its parts to be able to reassemble only in a different pattern.

When I returned inside, Yuan looked at me with an expecting stare. I cleared the table in silence; she did not ask anything. After piling the dishes in the sink, I sat back down at the table and rested my elbows on the wood, hands clasped in front of my face.

“If I were to talk to you, would you have to mention my name?”

It was my only concern at that point. I did not fear the consequences for myself; I could disappear again into another life before the article came out. But despite my failure to them, I did not want my wife and children to be involved any further, and most of all, I didn't want them to realize that I was alive but would not return home.

“I'll have to trace back your steps since October 4<sup>th</sup> and verify all the facts that you'll give me,” Yuan replied. “These facts will become the evidence that will support the story I'll publish. I give you my word that I will only refer to you through fictitious initials and that no indication will be provided that may lead the readers, the police, or any other party to identify you. This also applies to any other person whose name you wouldn't want to be mentioned.”

She spoke with gravity, but the feverish glow in her eyes betrayed her excitement. I knew that she was strong and dedicated, but as for her integrity, I would have to take a chance. That was the price to pay to redeem at least part of my conscience. I let my hands down on the table.

“You may need something to write on.”

She stood up swiftly, grabbed her bag, laid it on the table, and pulled out a small recorder that she set in front of me.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

I wasn't, but I had grown used to the self-destructive feeling of entering battles I was not prepared to fight. When I nodded, she turned on the recorder and the small red light instantly exhumed a segment of time that I thought I had buried to great depth.

## Chapter 9

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October 6, Year 1.

The San Francisco airport was swarming with passengers in transit, but I was empty. By leaving the city to engage further down into a senseless path, I was compromising even more my chances of returning to where I belonged. Yet, it also seemed the only tangible way out. After a half-hour, I knew that Tashia had probably made it back home and I had to fight the urge to run to the pay phone and talk to her. I had crawled into her life as an animal, but had walked out of it with some dignity; I could not lose that for a few minutes of momentary relief over the phone. I resolved to check in for my flight.

While getting my boarding passes, I asked the employee to look up how and when my ticket had been purchased, arguing that I had some doubts about the efficiency of my secretary. She rapidly retrieved the information which indicated that the ticket had been purchased at the airport the day before, and paid for in cash—by *me*! She had answered with a patronizing attitude, probably under the impression that whatever had caused the injuries on my face had also left some dents on my brain.

As the plane took off, I looked down at the city, stunned by the idea that I was leaving behind two families deprived of a father for the sole purpose of flying toward a black box.

At JFK, my lack of luggage, added to the residual stigma on my face, raised some suspicion from the officers carrying out security controls on international flight departures. I was asked to step into a small office, and a civilian ran the name on my passport through a computer while an officer stood close by. The search did not show any warrant or warning issued to the name of Kevin Cronin, but that did not seem to satisfy them. I spontaneously explained that I had been involved in a car accident the day before while rushing to the airport in response to the news of a close relative asking for me on his death bed in Ireland. I had just been released from the hospital and had not had a chance to retrieve my luggage, which would be sent to me on the next flight. They appeared to be convinced by the story, and after a short mumble returned my passport without any other comment than a laconic “Have a good flight, Mr. Cronin.”

I boarded the plane to Dublin without further trouble. The location of my seat at the back of the aircraft allowed me to scrutinize the faces of the incoming passengers. I was searching for an indication in support of my intuition that someone on the flight might be discreetly monitoring my journey. I abandoned that probing after realizing that even a crippled old woman ended up looking suspicious when being submitted to my mental dissection. After all, if there were somebody on this plane shadowing me, it did not matter, since I was following the path that they had charted for me.

I slept during most of the transatlantic flight. I passed the immigration controls in Dublin without any problem, rushed through a tight connection, and boarded a small propeller plane to my final destination.

Up to that point, I had no idea where Shannon might be located. I pulled out the Irish airline magazine from the seat pocket and looked at the maps. Shannon Airport rested by the southwestern coast of Ireland, only a short distance south of the Connemara—the travel feature of the month in the magazine—defined as *a land of lakes, rocks, and legends by the edge of the world*. Under different circumstances, I would have been thrilled, but during the past few days, I had already entered an eerie legend and slipped off too many worlds to miss this landing.

Shannon International Airport was very small and in a few steps, I found myself outside lighting my last cigarette. The soft wrinkled pack had accompanied me all the way through the past three days, and was almost the sole material link between my walking behind Alana and the kids in the train station, being shot in Tashia's basement, and this final destination on another continent. The airport opened directly on the countryside. There was barely any traffic, no multi-story parking structures, and only a two-way road separated me from small fields bordered by old chestnut trees. It was all so peaceful that I forgot for an instant how I had ended up there. My contemplation was interrupted by a cab pulling up in front of me. Its driver lowered the passenger side window; he was a skinny old man with a convivial smile opening only on a few scattered teeth.

"Mr. Cronin?"

"Yes?"

The man stretched to open the passenger door and yelled.

"Hop in, sir!"

"I didn't call a cab," I replied, on the defensive.

"Don't worry, it's all taken care of; I'm taking you to Galway."

I recalled that name from the travel magazine; Galway was the gateway of Connemara, located at one of the rare points of junction of that semi-detached land with the main Irish island. I hesitated for a few seconds but quickly realized that without a cent in my pocket and nowhere else to go on that foreign land, I was not really in a position to debate on the rationale of getting into that beat-up car. The joyful old character behind the wheel did not exactly look like a vicious maniac either. I sat next to him and before I even had a chance to close the door, he took off with a brutal acceleration.

"Nice day for a ride, isn't it?" he said.

Although it was only mid-afternoon, the light was dim, and a thin film of rain was further filtering it. I thought he was kidding but he seemed so content that I realized he actually meant it. I replied with the first words that came to my mind.

"Who are you?"

"*Banagher & Sons—Day and Night Taxiing*, Galway. I'm the middle son."

I could not help smiling in response to his colorful accent and reckless driving. We had been on the road for only two minutes and he had already startled an airport employee by inadvertently climbing on a sidewalk, drifted to the wrong side of the road while rolling a cigarette and holding the wheel with his elbows, and put a serious dent into the otherwise promising life of a young rabbit foolish enough to cross the road. I just hoped that Banagher Senior was no longer driving. I snapped out of these amused thoughts when I realized that his answer had not brought me any closer to solving my puzzle.

"Who paid for this fare?" I asked, bracing myself as the car approached a large pothole in the pavement.

"A gentleman came by the garage this morning; I don't remember his name; I'm not sure he mentioned it. He gave us detailed instructions and was very generous. By the way, he also insisted that I take you for dinner at the *King's Head*, the best pub in Galway. Plenty of beer, singing, and fancy ladies!"

Banagher drove straight over the hole without slowing down; the violent start of the car sent his cigarette flying and I had to hold the wheel while he wriggled around to try to locate it. I did not pursue my inquiry further. Besides, the old man was probably just an accessory in the scheme. The ride to Galway lasted almost two hours but my guide had a joyful communicative mood and I found myself enjoying the reassuring countryside scenery as much as his company.

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We entered the city at dusk, and I was stunned by the beautiful architecture of the old buildings aligned along the streets. I had never left the U.S. other than for my honeymoon to Hawaii, and upon entering Galway, I felt as if I had slid into a place lost in time. The sidewalks of the downtown area were filled with people of all ages strolling along in couples or small groups with total disregard for the persistent drizzle. We passed in front of several pubs whose misty windows could not totally hinder the lively crowds rejoicing inside. The driver parked the car on the street, two wheels on the sidewalk, and announced with excitement:

"King's Head, Guinness time!"

I was not sure what he meant but I was glad to have a chance to step out of the car and become a part of this community.

As we walked into a large pub packed from wall to wall, the cab driver hailed several customers who returned his greetings with loud convivial voices. We sat down at their table, and as I was introduced, they gave me vigorous handshakes and greeted me as if they had known me for decades. They were all cab drivers from different companies in the city. I understood the meaning of *Guinness time* after noticing that most customers were

drinking large glasses of a black beer with a creamy white foam. I never drank beer, and did not know anything about it. I was served a tall pint without having to order it, and requested to toast my arrival in Ireland by my newfound companions.

“Well, here is to my first trip to a land of legends!”

They cheered with great contentment and downed their pints in a single stride. I felt compelled to follow their lead, and as I gulped the Guinness, I realized that I was pouring a large volume of a strong and thick brew into a stomach that had not seen food since the pathetic snack on the plane to Dublin. Finding that I was American, one of the drivers started explaining with an insightful verve that most people fleeing the terrible famines that afflicted the Irish lands at the beginning of the century had embarked for the New World from Galway. Most of the songs performed by the four singers and musicians entertaining the crowd in the pub indeed revolved around the distress and hopes of the emigrants leaving behind their loved ones for the sole purpose of surviving.

I felt strangely moved by these songs; there was more to that emotion than the serious tipsiness resulting from the two glasses of beer that had appeared before me as spontaneously as the first one. Two tables had now been moved away from a small stage to open space for a lively traditional dance performed by an elderly woman and a teenager who had been sitting at a table next to ours. I participated with euphoria to the clapping and cheering of the crowd by knocking my empty glass on the table.

When I asked my companions the reason of such a celebration, the younger shouted, “Every night, we celebrate Ireland!” His words were answered by a joyous tumult of applause and cheers at all surrounding tables. Caught in the moment, I jumped to my feet, knocking my chair down, and yelled, “Well, I’m Irish tonight!” I received the same ovation, and then almost fell to the ground after missing my landing on the chair. I was saved from more embarrassment by the arrival of a bulky plate of food that Banagher had ordered for me. I started devouring the meal as he patted me on the back, laughing his remaining teeth out. I felt good among these people. They had let me into their heartening world without question or judgment, in spite of my alien accent and the fresh scar on my face. I had found a perfect shell for my confusion and loneliness in that place where past and future life paths intersected every night in a ritual cascade of songs and joy.

When we had finished eating, Banagher looked at his watch and patted my wrist.

“It’s time to go, lad, we have some more road ahead of us.”

I looked at him with surprise.

“I thought you said that you were driving me to Galway?”

“Well, that was for dinner. We have about an hour left to get to your destination.”

I was frustrated by the sudden change of plans. Here, I had felt as if I had reached my final destination, and it all made sense, at least under the dizzy swirl of the evening. Now, it was back to square one. I stood up with a lumpish frustration, thanked my table companions for their conviviality, and followed Banagher back to his car. We rapidly left the warm lights of the city streets to engage onto a narrow road bordered only by small walls of piled rocks encircling the adjacent fields. We were heading northwest on a road labeled N59, deep into Connemara land. The scenery was revealed by the pale glow of a half moon but I noticed that it was strikingly different from the luxurious countryside that we had crossed on our way to Galway. Only the shadows of a few isolated trees could be discerned on hills of white rocky patches and short grass fields fragmented by the geometric network of the stone walls.

The driver was now silent, as the constant curves of the road required his concentration. He actually drove better after our rounds at the pub than before. I lay my head against the window, looking with half-closed eyes at that landscape which indeed seemed to have been carved out by corrosive legends. Under the spell of the monotonous rumble of the car and the effects of the alcohol, I slid into a light sleep. When I heard the voice of the driver, it took me a moment to realize that the car was no longer moving.

“Here we are, Mr. Cronin. End of the journey.”

We had stopped on a narrow road and when I rolled the window down, I could hear the roaring of the ocean not too far away; we must have branched off N59 at some point. I looked around but did not see any light or sign of life.

“There's nothing here; are you sure this is the drop point?”

“Yes, my good man. The cross is the drop point.”

He pointed at a tall, thick Celtic cement cross by his side of the road. I was not sure what to do, but I felt exhausted, and the only way to put an end to the erratic journey was to finish it. I thanked my pilot for his company, shook his hand and stepped out of the car. He turned the vehicle around, and I stared at the red dots of the rear lights until a curve of the road removed them from my sight. There was no traffic on the road and no sound except for the crashing of the ocean on a shore nearby. With the car gone, I now had a full view of the cross. At its base rested a storm lamp whose yellow flame faintly illuminated a white arrow drawn with chalk on the cement. Whoever was leading the way seemed to have a fascination for Boy Scout games. The arrow pointed to the opposite side of the road. After taking a few steps in that direction, I noticed a narrow trail of grass flanked by two low stone walls heading uphill toward the sound of crashing waves.

I engaged on the trail with the feeling that this time there would be an answer at the end; even if I was not so sure that I wanted to know it.

## Chapter 10

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October 7, Year 1.

The trail grew steeper and more sinuous as I progressed. The grass had soon been replaced by a rocky ground, and although the path was still flanked by the stone walls, I was getting seriously concerned. I had been climbing for almost half an hour, and there still wasn't any light in sight. From time to time, scattered clouds passing in front of the moon would force me to pause and yield to the total darkness that they dragged along. I was exhausted, and a terrible feeling of loneliness oppressed me. I kept walking with mechanical strides until the stone walls ended and the track opened on a plateau.

I headed toward the roaring sound of the ocean now very close to finally stop by the edge of a sharp cliff. In spite—or maybe because of my weariness—the beauty of the scenery overwhelmed me. Moonlight rays burst through the strings of massive white clouds to reach out to the trembling sheet of the ocean rolling down a hundred feet below me. The high cliff thrusting into the dark water was laid down like a gigantic compass embracing all the other elements. I stared at that penetrating sight for what seemed an eternity. I had come to the edge of my world. The image cleared my fears as well as my memories and exacerbated my senses, as to initiate me to a new cycle. Words I had read years earlier without understanding them now resonated in my mind with a crystalline acuity, *The day here is so alive that all past is lost...*

When I finally emerged from my contemplation, I noticed a faint cluster of yellow lights several hundred yards to my right. As I approached them, I realized that they pierced the walls of a long, massive three-story house built only a few yards away from the edge of the cliff and facing the ocean. The building had many windows, but only the ones flanking the front door were lit. I peered through one of them and discovered an elegant dining room with imposing pillars of dark wood linking the floor and the high ceiling at different locations within the room. A dozen men and women were eating in silence at individual tables covered with white fabric. That sight comforted me. If this mansion was where I was supposed to end up, things had just taken a much more civilized turn than the most optimistic of the scenarios I had imagined along the way.

Since this seemed to be some sort of a hotel, I pushed the door without knocking and stepped in. Only a woman in her early fifties noticed my entrance by staring at me with an odd insistence. I smiled politely and closed the door behind me. I did not even have a chance to take a step in before a strident noise erupted out of the woman's almost sealed lips. In response to her shrilling cry, all the other guests turned their heads toward me, and in an instant, hell broke loose. Together, they jumped to their feet with

hysterical screams accompanied by a terrible tumult of chairs knocked down and glassware crashing on the floor. They started rushing in all directions, overthrowing everything in their path.

Petrified, my back flat against the door, I watched a man jump on a window sill and frantically shake the handle while another buried his face in a corner of the room, his hands over his ears, his right foot stomping the floor with rage. The woman who had first noticed me held her chair in the air, pointed at me with extended arms, her face distorted with fear. Most of the others were still running all around the room, screaming, bumping into each other, and stumbling on the chairs on the floor.

Across the room from me was a marble arch opening on a short corridor, but despite their obvious fright, none of the characters had left the room. Not one of them had looked at me again since the start of the commotion, though I had triggered it. A good minute elapsed and the chaos was not receding, but I began to recover part of my self-control. I turned around and grabbed the door knob.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please...”

The words had broken through the vociferous upheaval with a quiet strength. I turned back and scanned the room. In a matter of seconds, the tumult collapsed, as the men and women—totally out of control a moment earlier—froze, one after the other. As I scanned the devastated room, my eyes stopped on a plump man in his forties standing under the marble arch with a gentle smile on his indolent face. He walked into the room and helped each of its occupants sit down, dispensing pacifying words. As he assisted them, the distressed persons followed him docilely, and once seated, remained prostrated on their chair. The last person standing was the woman who had screamed first. When the gentleman took the chair from her hands, she just bowed her head and went to sit down by herself. The room was now silent and all the characters looked again perfectly normal except for the fact that their faces did no longer express any emotion, and that they did not seem aware of the fact that their chairs all faced different directions.

“I’m sorry if our guests reacted a bit emotionally to your entrance,” said the gentleman. “They’re quite shy and not used to surprises.”

*Quite shy* appeared like the understatement of the century in light of the uproar they had just generated, but I did not feel like elaborating on the subject. The gentleman wore an expensive suit and spoke with a pompous British accent, but the tone of his voice was amicable.

“I’m Duncan Winford, son of Lord Winford. This is my father’s villa but he’s out tonight; I’m house-sitting for him. How can I help you?”

“Well, I’ve been brought here. My name is... Cronin... Kevin Cronin,” I replied.

He arched down his lips to signify that the name did not ring a bell.

“Are you one of my father’s guests?” he asked, looking at the other persons in the room.

“No, I’ve never met your father. Actually, I had never heard his name until you mentioned it just now.”

He seemed perplexed for a moment, and then his face suddenly lit.

“Oh, you must have been sent for the gardener job. You’re not at the right place; my sister and I are the ones looking for a gardener. We live about a mile downhill from here. Just give me a half-hour to escort the guests back to their rooms, and I’ll ask the nurse to stick around until my father comes back. We’ll walk down to the manor together.”

He turned around without giving me a chance to reply, whispered a few words to one of the *guests*, gently helped her up, and walked her out through the arch.

I stepped outside, welcoming a few minutes of peace to try to regroup my thoughts. I sat down on a bench close to the edge of the cliff, overlooking the ocean. All the way to that point, I had believed that everything would come together when I finally arrived here, but the situation was still locked. Either Winford was sincere and truly believed that my presence here could only be related to the gardening job, or he was a great actor. At no point had Winford expressed any sign of embarrassment or tension. He had behaved toward me with a balance of congeniality and pretentious boredom well in line with his status, and he seemed to have little interest in whatever my story might be.

I remained convinced that somehow, I had been brought there to be confronted with the reason of my senseless behavior over the past days. But assuming that I had made it to the right place, it was clear that nothing would happen that night, and it might not even happen the day after either. Until the time came, I needed to eat and a place to sleep, and if by the same token I was able to make some money, it would help me regain a minimum of independence, as opposed to being constantly channeled by the lack of alternatives.

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Winford came out with a flashlight and nodded without looking at me. I followed him on a dirt track descending toward a very small valley whose cover of tree tops reflected scattered moonlight rays. Along the way, he described to me the functions of the gardener, which consisted mainly of taking care of the landscaping of the park around the manor. He appeared satisfied to hear that I had grown up on a farm, and did not ask for any specifics about my background or previous employment records. The injuries—still obvious on my face—my torn clothes, or my lack of luggage did not seem to bother him. Either the rules for job interviews were much more relaxed here, or he simply had no interest whatsoever in the personal history of a new domestic employee. The salary offered was one-hundred-and-fifty pounds a week and I would be lodged and fed three meals a day.

After twenty minutes or so, the stony trail through the forest ended on a wide grass track leading up to a high portal made of an intricate network of iron stems. We entered a wide open space hosting a small castle whose shadow was only cracked by a flickering light under the front porch. Winford led the way around the castle, toward the south end of the park where a wood cabin stood under a small overcast of low-hanging branches from the trees encircling it. He opened the door and reached inside the cabin to bring back what seemed like a short stick. He produced a flame with a lighter pulled out of his pocket and lit what turned out to be a candle.

"Here you are," he said. "I'm sorry about the light, we have electricity at the castle, but here you'll have to do with candles and oil lamps. You'll find some wood at the back of the cabin if you want to use the fireplace. Your predecessor left some clothes in the closet; you can use them. Tomorrow morning, come into the kitchen through the back door, and our cook will serve you breakfast. Afterward, I'll walk you through the park to give you detailed instructions. Good night."

Once again, he walked away before I had a chance to speak. A musky scent of wet wood welcomed me into the cabin. The main room was only furnished with a small table, a chair and two shelves on one of the walls. A dirty fireplace occupied one of the corners, while an opening in the wooden wall led to a bedroom with a tiny bathroom appended to it. I tested the shower; it only delivered a flimsy stream of cold water—probably rainwater from a tank on the roof.

That small lodge was the end of a long road. I had been allocated a blunt job and a rudimentary shelter, but they were mine for the time being. After the confusion of the past three days, they provided me with a much needed sentiment of steadiness. I lit a small fire to dry the cabin and went straight to bed with the goal to purge an exhausted body and a confused mind of a very long day.

I was awakened after what seemed to be a long sleep by the loud noise of a car storming into the park. It was still dark outside; the sound of the engine stopped only to yield to a female voice carrying a hysterical fury. The shouting distorted the voice so much that I could not make out the actual words. By the time I stood up and opened the window, all I was able to hear was a sound of broken glass followed by the slamming of a door. Complete silence followed. The scene had taken place on the opposite side of the castle and although I leaned at the window in the dark for several minutes, no light was turned on in any of the rooms by the south facade of the manor. I locked the cabin door before returning to bed and had much trouble falling back asleep.

This was my new world, and though I might have a reserved seat in it, I had the feeling that it would not be any easier than the ones I had crossed on my way there.

## Chapter 11

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October 8, Year 1.

The jet lag shook me up at dawn, in spite of a short night. Drowsy and nauseous, I took a cold shower—hot water did not seem to make it to the cabin either—and used several toiletry items, including an electric shaver left behind by my predecessor. The unfamiliar scent of his clothes bothered me, but they fit me quite well and their warmth was more suited to the Irish autumn than my light suit. I walked to the back of the manor and pushed a heavy door that opened on a large kitchen overheated by two wood cookers. Alarmed by the screeching of the old wood on the tiles, a heavy set woman in her late fifties turned to me with an inquisitive look on her face.

“Good morning, I’m the new gardener. My name is Kevin,” I said.

“I know. I’m Anna; have a seat.”

Her voice was not exactly warm and she did not seem inclined to chat any further, but as she served me a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs, and boiled potatoes, I thanked her with an emphatic politeness that seemed to please her. We engaged in a casual conversation. She had been working at the castle for nearly forty years and lived on a farm two miles from there. She came early in the morning, and returned home at night, just as two other local women in charge of domestic tasks did. Duncan Winford and his sister were the only occupants of the castle, and the gardener was the only employee to sleep on the property.

Anna mellowed much faster than the weather outside, and I got to learn the story of my predecessor. He was a drunkard who had been kicked out of the domain by the husband of one of the maids after he got fresh with her in the park. He never returned to pick up his belongings. Not much to live up to, indeed. Anna also informed me that if I needed supplies of any kind, I could add them to the shopping list posted on the refrigerator, which her husband took to the nearest town—nine miles away—once a week. Since the discussion had turned quite friendly, I made an attempt to learn more about the Winfords.

“Late last night, I heard a car stop in front of the castle...”

“That was probably Lady Winford.”

Since Anna’s curt answer was clearly intended to nip the matter in the bud, I went on describing my brief passage through Winford’s father’s guest house. Anna relaxed again and explained at length how Lord Winford was known all over the Connemara as a philanthropist who over the last few years had been providing a refuge for mentally impaired individuals that he had brought in from several institutions throughout Ireland. That, at least, shed some light on the extreme reaction of his *guests* to my intrusion in the villa the past night.

Shortly after I finished my breakfast, Duncan Winford walked into the kitchen and took me to the park to explain with great detail the tasks I would have to carry out. As we proceeded through the north side of the park, I saw an old sports car stopped on the gravel alley, right in front of the door. As we approached it, I recognized the model. It was a Bugatti Atlantique coupe from the late 1930's, a collectible worth a small fortune. Winford asked me to make sure to remove the shards of glass from a shattered bottle of French cognac lying over the front steps, and walked inside the manor without the need to provide an explanation.

I spent the rest of the morning raking leaves on the north side of the park while keeping an eye on the castle, but the timid gargoyles thrusting out of the base of the roof remained the only touch of life arising from the building. At noon, I was served lunch in the kitchen, and Anna introduced me to the two other employees, both in their thirties and married to local farmers. The three women were very intrigued by the arrival of that new gardener with an American accent and, contrary to Winford, were eager to investigate every detail of my personal history. To their avalanche of questions, I provided evasive answers, arguing that I had recently immigrated to Ireland for personal reasons and my past was too boring to make an interesting topic of discussion. When I left the table, I understood that my elliptic attitude would only further fuel their speculations, but in a way, I felt flattered by their curiosity. After all, most of my life *had* been quite dull and I had not had that many opportunities to capture the interest of my peers. Here, I was holding the almost glamorous role of the mysterious American gardener, and although it was only an insignificant household play, I could use the diversion.

That little game of cat-and-mouse with the three maids at lunch time became my only social activity for the days that followed. Winford walked by me on several occasions in the park, but only nodded silently. I found myself enjoying the landscaping job. It was a peaceful activity that reminded me of the outdoors of my childhood and provided me with a much needed time to decant the turmoil of events that had brought me there.

At nightfall, I would head back to the cabin and eat the meal that Anna had dropped on the front steps on her way out. My entire evenings were devoted to writing down in a notebook a detailed account of the events that had occurred since my breakdown in the train station. Now that my mind started settling down, I hoped to find in the layout of the events some clues that would help me understand what had happened; but despite my efforts, it remained a string of random incidents.

Every night after dark, I would hear the Bugatti leave but since my arrival almost a week earlier, I had not met or even seen Winford's sister. Although the servants enjoyed gossiping about neighbors, or even discussing openly the intimate performances of their husbands, they would never refer to *Lady Winford* for matters others than strictly domestic. They

had eluded all my questions about her appearance, personality, or even age. The Bugatti would always return very late in the night, but I had not heard the woman's voice again since the enraged cursing the evening of my arrival.

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Sunday was my day off. Around mid-morning, Winford came to the cabin to pay my week's wages, in cash. I seized that opportunity to ask him whether, on Sundays, I could borrow an old bike stored behind the cabin to go to town and do some personal shopping. He flatly turned down my request, arguing that he and his sister would often leave the castle on Sundays, and although I was off duty, they needed me to stay close by to keep an eye on the premises on that day. The entire exchange in the cabin had been very brief and once again he had left abruptly, just as I tried to explain the reasons for my request. I heard the car leaving a few minutes later and realized that without any means of transportation, I was stranded on the property on that autumn Sunday as I had been during the rest of the week. I placed the money on top of the bedroom cupboard and spent the rest of the morning cleaning the cabin and making a list of items to include in the next week's shopping list, enjoying the feeling of a return to some buying power.

I ate lunch on the front steps of the cabin; the other employees did not come on Sundays, but Anna had left me two cold meals to see me through the day. As I looked at the empty castle, the temptation of investigating it grew so intense that I walked to the manor's back door before finishing my meal. It was locked, and so was the front door. I was trusted to watch over the premises but obviously not enough to be allowed inside the castle when the *masters* were out.

Out of frustration, I decided to take a walk outside the park; after all, it was my day off. I passed the front portal and descended the wide grass alley cutting through a grove of chestnut trees that had escaped the shipyard decades earlier. After a few minutes, the trail became a gravel road that meandered between alternate patches of grass and rocks covering a high hill, which thrust its flank into the ocean about half a mile lower. I walked down to the shore, sat with my back against a rock only a few feet away from the water, and stared at the hypnotic routine of the waves.

I was worried about my condition. I had been there for a week and nothing had happened. I was the gardener at the Winford mansion, and that was it. I felt as if I had slipped into a different life by mistake and that it was now to be mine, without any further explanation, justification, or way back. I had drifted so far from my life in San Francisco that it did not even seem real anymore. I had landed in another place at another time. A place of enigmatic tranquility where even time did not seem to be able to impose its rationale. I did not seem to have any grasp or insight on the environment

and people that surrounded me. I drifted into endless wanderings interrupted by long naps until an early dusk took me by surprise.

I hurried back to the castle. The darkness was already thick when I reached the iron gate. I was relieved to see that the car had not yet returned; I headed straight to the cabin.

As I turned the corner of the manor, I discovered that the oil lamp in the cabin had been lit; the door was wide open, but I could not see any shadow inside. I hesitated for an instant, then approached the cabin and entered with caution. The main room was empty, but as I proceeded silently to the bedroom, I saw a woman with straight, shoulder-long blond hair sitting on my bed, her back turned to me. She wore a black pantsuit with matching high heels and was holding a crystal glass half-filled with brown liquor. She was reading my journal, which I had left in the drawer of the bedside table. The newspaper clipping reporting my disappearance and Tashia's address band, which I had tucked under the cover of the journal, lay flat by her side on the bed.

"Put that down!" I yelled, instinctively.

She reacted with a violent start and spilled some liquor on the bed as she jumped to her feet and turned around. Her tall silhouette and the balance of her pale face combined into an image of commanding elegance. Only the faint dark rings under her eyes and the formality of her allure betrayed her age—probably in the early forties. She confronted me with a feverish stare, still holding my journal in the right hand.

"Put that down," I repeated, "and get out!"

She threw the journal on the floor in front of my feet with sheer rage.

"You're no bloody gardener, Kevin Cronin, Richard Keiffer, or whomever you really are! Why are you here?"

She was obviously struggling to overcome the turmoil of conflicting emotions generated by the alcohol, my startling entrance, and anger I could not quite understand.

"You have no business here," I said. "For as long as I'll work here, this cabin will remain my private quarters," I said, picking up the journal from the floor to dodge her stare. "No one will come in without being invited to do so."

"Who the hell do you think you are?!" There's nothing for you here. I'm the one who decides who works here and what they will or will not do. My brother is a bloody idiot! If I want you to shut up, you will shut up. If I want you to dance, you will dance. If I tell you to burn down this cabin, then you will set the fire; and what I want is for you is to leave. Now!"

All fear had disappeared from her face and anger had taken over; an excessive, desperate form of anger.

"Your brother hired me," I said. "He's the only one who'll throw me out if he decides to. I won't dance and I won't—"

The sting in my eyes stunned me. She had thrown the remaining liquor in her glass at my face in an instinctive move, and I did not even have the reflex to close my eyes. Incensed by the burn, I grabbed her arm ruthlessly; she dropped the crystal glass, which shattered over the floor. When I dragged her outside, then across the park toward the castle, she did not resist or even attempt to talk me into stopping. She could hardly follow me and lost both pumps, sucked off her feet by the muddy lawn, but I did not stop until we reached the back door porch. I released my grip, turned around without looking at her, walked back to the cabin and slammed the door behind me.

I paced around the room for several minutes before stepping back outside to walk my aggravation out. I followed the boundaries of the park in the dark and was only a few yards away from the front gate on the north side when I heard the roaring of the Bugatti approaching. I jumped behind a thick clump of rose bushes and watched the car pass by and stop in front of the manor. As Duncan Winford stepped out of the car, his sister stormed out of the castle and started shouting.

“You’ve done it this time! Have you and Father gone totally insane?! This one has all his sense. He has a wife and three kids! Why did you bring him all the way here?”

Winford ignored his sister and swiftly walked inside the building. She followed him, leaving the front door wide open behind her. I ran across the lawn to the lit window on the first floor and looked inside. Winford was now talking to his sister, but although I could perceive the firm tone of his voice, I could not discern the words. His sister was very agitated, and after a vehement reply, she stormed out of the room. Winford followed her. I waited by the window for several minutes, but they did not return to the front salon. I walked back to the cabin, locked the door and turned off the lights. My days of *enigmatic tranquility* on the Winford domain had come to a close.

I got instantly oppressed by the confined environment of the lodge and attempted to find some relief by leaning out of the window, but a sickening fear had invaded me. I had been swirled around since the beginning of the ordeal, but the thought that it all might just be an unfortunate set of circumstances had fed my belief that everything would soon fall back into place. Minutes earlier, though, I had just been confronted with the reality that this play had been written for me. I had been *brought all the way here*, and I was *one who has all his senses*. For the first time, I had to deal with the thought that the story may not come close to having a happy ending.

My reflection was interrupted by the sound of the Bugatti engine being turned on. The tires growled on the gravel, and the rumble of the engine rapidly faded away. Lady Winford did not seem to be a consenting participant in the play, and now that she was gone, the stage was all clear for the prime actors to step in. Somehow, I sensed that the events of the

evening would precipitate the plans that my hosts had designed for me, whatever they might be.

The night seemed full of fugitive shades and I was seized by the long lost urge to hide under the bed. They had revived the gloomy phantoms of my childhood nights, and despite the trials and battles of over three decades of adult life, I was not more prepared to face them now than I was then.

## Chapter 12

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October 15, Year 1.

I don't know how long I soaked into a nightmarish lethargy. The shadows would not approach; they would not go away. My fear quickly morphed into panic. Crossing without a thought the threshold between dreams and reality, I jumped out of the bed, ran to the fireplace, grabbed an old hatchet I used to cut firewood, and stormed outside. In my rush, I missed a step on the front porch and fell flat on the ground; I instinctively braced myself in anticipation of a blow, but as dreadful seconds passed, only the serene feeling of the drizzle on my face answered my fear. The silence was absolute; there was nothing out here, just my envelope of stripped nerves. I stood up and walked around the castle, still holding my derisory weapon. Only the front salon and a room on the third floor were illuminated.

"Winford!"

My voice echoed throughout the park but did not trigger any response. I approached the front door.

"Winford! You brought me here, here I am. This is it! Whatever you want, now is the time to get it."

After a long moment, the door opened slowly, letting a stream of light flow over me. When my eyes adjusted to the brightness, the sight of a female silhouette standing in the door frame instantly paralyzed my demented rush.

"He left."

Lady Winford's voice was tense. She seemed frightened but did not retreat upon seeing the hatchet in my hand. I let it fall to the ground.

"Why am I here?" I asked, with a sudden lassitude.

She looked down at the hatchet on the gravel, turned around and walked slowly inside the room, leaving the door open. I followed her.

A short hallway opened on a large salon crowded with antiques and dull paintings on the gray stone walls. She stood still in the center of the room, and I could not help feeling somewhat intimidated by her fortitude. She looked at me for a few seconds before pointing her finger at a piece of paper lying on a coffee table.

"This is a check for twenty thousand pounds—close to thirty-thousand American dollars. Take it and go back wherever you came from. Just leave this property now."

The tone of her voice was not condescending anymore. She was trying to negotiate the situation with composure, but her face and posture reflected an extreme tension. I did not look at the check.

"When I pulled out of that *wherever*," I said, "I was pulled away from a wife and three kids. Do you seriously think I'm going to take your money and forget about all this without knowing why it happened?"

"I'm sorry for your trouble, but I cannot give you the answer to that question. I am just trying to help you find your way back."

"Oh, I see. You'll just give thirty thousand dollars to any lost stranger who passes through this property? Come on! You may not be aware of what's going on here but you obviously know enough to try to cover it. Who are you covering for? Your father? Your brother?"

She did not answer.

"Listen," I said, "I've gotten lost to the point of leaving behind all that mattered to me and all I know is that somehow this breakage is related to your father and brother bringing me here. I haven't come here to hurt anybody, only to find an explanation. Just help me understand, and I'll do all I can to find the best way out without further trouble for anybody."

She stared at me in a way that I could not interpret. She had probably anticipated a greedy response to her offer, or maybe an angry outburst on my part, but that call for help seemed to confuse her. She erupted without warning.

"Don't you understand? I can't help you! You have very little time left. I beg you, take the money and go away; go back to your children. Please listen to me; there are no answers here, only more pain."

Her eyes were blurry, and she was obviously in a great state of panic. I walked to her and grabbed her shoulders.

"Why more pain? Why more pain?! The only way to protect your father and brother now is to talk to me. I won't leave without knowing. What goes on here is also what's happening to me."

She wrestled her way out of my hold and ran out of the room in the direction of the front door. I hesitated for a moment, and then resolved to go after her. She was my only lead and I was now very close. I ran out through the front door but instantly froze on the front steps.

They stood in a half-circle around the front steps, out of breath, staring at me without emotion, eyes devoid of life, men's and women's alike. They started closing on me. I scanned their faces for a few seconds, then, in an impulse, jostled my way through their circle, and ran away. That brutal move instantly activated them. They erupted in a vociferous tumult and started chasing me through the park. I ran with all my energy through the front gate, off the track, and straight into the darkness of the forest. I charged through brushwood pushed by a mad fear fed by the savage screams of my stalkers now resonating throughout the forest.

My mind was in such a state of confusion that I had to struggle not to yield to the tantalizing spell of madness which seemed to offer the only way out. The brushwood thickened as I progressed deeper into the woods but I kept rushing between the massive shadows of the trees with moans of fright. I constantly changed directions in instinctive response to the shouts of my predators that now seemed to flare all around me. I saw the shadow of the low branch a fraction of a second before feeling its impact on my forehead.

When I regained consciousness, I tried to move my limbs but none seemed to respond, despite the fact that I could feel my entire body rocking. I turned my head sideways and saw the shadows of several heads aligned along each of my flanks. I realized that my body was laid on the shoulders of my pursuers and held tight by the clutching of their hands to my arms and legs. They were carrying me uphill in a silent procession. A surge of panic assaulted me and in a desperate attempt to break loose, I contracted my limbs in brusque convulsions. That brutal discharge of energy did not defeat their grasp but precipitated me into a severe dizziness.

Floating on the shoulders of Winford's guests, I let myself succumb to the dizzy spell and sink back into unconsciousness as the only way to save the vestiges of my sanity.

## Chapter 13

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October 16, Year 1.

My eyes opened on a spacious bedroom flooded with daylight entering through two sets of tall windows, but it took my numb mind a few minutes to hook up with the environment. I finally sat on the bed and realized that I still had my clothes on; only my muddy shoes had been removed and placed by the side of the bed. I walked to one of the windows and opened it on an ocean covered with a light haze. I took several deep breaths to impregnate myself with its scent. Only a few feet from the edge of the cliff was the bench on which I had sat to wait on Duncan Winford on the evening of my arrival. I was on the third floor of his father's villa.

I slipped my shoes on and headed for the door. Contrary to my expectations, it was open. A long corridor flanked with a series of closed doors ended on a massive, spiral-shaped staircase made of dark, matte marble. I went down the stairs all the way to the first floor, crossed a small hall adorned with a tall metal sculpture representing some a medieval warrior, and walked through a short vestibule to enter the dining room in which I had triggered an upheaval a week earlier. Since I had stepped out of the bedroom, the thought of coming face to face with the *guests* haunting the premises had frightened me, but I had not met anybody along the way or even heard any sign of life in the house. I crossed the empty dining room and walked out through the front door.

I was amazed to find myself outside. Only a few hours earlier, I was being chased like a beast by a herd of lunatics, apparently for the sole purpose of being brought to the villa, and now the way was opened for me to flee. Maybe I truly had lost my mind. Maybe I was living an inner delusion, out of the reach of my loved ones, gathered around my bed at home and striving at pulling me back into the real world.

I thought of running away in the direction from which I had originally arrived, go down to the road, and hide until I had a chance to hail a car. I came close to start running but instead, I walked to the bench by the cliff and sat down, facing the ocean. I could not retreat now; retreat to what? The only way to find my way back to a normal life was to figure out why it had ceased to be normal a week earlier. And if they had meant to harm me, they would have had plenty of time while I was unconscious.

I leaned forward to stare at the endless crashing of the ocean on the shore a hundred feet below the bench.

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"It should all be that simple, shouldn't it...?"

I jumped on my feet and turned around to face a short old man wearing a formal dark suit in shocking contrast with his shoulder-length gray hair and a matching beard trimmed short. He leaned on a wooden stick capped by a smooth silver pommel. I looked at him in silence. He sat on the bench and continued his monologue while gazing into the horizon.

"Many children of the past have sat down on the edge of this cliff," he said, "dreaming of 'the world by the end of the water'; the land you've come from."

I sat down next to him, also looking straight ahead.

"The land you've brought me from..."

"I had to. I'm afraid I'm all you have now."

"Are you responsible for my losing everything else?"

"We both have pieces of the answer to that question. That's why you're here."

"I've been here for over a week, why didn't you just come down to the manor and talk to me?"

"I thought that a few more people would be joining us, and I wanted to confront all of you at the same time."

"Do I know the others who are supposed to join us?"

"Probably not. Besides, it doesn't matter. Based on the news I've received over the past few days, it seems that you'll end up being the only one who made it here. In fact, I got confirmation of that yesterday evening, and I had planned to give you a call this morning to ask you to meet me here. Of your own will, that is. But last night when you confronted my daughter in the cabin and dragged her back to the castle, she got scared and called me. That's when I decided to ask a few of my guests to bring you back here. They arrived at the castle just as Mary Ann was rushing out, running away from you. I do apologize if my guests' manners after that point might have been a little abrupt."

"Abrupt?! They chased me like mad hounds!"

"A few more hours of patience would have saved you that regrettable experience, and we would have met under more civil circumstances."

Because of the actual *circumstances*, Lord Winford's patronizing attitude ticked me off.

"Well, I'm sorry if I got a bit impatient but I wasn't exactly prepared to be extracted from my life, manipulated all the way here by a string of uncanny signals, and stuffed in storage on your son's property without any explanation!"

My cynical tone of voice wiped off the jovial expression on his face.

"I understand your anger, Richard, but like you, throughout this ordeal I've tried to use my best judgment. Neither one of us was ready for this but it happened, and we both had to go through with it."

"Why don't we stop spinning around the ring? You said earlier that you needed me. Why? I've spent all my life on another continent, I've never met

you, I had never heard of your family or even of this part of the world until a few days ago.”

The old man turned back his face toward the ocean, took a deep breath, and stood up by pushing on his stick.

“You're right, let's get started. We'll go up to my workshop.”

The word *workshop* disturbed me, but the crooked posture of the man somewhat reassured me.

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We walked back into the villa, climbed the marble stairs to the third floor and went through a small door opening on a steep wooden staircase tucked between two bare cement walls. The stairs led to an attic covering the entire surface of the villa. Its floor was made of unstained wood slats, and it was lit only by narrow skylights. The attic was empty except for two chairs and a table flanked by two long bookcases by the center of the open space. The emptiness of this large loft, which was capped by the massive beams of wood supporting the roof, and the diaphanous light stolen from the autumn afternoon, formed a surreal environment that oppressed me. As we approached the center of the attic, I realized that the table was occupied by a small computer. One of the bookcases was filled with books; the other contained green filing containers and several boxes of computer CDs. Winford sat on the chair facing the computer and turned toward me.

“If you don't mind, I'll take a minute to write a few notes before we get started. My memory isn't quite as good as it used to be.”

He pulled out a notebook and a fountain pen from the table drawer and started writing in brisk strides.

To the scratching sound of his pen, I sat down by his side and examined in detail the rack holding the files. On the top shelf, all the filing containers were aligned upright except for one lying flat; when I read its label, a brief nervous chill ran up my neck. The handwriting in black ink said *R. Keiffer, San Francisco, USA*. I scanned the labels of the other files on the same shelf and read the names of six other men and women from different U.S. cities. The lower shelf was labeled “Ireland” and the folders it held, about a dozen altogether, were labeled with different last names.

Winford closed the notebook, and his voice cut through the heavy silence of the attic.

“We can start now. If you have no objection, I'll record our discussion from this point on.”

I did not reply. I was still absorbed by my examination of the files, trying to find a common link between the individuals' names or geographical locations. He activated a recording function on the computer and placed a slim microphone on the table halfway between us. He rotated his chair to

face me and looked at me with a grave expression for a brief instant before opening the discussion.

"I know that you're eager to obtain some answers, so why don't you begin?"

Dozens of questions had been rushing through my mind since the start of the ordeal, and I had a hard time selecting a starting point. I opted for a practical question to test his sincerity.

"How did you know where to reach me when you sent me the passport and the airline ticket?"

"I had hired a private investigator from San Francisco to monitor your actions, beginning a couple of days before October 4<sup>th</sup>. That day, he shadowed you all day, at the picnic in the Bay Area park, on the train; he was walking right behind you in the train station when you drifted away from your family; he followed you before and after your visit to the house across the street from yours, and was standing close by when you were assaulted in the Cantero district. He saw you crawling into Ms. Johnson's house and he—"

"He stood nearby while I was being beaten and didn't even try to help me?!"

Despite my snappy interruption, Winford replied calmly.

"I had no way of predicting that you would be assaulted; I had just instructed him not to intervene in any way with the course of the events affecting you. If you would please be patient, everything should fall into place as we go along. Rest assured that I am as anxious as you are to put all the pieces back together."

I made an effort to control my anger and nodded nervously to signify him to go on.

"Right after the beating," he said, "while you were lying on the ground, the muggers took the money and credit cards out of your wallet and threw it behind you. After they had left the scene, you crawled away without it. The detective picked it up. He took the picture on one of your identification cards to an acquaintance of his who prepared the false passport and used it somehow the next day to purchase the plane ticket under your name. After that, he threw your wallet on the doorsteps of the police station close to your house where it was found and returned to your wife."

Winford paused for an instant, a bit out of breath, before continuing.

"The detective went back to his office to report to me right after you sneaked into Ms. Johnson's house. At that point, I must admit that I was fascinated by your demeanor, but I was also concerned with your safety. I asked him to continue monitoring you, and this time instructed him to assist you in case you encountered danger—but only if your life was directly threatened. He set up camp in an empty warehouse across the street from Ms. Johnson's house. The following night, when a shot was fired in the house, he rushed to the basement window with the intent to come to your

rescue, but he stopped when he heard your exchange with Ms. Johnson. He understood that you were still able to handle the situation on your own, and after he saw you going up inside the house with her, he returned to the warehouse.

“The next day, his friend handed him the passport and the plane ticket; he dropped them by Ms. Johnson's house and followed you until you boarded the plane. As you can see, there was no magic in all that, only a careful organization aimed at documenting your actions at that point in time, and providing you with a way out of their consequences. Now, would you please fill in some of my blanks and explain to me what you did at your neighbors' house and what happened during your stay at Ms. Johnson's?”

I understood that he would not resume until I complied with his demand, and I was painfully aware that although his explanations had answered part of the *how*, they had not shed any light at all on the *why* that tore me apart. I described my short stay in the van Dressel's house, as well as the detail of my interactions with Tashia. He listened with intensity, taking some notes, despite the fact that the recorder was running. When I finished, he asked me some very specific questions, all centered on my state of mind at different moments of these two episodes. I could not quite rationalize his fascination with my mental responses at the various stages of those events. I could only relate that peculiar interest with the presence in the house of a bunch of mentally impaired individuals, and that did not reassure me in the least.

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I felt that I had fully answered his request and was in return entitled to place one of my own. I chose another precise question, as I had already understood that he would elude any inquiry aiming at the heart of the matter.

“You didn't assign a private investigator to monitor me by chance. Why did you pick me?”

He answered while still writing in his notebook.

“I didn't pick you; you pretty much tuned into my world on your own. How long have you been using the Internet?”

Although I did not see any connection between my question and his answer, I replied promptly.

“For a couple of years, why?”

“Do you use it for work or just for entertainment?”

“I use it for everything. I perform some research for my work, I buy books, I participate in online discussions about my hobbies—”

“What do you think of it?”

“It's an amazing source of information when used properly and it gives the user a window on the world of an unprecedented magnitude.”

My answer generated a cryptic smile on Winford's face, which disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

"The light goes both ways through a window, doesn't it? Have you ever thought that it might also be a window to the world on you?"

"I don't see your point," I said, with impatience. "What does the Internet have to do with all this?"

"Let me show you."

Winford turned on the computer and executed a few commands through several rapid clicks of the mouse.

"Does this website ring a bell?" he said.

He brought on the screen a page that looked somewhat familiar. I recognized it upon reading the bold header, *Your Own Personal Mind Trainer. Free Trial!*

"Yes, I remember that; it was a questionnaire that any Internet user could fill in. In return they would receive a free consultation from a team of alleged *professional mind coaches* who would provide them with customized advice to help them improve their social interactions at work, with their family, their friends, and their colleagues."

"Do you recall the questions that were asked?"

"Not specifically. I remember that there was a personal profile section, dealing with educational background, profession, and family situation. Another section was about what we felt was most important in our lives, and there were also questions regarding our goals and aspirations. The questionnaire was anonymous but we had to give our email address to receive the feedback; it wasn't a problem since none of the questions were of a confidential order. The worst that could happen was that it was a marketing trick."

Winford turned back to me.

"I posted that questionnaire on a popular Internet bulletin board—on May 17<sup>th</sup> to be exact—and I removed it a month later. Within that timeframe, I received over a thousand filled questionnaires from Internet users like you soliciting the free consultation. Most of the answers came from the United States. When you clicked on the *Submit* button after filling out the form, you sent it right here, to me. It was the first step on your way to this attic. That day was the day we first met, and we've probably been in contact ever since, although you may not have any recollection of the subsequent stages."

He pulled up another file on the computer screen.

"Would you please read this message?"

I looked at the screen.

*Dear Mr. Keiffer,*

*Thank you for filling out our questionnaire and giving us the opportunity to include you in our experimental prototype of an electronic consulting service. Our*

*practice has just been established, and our staff includes a combination of experts in the fields of psychology, neuroscience, and graphic arts. Our therapeutic approach is based on the scientific evidence of the influence of color patterns in modulating the activity of certain areas of the central nervous system. Our panel of experts has reviewed your personal profile, values, and expectations, and has designed, specifically for you, a medium of visual therapy.*

*This tool consists of a computer-generated image to which we refer as 'therapictorial.' This image contains a specific pattern of shapes and colors designed to stimulate the mental functions that will be central in your quest to unleash your full potential. You'll find it online at the following address: [www.scicentral.com/chromotrix/therapictorial7.html](http://www.scicentral.com/chromotrix/therapictorial7.html).*

*We recommend that you concentrate for a few minutes on this therapictorial at least three times a week, and we guarantee that within a few weeks, you'll achieve a clarity of mind and quality in your social interactions at work, as well as with your loved ones and friends that you never imagined. We will contact you again in about twelve weeks to obtain feedback from you. Thank you for your participation.*

*Enjoy your brand-new life... In color!*

*The staff of Chromotrix, Inc.*

I read the message in its entirety, though I had recognized it since the first lines, and then turned back to Winford.

"This is the reply I got by e-mail a few weeks after filling out the questionnaire. Did you also send that?"

"Yes, I did. Did you follow the instructions?"

"Not initially. I've always been skeptical about all sorts of alternative therapies, and that one sounded particularly silly. I assumed that it was another New Age infatuation of the same style as the alleged therapeutic virtues of sensory-deprivation tanks or body-piercing.

"A few nights later though, I was unable to sleep and went to my computer to send an email message to a friend. Afterward, I noticed that I hadn't deleted your message, and since I still didn't feel sleepy, I decided to check out the site that was supposed to contain my customized *therapictorial*."

"Could you describe to me what your first perception of the image was?"

"Well, it was a full-screen image somewhat similar to these computer-generated blurry patterns of colorful dots that you find in the malls and require that you concentrate, or focus in a certain way, to be able to visualize a three-dimensional picture. I never had any difficulty in deciphering such images after concentrating on them for a few seconds, but that one was different. The color dots were larger and irregular, somewhat resembling the strokes on an impressionist painting, and I was unable to visualize an image. All I could perceive was a diffuse motion within the picture,

circumvolutions that I sensed more than I saw. I must have been very concentrated on that graphic because I lost track of time. When I snapped out of it, fifteen minutes had passed, although it had seemed only a few seconds. I went back to bed and fell asleep right away."

As I answered his question, Winford's expression had gradually evolved from attentive to intense.

"Did you go back to that picture later on?"

"Yes, I did. For years, I've been suffering from severe insomnia. Several times a week, I'd wake up in the middle of the night, and it would take me two or three hours to go back to sleep. The night I had concentrated on the picture, I had been able to sleep immediately after. Three nights later, I had another insomnia attack. I went back to the picture, and it brought me the same relaxation. From there on, I developed the habit of concentrating on the picture before going to bed every night, and my insomnia disappeared."

"Did you talk about that to anybody?"

"No, I didn't want to sound stupid. My wife thought I was working on the computer."

"Do you think that the picture cured your insomnia?"

"I don't know, it was probably nothing more than an object for me to focus on and relax. I had just found a way to clear my mind by looking at that picture, like others would by listening to classical music, or walking outdoors. That particular way happened to work for me better than all the others I had tried in the past, that's all. I don't think that the picture itself had anything to do with it."

My answer seemed to bother him. He remained absorbed in silent thoughts for a long moment before bringing on the computer screen a colorful image similar to the one we had just been discussing.

"Would you agree to concentrate for a few minutes on this picture? It will be very important for you to be able to understand the remainder of our discussion."

I was getting annoyed by his constant diversions but played along once again to prevent a rupture in the communication flow. He expressed the need to go down to the bathroom and stood up.

I watched him limp toward the staircase. My feelings for him were confusing. I was now aware he had been manipulating me for months for a purpose I still ignored, but I sensed in him a latent distress that gutted out my anger. I turned back toward the screen and focused on the image to kill time.

## Chapter 14

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October 16, Year 1.

A pat on the forearm pulled me out of a short nap. I had dozed off right after looking at the picture; the emotional assaults of the past days were taking their toll on my energy. Lord Winford was sitting next to me with a gentle smile on his face.

"I'm sorry it took me so long, my daughter called me. She was quite upset about your being here alone with me, especially after your hatchet number last night. I had to take the time to calm her down, which can sometimes be a little difficult."

He handed me a small white envelope.

"Would you please put this envelope in your pocket? You'll understand the purpose of this in just a moment."

I took the envelope with some impatience and shoved it into my pants.

"Why is the house empty? Where are your guests?" I asked.

"They've gone to town for the day with the nurse. A bus comes to pick them up on the main road once a week. Going away from time to time is good for them; it prevents them from feeling entrapped here. They'll return soon."

"You seem to have a keen interest in people's behavior, especially abnormal behavior or behavior under abnormal circumstances. Were you a doctor of some sort before you retired here?"

He grinned, stood up, and took a few steps away from the table.

"I have not retired here; I have lived here all my life, except for a few occasional trips. I never had a profession; it's a word that doesn't exist in my world. I'm the descendant of a long line of British nobles. I inherited a large fortune from my father, who himself inherited it from his father. The last of my ancestors who had a *profession* lived in the eighteenth century. He was a captain of the imperial guard in the court of England under King George III."

I looked at him with an *I-don't-give-a-shit* expression but he continued, undeterred.

"In 1788, the King suffered a terrible attack of mental illness that led to a Regency crisis. My ancestor, Charles Winford, played a central political role in protecting the interests, and to a certain extent the sovereignty, of the monarch. The following year, George III recovered and knighted Winford in return for his loyalty. He gave him an entire county in the southern part of England, as well as this Irish estate. The knighting of Charles Winford is the high point of our family's history. It took place on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1789."

My mind and my body suddenly dissociated. I kicked my chair back, rushed to the staircase, ran down the stairs all the way to the ground floor, and stormed outside the villa. My body seemed to have a life of its own—all

I could do was to follow it. As soon as I stepped out, my hand entered my mouth, and two of its fingers reached down my throat. I erupted in a violent vomiting that threw me on my knees, and then remained curled up on the short grass until the spasms receded. When I finally lifted up my teary eyes, Winford was standing in front of me with a sad look on his face. He spoke with a surprising apprehension.

"I'm sorry it had to be that way, but I had to make you believe, Richard."  
The taste in my mouth was the feeling of my mind.

"I don't know what you mean, but whatever this freaking nightmare is, you can count me out!" I said. "It's over for me! I'm leaving this place and all your spooky games. You can send your creatures after me again, but if they catch me this time, they won't bring me back here in one piece! One way or the other, your toy is gone!"

I stood up and started staggering away. I had only taken a few steps when his sad voice reached out to me.

"Richard, the answer you're looking for is in your pocket..."

I stopped—my back still turned to him—pulled out the envelope and opened it. It contained a piece of paper torn away from a notebook, which bore only a few handwritten words: *When I mention the date of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1789, you will run outside the house and force yourself to vomit.*

I stared at the rain diving into the valley for several minutes, my thoughts pulsing with a feverish intensity. I finally turned around and slowly walked to him.

His face dripping with rain showed no fear, only an expression of intense distress. I had been at his mercy for months—he had just put himself at mine. I looked into his eyes and swung the back of my hand across his face with all my strength. He fell to the ground without a sound. I watched him struggle with his stick to get back on his feet but did not help him. When he finally stood up, we faced each other for a long moment, and I walked away, along the edge of the cliff.

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After a few minutes, a rainstorm broke and started jostling me around. I welcomed the slapping of the water on my face. It helped clear at least part of the putrid miasma implanted in my mind over the past hours. I reached the top of the trail that had brought me there, only to stare at a silent procession crawling up the trail fifty yards downhill. Winford's guests were coming back, heads down, dripping with rain. The last person of the cohort wore a nurse's outfit under an open coat and was the only one holding an umbrella. I stood still at the point where the stone walls ended. They passed just a few feet from me without a look. Even the nurse ignored me.

I sat on a wet rock and applied myself to put together the fragments of my story. Winford had just given me the central piece that I needed so

desperately. I could finally form a picture of what had happened to me over the past months, and although it was cruelly senseless, I was relieved to know that I might not have been directly responsible for the pain my breakdown had caused to my closest ones. Now, I only needed to know Winford's reasons for purposely flicking me off my life. He may have been somewhat eccentric, but he was not insane, and despite what I had just discovered, I could not envision him as a vicious man. When I had knocked him down, he had stared at me with an expression of extreme lassitude, as if he, too, was driven by a force beyond his will.

A dark shadow over my head startled me out of my thoughts. I jumped on my feet and turned around, bracing myself in anticipation of an assault.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to scare you."

Lady Winford stood by the rock, in a long gray wool sweater over a white dress and holding an oversized black umbrella. She continued with a soft voice—as if she was uncertain of my reaction.

"I arrived at the villa shortly after you left and my father asked me to come after you. He was afraid you might do something... irreversible."

"He already had me do something *irreversible!* Ask my wife and kids! What's so different now?"

"When he sent me after you, my father said that it would be terrible if something were to happen to you before he had a chance to fully explain himself. I understand that, somehow, he has hurt you and that you may see him as a monster, but my father has always been a decent and caring man. I beg you to hear him. Please come back with me."

She looked as much on edge as I was. She turned around and started walking away; I followed her.

We headed back to the villa in silence. When we got there, Lord Winford was standing on the front steps. He did not seem to care about the heavy rain that clumped his white hair in thick threads. He looked at me with a mixed expression of relief and angst but did not say anything. We followed him inside, and Lady Winford watched us climb the marble staircase. When we walked into the attic, Winford stopped after a few steps and turned to me.

"You're a courageous man, Richard. I'll do what I can to help you find a way back."

I knew that my wrath would never totally dissipate, but I could not bring it to turn into hate. We stood in that attic like two warriors who have fought each other in endless battles and are left standing on the battlefield at the end of the war. We both had lost ourselves in that war, and neither one could understand the spineless world to which we were returned.

I started heading for the table, but Winford did not follow me. I turned around and noticed that he seemed absorbed in deep thoughts. He finally looked at me.

“Richard, if you would please have a seat, I’ll return in just a few minutes.”

I nodded, and he went down the stairs. I decided to take that opportunity to investigate the green file labeled with my name. I poured its contents onto the table and rapidly identified a printout of the Internet questionnaire that I had filled. The other documents in the box were fax transmissions sent to Winford by a *Cerberus Detective Agency* located in downtown San Francisco. They consisted of several reports describing the detail of my moves from the morning of October 2<sup>nd</sup> to the moment I had boarded the plane to JFK a few days later. The box also contained several other documents and an audio tape, but the squeaking of the wooden stairs interrupted my investigation. I swiftly placed the papers back into the folder on the shelf, shoved the tape into my pocket and sat down. Winford emerged from the staircase, visibly tired. While I watched his face in search of an explanation for his brief absence, other shadows surfaced from the staircase. His *guests* started coming up behind him, one after the other, each holding a chair. I instinctively stood up—Winford waved at me.

“Don’t be afraid, Richard. My friends are just going to attend the rest of our discussion. I feel that they should hear what I have to tell you because they, too, have been part of the story. To hear might be all they can do, but I owe them to try.”

I sat down with a rigid posture. These unpredictable characters made me very uncomfortable. Their savage screams still resonated in my head. Winford directed them to sit in a half-circle, only a few feet from my chair. Once they all got set, he started heading toward the chair next to mine, but stopped and turned around upon hearing footsteps coming up the staircase. Lady Winford surfaced into the attic. She stopped on the last stair and stared at her father for a few seconds before addressing him.

“Father, I need to be here, too. You have cherished me for as long as I can remember but over the past years, you have shut me off, and even though you knew I was hurt, you never reached back to me. What you feel these people should know, I should know too, because even if you never intended to harm me, you did. This time, if you send me away, I won’t return.”

Winford hesitated for a long moment, then walked to the staircase, gently took his daughter’s hand, and led her into the eerie circle of silhouettes prostrated on their chairs. He sat down on the chair facing the computer; she stood still by his side. I looked at the tension on his face, at the gravity on hers, and at the empty eyes of the human shells encircling us. Magic, grace, and madness had come together for an unearthly ball.

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Winford turned toward me and started talking with a monotonous voice, looking at my hands, as if he was carrying out a task that had been assigned to him by a merciless destiny a long time ago.

“My wife and I had three children. You've met Duncan and Mary Ann, but you never had a chance to meet my younger son, Henry. Henry was a very bright child. He loved to hide in the library and read my books. As a child, he couldn't understand the meaning of most of them but he would keep on reading anyway—for hours sometimes. He seemed fascinated by medieval history and as he grew up, he asked me for more and more materials on the subject. I was very proud of his interest in history at an age when most kids spend their free time watching TV or playing soccer.

“For his tenth birthday, I offered him the medieval warrior sculpture that you saw downstairs, in the hallway. When I unveiled the statue, I expected him to be thrilled, but instead, he stared at the warrior with a fever that I had never seen in his eyes; he then started looking back and forth at me and the statue with bewilderment, as if he was suddenly torn between two worlds. Not a day has gone by since then that I haven't tried to understand what happened at that very moment.

“From that day on, Henry's demeanor changed radically. He had always been somewhat of a quiet child, but he became more and more distant. He stopped reading—instead he began spending hours sitting on the staircase staring at the warrior. In a matter of weeks, he progressively stopped responding to us. From time to time, he would suddenly erupt into great agitation. During these crises, he would use ancient words that are no longer used—words about holy wars, heretics, sorcerers that you can find in very old books. Then he would return to a total silence from which none of us could pull him out.

“My wife brought in several doctors to examine him, but they couldn't find anything wrong with him, other than his impairment to communicate, and they had no explanation to his sudden crises. We finally decided to take him to a renowned psychiatrist in London, and the doctor concluded that my son was subject to a mental illness called childhood disintegrative disorder. The onset of CDD is very different from that of autism but the kids who are affected exhibit similar symptoms—loss of communication and social skills, altered speech, repetitious behavior, agitation, unprovoked anger, and so on. Contrarily to autistic patients, children affected with CDD almost never recover any social skills, even after intensive therapy. They usually grow into adults that remain dependent on full-time caregivers or are institutionalized. In a matter of weeks, Henry had drifted into a world of his own and grown out of our reach.”

Winford paused for a long moment—as if he himself was projected back into a different time. His daughter was biting her lower lip. She put her hand on her father's shoulder to bring him back to reality. He had a small start, and then continued.

“The day after we returned from London, I decided to get rid of the statue, because—though I couldn't understand why—I sensed that it had catalyzed my son's delusion. Early the next morning, while Henry was still asleep, I asked a couple of neighbors to come and help me dispose of it. It's a very heavy piece of metal; it took them close to an hour to move it outside the house, drag it across the front yard, and bring it to the edge of the cliff. When they tilted it over the edge, they clapped as the iron warrior dived into the ocean. When I looked up, Henry was standing just a few feet from me, right by the edge of the cliff. He still wore his pajamas and looked down at the ocean with a candid smile on his face. Before I could reach him, Henry calmly stepped into the void and fell without a sound into the ocean, in the same spot where the warrior had disappeared—”

Winford broke into violent crying spasms; his head folded down onto his chest. Lady Winford moved behind her father and laid her hands on the sides of the old man's face. Her eyes were blurry but she looked at me with intensity, as to beg me to abridge her father's trial. My determination to extract the truth from Winford was shaken.

I had never been at the core of the story. I was only another host in the spread of a grief born in the tormented mind of a ten-year old child.

## Chapter 15

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October 16, Year 1.

Winford was slowly regaining control. He ran his wrinkled fingers under his eyes, took a deep breath and finally looked at me. He had suddenly turned into a very tired old man.

"I'm sorry... why don't you take over for a moment?" he said.

His abrupt shift took me by surprise. I had to sort out conflicting sentiments before answering him. I finally decided to bring back the confrontation to a less emotional ground to give him a chance to get back on track.

"When I got sick earlier today, out of the blue, was it related to my urge of leaving everything behind two weeks ago? What did you mean by *I had to make you believe?*"

"What do you think happened an hour ago, Richard?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was just a gut reaction to being bounced against the walls over and over for two weeks."

"And I could have predicted the exact moment and nature of that reaction? You didn't feel sick a few seconds before it took place, did you? I think that you *do* know what happened, because just an hour ago in the front yard, you had to pull yourself away not to beat me to death. What you don't know is *why* it happened. Take a look behind you."

I turned around, looked for the first time at the second bookcase, and scanned the titles of the books. *Hypnosis, Backdoor to the Mind... Hypnotists of the Kings... Modern Techniques of Hypnotherapy...* All the books covering the shelves were related to the same topic. My eyes stopped on one entitled *Light Through Darkness: A Treaty on Hypnosis Through Times, by Lord Edward D. Winford*. I stood up and picked it up from the shelf.

"Hypnosis?"

"Yes, hypnosis. A science as old as the desire of human beings to control the destiny of others. I've spent all my adult life studying that subject. At first, it was just a hobby, but the more I read about it, the more my fascination grew. Soon, I was accumulating all the books and documents I could find in relation to hypnosis. I even placed advertisements in foreign newspapers, offering a small reward to anybody who would send me relevant information. When computers came of age, I understood how useful they could be to help me organize my research. They became my second passion.

"When my wife died five years ago," Winford continued, "whatever was left of my spirit went with her. During one of the restless nights that accompanied my depression, I went down the stairs and sat in front of the medieval warrior statue. Shortly after Henry's death, I had arranged for the statue to be pulled back out of the ocean and brought back into the house. My wife and I had the desperate thought that somehow it would bring back

the spirit of our son with it. That night, I stared at the warrior like my son used to. At first, I cried over the losses of my wife and my son but after a while, my mind progressively cleared its way through the pain. It started spinning again, with a clarity and peace I hadn't known in a very long time. That night, I finally found an outlet to my grief and my remorse. I spent the rest of the night moving the computer and my best books to the attic, and I went to work."

Winford paused for an instant, and then abruptly resumed his monologue with the disturbing exaltation of a preacher.

"I had been unable to prevent my son's fall but I had spent my life learning about secret paths of the mind. That night in front of the warrior, I realized that within that knowledge might lay the key to rescuing other patients like my son. From that moment on and for over three years of intense work, Henry's memory guided each of my steps to create a tool that, I hope, will someday pull CDD patients out of their inner cage and reinstall them into to the world to which they belong. That tool is a new form of hypnosis, a very powerful new approach. That tool is the image to which you've been exposed. Until today, Duncan was the only person aware of its existence."

"Why only Duncan?" asked Lady Winford with bitterness.

Winford turned to her.

"For the trials necessary to the development of the hypnotic image, I needed a test subject. Somebody whose discretion I could fully trust. Duncan has always been a loner—I knew that with him the secret of my work would be safe. You, my child, have never really overcome your brother's death. I've loved you even more for that, but with your pain came along the alcohol, the endless nights out, your young *friends*... I couldn't take the chance of your disclosing my research to some unscrupulous person in a moment of weakness."

Winford's voice was serene and caring, but his daughter turned her eyes away. When he saw that she would not reply, he continued.

"When I asked for Duncan's collaboration, I was surprised by his eagerness to participate in that study. I had long felt that we had lost all ties, but that project seemed to bring him back to me, even if I couldn't understand why. I suppose that he, too, wanted to cultivate his brother's memory in some way. Week after week, I submitted him in vain to tentative prototypes of the hypnotic image. The treatment had no effect whatsoever on him. Every time, I would go back to work, research the literature for additional data, modify the colors, the shapes, and the motion patterns...

"After over two years of failed tests, Duncan had become very reluctant to continue the experimentation. His belief in it had worn off over the months and it came to a point where I had to pay him hefty stipends so he would keep sitting down in front of the computer for me. Although I never admitted it to him, I too had grown skeptical of my chances of success. I

pushed on only because I had no idea of what to do with what was left of my life if I were to stop.

"But about a year ago," Winford continued, "during a session, Duncan started staring at the computer screen with a strange expression on his face, a lifeless expression. The idea that he was playing a trick on me crossed my mind, but I knew all too well that he had long lost all sense of humor, at least in my presence. I got a bit scared to see him like that, but I waited in silence for the end of the hypnotic session. I didn't know what else to do. After three or four minutes, he emerged from his stupor, relaxed and totally unaware of what had happened, as would be the case at the end of any regular hypnotism session.

"Like you, Richard, he thought that he had dozed off. I talked to him for a while to make sure he was fine and when I was reassured that nothing was wrong with him, I resolved to put him to the test. I started clapping my hands. As soon as he heard the first clap, Duncan stood up and engaged into a silent waltz with an imaginary partner. He was spinning all around the attic with an expression of extreme concentration despite the ridiculous nature of the situation. He stopped only when I stopped clapping. At that moment, I knew that I had succeeded."

"Succeeded in what?" I asked, irritated by the emphasis in his voice. "In building a marvelous *tool* that drains all sense from those who are exposed to it?!"

Winford ignored my comment and continued on the same tone.

"You mentioned earlier subtle circumvolutions within the image. The image is a hypnotic animation whose color dots move in droves at such a slow pace that your brain doesn't consciously record the motion. Provided that you're relaxed and focused on these patterns, they'll help you reach a self-induced hypnotic trance in a matter of seconds. That state of trance is the explanation to your losing the perception of time during those sessions."

"Okay, so I lost perception of time for a few minutes several times a week, over a month or so, until the picture disappeared from the Internet. That doesn't explain why I suddenly grew the urge of leaving everything behind."

While talking, I noticed that Winford had started avoiding direct eye contact. He was getting nervous, and it took him a long moment to answer. When he did, his voice had turned shaky.

"In addition to the image itself, a second element of the hypnotic program is a short message in white letters on a black background that flashes periodically through the hypnotic image. These flashes are so brief that you don't see them."

"That's the exact description of subliminal messages; those are just a big joke! I read an article on that. The article reported that many scientific studies had been conducted with subliminal messages, all agreeing to conclude they have little or no effect on the human mind. You may want to read it, too—"

Winford responded with contempt.

"I'm quite certain that I've read more scientific documents on the subject than you ever will, Richard. After almost three years of failed attempts, I didn't know what to try anymore. One day, I read a review article on subliminal message research that ended with the same conclusion as the one you saw. The difference between you and me is that you stopped at the conclusion that subliminal messages don't work, whereas I tried to understand why. It has been demonstrated that the human brain does perceive such messages, but the information is instantly discarded because your mind dismisses it as insignificant before you become conscious of it. The mind is protected by many barriers whose functions are to filter incoming bits of information to let in only those of potential significance to you. For example, when you drive, your ears perceive the sound of the engine constantly, but your mind will only process that information if an abnormal noise rises from the engine.

"That day, I read only a few lines of the article on subliminal messages. I didn't need to read further on the reasons why they didn't work. I had just understood that all that was needed to make subliminal messages work was to bring down the mind's filters so the messages could penetrate it. A central function of hypnosis is to bring down most mental barriers. That's how it can unlock memories that have been pushed back into a dormant recess of your brain, or make your mind permeable to suggestions that it would have readily dismissed under normal circumstances. That day was the day when I incorporated a subliminal message to the hypnotic image, to test how a subject under hypnotic trance would respond to such messages. That was the day Duncan danced—"

"Are you saying that he danced in response to a subliminal message?" I asked.

"Duncan had always been hostile to the idea of dancing. He called it a grotesque ritual. That's the reason why that day I simply built into the hypnotic image a subliminal message reading: *When you hear clapping, you will dance until the clapping stops*. I knew that if I could make Duncan dance, I could flip over anybody's mind like a crepe in a pan—"

"Just with some animated image on a computer screen and a few flashing words?"

"Didn't our little experiment an hour ago convince you, Richard?" Winford replied. "Once the subject's mind is led into the trance by the hypnotic image, it becomes permeable to the message, which I call *anchor message*. Your mind is then zapped by that message, which conditions you to carry out a simple instruction. That zapping plays the same role of the hypnotist's voice programming you for a precise purpose, such as quitting smoking for example. Once conditioned, you'll unconsciously execute the instruction later on in response to an activation signal, which is also defined in the message. That signal can be set as hearing a clapping or a certain date

for example. I can change the anchor message and in the hypnotic session that you were submitted to this afternoon, I had, as you probably have already understood, chosen a different one. Each session, however, can only contain one anchor message, and it has to be kept quite short or it becomes ineffective.”

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Part of me still rejected Winford's preposterous explanations, but on the other hand, I felt an urge to believe him; each word of his story was pulling me further away from the fringes of madness that had become my territory over the past weeks. I got tempted to ask what anchor message he had submitted me to, but I was as anxious to know as I was not ready to discover what alien command had been planted in my mind.

“Once in a hypnotic trance in front of the computer screen, how does the subject come out of it after a few minutes?” I asked, as a diversion.

“I never had to work on that part,” replied Winford. “The subjects snap out of it after less than five minutes of exposure to the anchor message; after that, they return to reality by themselves, or sometimes, they just doze off, as you did earlier. My guess is that the short tolerance to the hypnotic trance results from a safety shut-down of the mind, as occurs when you incur an excessive emotion and faint, but I have no evidence to back up that theory. All I know for sure is that within a few minutes, the session terminates itself.”

“And the subject isn't aware of the instruction that has been implanted in his mind until he carries it out?”

“What happens during that particular hypnotic trance bypasses the memorization process. Duncan never had a clue of the treatment to which I had submitted him until I explained it to him. You submitted yourself to the treatment several times in San Francisco, and all you noticed was that it was relaxing you.”

“How about them? Is your hypnotic program responsible for their condition?” I asked, looking at the guests.

Winford ignored my aggressive tone of voice and stood up.

“I'm only responsible for failing in my attempts to help them. As soon as I got convinced of the efficacy of my hypnotic program, I was very anxious to continue developing it to apply it more specifically as a therapy for their condition. That had been my sole purpose since the beginning. I went on a tour of several small mental institutions throughout Ireland with the goal of gathering a group of patients affected with a psychotic condition similar to my son's. It wasn't very easy to talk the executives of these institutions into *lending* me a few of their subjects. I managed to convince several of them that my intent was to provide the patients with a sabbatical year in a cozy retreat by the ocean in memory of my son. I assured them that

a professional nurse would take care of their treatment as it would have been performed at the institution and that the patients' physicians would be welcome to visit them as often as they wished. A generous contribution to the institutions' finances took care of the residual reticence, and I was finally able to return here with fourteen CDD patients. They ranged in age from thirty-seven to sixty and were all severely impaired. Though you might be shocked by the means I used to bring them here, I never thought of them as guinea pigs. We needed each other; I only catalyzed our gathering."

Winford sat back down and searched my face for a reaction. Despite his justifications, I felt disgusted. I looked at the patients for the first time with feelings of pity, wondering how much of the whole process they had understood.

"Did you ever explain to them why you had brought them here?"

"I tried at first, but they didn't seem to understand, or if they did, they never expressed their sentiments in a way I could recognize. I always paid great attention to treat them as collaborators rather than patients. I started submitting them one by one to my hypnotic program, using very simple anchor messages to test whether they would assimilate the instructions or not. The results went beyond my most optimistic expectations. Despite their mental disorder, they would respond to the treatment as efficiently as Duncan had. Most of them hadn't talked for years, but once conditioned to do so, they would be able to say one or two simple sentences, with little hesitation or mispronunciation. They had never lost the ability to speak, and I could unlock it for them for a short moment. I then tried to condition them for specific group actions such as forming a circle by holding their hands, or caressing each other's faces.

"One of their characteristic symptoms was an acute repulsion for physical contact and collective acts. There again, the treatment was conclusive. They would carry out those actions without any apparent difficulty after being conditioned by my program. Those early days of experimentation brought me great exaltation. Every day, a new barrier was brought down for a few seconds, sometimes a few minutes. One day, we even organized a little ball to celebrate our progress and once *prepared* for it, my friends danced and enjoyed themselves very naturally. If someone had come in at that point, they'd never have guessed that the dancers had spent their lives in a mental institution.

"In the second phase of my work, I tried regression hypnosis. I knew from the patients' medical files when each of them had exhibited the first symptoms of the disorder. I used the anchor message to set them back mentally to that time of their lives, a classical method of regular hypnotherapy to bring the patient back to the origin of a psychological disorder. In most cases, the regression message was aimed at sending them back to their childhood, but although I could detect clear changes in their body language and facial expressions during the treatment, that approach

failed due to their inability to communicate properly with me, even under hypnosis.

“When they snapped out of session, they would simply return to their initial condition. I was crushed by that failure, especially after the promises of the first series of experiments. It took me several weeks to figure out another way to approach the problem. I knew that by using the hypnotic program, I could restore some of the patients' bridges with the normal world. I could make them talk again, establish physical contact with one another, act as members of a group. The problem is that I could only bring them back for a few seconds, at the most a few minutes, just the time for them to execute the command I had implanted in their mind with the anchor message. I tried to condition them to carry out multiple tasks sequentially, to extend the duration of their stay in the real world, but as the complexity of the anchor message increased, the treatment became less and less efficient. They would carry out the first command but were unable to transition to the following ones. They would then get very agitated, and I had to stop those experiments. I was in a dead end again. All I could do was to bring them back with a simple action, and they would bounce right back into their neurosis. My therapy was as vain as perforating the water sheet of a pond with the fist and hoping that it will stay open once you pull your fist out.”

“You never *brought them back!*” I said. “You *programmed* them to act within your standards of normality. Look at them! That's who they are.”

Winford bowed and started shaking his head in silence. I looked up at his daughter. She, too, was disconcerted by her father's demeanor.

“You don't understand anything!” said Winford. “You cannot blame me for their condition—I didn't make them what they are! I'm trying to help them return to what they should never have ceased to be. Yes, I damaged *your* life and I take responsibility for that. Yes, I may have programmed them but by doing so, I brought them to act in concert, to touch each other again. They're not computers! Their minds are synching up—their hands are doing the touching. Shortly after your arrival, I had conditioned them to go to the manor and bring you back to me upon hearing a keyword I would pronounce only if I felt my son or daughter might be at risk. I anticipated that you might at some point get angry or even break down.

“Last night, when Mary Ann called to tell me about your outburst, I gathered my guests and *activated* them with the appropriate word. I never told them how to proceed. The keyword was just associated with the task of bringing you back to me, and they did. Inside they're still fully functional. They have the logic, the faculty to analyze, and the ability to figure out how to carry out an action. They're simply unable to implement these functions toward an outside goal unless that goal is somewhat implanted into their mind, and once the task is completed, they return to their mental confinement. But, there's as much life and humanity in their dancing together as there is in your distress!”

I stood up to face him.

“So you decide whose distress is most valuable?! You decide who is to be sacrificed for the sake of whom?! Winford, you’re the only one here who has truly lost it!”

Winford's breathing had accelerated, and he was about to reply when the rumble of a chair behind us alerted him. As the tone of our confrontation turned belligerent, I had noticed a nascent agitation among the ranks of the patients. An older man had now lifted his head and rocked it as to follow the flight of an invisible bird under the framework of the roof. Another patient was frantically scratching the top of his hand while most of the others were wriggling on their chairs with a straight face. Winford composed himself and turned back to me.

“We'll have to interrupt this meeting for a moment. My friends have had a busy day, and I'm sure they'd welcome an early dinner. Why don't we all go down to the dining room? The cook has already left, but she has prepared a cold meal for all of us.”

I nodded. The last thing I needed was to get caught in another of the patients' surges.

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I glanced at Lady Winford while her father escorted his guests toward the staircase. Her face was pale and tense. We followed the cohort down the stairs in silence and entered the dining room. The nurse was already helping the patients to their individual tables. As soon as they sat down, they started eating from plates filled with a colorful pasta salad and slices of roast beef. They all had settled down, and their eating manners were perfectly proper. Nobody could have guessed their condition just by looking at them at that moment. Winford asked me to sit at a larger table a few yards away from those of the guests. His daughter joined us after a short hesitation. Just as I was about to cut my first piece of roast beef, I froze with some embarrassment as Winford started saying grace.

“Lord, thank you for gathering us all for this meal. None of us has really chosen to be here tonight under such circumstances but we all have arrived here as a result of using what we thought was our best judgment. Let us get together to the light if we have been right and forgive us if we have taken the wrong path.”

As he finished, I lifted my head and looked at him. Once again my wrath had cooled and I could not help but feeling compelled by the sincerity of his voice. As he started cutting his meat, I tried to restore our lines of communication.

“Winford, what did you mean by *if we have taken the wrong path*? That part can only apply to you since you're the only one here who has truly chosen his path over the past months. Why are you asking forgiveness?”

You've tried to help these people; your means may have been questionable but you never hurt them or made them worse. Why forgiveness?"

He slowly laid his knife and fork on his plate and looked at his daughter as to warn her before answering. Her posture and facial expression were stilted but she encouraged him to proceed by laying her hand on the back of his. She would stand by him, no matter what. Winford looked at his guests.

"I believe that I did right by them but when I started facing the limits of my therapy, I understood that I would have to push some boundaries to continue my work for them. I couldn't understand why I could bring them back to a normal behavior only to lose them to their inside world after a few minutes. That obsession eventually led me to the idea of testing my hypnotic program *on a healthy mind*."

Winford's emphasis on the last words brought back the knot in my stomach, but I let him continue.

"My reasoning was to test whether I could induce a radical and durable change on a mentally balanced individual—a change such as a rupture of that individual with his environment. If I could irreversibly pluck a balanced person off their world, then chances were that my program was powerful enough to free a mind such as my son's from its self-created cage. It would then only be a matter of finding the proper parameters to make it work on patients like him."

Lady Winford noticed the trembling of my hands and gazed at me with imploring eyes. How could she still plead for him? My guts summoned me to walk away, but my mind needed to hear it all. Winford continued with a monotonous voice.

"At that time, I posted the Chromotrix advertisement on the Internet. I couldn't recruit sane individuals for my experiments as I had CDD patients. Doing it through the Internet was the ideal way to bring test subjects into my research program almost without any risk. As I already told you, I received over a thousand questionnaires from people requesting the services from the *free mind coaches*. I carefully reviewed the personal profile of each of them and finally selected twenty candidates whose lives appeared to be in best order. They all had stable environments, cared very much for their close ones, and appeared to be committed to cultivating solid life foundations. These are the people who received the reply message indicating where to find their therapictorial, which as you know was the hypnotic therapy program. Every time one of you accessed the site, I would have a record of it. Three of the candidates never did. They probably thought it was a scam of some sort. You were among the seventeen who did submit themselves to the treatment, some of you only once, others multiple times, maybe due to the relaxing side effect of the treatment. I arranged for each of you to be monitored by a different private investigator for a few days before and after October 4<sup>th</sup>."

"Was that date the activation signal?" I asked. I was now ready to know.

"October 4<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary date of my son's death..."

"That's not an answer, Winford! Now, it will also be the anniversary date of the end of my life as I used to know it!"

Lady Winford tightened her grasp on her father's hand, as to screen him.

"Upon hearing or reading the words '*October 4<sup>th</sup>*', you will walk away from it all, and you will not go back," Winford said with a mechanical voice.

"That was the anchor message?" I asked.

Winford nodded, his eyes down.

"Did the seventeen patients execute the instruction?"

"Seven did, on the very day of October 4<sup>th</sup>, which was the day they were most likely to hear or read that date. The ten other patients remained unaffected by the treatment and went on normally with their lives."

"If we had all been submitted to the same hypnotic treatment, how come not everyone responded?"

"I don't know. Maybe because they never heard the words *October 4<sup>th</sup>*? Maybe because the treatment simply had no effect on them at all? All I can say is that you were among those who responded."

"So even if I were to rebuild my life, what would happen next October 4<sup>th</sup>?"

"Nothing. Once conditioned for a certain action with my hypnotic program, the patient will carry it out only once, and then the instruction is somehow purged from his mind. You have heard me say several times the activation signal—*October 4<sup>th</sup>*—since your arrival but it no longer affects your behavior in any way. The only way for you to drift away from your life again would be if you were reprogrammed for that."

"That won't be necessary, Winford, you trashed me right the first time," I said, mad with disgust. Despite my anger, I felt relieved to know that my mind was purged of the malignant instruction, but he did not deserve to know that.

Since we had come down from the attic, Winford's behavior had changed. He had been talking with an absent look on his face—as if he were at the same time dealing with an inner battle. I hoped that by actually coming face-to-face with one of his healthy victims, he was finally taking consciousness of the cruelty of his actions over the past months. He deserved the pain. When he withdrew his hand from the grasp of his daughter's, we both watched him struggle to stand up. He left the table without any explanation. Lady Winford stared at him as he walked under the marble arch, and addressed me with a begging voice.

"Don't let him walk away like that..."

I stood up and looked at the face of each of the guests. Some of them had already finished their meal and were now prostrated on their chairs again.

I walked to the front door, stepped outside, and closed the door behind me. I found comfort in noticing that the curtain of dusk was already

descending, as to signify to me that, indeed, it was closure time. Lady Winford had been right since the beginning; I had come all the way here only to find more pain. Sure, I had learned *how* it had happened but there would be no *why* other than the demented logic of a bright old man trying to escape his pain.

By any means necessary.

## Chapter 16

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October 16, Year 1.

The cold rain plowed my skull all the way down to the manor. The Bugatti was not there, and it was just as well; Duncan Winford was the last person I wanted to see. Once in the cabin, I changed clothes, lit a fire, and sat down at the table with a half-empty bottle of vodka that I had found in the bedroom closet while cleaning the place. Straight alcohol was just what I needed to purge a mind poisoned by hours of gradual intoxication. I knew that I had to run away from that place before it finally sucked me into its folly. But the nearest town was nine miles away, the weather was awful, and the night would be dark. The sound of a bell battered by the wind, from a nearby lighthouse or a chapel, resonated faintly within the cabin. It only took the alcohol a few minutes to soothe my mind.

I found peace in the resolution to leave at dawn using the bike stored behind the cabin. Once in town, I would take a bus to Galway and pay a visit to Banagher. The money that I had earned on my first week here did not even amount to a third of the price of a ticket for the U.S.; he may be able to help me find a job for a few weeks. By the time I emptied the bottle into my glass, I was already starting to make plans for my new start. Back home.

The realization that I was closing two weeks of alienating confusion by finally retaking control of my life revived my spirit. I stood up, laughed at my staggering walk to the door, and sat down on the small porch. The castle stood out of the dim light as to defy me one last time, and the shrilling echo of a bird cry seemed to exhort me to leave without delay.

As the cry approached, it morphed into a piercing human voice. I thought I might have overdone it a bit with the vodka and started standing up when a silhouette appeared at the corner of the castle and suddenly froze. It took me a few seconds to shake away the numbness of the alcohol and realize that the shadowy apparition was Lady Winford. Thin streaks of dark blood ran down her face and had dripped all the way to her chest. The bottom part of her white dress was splattered with dark, rigid mud. She could not seem to stop screaming in between gasps for air.

“Help me! They’ve all gone crazy! My father is hurt. Please! Come with me!”

I did not even have enough sense left to hesitate. I ran to her and saw that the blood came from a small cut at the base of her scalp. She grabbed the front of my sweater and started pulling me toward the park gate, but I resisted.

“Wait! We have to call the police!” I said.

“It will take them too long to get here—we don’t have time! Come with me!”

I pulled her hands off my sweater.

"Listen to me! Go inside and call the cops. I'll run up there."

She stared at me for several seconds as if she did not understand, then staggered away to the back door of the castle and went in. I rushed through the park and into the trail climbing through the woods. My drunkenness and the adrenaline rush combined to alter my perception. The forest was misty, and the trees had turned into gigantic spectra that seemed to close down on me. My run was erratic, and I fell several times into a gooey mud that turned my pants into a hard, frigid shell. When I finally reached the upper boundary of the forest, a spectacle of desolation instantly froze both my rush and my thinking.

Huge flames were bursting through several holes in the villa roof and sent tiles flying out with fairy lightness. Windows on the second and third floor of the house shattered one after another under the heat to let out a thick white smoke. The blaze created a pulsating red glare guarded by a string of immobile shadows standing only a few feet away from the villa facade. I walked to the bench by the edge of the cliff and stood there, away from their sight. After several minutes, two windows of the first floor exploded simultaneously, sending a flurry of shiny glass specs over the heads of Winford's still guests. As in response to that signal, they turned around one after the other and started walking straight toward me. They advanced in a broad cluster at a slow, steady pace, preceded by vacillating shadows that already stretched all the way to my feet.

I felt tired. Very tired. I set my eyes on the fire and found peace in its cleansing rage. When the string of silhouettes approached me, I stood still, mind blank...

They never touched me. They simply walked around the bench, then right over the edge of the cliff, without a sound, as a mute human stream.

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I don't recall how long I stood there before a moan dragged me out of my stupor. I turned my head to the villa just as Lord Winford crawled his way out of the front door and struggled to get away from the house. He collapsed before I reached him. He lay on his side, eyes wide open. In the glare of the blaze, his face had a shocking gray color; the left side of his hair was burnt and portions of his clothes were still smoking. He started whimpering when I lifted him up in my arms.

"I can't see... Duncan?"

I kneeled by his side.

"No. It's me—Richard. Hold on; I'll take you down to the manor."

"Richard... I can't see!"

He grabbed my arms with surprising strength and then fainted.

I carried him in my arms down the forest as fast as I could to beat the darkness—now almost complete. I tripped and fell on my knees several

times, dropping my load without caution, but picked it right up, every time with a fresh coat of mud, until a dancing yellow light appeared only a dozen yards downhill. Lady Winford's shadow faded in, running toward us with a flashlight.

"Is he...?" she said, out of breath.

"No, I think he's still alive. Have you called the police?"

"Yes, they should be here soon. Where are the patients?"

"They're gone."

The time was not right for explanations. We walked down the trail in silence. Winford was not very heavy, but I kept slipping. He had not regained consciousness, and the thought that I might be carrying a cadaver nauseated me. The park was deserted when we reached the castle. When we finally made it back to life under the porch light, Lady Winford asked me to take her father to a bedroom on the second floor. As soon as I laid him down on the bed, she put her head on his chest.

"His heartbeat is very faint. We should do something; he may not hold on until the medics get here!"

I sat on an armchair to catch my breath and did not reply. I felt sick, too, and had no idea of what to do—for him or myself. She left the room and came back rapidly with a bowl of water and a towel. When she started cleaning her father's face, I stepped out. I went down to the front salon. I was worried about Winford's condition. I had never wished for him to die. I could not afford for him to die. He was my only alibi, my sole pass to reenter the world I belonged to, so far away. No one would ever believe my story, especially now that all the possible evidence had been turned to ashes.

The medics arrived after a few minutes, accompanied by a police car. I led them to the bedroom and returned to the front salon to brief the police officers. The three men were initially quite affable, but after hearing only a few sentences of my account of the events, their attitude changed. They started interrupting me at every turn, asking incisive questions with a tone of voice increasingly suspicious. I had a hard time keeping my cool. By the end of my story, the older officer was shaking his head to express his irritation.

"You mean to tell us that tomorrow morning we'll find fourteen bodies in the ocean, and you explain that by *collective suicide*?! I don't know much about people with autistic tendencies, but I do know that the last thing they would do is something collective," he said with cynicism.

"Well, I didn't push them one by one if that's what you're getting at!" I replied, not caring much at all.

My brash attitude further fueled the officer's aggravation. He continued his inquisition by commenting on my accent and asking me why I had come all the way from the United States to Connemara to take a gardener job. I was about to reply but stopped upon noticing that the officer was looking over my shoulder.

"I saw them jumping, too."

I turned around. Lady Winford stood in the door frame. The medics had attended to her as well; her face was now clean, but it was livid. She still wore her soiled clothes. The officers—suddenly silent—stood up and watched her sit at the table. They waited for her to speak.

"After dinner, my father locked himself in the attic of the villa," she said. "I knocked at the door, but he said that he didn't want to be disturbed. I went back down, and the nurse helped me escort the patients to their rooms before she went home. I had some tea in the kitchen and stayed there—maybe fifteen or twenty minutes—until I heard shouting coming from the staircase. Before I even stepped out of the kitchen, two of my father's patients rushed through the door and knocked me over. I fell, and my head hit something; I lost consciousness, I couldn't say for how long. I woke up alone on the kitchen floor. There was a smell of smoke in the house, and I could hear the patients stomping and screaming all over the house. I escaped through the back door of the kitchen and ran down here for help."

She looked the older officer straight in the eyes while explaining that after calling the police, she rushed back to the villa and witnessed the suicide of her father's patients. She gave the exact details that I had—as if she had listened to my version of the events before entering the room. Throughout her entire account, her voice was firm and solemn. The officers took notes but did not interrupt her a single time. When she completed her deposition, she excused herself to go back by her father's bedside. The officers thanked her with deference and then asked me to hand them my passport and not to leave the area for a few days—enough time for them to retrieve the bodies of the victims, talk to Lord Winford if possible, and complete the formalities of the investigation. When they left, I headed upstairs and reached the bedroom just as the medics were leaving. I entered and saw Lady Winford crying silently by the bed.

"How is he?" I asked.

She kept looking down at her father.

"They only gave him medicine to try to help his heart. He's very weak and transporting him to the hospital would probably kill him. They'll come back tomorrow morning but they said there wasn't much they could do—that... he's unlikely to make it through the night."

"I'm sorry," I said, and somehow meant it—even though I was not sure that it was out of compassion.

She nodded, sat on the bed, and took her father's hand. I did not understand why she had lied to corroborate my story in the eyes of the police, but now was not the time to ask her. I walked out in silence and returned to the cabin.

Winford was dying and with him his story, along with my chances of fully retracing my steps.

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I spent over two hours writing down in my journal the detail of the events of the day and the information I had unraveled. I was afraid that the confusion of these days would scramble my memories once returned to a normal life. When I finished, I went to the manor's kitchen to borrow Anna's tape player. While writing, I had remembered the tape I had taken from my file in Winford's attic. It was still in my pocket and its box had protected it from the dampness of my pants. The label on the box only indicated *September 29, to Richard*. I returned to the cabin and started playing it.

*"Hello, my name is Edward Winford. I realize that you've never heard of me, but you'll learn more about the meaning of this tape as you go on. The simple fact that you're listening to it likely means that we'll never have a chance to meet. My plans at this time are to bring you to my home and explain all this to you but, at my age, it's always wise to have a backup plan. That's why I've instructed my son to make sure that you get this tape in the event that I couldn't talk to you in person..."*

I slowly paced back and forth, listening to Winford's voice with unexpected emotion. Although he was talking with a gentle, methodic voice, I could see through the window of the cabin the light of the bedroom in which he was dying, just a stone's throw from the spinning wheels of the tape. On the recording, he explained with a meticulous detail what he had told me earlier in the day—his son's death, his attempts to rescue his CDD guests from their psychosis, the Internet recruiting and treatment of the healthy test subjects. I learned several new details, such as the fact that he had prepared a copy of this tape for each of the other six Internet users who had—like me—been uprooted by the hypnotic program on October 4<sup>th</sup>.

For the first time, I wondered what had happened to them and wished that I had a chance to look into their files. They obviously had not followed the path that was supposed to bring them here, too. My attention was brought back to the tape as Winford explained that he had designed the hypnotic program alone and that no one else could repeat his work or modify it, for example by changing the anchor message. Duncan had been the test subject until the program was proven to function, but he had not participated in its development or been informed of the detail of its construction. The copy of the hypnotic image Winford had posted on the Internet to manipulate his *healthy minds* was protected against downloading or duplication, and it had been removed from the server in mid-June—a month after its initial posting. There was therefore only one existing copy of the program left, the original one, on the hard drive of his computer, back at the villa. He had instructed Duncan to bring the hard drive and all his notes to the Royal Society after he passed away. Winford explained that he was providing these details on the tape to assure us that although he had brought

us into his research without seeking our consent, he had always acted with a concern of scientific responsibility. He had therefore taken all the precautions to prevent access to the program to individuals that may not have the same ethics.

I shook my head with bitterness. The word *ethics* following his acknowledgement of never seeking his subject's consent was shocking, but obviously not to him, at least not at the time when he had recorded the tape. Only at the tail end of our confrontation in the afternoon had he appeared to start having second thoughts.

*"...You'll live after me and even if you feel today that you have been abused, I'm confident that you'll understand that it was justified by the higher purpose of this research as other scientists complete my work."*

I watched the tape spin silently for a few minutes before the player stopped, then walked by the chimney and squatted in front of the fire.

It was finally coming to an end. Winford would probably not make it through the night. The hypnotic program, the patient files, and all his notes had been destroyed in the fire. There was no sense in my telling the story of his desperate madness—it could only bring me more trouble. I would just have to live with the change and try to rebuild something on it.

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I snapped out of my thoughts in response to a knock on the door. I opened it on Lady Winford.

"He's awake. He would like to talk to you."

I nodded and walked with her back to the manor. The silence inside was oppressing. She did not follow me up the staircase. When I entered the bedroom, Winford made a vain effort to sit up.

"Richard?"

His eyes stared at the wall a few feet aside from where I stood.

"Yes."

"Thank you for coming. This won't take long. I just need to put some order in what can still be put back into place. There's an envelope on the bedside table, please pick it up." I took the open envelope and saw that it contained several £100 bills. "Mary Ann told me you would not accept money, but I had her prepare this envelope anyway. This is only what you'll need to buy your ticket back to the United States. Please take it."

Winford's voice was faint and he had to stop to catch his breath. I picked up the envelope and replied calmly. I knew it would be our last meeting.

"I'll leave by the end of the week."

He had a sad smile, but remained silent, his glare still on the wall. I waited for a few seconds then slowly walked to the door. Before leaving the

room, I looked back. His blind stare somehow found my eyes. I closed the door behind me.

I was surprised to wake up late in the morning. After meeting with Winford, I had returned to the cabin, taken off my muddy clothes and unexpectedly fallen into a deep sleep. I showered, put on clean clothes, and walked to the manor. I saw Anna through the kitchen window but walked around the building and entered through the front door. From the hallway, I saw Lady Winford sitting at a small desk in a corner of the salon. She wore a dark gray cashmere dress, and her hair was held back in a strict ponytail. She lifted her head as I approached. Her eyes were lined with dark rings.

"He passed away early this morning. Would you like to see him?" she said with a sad affection—as if I were a close family member.

I had expected the news of Winford's death but her request took me by surprise. The eagerness of people to show their dead had always disturbed me. I could not think of a proper way to decline her offer; I nodded and followed her up the staircase. Winford lay on the bed wearing a neatly ironed black suit. His hands were crossed serenely on his chest, but the expression of his face was one of pain. He had not gone in peace. That thought somehow made me feel closer to him. By a strange twist, the sight of his distorted face reminded me of my own image in the mirror, just a few days earlier in Tashia's basement. Winford had ended his mad run in the same world into which he had thrown me.

As we walked back down the stairs, I asked Lady Winford whether her father had explained what had happened at the villa the past night.

"Yes, he talked to me for a little while last night after you left him," she said. "He came out of the attic when he smelled smoke and saw the patients spilling cooking oil all over the villa and setting it on fire. He tried to stop them but they ignored him, and at some point, he got knocked over and lost consciousness. He was devastated; he couldn't understand what went through their minds."

"Did you tell him that the patients had jumped off the cliff?"

"No; I just told him that they were fine and would be sent back to their institutions."

"I see. How about your brother? Is he aware of what happened last night?"

"Duncan left early yesterday morning; nobody knows where he is. He does that quite often. He usually returns after two or three days. I've arranged for the funeral to take place on Saturday afternoon to make sure he'll be back on time. Will you stay until then?"

"I can't leave until the investigation is closed."

I was headed for the kitchen door when I decided to turn back.

"Why did you lie about seeing the patients jump off the cliff?" I asked.

Lady Winford had stayed back. She replied without hesitation.

“Father was dying; his work was gone. There was no need for the police to investigate in detail what had been going on at the villa. My father was a good man. I didn't want people to judge him on the calls he made in his final years. Will you talk about it?”

“If I were to try, they would probably take me straight to the madhouse.”

She looked at me with a thankful expression. She did not understand that I had no other choice than to remain silent about the whole ordeal. I watched her walk into the salon, and then pushed the kitchen door. The three maids had gathered around the table. As soon as I entered, they assaulted me with a flow of questions about the events of the past night. Their macabre curiosity revived my nerves. I ignored them, picked up a chunk of bread and several slices of ham, and then walked out through the back door.

I stayed in the cabin all day. The sound of several cars troubled the silence of the park throughout the day, but nobody came to the cabin. I washed and mended my suit in preparation for my departure. I would not take any of the gardener's clothes. Once back in the U.S., I did not want any reminder of my stay here. By mid-afternoon, the rain finally stopped. I went to the beach and paced along the shore for an hour or so before heading back. When I entered the park, three men dressed in black suits were carrying a coffin inside a funeral home van. I stood still by the gate as the vehicle left, and watched its black body slowly descend the wet grass track.

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I was exhausted by the walk but also felt very calm. I returned to the cabin, picked up the dinner that Anna had left me on the front steps, and ate without hunger. I started writing my journal but the darkness soon filled the cabin and I did not bother lighting the oil lamp. After a quick, frigid shower, I went to sleep.

A squeaking on the wooden floor woke me up. I fumbled for the switch on the bedside lamp and had to shut my eyes half-way to adjust to the rush of light. Lady Winford stood in the middle of the room, her face wan and tense. Without a word, she took off her clothes, laying them out neatly on a chair, as she would have in the privacy of her bedroom. She did not look at me when she silently slipped into the bed, entirely nude.

I woke up alone. The only trace of Lady Winford's passage was a faint smell of perfume on the sheets. I put on dry clothes, started a fire in the chimney, lit a cigarette, opened the front door and leaned on the frame. My mind was struggling to surface from a disorienting night, the only kind that could question my newfound resolutions of leaving it all behind and priming back my life far away from there. The guilt of adultery did not enter

my mind for a second. My mind appeared to be recording the events there in a different space-time continuum.

I spent the two following days in the cabin, only coming out to pick up some food from the manor kitchen. Anna was giving me the silent treatment. She was upset at my refusal to share with her what I knew of the circumstances of Lord Winford's death.

I did not see Mary Ann again.

On Saturday morning, I was coming back from picking up some wood at the back of the cabin when a police officer walked around the manor and headed straight toward me. It was the one who had expressed the harshest suspicion upon hearing my deposition. I put the wood down and stood still as he approached. He took out a passport from his pocket and handed it to me.

"The investigation is closed, Mister Cronin. We've recovered ten of the fourteen bodies from the ocean. The autopsy hasn't shown any evidence of violence on the bodies or chemicals other than regular doses of prescription drugs in the system of the victims. Since your version of the facts has been corroborated by Lady Winford, you're no longer required to remain at our disposal."

"Have you contacted the families of the victims?"

"All the victims had a plastic lined identification card in their pocket. It indicated their name and two emergency phone numbers. One was Lord Winford's, the other that of the mental institution where they stayed before being brought here. The bodies will be sent back to these institutions, but it seems that none of the victims had close relatives or friends who cared for them. As for the four bodies missing, they'll probably never reappear again. The ocean has swallowed many in the past around here. We've tried to search the ruins of the villa for information regarding these four victims, but there's nothing left there except for the walls and some metal appliances. In any event, I doubt that anyone will ever claim their bodies. It's a terrible tragedy that has occurred here, and we'll probably never know what went through the minds of those poor souls."

He looked me straight in the eyes, as to challenge me one last time, but I only nodded, and he left without any comment. I knew that he was not fully convinced of my innocence but Lord Winford and his children were probably the wealthiest family in the community and if Lady Winford did not want the investigation to go further, it would not.

I looked for an instant at the cover of my passport, and then walked into the cabin, put on my suit, and stuffed Winford's tape and my journal into a plastic bag that I tucked under my belt. I threw some water on the fire in the chimney and closed the cabin door behind me as I stepped out.

I did not meet anybody on my way out of the park.

## Chapter 17

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April 18, Year 2.

I had stopped talking for a while but the red light of the recorder was still on. I was just starting to emerge, drained and hazy, as I would have after too long a nap in the middle of the day. Yuan Miller was silent. She seemed overwhelmed by the story I had been telling her for over two hours; she had not interrupted me a single time.

"You don't believe me, do you?" I asked, and turned off the recorder. She looked up at me and shook her head.

"I don't know," she said. "I've spent the past six months trying to figure out why seven perfectly normal individuals would all disappear the same day and lose their minds. I understood that there was little room for a rational explanation, but I never thought the story would get so weird either. Let me look at my notes... You don't mind answering a few questions, right?"

"Go ahead."

"First of all, when you returned to the U.S., why Detroit?"

"When I left the Winford domain, I walked to the nearest village, took a bus to Shannon, and flew to Dublin that very evening. The first plane departing for the U.S. was the Detroit one; that was fine by me."

"Did you say goodbye to..."

She did not finish her question; I did not make any effort to answer it.

"Do you still have Winford's tape and the journal in which you recorded your observations during the whole ordeal?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Could I make copies of these documents?"

I stood up, walked to the bedroom and came back with the tape and the journal. When I laid them on the table, she flipped a few pages of the journal.

"I suppose that you don't want Tashia Johnson's name to be mentioned?"

"No, I don't," I replied. "She should never have been involved in the first place. Couldn't you just omit the report of my passage through her house? After all, that episode isn't central to the story, right? You could just say that for two days I slept in some warehouse before receiving my plane ticket to Ireland."

"I'll be writing a report on this affair, Mr. Keiffer, not a novel. But if the rest checks out, I'll just take your word for that part of the story, unless something comes up that requires me to contact her. In my final article, I'll refer to her using fictitious initials. Only she will be able to recognize herself if she reads the article."

"How about the Winfords? Do you have to use their real names?"

"Of course. The only way to validate such an odd story is to back it up with as much evidence as will still be left for me to dig up, and most of all demonstrate the involvement of real individuals. Even if I succeed in gathering that data, many people won't buy the story, but it will make it more difficult to dismiss. That's as much as we can hope for, considering the circumstances."

"How are you planning to get started?"

"First, I'll fly to Ireland. That's where most of the remaining evidence can be found."

"The Winford family won't talk to you about this—"

She looked down at her notes.

"Maybe not, but there I *should* find the cab driver, Anna the cook, the police report on the death of Winford's patients, the burned down villa... Don't take this the wrong way, Mr. Keiffer, but I'm still at the stage where I have to establish your credibility. I would have trusted the Richard Keiffer that was described to me by his friends, but it's Kevin Cronin I'm facing today—the man who's deliberately carrying on with his life away from his family."

She had returned to her clinical coldness, but her statement did not upset me. At least she was taking my story seriously enough to check it out.

"You *will* find the evidence in Ireland." I said. "Then what?"

"Then, I'll have to re-investigate the lives of the six other subjects who, like you, were submitted to the hypnotic treatment here in the U.S. If I could find in their homes some evidence, such as printouts of the Internet questionnaire, or of the Chromotrix e-mail, then I could tie their breakdown more tightly with Winford's activities."

"How long do you think all this will take?"

"It's difficult to say. I've learned many tricks on how to run an investigation here; how to get a police report, how to persuade a witness to talk, or where to find various kinds of information. The Irish ways are probably very different. I'll have to figure them out as I go along; that'll slow me down."

She packed her bag and asked permission to use the phone. It was already past midnight; I was exhausted. I heard her book airline tickets for Shannon, with a departing flight the following day from Chicago. She had the airline employee repeat the price of the tickets twice, and then gave her credit card number. She remained on hold for a moment, and then I understood that her card payment had been declined. After a moment's hesitation, she gave the number of another card—issued to the Chicago Daily—which she had probably not returned yet. She hung up with an expression of surprise after hearing that the payment was accepted, and then went into the bathroom. When she returned, she had her own clothes back on.

"Are you going to drive back to Chicago now?" I asked.

"Yes. My plane takes off from O'Hare at noon. If I leave now, I'll reach Chicago early in the morning. That will give me enough time to swing by my place and pack some clothes. But before I leave Detroit, I have to find a place to make a copy of your journal and somehow find a way to duplicate the tape."

"I'm not too familiar with my stereo, but it's old enough to dub audio tapes. I'll do that while you go make the copies."

I indicated to her the location of a nearby copying service and once she left, set up the stereo system, then laid down on the couch and fell asleep on contact.

When she knocked at the door, I felt as if I had just fallen asleep, but the clock had moved by almost an hour. I started brewing some coffee while she browsed the copies of my journal. She joined me in the kitchen after a few minutes. I handed her a cup of coffee.

"Will you keep in touch while you're in Ireland?"

"Well, I'll be going there with a very tight budget since the paper hasn't paid me for months, and international phone calls will probably be expensive. I'll only call you if I need additional information. Otherwise, I'll get in touch with you as soon as I return. Would you like me to take a message to someone over there?"

I walked by the window and looked for a few seconds at the scattered flurries swirling around the street lights.

"Just say hello to Banagher, the cab driver," I said.

She looked at me while finishing her coffee—as if she expected the rest of my answer, and then walked back to the living room to slip on her coat.

"Can I have the copy of the tape?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. Sure. I had forgotten about that."

I pulled the tape out of the stereo, handed it to her, and accompanied her to the car that she had parked by the entrance of the apartment complex.

She got into the car without a word, started the engine, then pulled the driver's window halfway down and looked straight at me.

"Yes...?" I said.

"Why don't you go back home?"

I had expected the question all evening.

"If your husband returned after weeks of unexplained absence and told you the story I just told you, would you let him back into the same house as your children?"

She hesitated for a second and decided not to answer. She turned her eyes away, closed the window, and drove off.

I watched her car disappear with the feverish lucidity that sleepless nights had always brought me. Guinevere was on her way to champion Lancelot's cause. Merlin will not be thrilled by this one.

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I worked through that day without a single thought for Yuan Miller but when I returned home, the sight of the dirty dishes and the pasta leftovers in the sink instantly set me back to the past night. By now, she was well on her way, and I felt somewhat uncomfortable at that thought. Just twenty-four hours earlier, we had never even met, and she was now already dissecting my most private journey. I had lost control of that fragile segment of my life. Once more.

Every morning and every night of the days that followed, I waited for the phone to ring, cursing myself for not giving her some money to call me. The first week of that waiting game was endless. I spent all my evenings watching TV, not even able to concentrate on whichever program was on. I was in Detroit, but my mind had gone back with her to the Connemara. On the second week, I began regaining some focus and stayed late at work to keep my mind busy. It did not help. My impatience grew more frantic every day and at the end of the third week, on a Saturday morning, I paced around the phone for a good half-hour before finally picking it up to call the international operator. I got the phone number of Banagher & Sons in Galway, dialed it, and got Banagher on the line right away. It took him a moment to figure out who I was, but he finally burst into a joyous laughter.

"Mister Cronin! Yes, I remember you. A journalist friend of yours came to see me two or three weeks ago, asking questions about your visit here. You must be a celebrity in the States!"

"Not exactly. Have you seen her since?"

"I can't say I have. After we spoke, she asked me to take her to a place in the Connemara—a castle. I don't remember the name, but I know it was a bit off the main road and we had a hard time finding it."

"Was it the Winford castle?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Was it close to the cross where you dropped me when I came?"

"Now that you mention it, yes—except that we had to turn before the cross into a gravel road that ran around a hill and led up to the castle."

"Did you leave her there?"

"No... Yes. Well, at first she asked me to wait for her but after fifteen or twenty minutes, she came back out of the castle, paid me, and told me she'd call me in Galway if she needed a ride back later."

"And she never called you again?"

"No, but I didn't expect her to; there are cab services much closer to the castle than ours."

"Did you see anybody at the castle while you waited?"

"No, nobody, but there sure was a fancy car parked there, a Bugatti, beautiful!"

"I see... Thank you, Banagher, you've been a great help."

"Well, lad, if you come back our way, I hope you won't be too big a celebrity to have a beer with us at the King's Head!"

"The Guinness will be on me this time, Banagher. Thanks again."

I hung up the phone, wandered for a moment around the room, and dug out the journal from my Irish trip. I remembered writing somewhere in there the phone number of the Winford residence. When I dialed it, an automated voice informed me that the number was no longer in service. I called the international operator again. She told me that the new number of the Winford estate was unlisted. I settled for the number of the police station in the village nearest to the castle, dialed it, and asked to talk to the officer on duty. The man who talked to me had no recollection of the visit of an American reporter but after asking around, he brought one of his colleagues to the phone. That officer did remember a woman with Asian features and an American accent who came in recently and asked to look at a police report.

"Can you tell me what that police report was about?" I asked.

"Last year, there was a collective suicide of mentally impaired patients in a residence a few miles from here. She wanted a copy of our report on that incident."

"Did she get it?"

"Yes, the case is closed, and the file isn't classified."

"Have you seen her since?"

"No."

"And there wasn't any case of violent accident or unexplained death recently in your area?"

"No, this is a quiet place. What happened last year was the only violent or unusual case that we've had to handle in over a decade. Can I ask what this is all about?"

I hung up the phone. Yuan did follow the path that she had drawn the night of our encounter. She might even have already returned to the U.S. and not taken the time to get back in touch with me. I called her home number in Chicago, but the phone just rang without end. The urge to drive there took me. My chances of finding her there were slim, but I was tired of waiting around.

The weather along the way showed the first bursts of spring in the Midwest, like a warm shower after a prolonged dip in chilly water. I entered Chicago in the early afternoon. The *Chicago Daily* was located downtown in an old three-story building. I entered a small hallway and walked to the reception desk. A young woman—probably a student—remained absorbed in the completion of a large doodle on a note pad for a few seconds after my entrance, then noticed me and spoke with a dragging voice.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm trying to get in touch with Yuan Miller."

"Who?"

"Yuan Miller, she's a reporter here."

Her paging call echoed throughout the building, but several minutes passed and nobody showed up.

"Would you please try again?" I asked, with a contrite smile.

The student reluctantly executed my request and this time a tall, skinny man in his late twenties walked into the hallway and came straight to me.

"Hi! Are you the one looking for Yuan? She doesn't work here anymore," he said.

"Yes, I know. I'm a friend of hers, and I haven't had any news for quite a while—would you happen to know where I could reach her?"

"She's out of the country. She left about a month ago and asked me to swing by her apartment from time to time to water her plants. I went there just yesterday; she hasn't returned yet."

"Are you a close friend of hers?" I asked.

"Well, I'm a photographer. We teamed up on a few stories, but I wouldn't say that I'm a close friend. Yuan is somewhat of a private person."

"Do you know if she has any family in town?"

"I'm not sure... I don't think that she was from here. She went to college somewhere in Seattle."

Great. Assuming that her family lived in Seattle, there were probably over a thousand *Millers* in the city. I remained silent for a moment, my mind rushing to find a new lead to keep my search alive. The photographer started heading out.

"Sorry I couldn't be of any help."

"Wait, where could I take a look at past issues of the paper?"

"There's an archive room upstairs, I can take you to it."

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I did not know the city, and I had a hard time finding my way through the northern Chicago suburbs. I finally caught a glimpse of a tall red brick building standing out of the intricate network of fancy houses in which I was lost and drove toward it. *Calvary Catholic Church, Church School: Sunday 9:45 AM, Worship Service: Sunday 11:00 AM*. The church name, engraved in black letters onto a gray marble sign, echoed the one I had just read in the old newspaper. I parked on the street and walked to the front door of the church. It was closed. I went around the back and saw a two story house appended directly to the wall of the church. Nobody answered my knocks on the door. I instinctively checked the knob. The door was not locked. I pushed it.

"Hello, anybody in?"

I did not receive an answer, but I could hear the sound of a TV or radio broadcast coming from the inside. I hesitantly stepped into a living room overcrowded with old-fashioned furniture and religious paintings on the walls.

"Hello!?"

The only response to my loud call remained the echo of an information broadcast coming through an arch cut into the left wall of the living room. I approached the opening and saw a man sitting down at the table of a small kitchen, his back turned to me, listening to the radio.

"Hi! I'm sorry—I knocked..."

The man did not move.

"Excuse me, can I come in?"

I was disoriented by the man's immobility. I stepped into the kitchen and walked around the table for him to see me. I kept my eyes on his head as I moved around him. He was a middle-aged man with a tanned face and very dark hair. The expression on his face was perfectly serene, except for the intense gaze of his pale blue eyes. I looked at him for a long moment then a sudden sadness seized me. I turned off the radio and stepped right into the direction of his look.

"Father Roselli..."

His eyes stared right through my face. I started talking to him with a soft tone of voice, trying to deliver a message I felt he ought to receive. Once more I told my story, but for the first time to another one of its actors. I needed to believe that, somehow, he could hear me, but his face remained still and although I had started pacing, his eyes never followed me. I paused on several occasions through the story to give him a chance to express a reaction, but his attitude remained the same, whether I talked or not. I was approaching the end of the story and describing the night of Lord Winford's death when I heard the front door open. I stopped talking. A few seconds later a man dressed in priest's attire walked into the kitchen, froze with surprise upon seeing me and spoke with a glacial voice.

"What are you doing here? Who let you in?"

"I'm an old friend of Father Roselli. I haven't seen him in a long time; I thought I'd pay him a visit."

I always lied well, but the priest did not seem convinced at all.

"It might have been more suited to call first," the priest said. "Were you unaware of his condition?"

"No, I had been informed about it, but I didn't know until this morning that I'd be passing through Chicago, and I thought that the surprise might do him some good. Another friend of mine recently told me about Father Roselli's breakdown. Her name is Yuan Miller; you may have met her..."

"Yes, she came here once, a few months ago. Are you a journalist, too?"

"Not at all, I work in a bank in Detroit. Have you seen Ms. Miller recently?"

The priest shook his head sideways. I sensed that he hesitated on which attitude to adopt, and I was growing concerned that he might call the police. The cat-and-mouse game between us continued for a few minutes, and his voice remained cold and suspicious despite my attempts to mellow the

situation. I finally managed to talk my way out, walked swiftly to my car and drove away, making sure that he would not get a glimpse of my license plate.

The long drive back to Detroit gave me a chance to reflect on the results of my short trip. I had not learned anything about Yuan's situation, or even about her personality. Her mention of the newspaper article reporting the initial disappearance of Father Roselli had led me to him, but even though we both had been the prey of Winford's madness, we no longer had much in common.

I came to the conclusion that Yuan had not made it back to the U.S. Since Roselli was the only one of Winford's victims living in her hometown, he would have been the first one she would have visited again after returning. I resolved to continue waiting. I had just been assigned a new project at the bank, and although I was concerned with Yuan Miller's situation, I had no indication that she might be in trouble, and therefore no real justification to jeopardize my job by flying back to Ireland and trying to locate her. There could be many reasons for her prolonged stay there, one of them being that she might have found out more about the whole ordeal than I was aware of. This investigation might be Yuan's chance to resume a successful career as a journalist, and she would probably want to polish her story as much as possible before bringing it back.

A few more days of waiting is all impatience let me have. Even though I was not sure that something had gone wrong, I decided to call the Chicago Police Department to report her disappearance. They had better ways to investigate the situation than I did, and at worst, I would look stupid if they were to find out that she was just fine. I explained to the police officer that she had gone to Ireland to pursue an investigation, without giving any detail other than the name and address of the Winfords. The officer did not seem very concerned by the matter.

"Well, Mister Cronin, what makes you think that she has disappeared? She could just like it over there and take advantage of her trip to visit the country."

"She went there for important business, not for a vacation. If you investigate, you'll probably find out that none of her relatives or friends have received news from her in several weeks."

"We'll look into it but honestly, we have more pressing priorities at hand. Going away for extended periods of time to bring back a good story is part of the journalist's life. As for her not calling you, well, you obviously aren't that close since you couldn't tell her exact age or the address of her family. Anyway, we'll let you know if something comes up."

I made an effort to thank the officer and hung up. Despite my irritation, I had to admit that he made sense. After all, he knew more about cases of missing persons than I did. Although I felt that Yuan should at least have

called me by now, I was only a link in the chain of this story and there was not really any reason for her to get back in touch with me until she returned.

I decided to concentrate on my work. My new project was moving along well and I was up for a promotion. I had to take care of the present until the past decided to knock at my door again.

## Chapter 18

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May 28, Year 2.

I got my promotion. I was even allocated my own office; a cozy, tiny box would have been a better name for it, but it had its own door and window—all mine. The moving, the pile of new client files to read, and the cascade of small adjustments to my new position instantly sucked me back into a steady present. My only concession to the memories of the fall was to call Yuan's apartment every night. I would wait for the phone to ring four or five times, then hang up and concentrate back on my homework. In fact, I was no longer sure whether I really wanted an answer to my calls.

But on a Monday night, more than two months after Yuan's departure for Ireland, the phone was picked up right after the first ring.

"Yuan?"

"Yes?"

"You're back!"

"Who's this...?"

"Richard... Richard Keiffer."

"What do you want?"

Her voice had cut through the phone with startling aggressiveness.

"Well, I was anxious to know how your investigation in Ireland worked out, but if I caught you at a bad time, I could call you back tomorrow or—"

She hung up before I could finish the sentence. I stood by the phone with the receiver on my ear for a long moment, disoriented. When I landed and steadied my hands, I redialed her number. The phone was picked up on the first ring.

"Yuan, please don't hang up," I said with haste. "I don't know what's going on but—"

"Listen here, you slime ball! You got me once with your little game but if you try to contact me in any way once more, I'll call the police. You get that?!"

She hung up again before I could reply. I started dialing again her number but stopped halfway through and put the phone down. I grabbed a jacket and my wallet and stormed out of the apartment.

I made it to Chicago close to midnight. Despite the four-hour drive, I was in the same state of mind as when I had hung up the phone. I had not been able to line up two coherent thoughts since. I had imagined several outcomes to Yuan's visit in Ireland, but none of them included her insulting and threatening me after her return here. I followed the directions that the Chicago Daily photographer had given me and easily found Yuan's apartment building. I ran up the staircase to the second floor and walked to the apartment located on the street side by the end of the corridor. I stood for a few seconds in front of the door to catch my breath. Inside, Villa-Lobos'

melancholic *Bachianas Brasileiras* played softly, but I could not hear anything else. I knocked.

"Finally! You took your sweet time, I'm starving!" said Yuan inside while disengaging the lock. The door opened wide; she was only wearing a large Chicago Bulls sweater descending to her knees. As soon as she saw me, she tried to slam the door closed but I blocked it with my foot and pushed my way in. She rushed out of the living room through an open arch leading into a bedroom. Though there was no door to hold me back, I waited by the entrance. From where I stood, I could see part of a large bed and an oriental lithography on the wall but she was out of my sight and I could not hear any sound besides the music coming from the stereo still playing in the living room. I turned it off.

"Yuan, I've not come here to harm you," I said. "What the hell is wrong with you?! You came to my apartment one night just a few weeks ago, remember? I never hurt you, did I?"

A long, silent moment passed before I heard the sound of drawers slamming. After a few seconds, she appeared in the frame of the bedroom door pointing at me a small black can with edgy determination.

"This is a nerve-gas spray. If you approach me, you go down. Get out of my apartment."

"Not before you talk to me. And if you use that thing in this small room, you'll go down, too."

I did not know anything about that kind of device but my argument seemed to disconcert her. I took the opening.

"Listen, Yuan. Something has obviously happened since we last spoke, but you have to give me a chance to defend myself against whatever it is you're holding against me."

She remained still and, as I tried to think of a more convincing approach, the oddest thought crossed my mind. I stupidly let it out.

"That's the third time in less than a year that a woman has threatened me. One ended up shooting me, the other threw alcohol in my eyes, and now you—"

"And that surprises you?!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's common knowledge that women tend not to be overly receptive to rapists!"

"What?!"

She took two steps toward me, still pointing the gas can at my face.

"Get out! That's the last time I'll tell you..."

I walked swiftly to the door and engaged the safety lock. She looked at me with surprise but did not move. I made an effort to speak calmly.

"Now, you listen to me. I'm not going anywhere until you give me an explanation, and if you're thinking of screaming, then you'd better be

prepared to use that spray. All I want from you is an explanation as to why you're calling me a rapist, and then, and only then, I'll leave."

Her eyes scanned the room for a way out, before locking back onto mine.

"Portions of the story you gave me on our first meeting in Detroit checked out," she said with contempt. "Your arrival in Ireland, the gardener job at the Winford's, the fire at the villa, the death of Lord Winford and his patients—all that was real. I verified it within two days. But in addition to having a totally extravagant explanation to your abandoning your family and flying there, you didn't have any explanation at all for leaving Ireland suddenly after just two weeks. Running away after raping your employer's sister makes out a pretty good reason for that—"

"Me, trying to rape Mary Ann?! That's insane! Is that what she told you?"

She instinctively took two steps back in response to my rising voice.

"Her brother told me the story. Mary Ann Winford has been living in a psychiatric facility ever since your little *visit*."

"Did you actually talk to her?"

"Her brother is the only person allowed to visit her. She's just starting to emerge from severe depression. The dramatic circumstances of her father's death had already shaken her, and *you* finished the job!"

"I didn't finish anything! Duncan Winford made up that story to destroy my credibility if I were to talk about his father's work!"

"Nice try, but there are several direct first-hand witnesses of your assault on Mary Ann Winford."

"Who?"

"Anna, the cook, who heard her screaming in the manor's salon and rushed to help her get rid of you. The two other maids, alerted by the shouting, ran downstairs and saw you run outside the manor with your shirt torn. They all saw you leave the property only a few minutes later."

"These are the Winfords' employees—they'll say what they are told! You're a journalist for God's sake; you can't possibly buy a story like that without digging deeper!?"

"I did my job, Keiffer! After Duncan talked with me, he invited me to spend some time at the castle so I wouldn't have come all the way to Ireland for nothing. I stayed there for over a week, just to have a chance to work him, as well as the maids, on their respective versions of the incident. They all are very nice people, and I didn't find a single flaw in their story. Yours is inconsistent from beginning to end—I don't even know what got into me to fly to Ireland to check it out."

"But what about Lord Winford's tape? They couldn't have had an explanation for that?"

She sneered.

"Oh, the famous tape! I couldn't thank you enough for it. It helped me kill the time on the plane."

"What's so funny about it? You don't believe it's real?"

"Oh, it's real all right, so real that from now on I'll be able to eat spicy food without worrying about the consequences."

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

"I believe that the title of the talk show was *Hemorrhoids: Why scratch when you can patch?* It was an hour-long infomercial about some miracle patch supposed to heal hemorrhoids. Very enlightening, indeed."

"What?! Shit! It's a mistake! I had trouble figuring out my stereo system that night—I must have taped the radio instead of dubbing Winford's tape."

"How convenient..."

"I can prove that the tape is real! I still have the original in my apartment. I'll bring it to you tomorrow."

"No, you won't. If you ever try to approach me again, I'll make sure that the police stop you this time."

"So that's it?! A month ago, you were ready to spend hours outside my window in freezing weather just to get me to talk, and now just because you've been fed a ridiculous lie, you're going to give up without even giving me a chance to show you how wrong you are?!"

She remained silent for an instant before replying.

"How wrong *I am*?! It's your word against that of four perfectly respectable persons. That is before mentioning the police officers who investigated the fire at the villa. They didn't find any sign of wrongdoing besides the demented outburst of sick individuals already known by those who had come across them to be very unpredictable."

I could not find a reply. She continued.

"When I came to Detroit to see you, I was obsessed by the need of a breakthrough in my investigation of the case of the October 4<sup>th</sup> missing persons. After months of frustration, I was desperate. Desperate enough to believe the most ludicrous story from a man who had deserted his family and lived under a false identity. The only good thing that came out of that absurdity is the fact you sent me to the Winfords' castle."

"How so?" I asked.

"Duncan was a perfect gentleman all along and during our discussions, we found out that we had many common interests. Two days before my departure, he told me that he had contacted on my behalf a college friend of his who happens to be a chief editor at the Times, in London. After leaving the castle, I flew straight to England, had several meetings with the editor, and even did some translations of Chinese articles for the paper. After only three weeks, he offered me a job. I'm leaving in two days for Shanghai, where I'll be the assistant to the Times anchor there. An incredible opportunity and I owe it all to your madness."

"So that's it—they bought you out!"

“Oh, please! I had already made up my mind about your lame story before Duncan mentioned his friend. Next time you tell your little tale, try to listen to it as well, and maybe you'll realize how much help you need.”

Yuan's voice was calm again. She had lowered the can. She was slipping out of my reach.

“But how about the others? I said. “The missing persons of October 4<sup>th</sup>? You said yourself that they all were perfectly normal individuals?!”

“I'll wonder for a long time what happened to them, but I won't waste a great opportunity to keep trying to figure that out. About fifteen or twenty years ago, there was a case of collective madness in a small rural community somewhere down South. All the villagers, children included, suddenly turned aggressive and started assaulting, and in several instances, even killing each other. It took a long time for the authorities to finally link the villagers' behavior with the contamination of the tap water with a neurotoxic chemical dumped into a river by a factory several miles upstream from the town. I'm sure that, one day, a logical explanation to last fall's disappearances will be found. That day, I'll be the first one to buy the paper. Until then, I'll have a great job. You were probably right the first time we met—you weren't part of that case. All I know now is that you've lost control of your life and your actions. You're a paranoid who makes up crazy stories to cover up his crimes—and believes them. Psychiatrists are the only ones who can help you now.”

“Yuan, you can't possibly believe that,” I said taking a step toward her, “I'll bring you the tape, we'll call Tashia Johnson...”

“Don't come any closer!” she said.

I kept advancing slowly.

“We'll visit the other patients again... We'll find the evidence... We'll—”

A diffuse mist came out of her hand and my body instantly collapsed out from me. Just after my head slammed against the thick carpet, I looked up at a distorted image of Yuan falling on her hands and knees, her eyes locked on mine. Each of us tried to overpower the other in resisting the paralyzing grasp of the gas. I passed out for a few seconds, and then struggled to come back. I saw Yuan crawling on her stomach toward the front door but my attempt to stop her ended up into another blackout.

Each pounding sound seemed to trigger the explosion of thousands of blood vessels in my head. The pain was so brutal that it snatched me out of my stupor.

“Police! Open the door!”

Several more violent knocks on the door punctuated the words. Yuan's still feet lay just a few inches from my face. I dragged myself into the bedroom; the lower part of my body was dead. I saw an open door revealing a sink and crawled into a small bathroom. It took a tremendous effort to climb into the bathtub and get a hold of the faucet. A stream of frigid water

exploded out of the shower to suffocate me but after a few seconds, I felt my entire body trembling convulsively. My legs still felt empty, but they managed to support my attempt to stand up. I staggered out of the bathroom. The police officers were trying to break down the door, but it resisted their assault.

As I zigzagged toward the bedroom window, I noticed that the phone on the bedside table had been left off the hook...

I opened the window and jumped through it without thinking. It was only a one-story fall but my legs gave up on me at the landing. I sensed that I had probably hurt something but my entire body was still a numb limb. The police car was parked only a few yards in front of mine, but no one was around. I made it into my car and started driving away. The road had become a moving ribbon of asphalt, and the convulsions of my arms and legs did not help. The wheels of the car hit the cement border of the sidewalk on both sides of the narrow street several times. I badly scratched two cars parked along the street, but was lucky enough not to meet with any traffic. I took the first right, and after a few hundred yards, I managed to navigate the entrance of an underground parking structure whose automatic barriers had been left up. The cement spiral channeled me to the lowest level and I parked at the end of an alley without hitting any of the other cars. My mind went black when I turned off the ignition.

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I woke up the next day in the middle of the most terrible hangover that I had ever experienced—veins pounded in my head, my stomach was in a nauseating upheaval, and to crown it all, I had a sore and aching body. I grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and took several deep breaths but they only further aggravated my dizziness. I leaned across the front seats and passed out again. When I woke again, I felt a little better. As I stepped out of the car, a diffuse pain in one of my knees reminded me how I had gotten there. I lifted the right side of my pant leg to discover that the knee was bruised and swollen. I hobbled between several rows of parked cars bleached out by the orange glare of the lighting and took the elevator to the ground floor. The doors opened directly onto the street. It was a beautiful day and the sun was already high in the sky, but as soon as I stepped on the sidewalk, a strong tension took a hold of me. I felt as if all the pedestrians had waited there all night just to see me come out of the parking lot and stare at me. I felt just as I was: on the run.

About two blocks down the street, I ended up on a small plaza and entered a coffee shop. I took my double espresso and two bagels to a table by the back of the shop. Up to that point, I had made an effort not to think. Since my waking up in the car, I had an intuitive perception of how much trouble I was in, but now that I set my thinking free, I was getting the full

blast of the situation. Since the past fall, I had endured many different storms, but this time, I was a runaway fleeing *criminal charges*, and that added a totally new dimension to my problem. The more I thought of it, the uglier the whole ordeal looked. My torment reached a high when I realized that Yuan Miller knew my real name. In their attempts to locate me, the police were going to contact Alana as well as my parents. They would not only learn that I had been deliberately living away from them for months but also that I was now wanted for forceful entry into a woman's apartment and was suspected of sexual assault on another one.

When I looked at the other customers peacefully downing their daily caffeine hit, I felt nine again, nailed to my bed by the flu and wondering how the world could continue spinning smoothly for those around me when I was a wreck only a few feet away.

I left the coffee shop after an hour of depressing thoughts and looked for an ATM. Once I found one, I attempted to withdraw a thousand dollars but got notified that three hundred was my daily limit. I settled for that amount, pocketed the money, and threw my passport, driver's license and all other documents that could identify me down into a sewage hole cut out by the edge of the sidewalk. The bus heading to the Amtrak station was packed, but I welcomed the thick screen of the crowd. As soon as I stepped into the hallway of the train station, I passed in front of two security guards that I had not spotted. A discharge of adrenaline rattled my nerves, but they did not pay any attention to me. I caught the reflection of my day-old beard and painful walk in the glass window of a candy machine; I might as well have worn a *Man in Trouble!* sign around my neck. I purchased disposable razors and a few other toiletry items at a concession stand and cleaned up my appearance in the bathroom. I spent the following two hours locked up in one of the stalls and only came out to purchase my ticket a few minutes before the train was scheduled to take off.

It was an endless ride. Day or night, my sleep only consisted of naps of twenty minutes or less spaced by several dragging hours of restlessness. The knot in the pit of my stomach refused to let through anything but fluids, and I was growing fainter with every train change. At first, I had tried to concentrate on the constantly changing scenery brushing the window but all I could see was the same adverse landscape. I had become an alien in my own land. Everything aggravated me—the shallow conversations of other passengers, the squeaking of the train brakes, the greasy scent of fast-food. I had become a human funnel for all the annoying sounds, disturbing body odors, and irritating personalities entrapped in the train. Only halfway through the two-day ride, my nerves were already threatening to burst out of my body and it was a fight of every moment not to let them take over. I was exhausted but could no longer sleep at all, even for a few minutes. My inner condition had probably grown all over my face since incoming

passengers would only take a furtive look at my cabin before hurrying down the corridor.

I stepped out of the last train in a hazy state of mind and walked down the very same corridor that had sucked me into that recurring nightmare eight months earlier.

I had made it home.

## Chapter 19

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May 31, Year 2.

I would never have imagined that I could return to San Francisco worse off than I had left it, but if the authorities were to catch up with me, it might as well be there; in a place where I knew at which doors to knock for help. Two of Alana's acquaintances were decent lawyers from whom we had sought advice on several occasions, and one of my tennis partners was a consultant for the San Francisco PD. None of them was a close friend, but in my position, friends were no longer the first necessity.

I sat on a bench outside the station to absorb a dizzy spell. The sun was blinding me and despite its warmth, cold chills chased one another down my spine without a rest. After a few minutes, I walked to a street vendor and bought two hot dogs and a can of orange juice. I had to force the first bites down my throat, but as some food finally landed in an empty stomach, my body decided to make a comeback, dragging with it a gloomy but functional mind. I started reviewing my options, only to realize that I did not have any. Checking into a cheap hotel was out of the question since I did not have any identification. The homeless shelters were out, too. Though I was not a high profile criminal, there was a chance that the police would at least give the shelters of my hometown a warning against me. I was definitely not cut out to live on the street either, and as for my friends, I could not think of a single one who would take my word over that of the police.

I was almost resigned to jump into a cab heading downtown and walk into a police station when an odd thought crystallized in my mind. I fed it for a few minutes; it went on growing. I went back inside the train station and purchased an envelope and a stamp. After writing down the address on the envelope, I stuffed two hundred-dollar bills in it, along with a short note, and dropped it into a mail box on my way out of the station. I caught a bus heading for a nearby shopping mall where I purchased two pairs of jeans, three shirts, a sweater, and cheap sneakers. I completed my shopping with some briefs, a few toiletry items, a flashlight, some food, and a denim back-pack to carry it all. I sat on the low wall of a fountain in front of the mall until dusk became thick enough.

The cab dropped me a few houses down from my destination. I hurried up the street and sat for a moment in the shadow of the warehouse right across the street from the house. There was no light inside; it was ready to receive me. I verified that no one was around, ran across the street and the front lawn, threw my back-pack into the basement's open hole and climbed down after it. I stood for a moment in the semi-obscurity of the basement and felt at great peace. Nobody would find me there. Not even Tashia, this time.

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I turned on my flashlight and walked around the staircase; next to it lay the key to my temporary underground survival. When repairing the gas furnace during my first stay in Tashia's house, I had noticed a U-shaped recess, about three square feet, hidden behind the heater. I had to climb over the furnace to get into it but it was not that hard. That lodging was devoid of ceiling, and hosted only two pipes coming out from the base of the furnace and riding along the wall of a large duct all the way to the second floor of the house. I tucked the flashlight into my pants, beam facing up, and started climbing along the pipes, resting my feet on the metal fixtures holding them to the wall.

After only a few seconds, my face leveled with a cut-out in the wall on the first floor of the house, covered by a metallic grill. It had probably been an air intake for the previous heating system but it was now just a sizeable hole in the wall. The clip-on fixtures that held the grill into place snapped loose easily. I crawled into the hole to end up on the floor of the short corridor between the kitchen and the basement door. I dimmed the beam of the flashlight with my hand before entering the dark kitchen, picked up two slices of white bread from a loaf lying on the table, and drank water straight from the faucet over the sink.

As I headed toward the living room, the sound of the front door locks being released startled me. I retreated and in my hastiness stumbled over a small fire truck lying on the kitchen floor. The toy started running with a life of its own all around the room. I tried to catch it, but it swiftly changed directions every time it hit an obstacle and kept fleeing the beam of my flashlight. When the voices made it inside the house, I rushed back into the corridor, sneaked through the duct hole, and snapped the grid back into place.

I clung to the pipes to keep my head behind the grid; I could still hear the grinding sound of the fire truck still running in the kitchen. Light burst through the kitchen door into the corridor. The duct grid was located close to the floor, just opposite the open kitchen door. Now that the lights were on, I could see most of the kitchen though the grid, but the metallic mesh was dense enough to protect me from being seen in return.

The six or seven-year-old boy who had turned on the lights caught the fire truck as it passed near his feet.

"Mama, there's been a fire in the kitchen!" he said.

"What?!"

A stomping on the wooden floor preceded Tashia's rush into the kitchen. She looked around with apprehension and then turned to the boy.

"Dwayne, what's wrong with you?! There's no fire here."

"No it's okay now, Mum; the firemen put it out."

"Child, this is not funny! I don't want you making up stories that scare your Mummy, do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Go get changed now."

The kid ran out of the kitchen. I let out a sigh; there was a God for squatters.

Tashia took a can of soda from the fridge and as she drank, she started pulling plates and glasses from the cabinet to set the table. She wore a white sleeveless dress and was barefoot on the kitchen linoleum; my first human encounter after three days in a vortex only inhabited by transient faces and nerve-wracking voices. I was instantly seized by the urge to back out of the basement and knock on the front door of the house. But during the hours preceding my reentrance into Tashia's world, I had designed with much detail a strategy for my stay in the house and understood that I could not take the chance of letting her know about my presence. Yuan Miller knew about Tashia, and she could find her address in the copy of my journal. If Tashia heard about my alleged assaults on two women, she would not take any chances.

I was now condemned to living in a dark cuboid and watching through a small grid the only person who had given me a break since the beginning of the whole ordeal. The frustration finished draining me out. I slid down the pipes, laid down on the cement of the small recess with my head on the back-pack and listened for a moment to the tumble of the children's feet somewhere on the second floor until a long-overdue sleep swept me away.

The strident siren of a police car woke me up. I sat up with a vague apprehension, but the sound quickly faded away. By my watch, it was early afternoon; I had been out for sixteen hours and my body was sore. Only a poor glimmer filtered into the recess through a slit between the furnace and the wall. The furnace was located behind the staircase, and through the slit, I could see most of the basement. The bright light coming through the window close to the ceiling pushed back the darkness almost to the end of the room. I listened to the house for a few minutes and when I got convinced that it was empty, sneaked again into the kitchen.

It was time to put my plan to work. Stage one was to survey my territory. The back door, by the kitchen, was now obstructed by a tall cupboard filled with used children's books and cleaning products. Since I already knew that, from the kitchen, I could hear the locks of the front door slap open, that room was a safe zone. The only other facility that I would need was the bathroom, but that was a much more hazardous venture. Though I intended to leave the bathroom door wide open once in there, the sounds of the faucets or the toilet flush might still mask that of somebody entering the house.

Tashia's work schedule was posted on the fridge, but if she were to divert from it only once and return unexpectedly, I could end up in a very

embarrassing position. It would already be delicate enough to justify my intrusion if she were to find out about my presence in the house; being caught with my pants down sitting on her toilet would definitely not give me a psychological advantage.

I took the chance of going for quick ablutions; they were planned like a little war. I had bought unscented shaving cream and soap for fragrance control, and each hair deserting my scalp to cuddle with the white sink was instantly shoved down the drain. After the bathroom campaign, the food expedition was a piece of cake. It started with a fistful of cereals, washed down with several sips of milk straight out of the plastic jug, a few forkfuls of cold potato salad, a slice of white bread and two cookies. A parasite's feast.

After washing and putting away the fork, I sat at the kitchen table. I was not proud of myself, but in light of the situation, I had come up with a fine plan to survive until I could think of a better alternative. A fine plan—except for one little detail that I had overlooked. I had been up for less than a half-hour and my day was already done. I was clean, satiated, and... *bored*.

The idea of taking a chance into the living room to watch TV crossed my mind, but all parts of the house beyond the bathroom were hazardous territory. If somebody were to enter the house, I would never be able to make it back to my hole fast enough. I searched around the kitchen for a newspaper but could not find any; I ended up mechanically turning the pages of the phone book. After a moment, I picked up the phone and dialed the number of an automated *Toll-Free Information* service. From one four-digit code to the next, I traveled through the fascinating worlds of *Legal Counseling* and *Recourses Against Lawyers*, *Dog Bites* and *Pet Care*, *Mortgages for Newlyweds* and *Gonorrhea*, and many more life-encompassing topics. After nearly an hour of that routine, I hung up the phone upon realizing that someone might try to call Tashia and later on mention to her that the line was busy at a time when she was not home.

I ran around the kitchen table for a few minutes to flush out the tension in my muscles, then walked to the cupboard blocking the back door and went through the children's books piled on its shelves. I sat down on the kitchen tiles with my back to the wall and had no difficulty identifying with *Giffy the Goose* whose harrowing misfortunes culminated with the laying of a pyramid-shaped egg. Cheerfully enough, everything ended in a joyous cavalcade with her pig friends. I hesitated for an instant to follow up with the underground adventures of Wormy Poo, but eventually decided to stay on the emotional roller coaster Giffy had just put me through. It was a beautiful day outside. I cracked open the kitchen windows to let in the warm scent of spring and looked at the sun bathing the clumps of flowers scattered throughout the small backyard. The scenery beyond the wire netting encircling the backyard was obstructed by a long building whose gray walls were covered with half-torn political posters and mystical spray paint

graffiti. The kitchen windows were facing north; I would not get a chance at a direct ray of sunshine anytime soon.

I turned on the radio and tuned it on the AM band to listen to talk shows, but got annoyed after a few minutes. Whichever topic they dealt with was not even remotely relevant to my current situation and that only enhanced my feeling that I had been spit out of the real world. I reset the radio to its original tuning and crawled back down into the basement. A nap was my only chance at a mental escape until Tashia and the kids returned.

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The singing voice of a child brought me back to reality. I climbed the pipes and looked through the grid. A cute little girl wearing a long colorful scarf tied around her neck was dancing in the kitchen. She could not have been older than four or five, but she clapped her hands and shook the short braids sticking out of her head like antennas with a frenzied application. Tashia watched the performance and had a hard time keeping her composure. When the girl finished her show, she hugged her.

"That's a beautiful song, honey. What else did you learn today?"

"So many things! I speak French now, too! *Je m'appelle Kira Johnson and j'ai quatre ans!*"

"Very good! What does that mean?"

Before the little girl could reply, two boys burst into the kitchen and chased each other around the table for a few seconds before Tashia grabbed the taller one by the arm.

"Anton, leave your brother alone! You're almost ten, for God's sake! It would be about time for you to start growing some sense!"

"But Mum, he put a piece of raw liver inside one of my sneakers!"

The other kid tried to sneak out of the kitchen.

"Dwayne, come back here. There'll be no TV for you this week and if I catch you playing with food again, you'll be in big trouble, do you get that?"

The boy nodded with a sad face but gave his brother a defiant smile as soon as his mother turned around.

"Now, all of you, go tidy up your rooms. After that, you can play in the backyard. I'll join you in a little while."

"Mum, can I keep the scarf to play?"

"Yes, Kira. Just be careful with it, okay?"

The girl ran out of the kitchen to catch up with her brothers. I had been smiling through the entire scene in the darkness of my duct.

When Tashia sat down, I noticed the small pile of mail on the table. She opened two envelopes, inspected their content, and then tossed them on the other side of the table. She flipped the third one over to look at the back side before opening it. As she pulled two hundred-dollar bills out of it, a small piece of paper fell on the table. She inspected the bills, then read the note

and laid it back on the table. She remained immobile for a long moment; eyes stuck on the note. Her face had turned hard; an expression I had already seen. She snapped out of her thoughts to cut out the top right corner of the envelope and clip it to the note; when she finally stood up, she slipped the papers inside a wooden box lying on a shelf of the cupboard, picked up the hundred-dollar bills from the table and left the kitchen.

I slid down the pipes, and as soon as I landed, I felt like kicking the walls of the cubbyhole. "Thank you for your kindness in a time of need. Best regards. Richard Keiffer." A canned Hallmark blurb hastily written on a torn piece of paper, along with a ridiculous sum of money sent in an envelope with no return address but a San Francisco postmark. I could not believe that at the train station, it had seemed a fine move. As I planned my stay in her house, I had come up with the idea of paying for the food I would eat using the pretense of compensating her for my first stay. That idea had made me feel less guilty about using her house and, stupidly, all I had imagined was her joy upon finding the money. Now that I had rediscovered the contents of the envelope from the receiving end, I realized that I might as well have written, "Here is some cash for your trouble; I will no longer need your services."

I listened to the kids playing in the backyard but did not hear Tashia's voice until they all gathered in the kitchen for dinner. I did not climb the pipes. I might have had mitigating circumstances for breaking into the house but I did not have any right, especially the one of sharing their life by peeking through the grill. I sat at the bottom of my hole for several hours until the house became silent. I had made it through day one of my survival run, but I could barely stand the idea that tomorrow would be just as empty. I tossed and turned for another hour before falling asleep.

The second and third days were even worse than I had feared. *Oh, a fine plan all right!* I would wake up before dawn, well before the other residents of the house, and would have great trouble falling asleep at night. My only daily occupations were short ablutions and nibbling on a few snacks. The rest of the day was sheer nerve-wracking boredom. On the third afternoon, I had to drink a few sips of the brandy stored on the higher shelf of the kitchen cabinet to ease my nerves. Carried away by the liquor, I packed my things, pulled a short ladder by the basement window to escape into the outside world. Half of my body was already sticking out of the window when the blazing light scared me back down.

Tuesday was Tashia's only day off. Since I was aware of her schedule, I had made a small provision of water, dry cereal, and cookies to see me through that day but I still had to face about eighteen hours of silent wakefulness into the minuscule recess.

Tashia's footsteps and the music coming from the kitchen enlivened the house all morning, but I felt even more isolated than when the place was

empty. By noon, I had eaten all my food and was already oppressed by the confinement of my cement jacket.

Shortly after lunch time, I heard the locks on the basement door disengage and the door squeal open. I looked through the slit between the wall and the furnace and saw Tashia descending the stairs, holding a large laundry basket and humming the tune playing on the radio. I looked at her walk toward the drying racks for a few seconds—*too long*—and then brusquely pulled away from the slit. She only wore leather sandals and a long white shirt that the bright light from the window penetrated to highlight the contours of her body. I was not so much embarrassed by the awkwardness of the situation as by my desire to look at her again. I took a long sip of water, sat down with my back to the slit, concentrated on Tashia's humming, and applied myself to lip-synch along until she climbed back up the stairs and locked the basement door behind her.

Shortly following Tashia's visit, another problem arose. I was able to ignore it for a while but had no illusion on the outcome of the situation. In the right corner, me, one hundred and seventy-three pounds—the most powerful predator species on earth. In the left corner, a silly looking water balloon with the pretentious name of *bladder*—undefeated. I offered a heroic resistance to my opponent but the sound of water falling through drain pipes nearby gave me the final blow. I resolved to grab the empty water bottle and give it a new purpose that would probably never make it into the recycling brochures.

Once freed from that need, I almost missed it. At least it had kept my mind busy for close to an hour. The radio was still playing, but I had not heard anything else coming from the inside of the house for a while. As dreadful minutes passed, I grew so restless that I had to slide out of the recess and run around the basement for a few minutes to vent my nerves. When I ran out of breath, I sat against the furnace. I could no longer go on like that; I had always feared isolation. I could count on the fingers of my hand the times I had been on my own for more than a day, and those occasions weren't even remotely as disturbing as my incarceration in the hidden dungeon of a warm house.

I sneaked back into the recess upon hearing some tumbling on the ceiling. The children were back. The evening went by even slower than the day that had preceded it.

As soon as the house quieted down, I shaved and changed clothes by the gleam of the flashlight, then cautiously slipped out of the basement window. I ran across the front lawn to the sidewalk and swiftly proceeded up the street.

## Chapter 20

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June 4, Year 2.

My escape felt exactly as I had imagined it all afternoon. The warm stream of air dissolved the knot in the pit of my stomach a little more with each step, leaving behind a dull fear. Each car that passed by sent me into a small adrenaline rush, but none even slowed down. In this neighborhood, I was probably perceived to be as much of a threat to them as they seemed to me. It was already close to midnight and although most houses were still lit, nobody was sitting on the front porches enjoying the breezy night. I walked for two blocks without meeting a single soul and ended up facing a small park. I started heading toward its entrance but changed my mind and decided to keep walking along the street encircling it rather than cross it. Along the circle, several businesses were open, most of them fast-food restaurants, all pretty much empty. The lack of human activity in the neighborhood oppressed me.

I was about to retrace my steps back to Tashia's house when I walked by the entrance of a narrow alley stuck between two tall buildings. It was so dark that I could not see the pavement for more than a few feet into it. About forty yards down the alley, an indigo neon sign glowed on the facade of a small building. *Nam Palm*. The words puzzled me. I was looking for a place to have a beer, buy some cigarettes and most of all see people, but there was no window to the structure and no other light than the neon sign.

I took two steps into the alley and when my eyes adjusted to the darkness, verified that it was empty. After a moment of hesitation, I walked toward the sign. As I approached it, I realized that it was not affixed to a house but rather to a wall linking the two buildings flanking the alley. Right under the neon, a steep staircase dived straight into the ground. A steady pounding seeped from it. I slowly went down the stairs and recognized the rugged song, *War! Huh! What is it good for? Absolutely Nothing!* The Motown classic born in the unrest of the sixties.

At the bottom of the staircase, I faced a heavy wooden door. Despite my fear, I banged the metal knocker twice. The door swung open to a black man about twice my size wearing a silver ring on one of his ears. I felt all the blood retreat from my face and started missing my cubbyhole badly. The man looked at me with a condescending expression and I instinctively laid my arms along my flanks like a scared recruit reporting for duty to the meanest sergeant in the company. Despite my stupid posture, he tilted his head to signify me to get in. The idea of turning down the invitation did not cross my mind.

I stepped in and in a flash, all my senses got saturated. The clouds of cigarette smoke were so thick that the red beams bursting out of the ceiling spot lamps seemed to ride them along before falling to the bare cement floor.

The pounding of the stereo's bass breaking loose from the wide speakers hanging on the walls slapped my guts around and knocked on my heart as to change its beat. Even the air had a thick, bitter taste. I stood there for a long moment trying to adjust to that sudden change in my environment until I felt a presence behind me. I turned around and came face-to-chest with the doorman, clearly annoyed by my reluctance to move from the front door. I took a few steps back with a stupid smile on my face and retreated toward the bar, which was only a long succession of wooden boards covered with red plastic sheets and supported by tall trestles. Behind the counter, a white man in his late fifties dressed in a combat uniform was frantically feeding the trays of the waitresses with bottles of beer and flasks of whiskey. The two waitresses were Asian and very young. They wore long shiny black dresses bearing fine strings of nacre incrustations streaming from the high collar all the way down to the lower edge of the dress. I had just slipped into an Oliver Stone movie.

When a break occurred in the rotation of the waitresses, the man at the bar looked at me with a closed face.

"Nice place!" I shouted.

The guy replied with sheer aggressiveness.

"You want a drink or what?"

"Yes sure, I'll have a fifth of J&B, a pack of Marlboros, and some matches."

"We don't serve at the counter, get a table."

*So much for customer pampering...*

I walked to a table in a corner and inspected the room. It was a small underground space that had probably been the basement of a store at some point. A dozen other small tables were tightly clustered and most of them were occupied by groups of three or four men, all older than me. Despite the promiscuity, only a few of them were talking and none of them smiled or even looked relaxed. Most of them now listened to a tune from the Rolling Stones with their eyes lost in the swirls of their cigarette smoke. One of the waitresses stopped by my table and looked at me without a word. I placed my order again; she walked away. I did not belong here. I was either too young, too white, or too shallow-looking. But I did not feel like leaving. The music was my music and there was in that underground a scent of desperation that suited me just fine. When the waitress returned, I looked up at her. She had a beautiful Asian face, but her eyes were empty—as if her mind was in another place. Her hair brushed my forearm as she left. I enjoyed the sight of the flask of whiskey and the shiny red pack of cigarettes for a moment before touching them.

The liquor hit me hard. Within only a few minutes, I felt easy. Although the night was already advanced, customers kept coming in. They joined one group or another after a round of intricate hand shakes which I had always thought to be the trademark ritual of young black men. Several of the

newcomers were older Asian men, and although this underworld was obviously a living tribute to a Far East war, they were greeted by the whites and the blacks with as much warmth as the others.

As time and liquor went by, I underwent a chameleon transformation. I now lived each oldies tune as if I had memories of steamy jungle, shattered youth, and ethylic kisses to VC hostesses glued to it. I could sense my facial expression harden, and my eyes grew into those of a man who has seen too much to ever see again—even though I really had not seen much at all. I felt that I was morphing into one of the men there. For the first time since my entrance, I wished that they had paid attention to me. Three of them had come to my table to take the free chairs without even a look, and I was to remain the only one sitting at a table alone.

The first notes of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* ignited the place. A skinny black man in his fifties wearing jeans, a sleeveless tee shirt, and a red scarf tied above his elbow climbed on a table and started lip-synching with slow arm motions. As if they had been waiting for that moment all night, all the other men in the room started pounding the beat by slamming the palm of their hands on the tables. They all stared at the black man with a seizing intensity, as if stunned by a corrosive flashback.

The fervor of that ritual took me by surprise, and I remained still for fear of disturbing it by a stupid move. Only one other customer was immobile. She was the only female customer in the room, sitting at a table with three men on the opposite corner of the room; I had not noticed her until she turned her chair around to face the room when it suddenly came to life. She was slightly older than most of the men but the expression on her face was as tormented as theirs. She was dressed in a sober pant suit and her gray hair was arranged in a tight chignon, but the cheekbone area of her face was swollen—fleshy testimony to a history of alcohol abuse. She was the only one not staring at the performer. Instead, her eyes scanned with a feverish sadness the faces of the men in the room, one after the other.

When the song came to a close, she walked to the man on the table, helped him down and gave him a long hug. While she rubbed the man's back, she lifted her head and looked straight at me for a brief instant before sitting back at her table. I emptied my flask of J&B. The silent waitress instantly popped out of nowhere; I ordered a draft beer.

The music just went on for hours. I leaned back in my chair and listened to it with my eyes half-closed. A warm dizziness caused me to doze off for a few minutes on several occasions. When the first customers finally started leaving, their weary faces reminded me of the time. It was almost five in the morning. I left a small tip on the table and headed to the door with flimsy legs. The doorman watched me as I approached him. He opened the door and the fresh air rushed in to sweep away the haze of an unlikely night. As I emerged out of the staircase, the first glimmers of dawn were seeping into the dark alley. I walked with a quick pace through the deserted streets but I

was not afraid. Somehow, it seemed too late or too early for trouble. The street was still empty when I snuck back down into Tashia's basement. After putting the ladder in its original location, I crawled into the recess and went straight to sleep.

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I spent the following night at Nam Palm; and the next one. My afternoons in Tashia's house were still very slow but no longer restless. My escapades to Nam Palm after dark gave my daily life an outlet and the feeling that I had reconnected with the outside world. The third night, on my way to the bar, I crossed a small group of black teenagers descending the street on the opposite sidewalk but even though I felt as if the skin of my face glowed to call their attention, they did not give me as much as a look.

On Saturday night, customers that I had not seen during the week joined in with the regular ones. The place was packed from wall to wall, with as many men standing as sitting. I even had to let my table go and was left sitting on my chair alone in the corner with a beer in my hand. I noticed that the man behind the bar had a hard time keeping up with the flow of trays that kept streaming on the counter. I walked by the bar and waited for a brief interruption in the cortege of the waitresses. The man was furiously washing glasses in a small sink under the counter and did not look at me. I waved my hand to get his attention. He shouted over the sound of the stereo.

"What do you want?!"

"For fifteen dollars, I can give you a hand all night," I said.

Two waitresses unloaded empty beer bottles and dirty glasses on the counter and started placing orders at the same time with a strong accent.

"One at a time for God's sake! How many times do I have to tell you that?!" said the man.

A third waitress that I had not seen during the week arrived and shouted her order. The barman slammed his sponge into the sink, looked at the three women, sighed with aggravation, and turned to me.

"Do you have any experience with this?" he asked me.

"No, but I work hard. For fifteen bucks what do you have to lose?"

He hesitated for a few seconds then nodded at me.

"Okay, you'll put away the empty bottles in the boxes by the end of the counter and wash the glasses. Don't even think about touching the money, just leave it on the counter, I'll pick it up."

I crawled between two trestles and started clearing the counter with as much energy as he filled the trays.

I worked like a dog for several hours. I noticed that at every occasion they got, both the owner and the doorman watched me closely. It was a tough job for very little money, but it was a blessing in light of the fact that I had only a few dollars left in my wallet. I kept up all night with the constant

avalanche of dirty glasses and empty bottles that the waitresses unloaded on the counter without a look. My only worry was that I might not get out of the bar before daylight. Luckily, shortly after five in the morning, the bartender turned off the stereo and announced it was closing time.

The room emptied in minutes. I waited as the bartender, who was apparently the owner of the bar, paid the other employees. The waitresses left together but the doorman stayed by the counter as the boss collected the money in the cash register. I finished stacking the clean glasses on a shelf, and then crawled back under the counter. The owner took two bills out of a thick bundle of bills and handed them to me.

"Fifteen dollars...?"

"That's right, thanks," I replied.

I started heading to the door but turned around before reaching it.

"Do you think I could help again tomorrow night?" I asked.

"Listen, you did a good job here, but I already have four employees. I can't afford to hire another one."

"Well, what if I happen to be in the room when there's a rush? Let's say that I give you a hand as a friend—and let's say that you give me fifteen dollars a night—as a friend. The work inspectors wouldn't have anything to say about that, right, friends helping each other?"

The man's face did not relax, but he said, "I guess not," and walked away.

I nodded and stepped out. I had gotten myself almost a job.

I worked the sink each of the following nights. The bar was only open at night, from ten to five in the morning. I would come in close to midnight and only had to wait on a chair for a few minutes before the boss would signal me to join him on the other side of the bar. Sunday night had also been frantic, but the Monday shift had been quite slow. When I came in on Tuesday night, I was afraid that the owner would tell me that he did not need me on weeknights, but on the contrary, he instructed me to take care of the waitresses' orders whenever I had a break at the sink. He showed me the location of the different liquors and the preparation of a few basic mixes. After he had watched me carry out my new functions for about an hour, he started taking long breaks to walk from one table to the other and sit down with the customers. As long as I did not touch the money, and passed the constant scrutiny of the doorman, I was now a free man behind a bar.

I could not say that I had regained a social life, though. The waitresses did not address me other than to place their orders and the boss never even asked my first name. I had grown from a tolerated customer to a ghostly bartender. On the bright side, though, I had never been asked for a piece of identification or even why I accepted to work a night shift for a third of the minimum wage. The only person who seemed intrigued by my presence in that underground was the older woman who had noticed me on my first night at Nam Palm. While washing glasses, I would often watch the

customers and try to figure out their story as a way to keep my mind busy. On several occasions, as I lifted my eyes, I caught her looking straight at me. I was quite sure that I had never met her before my first visit to the bar, but there was in her scrutiny something more than just a banal curiosity.

On Tuesday morning, I was awakened early by the rumble of the vacuum cleaner on the kitchen floor. I realized that I had totally forgotten to stock up on some food and water to see me through Tashia's day off. All I had was a small bag of salted peanuts from the bar and a half-pack of cigarettes I could not light. By mid-morning, I heard her come down the basement staircase, but I did not look through the slit. After a moment, I started worrying about the pungent scent of cigarette smoke impregnated into my clothes. I stood still to keep the smell confined to the recess but caught myself vaguely hoping that she would detect it anyway. My desire to come out of that hole and talk to her was as keen as the night I had returned to this house. I had managed to restore a certain beat into my life but felt lonelier than ever. Tashia went back upstairs after a few minutes and as soon as I heard her lock the basement door, I snuck out of the recess and took a slow walk around my crypt.

It was my birthday.

## Chapter 21

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June 22, Year 2.

My third Saturday night at Nam Palm was as frenzied as the first two. The boss locked the door behind me after I came out of the bar. Climbing the few stairs leading back up to the surface world was a challenge in itself. I stood at the top of the staircase for a few seconds to inhale some fresh air before heading back when a female voice coming from behind startled me.

“Mister Keiffer...”

Hearing my name for the first time in weeks added further weight to my surprise. I turned and saw a woman leaning back on the wall just under the neon sign. Her face was bleached by the purple light; it took me a few seconds to recognize the older woman from the bar. Again, she looked straight at me with an ambiguous intensity, the palms of her hands flattened against the wall. I collected myself before replying curtly, “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, *Richard*,” said the woman. “I *am* talking to you and you'd be lucky if your name were the only thing I knew about you.”

She moved away from the wall and took a few steps toward me. It was still dark, and all I could see now was the glare of the neon light on the left side of her face. Her eye on that side shined with strange reflections, while the other seemed turned off. I had grown used to dealing with the threats of this neighborhood, but the woman's demeanor made me feel edgy. I started walking away.

“I'm afraid that you won't be able to go home until you hear me, Richard. That is, if your plan is to continue hiding in Ms. Johnson's basement.”

I followed her in silence to a nearby twenty-four-hour convenience store that had a small coffee area flooded with fluorescent light. She ordered an espresso at the counter while I sat at a table by the back of the room. She joined me without haste and started drinking her coffee while looking at me. I had no idea what was going on, but I felt trapped. I spoke first.

“What do you want?”

“Let me first tell you what I have to offer. Your name is Richard Keiffer, you walked out on your family eight months ago, and you are now wanted for something that happened about three weeks ago in Chicago. But then, my memory isn't what it used to be and I could forget all this—”

“In exchange for?”

“A small favor.”

Stupidly enough, my first thought was that she would try to blackmail me into her bed. But there was a determination in her soft voice that did not

add up with such a pitiful scam. She did not show any sign of drunkenness and seemed to know exactly where she was going.

"What kind of favor?"

"Aren't you interested in finding out how I know about you, first?"

I looked at the rows of cigarette packs above the store counter to ignore her grip. She patiently waited for half a minute before continuing.

"For more than twenty years, I've been running a shelter for Vietnam veterans in trouble back in the suburbs. About two weeks ago, I received a notice with your picture on it. The police thought you might show up in a shelter around here, but obviously, you knew better. Anyway, since its creation, the shelter has been funded in part by subsidies from two federal agencies and a veterans' association, but these funds cover just a little more than half of the running expenses—"

"If it's money you're after, you picked the wrong guy. By now my bank accounts are probably frozen; all I have is what I earn here as a bartender."

"I'm not interested in your money. In fact, the finances of the shelter are doing quite well. That's why I need you."

"You want me to manage your money?"

She laughed.

"Oh yeah, I've been looking for years for a rapist on the run to manage my money! Get real, Keiffer, this is Cantero, not *The Little House on the Prairie!*"

"What the hell do you want, then?!"

"Uh, we are a little grumpy, aren't we?"

I brusquely leaned back on my chair; she sensed that I was ready to walk out and switched to a serious mode.

"During the first ten years of the shelter's activity, it was an everyday struggle to keep the accounts afloat. To make ends meet, I had to spend most of my time soliciting individual contributions but during the seventies, there wasn't much support for Vietnam veterans in the community. As for those of my friends who had made it back from the war, they weren't doing that well themselves.

"By the early eighties, I was in deep for a while. At that time, I heard from one of my friends about the opening of Nam Palm. I became one of their first regular customers. In a matter of weeks, veterans from all over the area started pouring in every night. I had no idea that there were so many around San Francisco. Two of them even recognized me from Vietnam, and when I spoke to them about my shelter, they immediately proposed to help. They started talking to others and it quickly snowballed. Most veterans would give me money directly; others organized a fundraiser in the bar. Within a few months, there wasn't a single regular customer that hadn't contributed to my shelter. One morning, even Door Man, the bouncer who stands by the entrance all night and hasn't spoken to anyone in ages, shoved two fifty-dollar bills in my hand as I left the bar.

"They all have continued helping me financially ever since and brought friends of theirs to participate, too. Most of Nam Palm's customers have gone through some rough times after returning from Vietnam, too, but contrary to the men passing through my shelter, they eventually got back on their feet. Most of them are actually doing quite well. They spend their nights at Nam Palm to take care of their old wounds, but during the daytime, they manage to act healed. A few months after my first night in the bar, I had gone from near bankruptcy to a position where I could deposit some excess cash from contributions into a friend's safe to secure the future of the shelter if things were to go down again."

She paused to light a cigarette and take a drag.

"My little problem is that I have *omitted* to declare part of the contributions. I was worried that federal agencies and the veterans' associations would cut down their funding if the shelter's resources rose too high. Officially, the shelter's total income just covers the running expenses. But a few days ago, I received notice from the IRS that I am going to be audited for the past five years."

I had figured out where she was headed and in a way, felt relieved.

"And you want me to clean up your accounts."

"I just want you to do for me what you used to do for your wealthy clients of Merryl's Associates. My accounts are very detailed, but they're all made in pencil. I need you to ink them down for the IRS."

"How did you find out that I had worked at Merryl's Associates?"

"When I saw you for the first time at Nam Palm, I immediately recognized you from the flyer. My initial reaction was to contact the police but before doing so, I gave you a chance—it's a force of habit, I suppose. I went back to the newspapers published around the time of your disappearance to try to figure out why you turned into a criminal. That's when I realized that you could be of some use to me first."

"What do you mean, *first*? Your plan is to have me help you with your little fraud and then turn me in?!"

"No, you don't get it. I had a friend follow you one morning. He saw you crawl into Ms. Johnson's basement like a scared dog. Over the past twenty years, I've seen many men on the run pass through my shelter. Believe me, your basement and the sink at Nam Palm are all you can hope for. That's as good as it will get. As far as I'm concerned, whatever you did, you're paying for it, and you will continue. If you help me, I'll let you keep it that way. There's only one special clause to that deal, though. Is Ms. Johnson a friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"Is she aware that you're living in her basement?"

I looked through the window to dodge her stare.

"In any event," she continued, "listen to me carefully, Keiffer. If anything, shall we say, *annoying*, were to happen to her, or if I had any indication that you've done wrong again, I would arrange for my friends to track you down and turn whatever might be left of you into the cops. You have no idea how tight the Nam veterans' network is throughout the U.S. If I put a call out on you, you may be lucky enough to find another basement to hide in, but this time, you'd better not come out of it. Most of the veterans have returned to normal life but inside they'll never cease to stalk VC terrorists down the jungle trails. You do not want them to be looking for you. Did I make myself clear this time?"

I nodded.

"I'll bring you my books tonight at Nam Palm; I want them back by Thursday morning. My audit is on Friday, and I'll need a day to make myself familiar with your *revisions*."

She stood up and started walking away. I tried to regain some dignity by having the last word.

"Doesn't it bother you to kick a man already on the ground?"

She turned around.

"In my shelter, I have over twenty men down who don't deserve to be. I would cut off the arm of a *man like you* to feed them if I had to."

"And if I were to tell you that I'm innocent of the charges for which I'm wanted?"

She sneered and replied on her way out.

"I hope you have a bit more imagination when it comes to playing with numbers."

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I expected her at the bar all night, but she never showed up. By closing time, I had convinced myself that she had changed her mind. The woman was strong, and she was cornered, but after all, she had dedicated her life to helping others. The more I thought about it, the less likely she appeared to blackmail a man in distress, even if she despised him for what he had done. She had stunned me with her cold determination the morning before, but after a long day of severe worries, I was starting to feel reassured.

When the boss handed me my money, I walked toward the door, but Door Man did not open it. He held his hand up to signify me to wait there, walked to the end of the counter, reached over it and came back holding a white plastic bag. He handed it to me, and I looked inside on my way out. It contained two large black books.

It took me three full days to clean up the shelter's accounts. It was a complex task since I had to figure everything out on my own, but as the woman said, the books were very detailed. I could not help loving that job,

even though that particular type of assignment had bothered me on the few occasions I had been asked to carry it out at Merryll's Associates. This time, I did not feel any guilt about falsifying the books. It was for a good cause, and I had finally been brought to the realization that life indeed would never be again *The Little House on the Prairie*.

On Wednesday night, she was already sitting at a table when I came in. I laid the white bag containing the books on the end of the counter. The woman ignored me all evening but picked up the bag on her way out several hours later, without a look at me. She did not come in the following night but showed up shortly after my arrival on Friday evening. All night long, I expected a sign from her, but I did not catch her looking in my direction even once. Her joyful mood was the only indicator that I had as to the outcome of her audit. At closing time, she headed to the door, laughing with a group of men. She was almost out when she turned around. She looked straight at me for a second, nodded once, and left. It was not a thank you; just the closing of a deal.

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The woman kept coming in almost every night, but I no longer existed to her. One evening, the boss visited one too many tables and shared one too many drinks with his customers during his ritual tour of the room. When he returned to the bar, he slapped me in the back so violently that I almost dropped the glass that I was washing.

"Good old... you!" he shouted. What's your name by the way?"

"Richard, sir."

"Okay, *Richard Sir!* Have I told you lately that I love you?"

The man was drunk as a pig, but I was so starved for conversation that I would have welcomed a lunch meeting with a weatherman. I laughed at his joke and replied with the same playful attitude.

"Well, I'd never get tired of hearing it!"

He grabbed me roughly by the shoulders. His breath could have been patented as an antiseptic spray.

"No, seriously, you're doing a good job here. I'm even thinking of raising you to twenty dollars a night. I'm not promising anything, but I'm thinking about it."

"That would be a dream come true."

He did not pick up on the ironic tone of my answer and patted me on the shoulders with approbation. The arrival of a waitress at the counter gave me a chance to pull away. While I took care of her order, I tried to keep the discussion with the boss going.

"Sir?"

"Stop calling me sir, *Richard Sir*, just call me... Your Serenity!"

"Very well, Your Serenity. How come we don't get any women customers in this bar?"

He leaned on the counter with a stupid smile.

"Oh, look at the naughty little rascal! Now that he's making good money, he wants to see some action!"

"No, that's not what I meant. I was just thinking about making the bar more appealing to women to enlarge the pool of customers."

"Yeah right, Smarty Pants!"

The expression on his face switched to an affectation he probably meant to look mysterious.

"Let me tell you something, Richard Sir. This isn't a bar, and this isn't a business. This is a sacred place where men come to lick the wounds from their past."

He swung his arm around, which almost caused him to lose his balance.

"Look at them! These aren't customers. These are men who dance along with the music all day long but this is the only place where they can hear it. Any woman with the same scars is welcome here. Any man or woman who thinks this is a bar doesn't belong here."

He was getting quite agitated; I retreated prudently.

"I understand now." I pointed at the woman from the shelter. "How about her, does she have the scars?"

He answered in a grave tone.

"Maggie is *The Healer*. She has been for over thirty years."

So much for useful information. I took another shot at it.

"Was she in Vietnam, too?"

"Longer than anybody else in this room. She left only two days before the fall of Saigon."

"Was she a nurse?"

"She became one over there. I heard that before, she was a secretary in a trucking company somewhere in Virginia or North Carolina. When the first GIs started dying in Nam, she enrolled as a volunteer and spent the entire war with a paramedic unit that constantly moved from one combat zone to another. I can see right in this room at least two guys who passed through her hands over there."

He pointed at a white fellow and an Asian man sitting at different tables.

"How about the Asian guys in there? Did they fight for the U.S.?"

"Some of them fought with us, some of them fought us, who cares? Today, they all belong here more than any freaking civilian you'll pass down the street."

"What kind of jobs did all these men find when they returned here?"

He slowly raised his hand and took the side of my neck into a tight grip.

"You sure ask a lot of questions, Richie Boy..."

"I didn't mean to be noseey. It's just that I never had a chance to meet many Vietnam veterans before."

“Okay, then. Just remember that questions aren't cool around here, alright?”

The frigid stare in his eyes demented his placid smile. When I nodded, he released his grip, patted me on the cheek and staggered to the bathroom.

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Over two weeks had passed since I had returned the books to Maggie *The Healer*. I never got the raise, but the boss now talked with me for a few minutes every night. He never asked where I came from and since our first real talk, I made sure to avoid questions, too. Even the waitresses started exchanging a few words with me when the boss was away from the counter. I understood that they had all been brought from China over the past five years by distant relatives of their respective families living in Chinatown. The same relatives would drive them to work every night and pick them up in the morning. I was pretty clear that the girls were illegal aliens, but that only brought us closer. They seemed clever and eager to perfect their English, but it was still very limited. One of them had heard the boss calling me *Richie Boy*, and they now all addressed me by that name with a funny deference. I tried to correct their English as often as I could, and although the language barrier was still severely hampering our brief conversations, I looked forward to them every evening.

On a Sunday night, I noticed that Door Man was all dressed up; three-piece suit, tie, shiny shoes, even a gold earring in place of the usual silver one. I asked the boss the reason of that transformation.

“I heard he got engaged today. He must have come straight from the party at his fiancée's. I wonder how he managed to pop the question. Maybe he just knelt down to tie his shoelace, and she took it as a declaration!”

He chuckled; I smiled prudently. When he left the counter, I opened a bottle of Heineken and waved at Door Man to catch his attention. He reluctantly approached the counter, and I pushed the beer in front of him.

“Hey, I was told you got engaged today. Congratulations, Man! This one is on me.”

He looked down at the bottle for a few seconds, scanned the room with a suspicious expression, then picked up the bottle and walked back to the door without a word. *So much for breakthroughs...*

I made more money at Merryl's Associates during a coffee break than in a night of strenuous work at Nam Palm, but one of the advantages of my new lifestyle was that I had no expenses besides a few drinks and a couple of packs of cigarettes a week, and some grocery shopping at the nearby convenience store. On one of the shelves in Tashia's kitchen, I had noticed a large glass jar half-filled with nickels, dimes, and quarters. I asked for one or two dollars of my nightly wages to be paid with change and started

contributing every day to the glass jar account and whatever it might be intended.

I had been living in the basement for nearly two months, and the fact that I had been able to pull that stunt for so long without getting caught or going nuts amazed me. Now that I thought of it, the basement of our home always had a scent clearly distinct from the rest of the house. I was pretty sure that it was not due to a foreign body hiding in some recess, but then, Tashia probably thought the same. There just were more compartments to life than we cared to think of.

## Chapter 22

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July 28, Year 2.

The change came from above. As I headed home shortly after five on a Sunday morning, a helicopter kept circling the neighborhood. They quickly spotted me on the deserted street and made several fly-bys at a lower altitude right above me. The logo of a local network TV station was plastered on the side of the aircraft. I made an effort to keep walking at the same pace without looking up, but as soon as the helicopter made a broad circle to prepare for yet another pass, I rushed to Tashia's house and jumped into the basement.

This was a tough neighborhood, and there could have been many reasons for the flyover, but I just could not shake off the thought that their presence was somehow related to me. I paced around the recess for nearly two hours, incapable of going to sleep despite the exhaustion from a night of work at Nam Palm. When Tashia and the kids finally left the house to head for church, I rushed up the pipes, snuck into the house and, without hesitation, walked straight to the living room. I was so agitated that I did not even care that somebody might see me through the windows. A quick scan of the room revealed the pile of newspapers on a side table next to the sofa; the Sunday issue was on the top. I took it with me to the kitchen, starting to read along the way the article under the massive headline.

*“Surge of Disappearances Reaches Epidemic Proportions—The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta has issued an alarming notice following the surge of disappearances reported in three American cities for the past four days. As of last night, more than eleven-hundred cases of disappearances have officially been recorded in Boston, Denver, and San Francisco, whereas only a handful of cases of the same nature were documented in other U.S. cities. Over 80% of the victims are men and most of them are college-educated individuals.*

*With only a few exceptions, most of them were found within hours of their disappearance, only a short distance from the site where they were last seen. They all exhibited the same symptoms—including prostration, staring eyes, and a total inability to communicate. Although the syndrome does not appear to be of a contagious nature, the rate of daily disappearances has not slowed down since the first cases were reported on Wednesday.*

*The CDC is coordinating medical resources in all major cities to accommodate these patients and thoroughly examine them, but the first medical analyses have not provided any clue as to the cause of their breakdown. CDC officials reportedly dismissed early rumors of chemical warfare, but they would not comment on those suggesting a viral outbreak, or the accidental contamination of a food product with a toxin targeting the central nervous system.”*

The second page of the paper was entirely dedicated to the story. I devoured each detail in a turmoil of conflicting sentiments. I felt mad. I felt relieved. I was mad at seeing the long rows of small pictures only underlined by the name and age of the victims, and a few words on the circumstances of their disappearance. I was mad at seeing the stupefied faces of some of them on large shots taken just a few minutes after they had been located. I was mad at reading the dismayed reactions of their close ones. But I was no longer alone and—most importantly—I was back into the live stream of events, however scary that might be.

I took the paper back to the living room and turned on the TV. Tashia did not have cable and there seemed to be something wrong with the TV. The sound of the broadcasts was overcast by purring, and as I zapped through the public channels, the shivering image was always the same. Only after looking carefully at each broadcast did I realize that they were all slightly different. All of them featured a live image shot from a helicopter flying low over city neighborhoods. The noise from the engine almost covered the comments of the reporters. I turned up the volume and understood that the helicopters of the local TV stations were on a hunt for missing persons. It was a race to spot one of them first and allegedly rescue them. *Claiming* them would have been a more appropriate expression since all journalists made constant recaps on the number of *hits* that they had scored since the morning.

I kept flipping channels with a certain fascination for the morbid airborne ballet until one of the cameras zoomed down on a man standing immobile in the middle of a large parking lot. The helicopter landed in an empty area of the lot while the reporter babbled some lame considerations about the welfare of the man with a poorly concealed excitement. The camera followed the journalist's rush through the rows of parked cars. Their prey was a young man standing still in a tennis outfit, a racket dangling from the end of his right arm. His eyes did not even turn toward the press crew as they approached him. In the middle of that circus, his dazed immobility was paradoxically the only touch of dignity. When the reporter stuck a microphone under his nose, he brushed it away with the racket as he would have a fly. The arrival of two police cars a few minutes later put an end to the pathetic attempts of the journalist to trigger some response from the man, who docilely followed the lead of the officers to the police car. I turned off the TV.

I walked to the bathroom and concentrated on thorough ablutions. I did not truly think again until I sat at the kitchen table, forehead resting on my crossed arms. The turbid stream of information with which I had been bombarded since my encounter with the helicopter early in the morning finally started decanting.

The idea that the surge of disappearances may not be connected with Lord Winford's hypnotic program could not sink into my mind. The man

was dead but I was convinced that his madness had somehow survived him and, after months of dormancy, was beginning to germinate through the foundations of the *World by the end of the water*. The flashing digits of the FBI hotline number on the TV screen still blinked in my mind, but the more I tried to prepare my words, the more senseless they seemed. I had nothing to give them, other than a ludicrous story that I could not back up with a single piece of evidence. I struggled in vain to find a way to enter the play and inflect its course, but I was stranded in a game of *Monopoly* in which every roll of the dice would land me straight in *Jail* without getting a *Chance* card. Although I was probably one of the rare people who had an idea of what was happening, I was as impotent as anybody else out there. Exhausted, I snuck back in the basement and let myself go to sleep, the roaring sound of the helicopters entrapped in my skull.

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The same sound escorted me back to reality several hours later; one of the helicopters was still scouting over Cantero. I wished I could have awakened in a cleaned-up world, just this once.

I heard footsteps on the kitchen floor. The stuffy air of the recess quickly suffocated me. I freed myself from the cage and paced around the basement for a few minutes before finally sitting down at the bottom of the staircase, my eyes looking out of the basement window in an attempt to oxygenate my mind. I did not worry about Tashia finding me there anymore.

Tashia never opened the door. The window slowly sucked the light out of the basement, and with it, my agitation. I climbed the ladder until my face aligned with the window and I lit a cigarette. I was out of nerves. I could not even measure time, and only the burning of the cigarette between my fingers snatched me out of a string of fuzzy wanderings. I heard Tashia's voice above the ceiling, punctuated by long silences. She was on the phone.

"... That's okay, Sis. Tomorrow, I'll leave the kids with Mum after church. They drive her nuts but she hasn't seen them this week. We wouldn't want you to miss the date of the century!"

"..."

"Don't be so picky, Miss Thang! I know the guy. He's not that ugly and he's always kind to the kids when we visit his store."

"..."

Tashia laughed.

"So what if he limps a little, it'll be easier for you to keep him around!"

"..."

"That's the spirit; give the man a chance! Okay, I gotta go. I'll be there in about an hour. I just have to take care of some paperwork. I'll bring you the check today. Go get your nails and your hair done, and please don't let the kids have snacks or they won't eat anything for dinner, all right?"

The silence reset, but I could no longer let it be. I climbed the staircase and knocked on the door. I waited for a few seconds but it did not open. I tried again without success. Tashia had probably gone upstairs, and on second thought it was better that way. The front door of the house was the proper place for me to appear. I descended the stairs and started heading to the basement window when something flew in and landed a few feet in front of me. It was a rolled-up newspaper. I quickly climbed the ladder by the window and popped my head out. The massive silhouette of Door Man stood still, feet just inches from my face. He looked down at me, nodded soberly, and walked away. I went back down and opened the evening paper. My photograph was embedded into a two-column feature on the front page.

*“**Fade Out Syndrome: Patient Zero Identified**—In a CNN interview last night, Yuan Miller, a London Times anchor in China, may have unraveled the first significant clue to the wave of disappearances that has plagued several cities for several days. Last fall, while a reporter at the Chicago Daily, Miller investigated a case of simultaneous disappearances that may have constituted the first outbreak of what is now known as the Fade Out Syndrome.*

*On October 4<sup>th</sup>, seven persons, including a priest, vanished from different cities throughout the U.S. without warning or apparent motive. Six of them were located in a matter of hours, near the site of their disappearance. All exhibited the same symptoms as this past week’s victims. Miller located the seventh missing individual, Richard Keiffer, an account manager in a San Francisco financial firm, six months after his disappearance. He lived in Detroit under a false identity and held a new job at the Detroit Mutual Bank.*

*Although Miller emitted some vague reservations about Keiffer’s mental state, his colleagues at the DMB described him as witty and congenial, and never noticed any sign of mental impairment. Since Keiffer appears to have been one of the first victims of the Fade Out Syndrome, but hasn’t suffered the mental destruction of the other victims, CDC officials are very interested in this lead.*

*Keiffer has not been seen at work or at his Detroit apartment for the past two months and any person who might help in locating him should immediately call the nearest police station or the FBI hotline. Miller, who arrived in Washington yesterday morning, also urged Keiffer to contact her directly at her hotel.”*

I set the paper down, and started walking along the walls of the basement, slowly at first, but ended up running in circles within the square walls. A shock on the wooden floor above my head finally stopped me. I listened for a couple of minutes but did not hear anything else. Exhausted, I lay down on a piece of cardboard, numb and dizzy, and simply went to sleep.

I came back between two sleep cycles and gradually recognized the sound of a male voice coming from the kitchen. The phosphorescent hands of my watch indicated three in the morning. I climbed the pipes and saw a

white police officer and a black woman facing each other in the kitchen. The woman was very agitated.

"Why don't you just stop telling me to calm down and start trying to figure out where my sister is?!"

"Keep your voice down, please. Your sister might be trying to call you at home right now; why don't you go back there and call us back later today if you still haven't heard from her?"

"But I keep telling you that she was supposed to pick up her children six hours ago! She would never have waited that long to call! What do you think? That because we live in this neighborhood, we dump the kids somewhere, go fool around all night, and get them back whenever we remember them?!"

The officer sighed with aggravation.

"Don't put words in my mouth, lady! All I'm saying is that six hours do not justify a 911 missing persons call. Did you check the local hospitals? She may have had an accident on her way to your house."

"I live three blocks down the street; if there had been an accident, I would've heard the police sirens. Besides, her car is still parked in the driveway, and I did call the local hospitals; she wasn't admitted to any of them."

"Could she have walked to a friend's house?"

"She would never have left the door unlocked. Something's happened to her. I know it!"

A black female officer walked into the kitchen.

"I checked the place. There's no sign of violence or robbery. The only thing is that chair lying on the floor."

The female officer stared at her partner, they nodded at each other and the man turned to Tashia's sister.

"It's too early to be draw conclusions but you've surely heard of the *Fade Out Syndrome* by now. We've had over fifty cases in this city today alone."

Tashia's sister sat down, a shaky hand over her mouth.

"Oh, Lord..."

Her entire body was trembling. The female officer filled a glass with water at the sink and forced it into the woman's hand.

"Come on now, as my partner said, it's too early to know for sure. Your sister may still come back. Just give it some time; we'll try to locate her, too."

The officers helped Tashia's sister off the chair and escorted her out of the kitchen. I heard a car pulling away shortly after. The house turned so very silent. I stood still in the dark, the tip of my feet resting on the fixtures, my hands clenched to the pipes, awaiting the next blow.

It did not take long. A few minutes after the rumble of the police car faded, the kitchen lights blasted my eyes again. A saturating flash that yielded an all too clear picture two seconds later.

Duncan Winford was standing in the kitchen's door frame.

I was not sure whether the vision came from the inner or outer reaches of my mind, but mad is what I was—one way or the other. I punched the duct grill loose; it crashed to the wooden floor with a tremendous noise. Winford watched me pop out of the hole, his mouth wide open. He did not even brace himself when I rushed toward him. My fist broke his lip open and under the impact, his head swung hard against the door frame. He clumsily fell back on his butt and stared at me, stunned. I kicked him flat with a meticulous rage, knelt across his chest, pinning his arms down with my knees, and pressed both my hands on his mouth and nose with all my weight. The violence of his struggle for air almost threw me off but when I thought I was going to lose my hold, his convulsions started weakening. His eyelids slowly wound down over the panic in his eyes.

Mine slapped shut just a second later.

## Chapter 23

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July 29, Year 2.

We all sat around the table in silence—*The Last Supper in Freakyland*. I opened my eyes fully and started laughing. When my mind was screwed up, it was anything but a picky host. Duncan, Yuan, Maggie—all staring at me, almost gently. The more I looked back at them, the harder my laughter. I stood up and started strolling around the table, patting each of them on top of the head, one after the other. Over and over. It was such a funny game; like the musical chairs; without the music. I felt light and delivered; I just could spin and pat forever. It was such a funny game. That is, until Maggie stood up and patted me back; in the form of a loud, stingy slap on my face, punctuated by a loud bark.

“Get a grip, Richard!”

I sat back down with tears in my eyes. It was not funny anymore. Maggie's generous chest was only a few inches away from my face. I looked up at her, smiled, and grabbed her right breast. The second slap almost threw me off my chair. That one did the job. An adrenaline wave rose in my thighs and rattled the nerves under my skin all the way up to the top of my skull. I got back to my feet and backed up against the sink. Maggie followed me.

“Okay! That’s enough!” I said, raising my hand in front of my face.

She stopped. I turned my back to her, flipped the faucet handle up, and dipped my head into the sink. It hurt where the cold water hit my skull. I reached to the back of my head and felt a sore bump under the hair. The water raging down the drain after plowing my skull quickly stripped my thinking clearer, except for one little hitch; when I turned around, they were all still there. Still and silent, looking at me with an odd expression, as if they expected me to turn into a magical animal at any second. I brushed off the water dripping down my face with the palm of my hand and walked around them to the fridge. The chilling contact of a wine cooler against the palm of my hand finished sobering me as I stepped out of the kitchen. I left the front door wide open behind me, sat on the front steps of the house, and looked up. It was a beautiful starry night. Only Van Gogh style.

I could hear their mumblings behind me, somewhere in the living room. Far down the street, the first streaks of dawn scratched the darkness. The wine cooler was too sweet, my cigarette was bitter, and I felt like shit. *Good to be back...*

“Richard?”

I did not turn around. Yuan sat down by my side.

“Do you feel better?” she asked.

I nodded without looking at her.

"Richard, we have to talk. Many things have changed since we've seen each other last."

I let my cigarette fall into the now empty bottle.

"Am I still wanted for assaulting you?"

She dodged my look and did not answer.

"Then, the change wasn't for me," I continued, "except that on top of being an alleged rapist, I'm also now *Patient Zero*. Not bad at all for my first walk on the wild side..."

She remained silent.

"How long was I out in the kitchen?"

"Only a few minutes."

"So I guess the police are on their way."

"No one has called the police."

I swung around to face her; she leaned back in a reflex.

"What the fuck do you all want?" I said.

The answer came from behind.

"Just to keep you out of it," Winford said. His shadow enveloped me before streaming all the way to the gutter several stairs down. I kept my eyes on Yuan.

"Are you in this with him?"

"We're all in this together, Richard," she said. "Duncan was the last person I expected to find in this place."

"And you just happened to get here at the same time—"

"Maggie brought me here. She called my hotel last night after seeing me on TV. She said she could arrange for me to meet you but didn't want the police to get involved; something about a deal between the two of you. She picked me up at the airport an hour ago, and we went straight to that bar, the Nam Palm. Since nobody had seen you, and she knew that you hid in this house, she suggested that we come here."

"Who knocked me out?"

Maggie walked down the stairs.

"I did. We tried to talk you into letting the man go, but you didn't seem to hear or see us. You would've killed him."

"That was the idea... What did he tell you while I was out?"

Yuan answered.

"He asked us not to call the police until you regained consciousness." She hesitated for a second, "And—that you weren't crazy or a maniac."

"How nice of him. Did he also happen to mention that he is the one everybody should be after?"

Winford's shadow glided a few inches forward. I stood up and swung around, which brought my face very close to his. He backed up.

"What did you do with Tashia?" I asked.

"I haven't done anything..." Duncan replied hastily while retreating into the living room.

I kept advancing. His swollen lip gave the fear on his face a grotesque twist.

"Wait! Let's talk," he said.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know! I got here too late!"

"Too late for what?! Don't play with me, Winford; I won't kill you now, but it will make me very happy to bust each bone of your face one after the other until you tell me what happened to her."

I sensed the presence of the two women behind me. Winford's retreat got stopped by the couch. He held the palms of his hands up in surrender.

"I'm going to explain everything but we have to get out of this house first; the police could come back at any time."

Maggie grabbed my arm.

"He has a point, Richard. Let's get into my car and find some quiet place outside the city where you two can talk this out."

She pulled me firmly toward the door. Winford and Yuan followed at a distance. As I walked through the front door, I noticed that Duncan stayed behind, scanning the floor of the living room, as to make sure he had not dropped anything there. Maggie held my arm all the way to the small van parked in the driveway, got in the driver's seat and turned on the engine. Yuan waited for Winford on the front steps. He finally stepped out of the house, turned off the living room lights and closed the door.

"Shouldn't we lock that door?" Yuan asked as they came down the stairs.

Winford replied while getting on the back seat of the car.

"It wasn't locked when I arrived."

Yuan joined Winford in the back of the van; I sat in the front, next to Maggie. When she drove off, I looked at Tashia's house. This time, I had managed to drain it empty.

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The van left the Cantero neighborhood to merge with a large avenue overcast with acidulated orange skies. Maggie lit a cigarette. Her face was weary and her wrinkles were deeper, but her hand remained steady.

"Are we going to your shelter?" I asked.

"You have to be kidding!" she said. "Driving you around in my car is risky enough. There's a natural area about fifteen miles south of here. At this time, it should be pretty quiet."

She drove in silence for a few minutes before offering me a cigarette.

"Why weren't you at Nam Palm tonight? The *Patient Zero* stuff?" she asked.

"Well, you should know, you sent Door Man right?" I said.

She looked at me, surprised.

"Door Man came to you?"

"He threw today's paper into Tashia's basement. If you didn't send him, how did he know where to find me?"

"He was the one I asked to follow you one morning when I needed to find out where you hid, that's how. But I didn't send him today."

I did not reply. In the midst of Nam Palm's din, I had somehow made an ally of a mute.

After a few minutes in light traffic, Maggie drove the car into the rightmost lane and slowed it down to a walking pace.

"What's wrong?" I asked, as I checked the gas gauge.

"Look at that guy."

She pointed at an older man sitting still on a garbage can by the edge of the sidewalk. He stared straight ahead, his arms hanging loosely along his flanks. Maggie put on her emergency lights and stopped the van on the road, right in front of the man. He did not move. I turned back to Maggie.

"What are you doing?!"

"Ask him something."

"There's nothing we can do for him. Haven't you seen the news? We'll give the police a call at the first phone booth."

"We can't leave him like that. Talk to him; maybe he'll snap out of it."

I sighed and rolled down the window. The man looked at me and, before I had a chance to speak, jumped to his feet and started dragging the garbage can toward the car, vociferating with a raucous voice.

"Get the fuck out of my face, you assholes!"

I quickly rolled the window back up as he lifted the can over his head. He started pouring its contents on top of the car, still swearing at the top of his lungs. As soon as the first pieces of trash tumbled down the windshield, Maggie took off in a brusque acceleration.

"Well, this one is only a victim of the *Bad Booze Syndrome!*" Winford said, laughing.

"Shut up, Winford," I replied without turning around.

To divert the tension, Maggie turned on the radio.

*"... bringing to over fifty the number of countries that have announced they'll deny landing authorization to any plane originating from, or having transited through Boston, Denver, or San Francisco. As the wave of disappearances continues unabated in these three cities—with more than one hundred victims per day in each of them—several public figures have also fallen victim to the disease. An aide to the mayor and Mara Spitz, the host of a community TV show, have been 'reduced to the stage of deboned hams' as put by the chief of the psychiatric service of Atlanta's Henford Hospital where they were all sent to be examined by CDC doctors. Joining us this morning is Dr. Andrew Torrensen, professor of epidemiology at New York University. Dr. Torrensen, you've been working closely with CDC scientists since the beginning of the outbreak; any new clue as to what's happening to us?"*

*"We're making progress; we still don't know the cause of the disease, but we're forming a better picture of what it's not. The data collected over the past few days clearly demonstrate that the Fade Out Syndrome is not of a contagious nature. Later today, the CDC will release a report on that conclusion and will make the original data available to all countries that will request them. Thanks to a tight collaboration with the police services, we've also had a chance to collect blood and urine samples from several victims within an hour of their breakdown. We haven't found any indication of an immunological response to a pathogenic agent, as would be expected for a bacterial or viral infection. There wasn't any evidence of a foreign toxin in the victims' systems, either."*

*"No infection, no toxin... no clue at all?"*

*"We're working on a lead—"*

*"I understand that you have to be very cautious, but can you give our listeners something a bit more specific?"*

*"The last thing your listeners need is another premature assumption. All I can say at this point is that the blood analyses of most victims reveal a fairly characteristic chemical imbalance."*

*"But you just got through saying that you didn't find any toxin."*

*"That's correct. What we find is unusually high amounts of some chemicals that should only be present in the blood at trace levels."*

*"Does that imbalance relate to any known illness?"*

*"A similar pattern has been found in some extremely depressed war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of being forced to carry out actions that their minds could never accept."*

*"But the Fade Out Syndrome patients were leading peaceful lives..."*

*"Yes, they did, but the mental shut-down is only a defense mechanism, not the cause of the condition; we are flying top experts to Atlanta from all over the world to investigate what triggered the shut-down."*

*"How about 'Patient Zero'? Does he have the answers you're after?"*

*"There won't be any way to tell until we get a hold of him. His wife, his parents, and some of his friends have been brought to Atlanta, too, and are currently being interviewed by a panel of doctors and FBI special agents."*

I caught Yuan's stare in the rear view mirror. She swiftly turned her eyes away.

*"How much worse could this get?" the broadcast continued.*

*"It's difficult to say. There's no precedent of such nature. No plague, war, or natural disaster has in the past selectively destroyed people through their minds. Once they fade out, the patients are unable to function, and they become entirely dependent on their loved ones and the system. If the spread of the Fade Out Syndrome were to continue for an extended period, it could put a tremendous strain on the medical system. It is overloaded as it is with the very small portion of the*

*population that suffers from mental illness; it couldn't take hundreds more every day."*

*"Thank you Dr. Torrensen. We look forward to having you over again as soon as your tight schedule allows. This special report was brought to you by NPR affiliate WKRY in Boston —"*

I turned off the radio. Only small clusters of houses bordered the road as we approached a dense wall of vegetation. The van broke through it, following a narrow two-way road still screened from the sunrise light by a thick cover of pine trees. About a mile into the forest, Maggie turned into a sandy trail leading up to a small glade. She stopped the van by the edge of the island of light.

We got out of the car and instinctively walked by the center of the clearing. Yuan's hair was catching the morning rays, but her face was shadowed by tension. She spoke first.

"Duncan?"

He hesitated for an instant before looking at her.

"Richard did not assault your sister, right?" she asked.

"No, he didn't," said Winford.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't make up the lie; I just told it."

"Why?!"

"To protect my father's memory —" he stopped and looked down before continuing, "—because I had been told to."

"So, the story that Richard told me in Detroit about your father's research was true?!"

"Yes."

"The hypnotic program? The Internet recruiting?!"

Winford did not respond. Yuan stared at him, clearly stunned. Maggie seemed just as surprised, but neither woman took as much as a glance at me. I took two steps toward Winford.

"Where's Tashia?" I asked.

This time, he replied without hesitation.

"He took her with him."

"He? Who's He?"

Winford looked straight at me but did not answer.

"You're going to get hurt, Winford, you know that?"

The calm of my voice panicked him.

"One of my father's patients took her away," he said.

"One of your father's patients?! They're all dead! I saw them jumping off the cliff; I was there!"

"I know you were, but you only saw thirteen of them jump. One wasn't with them. He wasn't like the others. He wasn't ill."

"And you knew that all along?"

"No. I found out only a couple of weeks before you arrived. One night, as I was returning home after having dinner in town, I saw him sneaking out of the castle through my sister's bedroom window. I followed him at a distance; he crossed the forest all the way to the track that leads up to the manor. He waited there, by the edge of the forest, about half a mile down from the park gate. Mary Ann picked him up a few minutes later with the Bugatti, and they drove away. She came back to the manor alone, early in the morning. I'm pretty sure that it wasn't the first time that they had seen each other that way."

Yuan discretely pulled out a small recorder from her pocket, turned it on, and moved closer to Winford's back.

"Did your father know that the man wasn't a CDD patient?" I asked.

"I don't think he ever realized that. He got him out of an institution like the others. As far as I can tell, and for the months the man spent at the villa, his demeanor was as strange as that of all the other patients. He was probably mimicking the others' behavior to stay there. It was only when Mary Ann brought him to the manor later on that I discovered that he wasn't anymore psychotic than you or I. His first name is Erwan, but even Mary Ann doesn't know his last name. After becoming aware of Erwan's little game, I tried to figure him out for weeks but the only certitude I reached was that he was all but insane; intimidating most of the time, but certainly not mentally ill. He had total control over Mary Ann, and Mary Ann had total control over *me*. We weren't supposed to mention his presence in the castle to anybody — officially, he was *dead*. After a while, they wouldn't even let me off the property. They were afraid that I might talk after a few drinks—"

I interrupted him. While he spoke, my mind had already decided on a track of its own.

"Do you know that the day after your father's death, your sister spent the night with me in the cabin?"

"Yes. We watched her get into the cabin through one of the back windows of the manor."

"We?!"

"Erwan and I."

"He saw her getting into the cabin and didn't do anything?!"

"He had already done something. He had sent her to you."

"What?!"

"That night, right after you fell asleep, she drove straight to her doctor and told him that she had been raped but didn't want anybody to know about it. She asked him to keep the sample of the semen he collected from her in case she decided to press charges against you later on."

I shook my head with a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Insurance against my talking about your father's work..."

Winford took a step back.

"They wanted to make sure they'd keep a grip on you in the future."

"But why Tashia?! How did they even find out about her?"

"Mary Ann first saw the name when she read your journal, a few days after your arrival at the manor, but you interrupted her before she could figure out who exactly Ms. Johnson was. She hadn't paid attention to her exact address either; she just recalled that it was in San Francisco. We finally got the details from the copy of your journal that Yuan gave us as a souvenir when she left the manor."

Yuan looked at me with embarrassment.

"I thought that it was all over," she said. "That the manuscript was just a fabrication."

When he saw that I would not comment, Winford continued.

"They wanted to know whether you had left traces on your way to Ireland. When they read the journal, they realized that Tashia was the only person who could corroborate part of your story."

"And they waited for over two months to get to her?" I asked.

"They weren't worried about her. Yuan had told us that you lived in Detroit; she also mentioned that you hadn't talked to Ms. Johnson since the fall. Since she couldn't know about what had happened during your visit to Ireland, she wasn't an immediate threat."

"So why did they suddenly decide to move on her yesterday?"

"Because of Yuan's public revelations about you, *Patient Zero*, two days ago. They were concerned that after hearing about that, Ms. Johnson might contact the authorities. She didn't know much, but she had seen you receive the false passport and the plane ticket to Ireland; that could've been enough to trigger the FBI's interest. Things were getting too hot to take a chance with her."

"So you were with them all along, and you want me to believe that you didn't have anything to do with Tashia's kidnapping?!"

"I didn't! I had no idea that things would take such a crazy turn when we reached the U.S. They told me that they would just offer Ms. Johnson a hefty sum of money to keep quiet—"

"What will happen to Tashia now?"

"I'm not sure. Erwan didn't say."

"Well, I tell you what, you'd better think harder because if anything bad happens to her, I promise you that the same will happen to you. Where's Erwan now?"

Winford froze, his eyes already resigned. I looked around, took a few steps back and picked up a short, thick dead branch from the ground. I started moving toward him. Yuan rushed in front of me.

"Stop, Richard!"

She dug out a small black can from her handbag.

"Please, don't force me to use this again—"

I snatched the can from her hand so brusquely that she did not even react.

"No, Yuan. There won't be any more shooting me, spraying me, knocking me out, or blackmailing me. That's it! Now, step aside or I'll use this spray."

Out of the corner of my eye, Maggie's shadow moved. I did not turn.

"That goes for you too, Maggie."

The shadow froze. I lifted the can toward Yuan's face. She looked me in the eyes, and then slowly retreated to the side. Winford did not move. I smiled candidly at him.

"Dear Duncan, alone at last. What do you say we chat a bit before getting steamy?"

His Adam's apple jumped. I kept smiling; my words seemed to disturb him more than the branch hanging from my arm.

"When did you arrive in the U.S.?" I asked

"About three weeks ago," he said.

"Just before the beginning of the *Fade Out Syndrome*."

He nodded.

"Did you start it?"

"Erwan did. I had no part in it."

"How is he doing it?"

He stared at the van with a distressed look in his eyes.

"How?!" I insisted.

Winford had a start, turned around, and started heading slowly toward the van with a rigid posture—as if he expected a blow at any step. I looked at Yuan. She shrugged with a perplexed expression before calling Winford.

"Duncan, where are you going?" I asked.

He did not answer. When he got a few yards away from the car, I started running after him, but Maggie stopped me by waving the car keys. Winford jumped inside the vehicle and wiggled around for a few seconds to lock all the doors. I walked to the van, escorted by Yuan and Maggie.

"Winford! What the hell do you think you're doing?!" I said, banging the driver's window with my fist.

He skidded to the passenger seat, and looked fixedly straight in front of him. Maggie walked around the van and approached the passenger window.

"Winford, look at me for a second."

He obeyed. Maggie spoke calmly.

"There's no reason to panic; all you have to do is finish your story, and we'll all work something out from there. I give you my word that nobody will put a hand on you."

I cut her pep talk short with irony.

"Is that so?"

She reached behind her back, under her jacket. When her hand returned, a small caliber gun with a nacre handle laid flat across it. She smiled.

"It is so, Richard. Little black can beats big branch. Little lady's gun beats little black can."

I shook my head with aggravation.

"Nerve gas? Guns? Where the hell do you all come from... A female militia?! Why don't you both just stay out of it?! This has nothing to do with you!"

"It does, Richard. I don't want you to get in any deeper. I'm afraid I owe you one."

"And you would shoot me to protect me?! Gee, thanks, Mother Beretta!" She smiled.

"I won't shoot you in the head, I promise. Just in the leg if necessary. Don't worry, I was a nurse in Vietnam, I'll fix you up like new afterward," she continued with an awkwardly pacifying tone of voice. "I know you're angry, but it's time for you to snap out of it and start thinking again. Because if you think, you'll realize that things have gotten better for you over the past hours, not worse."

"How can you say that?!"

"Because you're no longer a rapist on the run. I'm sure that in light of the circumstances, Ms. Miller will reconsider the charges that she brought against you."

I turned to Yuan. She smiled, walked up to me, and slowly pried the branch out of my hand. I turned around and took a few steps away from the van.

"All right," I said, "but I'm still *Patient Zero* and they all think that the key to putting an end to the *Fade Out Syndrome* lies somewhere in my head. Do you know what's going to happen if they get a hold of me? I'll be put in a maximum security medical facility and promoted straight to Guinea Pig Number One!"

Maggie tucked the gun into her pants behind her back.

"We'll have to work on that part." She looked at Winford, still prostrated inside the van. "But if you want to get somewhere, you'll need to give that man a chance to talk."

I walked to the passenger side of the van. Maggie nodded with a gentle smile as I approached her. Behind the glass, Winford stared at me for a moment and finally rolled the window about an inch down. I brought myself to encourage him.

"Okay, Winford, your game..."

He backed up instinctively as I addressed him, but started talking after only a few seconds. His resigned voice was just a disturbing echo of his father's a few months earlier.

"We were going bankrupt. We had to do *something*."

Yuan approached the window and casually laid her arm on the top of the van. The red light of the small recorder in her hand was still on, an inch away from the slit in the window, just out of Winford's sight. Winford had

stopped after the first few words and seemed lost in his thoughts again. I tried to prime him back.

"What do you mean, bankrupt? The Bugatti alone is worth more than my house!"

"My father was ruining us. He had paid hundreds of thousands of pounds in donations to the mental institutions just to *acquire* the patients. He then spent two hundred thousand to renovate the villa and take care of them there for over a year. One day, my father asked his financial advisor over and I overheard part of their discussion; I understood that he had started mortgaging the British estate, his villa, the car, even the manor."

"I thought that the manor was your sister's?"

"It should've been, like the British estate and the villa should've been mine. Father had made the arrangements with us years earlier, but he never got around to signing the paperwork. Everything was still in his name when he died."

"Didn't you try to reason with him?" I asked, surprised at my interest in Winford's story.

"I did, but he said that his work was worth every penny he spent on it and that it would bring our family name a level of prestige that it had never reached. I don't think that he realized that we were headed for bankruptcy; he had never been very smart when it came to money matters. When I understood that he wouldn't stop spending our money, I tried to think of ways to make up for the losses and ended up approaching Mary Ann with an idea—"

"Getting a hold of the hypnotic program and flying to the U.S. to screw up thousands of American men and women?!"

"No, just *selling* the program. My father was old; his heart was weary. He himself knew it was a matter of months before he would go. In the meantime, I would just look for a buyer."

"What kind of buyer?"

"I wasn't sure. I thought of companies involved with medical research but they would never have taken me seriously. I could have sold the story of my father's research to a newspaper, but I wouldn't have gotten a tenth of what the program itself was worth, and after the story got published, I would have been forced to hand it over to the authorities. I couldn't come up with a good plan; that's why I talked to Mary Ann."

"So, she *did* know about your father's work."

"She did by the time you came, yes, but when I first spoke to her about it, she did not believe me. She thought that I was trying to deceive her and got very upset. After that, she refused to talk to me—until you came along. When she read your journal, she realized that what I had told her was true. Later that night, she brought her friend to the manor openly for the first time.

"That Erwan guy?"

"Yes. I was stunned. I had no idea that Mary Ann and he had become lovers. I had seen that man behave as hopelessly as all the other patients for months, and now—all of a sudden—he stood in front of me bombarding me with sharp questions about the hypnotic program."

"Wait, Winford. That man stayed with your father for months. He saw the effect of the program on the other patients. If he wasn't insane, he must have learned quite a bit about the program, no?"

"He only knew what my father had tried to explain to the patients when they first arrived at the villa. That was just enough for him to understand the potential value of the program, especially after he witnessed first hand its effect on the other patients. That's why he decided to stick around and play the fool until he could figure out a way to put the program to work for his benefit."

"What did you know that he didn't? Your father said that nobody but he was aware of the construction of the program."

"He was right, but you don't need to know how it's built in order to use it. All you need is to know how to load it and modify the anchor message to fit your needs. I saw my father change the message on several occasions—all it takes is three simple commands. When I told that to Erwan, he got very excited and started taking over my idea of selling the program. That's when things got out of control—"

Winford stopped in response to the sound of a car approaching. Maggie grabbed my shoulder.

"Richard, get under the van, quick!" she said.

I dove under the front of the vehicle. A few seconds later, the large tires of a pickup truck rolled up the trail and came to a full stop a few feet behind Maggie's van. A pair of black boots stepped out of the car and walked toward us.

"Good morning, ladies. Need some help?" he said, with a friendly attitude.

"No, just taking a breather before heading to work," Maggie replied with a lively voice.

"Good plan, but not here. Didn't you see the sign up the trail? This area isn't open to the general public. Only the lumbermen are allowed here."

"Oh, sorry about that officer, we didn't pay attention. We'll be on our way."

"Is the gentleman in the car okay?"

I heard the squeaky sound of the car window being rolled down.

"I'm fine officer. Just too much oxygen for me in here! I guess that's the price to pay for carpooling with country girls!"

Winford's voice resonated under the car, poised and playful. They all laughed and after a few banalities, the man got back into his car and drove backward up the narrow trail. I crawled from under the van.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, just a local ranger, but let's get out of here," Maggie said, and turned to Winford.

The passenger window was still wide open. After a brief hesitation, Winford unlocked the doors. I got into the back seat, next to Yuan. Maggie turned the car around and drove out of the forest.

When we approached the highway entrance, Maggie slowed down, visibly hesitant.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"I don't know."

The van was slowing down the traffic.

"I'll take you to Erwan if you hand the gun over to me," Winford told Maggie.

I turned around.

"You must be out of your mind, Winford! Here's the alternative, I beat the hell out of you until you tell us where to find that guy!"

He looked straight at me.

"Eight months ago, I let a man take control of me," he said. "He turned my father's life dream into a damned plague and my sister into a ghost of herself; you're the one out of his mind if you think I'm now going to let you take control."

The forceful tone of his voice took me by surprise; he realized it and continued.

"I want to put an end to this situation more than any of you ever will. Hand me the gun—remove the bullets from it if you want—and I give you my word that we will end this, once and for all. All I'll ask in return is for you to give me a head start on the police once we do. Yuan will get the story of her career, and you, Keiffer, will be cleared. The hypnotic program will be destroyed; the madness will end." He paused. "The alternative, as you say, is that you beat me to death and everything for me ends right here on the side of this road. But only for me; more and more people will continue falling like dominos, and you won't have a clue as to how to stop it."

Maggie turned to me.

"I'm not sure I got everything in this mess, but don't we have enough to go to the police? You could just hide until they find that Erwan—"

Winford cut her off.

"And you think I'll go along with that? Do you have any idea of what they'll do to me in jail when they find out that I was involved in the destruction of at least a couple of thousand people?! I'll put an end to the *Fade Out Syndrome*, but *my way*. If you go to the police, I'll deny the whole thing. You don't have a single piece of evidence to back up your story; your word against mine. A fugitive on the run with a journalist who had him charged with attempted rape and an old woman with a gun... My family's name is respected all over England and Ireland; my father spent all his

fortune to provide a shelter for mentally ill patients; I've never had so much as a parking ticket."

He stopped, picked up Maggie's Marlboro pack from the front pocket of her jacket, and lit a cigarette before pursuing.

"I'm the *only* person who knows where Erwan is, how he works the hypnotic program on the Internet, and where he keeps the hard drive that contains my father's original program. I'm your only chance, and the only chance of the men and women who are destined to crowd the mental facilities in the days and months to come."

Winford exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. Maggie had slowed down the car to a crawl. I leaned back on my seat as silence suddenly set in the van. Yuan looked at me. Winford stared back out of the window. Behind us several cars started blowing their horns. Maggie glanced at me in the rear view mirror.

"Richard?"

I ignored her call until she repeated it.

"Richard?"

"It's your gun..." I said, instinctively.

She kept driving silently at a low speed in silence for a moment before reaching behind her back for the gun. She dropped the clip to her lap and handed it to me before giving the gun to Winford. He took it without looking and inserted it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"We're going to Davis," he said. "Follow the directions for Sacramento."

Maggie accelerated. Yuan turned to me.

"How far is Davis from here?"

"About two hours, eastbound," I said.

I looked at Winford's face in the rear-view mirror. His eyes were lost far beyond the window. As if they had sensed my scrutiny, his gaze turned to the rear view mirror, bounced off mine, and then dove back through the window.

## Chapter 24

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July 29, Year 2.

Not a word had been exchanged since we had gotten onto the highway. Even though he had regained control of the situation, Winford's indolent face had gone back to a somber mode. I decided to take advantage of the down-time to fill in the gaps in his story, most of which was also very much mine.

"Winford, does Erwan know how to manipulate the hypnotic program by himself?" I asked.

Winford took a long way around the answer—as if he were putting all the pieces back together for himself.

"The night Mary Ann read your journal, shortly after your arrival at the manor, we had a serious argument; I went for a drive just to get some air and when I returned, an hour or so later, she told me about your outburst and my father sending his patients to get you. She was very agitated; before I had a chance to calm her down, she walked out and drove off. She returned half an hour later with Erwan and from there on, everything moved very fast. Mary Ann had repeated to him all the details I had given her about my father's work. She went on talking to him about my idea to sell the hypnotic program, but clearly, the idea wasn't new to him. That is the night he bombarded me with questions about the program, and he pressured me to write down detailed instructions on how to change the anchor message and load the therapictorial online. I was aware that handing him that information would give him full control of the game but he had what was needed; very little conscience, and a plan."

"What was Erwan's plan?"

"Around nine that evening, my father called us. By that time, the guests had brought you back to him, and he had sedated you for the night to avoid any further problem. Every Saturday night, after his patients would be brought to their rooms, he would walk down to the main road, and I would take him to a friend's house for a game of bridge, while Mary Ann would stay at the villa until we returned. That night, with all the turmoil, I had assumed that he wouldn't go, but he still phoned me up to ask me to take him there. When he realized what the call was about, Erwan passed me a note instructing me to go pick him up and act natural. So I did.

"Mary Ann told me later on what happened while Father and I were away. She and Erwan went to the villa, made sure you weren't awake and locked the door of your room. He then managed to get the hypnotic program up and running and had Mary Ann wake up all the guests and assemble them in the attic. They were submitted to a hypnotic session as a group. He used a projector to display the therapictorial on a screen, just like my father would proceed when he wanted to *program* all the patients at once. Erwan

had seen my father operate on many occasions; he knew how to coach the patients and get them to concentrate on the animation. And he knew it worked—”

“But what about him?” I asked. “He had himself been submitted several times to the hypnotic program by your father; he didn’t respond to it?”

“Erwan bragged on several occasions to Mary Ann about his talent to dodge any form of therapy, even in the most coercive environment,” replied Winford. “He said that he never swallowed a single pill for the several months that he was staying at the mental institution, and that nobody ever noticed anything. When my father first gathered the patients in front of the computer, he tried to explain to them what it was all about. Erwan is probably the only one who understood, at least enough to sense that he shouldn't yield to the treatment. From there on, he made sure never to focus on the therapictorial during hypnotic sessions. He would stare just above the screen. Whenever he'd see the other patients engage in an action that they had been programmed for—that is, when they would suddenly act alike at the same time—he would mimic their demeanor and play along. I attended several of these occasions, but never noticed any difference between Erwan's attitude and that of the other patients. My father never emitted any doubt about Erwan being different either.”

“And of course, you never felt the need to talk to your father about him, right?”

“And risk having Erwan come after me? Besides, hurting Father wasn't a part of his plan so I was not worried about that. In any event, that night, when my father and I returned to the villa after the game of bridge, everything was back to normal. Mary Ann was watching TV, the patients were back in their rooms, and so was Erwan. They had also unlocked the door of your room. On our way back to the manor, Mary Ann told me what had gone on while Father and I were away. She didn't know the nature of the anchor message Erwan had used on the patients; he didn't want her in the room during the session. He had just told her that it was intended to be a test; a *demo* was the exact term that he used. All we knew at that time was that the demo was supposed to take effect the following night at the villa.”

“That would be at the end of the day I spent with your father. Why not wait until I had left?”

“Erwan wasn't concerned about you. Up to that point, everything had just been free flowing around you; my father's plans, Erwan's schemes; you were bounced around by the events but had no handle on any of them. But that Sunday, you somehow managed to get into the motion and inflect its course.”

“Because I finally got to show your father how much he hurt people?”  
Winford had a disenchanted smile.

“Oh no, nothing that chivalrous. From the day you deserted your family to the day you left Ireland, your only input in the whole play was to push a lock in it; a silly, sturdy lock.”

“A lock?”

“Yes; you put a lock between my father and us at the worst possible time. He should never have been inside the villa the night of the fire; Erwan had given clear instructions to Mary Ann in that respect. A few minutes before eight, after the patients would be in their rooms, she was supposed to ask her father to join her for a chat on the bench by the cliff, and not to let him back into the villa, no matter what.”

“So Erwan knew that the patients would —”

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Yuan turned to me with a stunned expression. She too had understood. Winford continued with the same distant, mechanical voice.

“Erwan gave us details about the whole ordeal later on. His reasoning was quite simple. We would make much more money with the program if we were to market it as a possible weapon than as a therapeutic tool.

“A weapon?!” said Yuan.

Winford kept staring out of the window.

“Look around you, Yuan; what do you think this is about? The program has been out there for less than a week, and over two thousand men and women are already gone, not even mentioning the impact of the fear on the whole fabric of the country. This is nothing but computer-borne warfare. My father dreamed a cure, Erwan turned it into a virus — ‘*The first true computer virus, the only one that can propagate across the world in a fraction of a second and infect a human target*’ — these were the exact words that Erwan used later in a letter to a potential buyer for the program. He had it all planned; he even had thought of several possible clients for the software; all he needed was convincing evidence of the program's power.”

“And he sacrificed twelve lives for it?!”

“He swears that he never programmed the patients to jump off the cliff, that they were only conditioned to set the villa on fire. Now that I've seen what he has done here, I am convinced that he also conditioned them for the collective suicide, as it would make for a much more powerful argument than the fire alone. The activation signal was the ring of a bell. About two hundred yards from the villa, on top of the cliff, is an old lighthouse. Every Monday night, someone goes there and rings the bell, at eight sharp. It's an old tradition; Erwan had been around long enough to be aware of it.

“According to what Mary Ann told me, you left the villa that evening around seven, after an argument that left my father so upset that he locked himself in the attic. Mary Ann and the nurse escorted the patients to their rooms, including Erwan, and then the nurse left. Mary Ann went by the attic

door and tried to talk my father into coming out, but he wouldn't answer. At a quarter to eight, she started panicking and rushed to Erwan's room for help. Since they couldn't hear any sound coming from the attic, Erwan tried to break down the door; it's a thick door with a massive old lock; he didn't succeed.

“By the time he finally gave up, it was two or three minutes before eight. He exhorted Mary Ann to get out of the villa, but she wouldn't leave her father behind. They got into a violent argument during which he shoved her; she slipped, her head hit the marble banister, and she passed out. He carried her outside the villa, left her unconscious on the front lawn, and then went back to the villa as the light house bell finished ringing. The patients were already rampaging through the house. Erwan proceeded with his plan and used Mary Ann's camcorder to record their actions as they rampaged the house and started fires using cooking oil that they had found in the kitchen.

“After a few minutes, my father, probably alerted by the noise and the scent of smoke, came out of the attic and tried to stop them. At some point, he, too, must have lost consciousness for a while as a result of being knocked over or from smoke inhalation, since—as you know—he got out of the villa well after the patients. Erwan told us that he didn't see our father get hurt because he sneaked into the attic shortly after my father came out. Erwan grabbed the hard drive of my father's computer, rushed down the stairs and took it outside the villa through the back door. That's how he got the program.

“He hid the hard drive in a small tool shack by the end of the backyard, then took up position by the edge of the forest, close to the cliff, and taped the rest of the events from there. He got it all; Mary Ann regaining consciousness and rushing away to get you, the patients lined up in front of the blazing building, your arrival at the scene—he even said that you walked only a few feet from him and looked demented—the patients jumping off the cliff, my father crawling out of the villa. He got it all. He even managed to get a long shot of the patients' bodies floating on the ocean the next day before the police got there. He had his demo tape, more convincing than he had ever dreamed.”

“But what about *you*? Where were you during the whole ordeal?” I asked.

“Erwan had told me that it would be easier for me if I weren't around that night. I stayed with a friend in town; even Mary Ann didn't know where I was. The irony of it all is that I learned about my father's death through the newspaper. I called my sister right away, but she said the police were investigating and that I was better off away from the castle for a few days. I went to my father's funeral three days later, straight from my friend's house, and drove back to the manor afterward. By that time, the investigation was closed, you were gone, and Erwan was at the manor with Mary Ann.”

"The man killed fourteen persons—including your father—and your sister just took him back?!"

"As I understood it, he came back to the manor the night after my father's death. At first, Mary Ann tried to stab him with a letter opener, but he somehow managed to convince her that it was all an accident; that he never intended for our father or the patients to die. He even said in my presence that you were the cause of things going sour. But neither Mary Ann nor I ever took him back. Even if that night people had died by accident, we were both very much conscious that Erwan had crossed the line; even more so in light of the fact that he didn't show any real sign of remorse. At that point, we had become scared of him. Throwing him out was no longer an option."

Winford paused. Maggie tried to lighten the atmosphere.

"Nothing like a good chitchat to ease up a long drive, huh?"

The mortified silence that followed did not leave any doubt on the fact that she was the only one in the upbeat mode. I turned back to Winford.

"Let me get this straight. After what happened that night, you knew how dangerous that guy was, and even your sister was having second thoughts. Why not just call the cops on him? He had somehow gotten into a mental institution but wasn't insane; didn't that ring a bell for you?"

"Oh, yes it rings a bell!" said Maggie, laughing. "Please stop it or I'm going to jump off the van! Please stop the bell!"

I cut her off.

"Shut the hell up! This is no time for your freaking jokes! If you find this funny, then it's time for you to get off the booze!"

Maggie did not reply, and her smile did not fade. Yuan put her hand on my arm.

"We're all tired, Richard," she said with a patronizing attitude. "Let's try to keep cool, okay? Wherever we're going, we'll have to work together." She gave me a soft smile before looking at Winford in the rear-view mirror. "Continue, Duncan," she said.

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Winford turned his head back to the side window before resuming his monologue.

"We had a long talk with Mary Ann and we did figure out that Erwan was probably some hardcore criminal who had managed to get into a mental institution to hide for a while, or had convinced a judge that he was insane to dodge jail. We considered calling the police, but we finally decided not to. There was much more at stake for us than Erwan's squatting at the manor."

"Such as?" I asked.

"The day before my father's funeral, Mary Ann had met with his financial advisor. We knew that Father had mortgaged part of his estate, but

we had no idea that in fact everything was gone. Since the age of eighteen, both Mary Ann and I had been receiving a generous monthly allowance from our father; since he kept paying it down to the end, we could never have imagined that the situation was so bad.”

“How about the insurance money? Wasn't the villa insured against fire?”

“Yes, but the insurance company turned around and called it arson; they paid only a fraction of the villa's actual value. The money that Mary Ann and I received from our father over the last months was coming from a loan that he had contracted; we had to use the insurance money to pay off that loan. We also found out that the manor was so heavily mortgaged that it now pretty much belonged to a local bank; Mary Ann had to beg its director to let us stay there, and use the Bugatti since it was our only car, until he could find a buyer or we had a chance to get back on our feet, whichever came first. We would've had to go to work for the first time in our lives, and we didn't have any experience or qualifications. We had both graduated from college *cum laude*, but only because in our world people always graduate *cum laude*. We were left with two choices: contact one of our family's friends and beg them for a middle class job—or Erwan. He was all set to go in business with our father's program. If we were to turn him in to the police, the story of the program would come out, and we'd have nothing to go on with. Besides, we would not have had the first idea on how to contact possible underground customers for the program.”

“So, in the forest, when you said that they had forced you to play along, it was a lie. You chose to stay with him, just as your sister did.”

“If I had put it that way, you would have jumped on me again. I feared Erwan, but he never threatened me directly. When Mary Ann and I realized that he might be our only way out, we sat with him to lay down the grounds of an association. He was as dependent on us as we were on him. Since he was officially dead, he needed a safe hideout and people to run some aspects of his business on the outside. It was a forced symbiosis. He was confident that he could get a lot of money for the program. Once the sale was done, we'd split the benefits, half for him, half for us.”

“And you trusted him?!”

“Of course not; but that was something to be dealt with further down the road.”

“Was he planning to sell multiple copies of the program?”

“That was impossible. The program's code was protected against copying; neither one of us was good enough with computers to break that protection, and we didn't want to bring in anybody else. And Erwan had also figured out that giving the customer the full exclusivity on the program would dramatically increase the value of the product, so it wasn't a problem.”

“The customer? He had already made arrangements for the sale?”

“No. In fact, that turned out to be more difficult than he originally thought. In early November, Erwan started scouting for potential customers through some of his connections, but he wasn't getting anywhere.”

“Who was he talking to?”

“All I know is that he got some contacts through a friend in England; he didn't want us around the study when he was on the phone. One day, he stormed out of the room after one of those calls. He was infuriated; nobody would take him seriously. They didn't even want to check the demo tape. As weeks went by, Mary Ann and I grew serious doubts about Erwan's plan. We were living on borrowed money and getting in deeper every day. Erwan was very edgy; no matter what we did or said, we were just a source of aggravation to him. He would burst at us several times a day, calling us pathetic, useless bourgeois; shouting he would have gotten more help from Anna's goats.”

“Since he wasn't getting anywhere, why did you take that? Why didn't you just tell him to leave?”

“There was no going back. It would have been dangerous to challenge him, and even if he were to leave, then what? He would've taken the program with him and we'd have been left with nothing. Just when we thought that Erwan had given up, one evening in late February, we saw a special news broadcast about a string of incidents that had occurred earlier in the month between anti-government groups and the police in the U.S. Erwan instantly connected the dots. It was easy to imagine how such fanatics could target officials and authorities with the hypnotic program, to destabilize key institutions of this country.

“That same night, he searched the Internet for somebody based in the U.S. who could serve as an intermediary between militia groups and him. In a survivalist discussion group, he identified a man in South Dakota whose postings clearly showed that he was close to several different militias. Erwan contacted him by e-mail. In his message, he was very vague, arguing that he just wanted to join one of the groups that the man was defending in his blog. He got a one-line anonymous reply just asking for his mailing address. After he had communicated it, we had to wait for two weeks before a letter finally arrived by regular mail from South Dakota. It just contained a Post-It note with a U.S. phone number written in bold letters.

“Erwan tried to research online who was behind that number, but it traced back to one the identity protection services that receive and forward calls to your real phone, making it impossible for the caller to know who is at the other end of the line. He called the number the next morning and from there got into a lengthy game of negotiations with whoever was on the other side of the line. Their conversations would be very short, no more than a few minutes, but they took place almost every other day. According to Erwan, who initiated all the calls, that person was suspicious of him, and money, militias, or deals were never discussed directly during these conversations.

“In mid-March, Erwan finally got instructions to mail the demo tape to a P.O. box in a small town in Montana. He made a copy of the tape and sent it. We didn't receive any feedback until three weeks later. This time, the potential customers called us. They questioned the authenticity of the tape; they seemed to think that it was a setup. Erwan reacted with a puzzling calm; he just hung up the phone and slowly climbed the stairs to go to his room. He didn't come out for two days. Mary Ann and I were having dinner in the kitchen when he finally reappeared. He walked in, grabbed Mary Ann's plate, sat down at the table, and ate her dinner without a word. We didn't dare say anything; we thought that he had lost it. When he got through eating, he stood up and just said 'It's time for some hardball,' then he left the room.

“The next day, when I came down for breakfast, the Bugatti was gone, and so was Erwan. Mary Ann took it very badly. I only realized then how addicted she was to him. She blamed me for everything; she said that if I had done my part, Erwan would not have left us. He had not been gone for more than a few hours, but she was convinced that he wouldn't come back. The more I tried to reason with her, the more aggressive she got. I didn't know what to do. It was a Sunday; the servants weren't there. I tried to talk her into taking a sleeping pill and rest for a while, but she threw it at my face. Her agitation scared me; I attempted to sedate her by force but she fought me back and ran out of the salon. I rushed to the phone to call our family doctor, and then went after her; I could not find her anywhere in the manor or the park. I waited for the doctor to arrive and we decided to try to locate her on our own first. He went down toward the ocean; I took the uphill side. I searched the forest for about an hour, calling her name over and over, but without any success.

“I finally ended up on top of the cliff and saw her, sitting on the front steps of the scorched ruin that used to be my father's villa. When I approached her, she didn't move. She was staring at the sky, calm but unresponsive. I got her to stand up and held her all the way back to the manor while she kept staring up in silence; when we got there, the doctor had already returned. He examined her and said that she seemed in shock. He tried to talk to her, even slapped her several times, without any response. The physician was concerned that she might not snap out of her torpor. We ended up laying her down on the sofa and covering her with a blanket. I called a friend of my father's who runs a psychiatric institute. He offered to see her right away. The doctor and I drove Mary Ann there that very night and left her at the mental facility at the request of my father's friend.

“I talked to him the next morning; he said that she was in a deep state of depression and still refused to communicate. When I told him that she had just lost her companion, he argued that nobody would get that disturbed over the loss of a loved one, that her condition was more likely to be the cumulative result of a succession of traumatic events. He offered to

keep her for as long as might be necessary. Erwan came back that same day. He hadn't even been gone for twenty-four hours. I was very surprised; like Mary Ann, I thought he'd sell the Bugatti to some crook and run off with the money. That's the first thing that I said when he walked back into the house. He laughed at me, arguing that I had to be retarded if I believed one could sell a collectible worth over a hundred-thousand pounds like some BMW snatched off the street; that he might as well have run into a police station and fired a gun in the air. At that moment, he didn't give me any explanation for his short disappearance. When I told him how Mary Ann had reacted to it, he casually replied 'I'm sorry to hear that,' then walked into my father's study and locked the door. He never asked about her again."

"What happened to her?" Maggie asked, while recklessly changing lanes.

"I went to see her the next day, but when I told her that Erwan was back, she remained totally prostrated, as if she hadn't heard me. For the next ten days or so, she refused to communicate with anyone, and the doctors asked me to abstain from visiting her for a while. Afterward, though, her condition gradually improved; she started responding to therapy, and a month or so after her breakdown, I was notified that I could visit her again. I found her very weak and still depressed. The doctor who took care of her told me that when she had started emerging from her torpor, she was very aggressive and had serious suicidal tendencies; he had been forced to medicate her with strong sedatives. When I talked to her, I realized that she only had a very vague recollection of our father's death and of the difficulties we had faced ever since.

"She was detached from everything; she never even asked about Erwan. I asked the doctor whether he could reduce to doses of sedatives to give her a chance to hook up again with reality but he said that it was much too soon. From that day on, I went to see her three or four times a week, but I never saw any improvement—neither did the doctors. I know that the circumstances of our father's end had traumatized her, even if she didn't show it. After that, she struggled to handle the remorse of having contributed to his death and that of the patients, to deal with her love for the man who had caused it all to happen, to face our financial troubles and the end of the only lifestyle she had ever known.

"When she thought that Erwan had left us behind, the rubber band finally snapped. She had walked by Erwan's side for months, but that day, she just decided to put her baggage down by the side of the road and stay there. She found her own way out; she will never be forced to do things that repulse her again to rebuild a future; she will never have to worry about money or going to work either. She will just go on taking the pills. Now she is safe."

For the first time, I believed Winford and started connecting with his whole story. As he described Mary Ann's fall, I was brought back to the night

when she had walked into my bedroom. At that moment, I had seen a distress in her eyes that had moved me and felt as if I were the only one who could hold her. I realized now that—at the time—I might have been right after all.

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Yuan stopped writing and looked at Winford, now silent again.

“Duncan, where did Erwan go when he left the manor for a day?” she asked, with a casual tone of voice.

Winford took a deep breath in, as to flush out his thoughts.

“I learned later on that he had gone to Galway, on a hunt for a false passport,” he said.

“What for?”

Winford turned toward Yuan.

“The day after he came back, he had me hand a letter to the mailman. It was addressed to the guys in Montana with whom he had been in contact earlier, but he wouldn't tell me what his angle was.”

“Erwan was still at the manor when I visited?!” said Yuan.

“All along. He was running the show from his room...”

“But how about the servants? Did they know he was there?”

“Of course they knew; he never hid from them. They would bring him all his meals in the bedroom until you left.”

“And none of them would have mentioned that to me? Come on, Duncan, I worked them on their version of the whole story for two weeks.”

Winford had a bitter smile.

“Yes, I noticed that. Since the first day Erwan stayed at the manor, we had given them strict instructions never to mention him to anybody.”

“Okay, I'll buy that; but they also gave me separately the same details on the story of Richard's assault on Mary Ann, on Mary Ann's breakdown being the result of her father's death and Richard's conduct...”

“For that, you got to them too late. The day of your arrival, I made sure that you would only talk to me. While you went back to Galway to get your luggage from the hotel, Erwan gave the maids and me a long briefing on what we should or should not tell you.”

“And each of the three women went along with that?” Yuan asked, openly skeptical.

“Anna practically raised me; the two younger domestics have been with our family since they were teenagers. Shortly after my father's death, they learned about our financial troubles and thought we would let them go. Instead, Mary Ann fought to get the bank that owns the manor to pay their wages, arguing that they would keep the place in top shape, which would prevent a loss of value. When they realized that, the three women were so

grateful that they would have done much more for us than tell a few lies to a foreign journalist.”

Yuan was about to reply but I anticipated her question.

“Why did you ask Yuan to stay at the manor for almost two weeks? The longer she stayed, the greater the chances that she would find a loophole in your scheme.”

Winford kept his eyes on Yuan as he answered.

“Erwan wanted to make sure that she would leave fully convinced by our side of the story. After she had mentioned her troubles with her paper, he was also the one who thought of finding her a new job to get her off the track once and for all. That’s when I called my mate at the Times. All I said was that a friend of mine was looking for a job; I never asked him to send Yuan to China but when we learned that she would be assigned there, Erwan was so thrilled that he even said that I had *played a fine game*.

“Erwan only received an answer to his letter to Montana in the second half of May, but he had not shown any impatience. He seemed to be confident in the outcome of his proposal to the militia guys, whatever it was, and he had been spending several hours every day in the office, where he had reconnected Father’s hard drive to a monitor and the Internet. I didn’t see the letter that Erwan received, but he got very excited after reading it. The people on the other side had responded positively to his proposal. At the end of that day, he sat with me to discuss his strategy, or rather the general idea behind his strategy; at that point he did not give me any detail. He would conduct what he called a *field trial* in the U.S. in order to finally convince the potential customer of the power of the hypnotic program. He asked me to accompany him there.”

“Why did he need you?” I asked.

“Ever since I had helped him get rid of Yuan, his behavior toward me had changed for the better. He had even made it a habit of calling me *Partner*. When he asked me to join him on his trip to the U.S., I stupidly thought that he considered me a full-blown associate in his venture. He would accidentally let out later on that the main reason why he dragged me along was that if we were to run into some trouble with the American authorities, the British Embassy would be much more diligent in helping out if the son of a distinguished British family was involved. Anyway, Erwan had me sell most of Mary Ann’s jewelry, over fifteen-thousand-dollars worth, to finance our trip. I had to get a new passport because my old one had expired; that took three weeks, but Erwan did not seem in a hurry. He said that we only needed to be there by the second half of July. We took off for the U.S. three weeks ago.”

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When Winford paused, Yuan finished writing some notes before lifting her head.

"Didn't you have second thoughts about getting involved in a trip abroad with a person who was very likely wanted as a criminal somewhere?" she asked.

"That's the strange part... no, I didn't. At that time, it seemed like the only option. Mary Ann was gone, the banker who owned our property had notified me that he was in discussion with a potential buyer for the whole estate; I was already alone and in a matter of weeks, I was bound to be kicked out of the manor. Erwan was the alternative; apparently, he was close to striking a deal for the program and at that time, I had no idea of how far he was determined to go to see it through."

"Why did you come to California if the potential customers for the program were in Oregon?"

"All we had in Oregon was a P.O. box number, nothing else. Actually, we didn't come straight here; we stopped in Detroit on our way here—"

"Detroit?!" I said.

Winford continued with a flat tone of voice.

"Erwan was looking for *you*, Richard. I didn't know exactly why at the time, but now I'm pretty sure that he wanted to get you *under control* before he would set his plan in full motion, like he did for Tashia last night. We went to the address written in your journal, but the secretary of the apartment office told us that they had emptied your apartment shortly after you disappeared from Detroit, after finding out from the police that you were wanted on criminal charges. We also went to the *Detroit Mutual Bank*, but no one there knew what had happened to you. At that point, Erwan decided that we would go somewhere close to San Francisco. He said that a soft guy like you, when finding himself on the run, would instinctively be drawn back to his hometown; I guess he had some experience with life on the run, and obviously, he was right. In light of what happened last night, I guess he also wanted to stay close to Ms. Johnson.

"From Detroit, we flew straight to San Francisco; he rented a car, and we drove to Davis, where he knew someone. We spent the first night in a motel and in the morning, he met with his acquaintance there who connected him with a real estate agent. Later that day, we rented a furnished house in the countryside, just outside the city, that belonged to a university professor who was away on a six-month sabbatical. Erwan pretended that we were visiting British scientists coming to U.C. Davis for a short training course. For the first three or four days, we didn't do anything at all. Erwan just told me that we had to wait. He'd occasionally sit down by the house computer, whose Internet connection was still live, but spent the rest of the time sleeping or watching TV. I had no idea what we were supposed to wait for, until the first cases of disappearances were reported in the news, four days ago.

"I immediately understood what was happening and where it came from. I confronted Erwan right away. I wanted out; I was going to take the first plane back to Ireland, while I still could. At first, Erwan just listened; he did not get upset, he did not argue with me. I had not imagined that it would be so easy. I went to my room, threw my suitcase on the bed and started packing as fast as I could. He walked in a few minutes later, headed straight for the bed without looking at me, grabbed a pair of socks from my suitcase and let them fall on the floor. I picked them up and put them back; he slowly grabbed them and dropped them again. The playful smile on his face scared me. I threw everything left in the closet in a pile into the suitcase and struggled to close it. He climbed on the bed and sat on the suitcase with the same silly smile on his face. I backed up and tried to reason with him. 'I won't talk to anybody' I said. 'You'll be better off on your own; I'm not cut for all this... You can keep all the money once you're through. I'll just go now.' He replied with a patronizing attitude—as if he were dealing with a child. 'That would be rude, my good friend... and I would never forgive myself if something were to happen to you. We are partners, remember? Come on back downstairs, let's have a beer.' And so we had a beer; it was the first of many on that day.

"Once he got totally imbibed, Erwan became very agitated. He spoke fast and loudly. He disclosed to me how, several weeks earlier, he had set up a catchy ad on a popular discussion group that, when clicked, would take Internet users to my father's hypnotic therapictorial. The ad was to be shown only to Web users of three American cities: Boston, Denver, and San Francisco, the targets of what he called his *field trial*. That still put millions of people within his scope, and even if only a very small fraction of them ended up going for the ad and exposing themselves to the program, it would be plenty to make a strong point. The therapictorial was designed to *activate* a pool of victims on that day, July 24<sup>th</sup>—which I found out later was his birthday—and a new pool on each of the following six days. That's when the *Fade Out Syndrome* was unleashed and also when I realized that he would stop at nothing to achieve his goal. At that point, I got scared."

"Why didn't you try to escape later on?" Yuan asked.

"I always knew that Erwan was a shady character, but I realized now that he was much more than that; he was a cold-blooded criminal without an ounce of humanity in him. The house in which we hid was at least three miles from town. If I tried to leave, he would come after me. If I stayed, I knew that he would not harm me; when drunk, he had made it clear to me again that he'd need me in the event that things turned sour. For the past few days, we stayed in the house. Erwan watched the news channels almost continuously to follow the progression of the syndrome. He would stay in front of the TV for hours, silent, absorbed. He hardly talked at all; I don't know what was going through his mind."

"How long is his *field trial* supposed to last?!" I said, exasperated.

“Two days ago, Erwan’s phone rang. He locked himself in the office. I couldn’t hear the conversation, but when he came out, he looked at me with a hard smile on his face and shouted: “Now, we’re in business, *Partner!*”

## Chapter 25

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July 29, Year 2.

Davis was not exactly the kind of place where you would expect to jump a criminal. The town was still curled up under an early sun, neat and placid. Duncan guided us through the city and into a sunburnt countryside; Maggie turned on the air conditioner to strip the dry heat off the morning rays blasting through the windshield.

"Take the next right," Duncan said, after fifteen or twenty minutes of a silent ride.

Maggie steered the van onto a narrow road meandering between fields of corn and sugar beets wallowing under the pulsating gushes of the sprinklers already hard at work. About a mile into the road, we approached a cluster of palm trees awkwardly standing out of the patchwork of fields.

"Stop the car here," said Duncan.

Maggie parked the van on a grass track separating two parcels of corn, turned off the engine, and hung on to the steering wheel for a long moment before pulling out the keys and stepping out of the car. We all walked up the road in silence.

Behind a thin screen of bushes stood an elegant two-story house surrounded by a luxurious oasis of flower beds laid on a thick blanket of dark grass. A convertible was parked by the front door, trunk wide open. We all instinctively turned to Winford. He pulled the gun out of the inner pocket of his jacket.

"You don't want to run in there with *that*," said Maggie with a dragging voice.

"Why not? Just let me have the clip." Winford replied, looking down at the weapon.

"It's not real. It's just a slick replica I carry around to scare away the muggers at night; look down the barrel, half an inch from the tip it is no longer hollow. In broad daylight, you won't fool anyone with that."

Winford looked at the barrel and threw the gun on the ground with rage.

"Damn it! You, tricky—" He stopped suddenly, staring at the house.

A man had just stepped out; a tall, heavy fellow in his mid-forties, with jet-black hair and a tanned complexion. He stuffed two suitcases inside the trunk of the car and walked right back into the house. Winford's eyes remained glued to the open door for a few seconds before he turned to me.

"That's him! He's leaving. We have to do something!"

"Is Tashia in there?" I asked.

"Probably. When he left last night, his plan was to bring her here."

"Where's he going now?"

"I don't know, maybe to Oregon. His client might be ready to make the buy. They've been talking on the phone several times over the past three days."

"And he is going take Tashia along?"

Winford dodged my stare. I grabbed him by the collar.

"Is he—?!"

Winford shook his head, eyes empty.

"Erwan likes to keep things simple. He is too far down the path to leave a witness behind."

Yuan pulled my hands from Winford.

"We have to go back to Davis and get the police right away. Let's go," she said.

"There's no time for that!" I replied under my breath, despite the anger. "The guy is all set to go; if Tashia is still alive in there, he is going take care of her now."

"The guy is built like a linebacker! What do you propose we do? Scream *Geronimo!* and charge the house?" Maggie asked.

"No. Yuan, can I have your nerve gas spray?" I replied.

Yuan pulled the small can out of the pocket of her jacket. I took it from her and handed it to Winford.

"Okay, you can't fight but you can at least run, right?" I said.

He nodded.

"Now, listen carefully. Erwan left the trunk of the car open; that means that he is not yet done loading his stuff," I explained, and picked up the fake gun from the ground. "I'm going to run to the house, wait by the side of the door for him to come out again, and try to knock him out with this. I may not take him out right away but I should at least be able to throw him to the ground and hold him down; as soon as I jump him, you rush over there and spray him with the gas. Do not hesitate; there's a lot of wind, get as close to him as you can before you start spraying. You have to take him out, even if that means spraying me, too. I know that stuff; it won't kill me. Can you do that?"

Winford approved with a curt nod.

"If you're not sure, now is the time to tell. I don't want to end up wrestling that guy without any backup, alright?"

"I'll be there," Winford said with a surprising poise.

I turned to the women.

"You two can pick up a stone or something and give us a hand in case we can't handle him, okay?"

They both nodded and started looking around for rocks.

I turned around, glanced at the house to verify that Erwan was not yet outside, and ran straight across the front yard of the house. I flattened myself against the wall, a few feet from the door, tense but surprisingly determined.

A string of endless seconds dripped out of the open door. Just enough to give me time to drop down mentally from action-mode to reason-mode. My thoughts started crystallizing into needles of fear that pinned me to the wall. I could hear a faint rumble far down the house; I still had time to run back across the lawn and hide before he would come out again. All I had to do was to push myself away from that wall and run; we weren't that far from the city; we still had a good chance to bring the cops back in time. A pretty good chance—a chance—a very *slim* chance for the woman I had put on the other side of that wall. I did not push away from the wall, and peace came to me just as panic had, sudden and whole.

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When the man walked out and started going down the front steps, I threw myself at him. Alerted by my shadow, he turned around just as I swung the gun. The blow landed on the base of his neck. He groaned, dropped the oversized sports bag in his arms, grabbed the front of my shirt, and sent me twirling against the back of the car. I felt the gun being ripped from my hand and braced myself but the man did not hit me. He stood tall, looking at me with the condescending assurance of the victor. I looked him straight in the eyes before punching his jaw as hard as I could. His head tilted for a second and swung right back, undaunted.

I tried to tackle him, but he did not fall; I ended up hanging stupidly from his waist, my arms clutched behind his back, pushing on my legs without any result, like a goofy cartoon character. He grabbed my hair and pushed me back toward the car. When I punched him in the stomach with all my strength, he only bent slightly under the blow, then lifted my head and violently swung his forehead against mine. The shock did not really hurt; it just filled all my senses with nauseating warmth. I realized that the man was shoving me into the trunk of the car but I was unplugged. The trunk lid slammed dark on me and for some reason relief was the first feeling that came about.

"I'm sorry about that, but he got out of control."

It took me a few seconds to recognize Winford's voice in the distance.

"We can leave him in there for a while, he'll cool off," the voice continued, now closer. "I'll take it from here; let's step inside, I'll explain everything."

I listened for a long moment but only a heavy silence now fed the darkness of my cage.

"Yuan? Maggie? Get me out of here!" I shouted, panic reactivating my senses.

Some more silence; some more panic.

"Winford!" I screamed, kicking the side of the trunk.

No answer. Just overheated air burning my lungs and the intoxicating caress of madness—back around.

I tried to form an image of Alana, of my kids—they weren't there. Tashia, yes, *Tashia*, that was it... She was here, a few yards away, scared but still here; Yuan and Maggie? They had to be around; where the hell were they?!

"Yuan?! What's going on? Get me out!" I yelled again.

One, two... ten... three hundred and four... To dodge the panic attack, I became a counter; a slow, mechanical counter; a counter that would stop at the first sign of hope; a counter that stopped somewhere between seven and eight hundred.

"Thanks a lot; I'll see you tomorrow then..."

Winford's voice again; jovial and relaxed. Then steps on the gravel and the sound of a bike riding away.

"Winford! Let me out of here, I can't breathe!" I said.

The sound of gravel, and silence—again, several times. Then a long silence, a click from the trunk lock, and light suddenly blasting my pit.

I took several deep, hard breaths, eyes dazed by the brightness.

"Richard... Richard..."

I recognized the perfume before the voice.

"Mary Ann...?"

And a gun—this one with a hollow barrel.

"It's good to see you again, Richard..."

My eyes could not move from hers. Her soft, elegant face, even paler in the blazing sun, seemed to have been peeled off a negative strip from my past.

"Come on out, Richard. It's over now."

I painfully gathered my limbs and climbed from the trunk to face her. She gave me a candid smile and waved her gun to signify me to head for the front door of the house. When I reached the first step, Duncan walked out the door. He did not look at me—he just smiled at his sister and went straight to the car. He took off as I stepped inside the house.

## Chapter 26

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July 29, Year 2.

Outside, a hot summer morning was already out in full force, but the large living room was dark and cold. All the curtains were drawn and the fine leather and wood furniture could not make up for the gloomy atmosphere. I turned around. Mary Ann stood just a few inches from me—the length of a gun barrel.

“Good to see you again too, Mary Ann,” I said, trying to weather an onslaught of conflicting emotions.

I walked backward to the sofa and sat down. She leaned back against the thick arm of a black leather armchair, facing me.

“I had hoped that our paths would not have to cross again; it would have been cleaner for both of us,” she said softly.

“I know,” I replied, suddenly very tired.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

She laid the gun down on her lap but did not let go of it.

“I guess we were not meant to part easily,” she said, without real emotion.

“We couldn't. We belong to the same script—your father wrote it.”

“And now I'm writing the end of it.”

“With Erwan?”

“Erwan? Who's Erwan?” she asked, with a perplexed look on her face.

“The guy who was here with you this morning!” I said with impatience. “The guy who locked me in the trunk of the car!”

“His name is not Erwan; his name is *Fernando*,” she said, clearly confused. “He is the gardener employed by the owner of this house; he lives a mile from here and comes two mornings a week to take care of the landscaping. He locked you in the trunk of the car because you tried to knock him out! He was just helping me load the luggage into the car because I had asked him to. What's with the Erwan story?”

I gave Mary Ann a short version of the story that Duncan had fed us. She listened attentively at first, but an amused expression soon took over her face, and she patiently waited until I finished to burst out with laughter.

“Amazing!” she said. “Duncan always had a fertile imagination, but this time he outdid himself. I have to admit, on top of being a dear brother, he is also a precious partner. With that story, he managed to get you, Yuan, and Maggie here in a single load. Since he had already brought Ms. Johnson yesterday, the family is complete. Every person who could link the *Fade Out Syndrome* to Duncan and me is now under this roof. A fine work, indeed...”

“You can't possibly think of killing us all!” I said, incredulous.

Mary Ann looked right through me and did not answer.

"How about the gardener?" I continued, searching for leverage. "He saw this morning that something wasn't right; are you going to get rid of him, too?"

This time, Mary Ann responded, with a detached voice.

"Duncan explained to him that you were a member of our family; a *mentally challenged* member of our family. Duncan explained to him that we had brought you here to get some rest but you got out of hand."

"And the gardener bought that?"

"He doesn't have that much of a choice; he's an illegal alien, from somewhere in South America. A nice guy, though, but not exactly the type who'll call the police at the first little glitch. We gave him a very nice tip this morning. He'll forget..."

"So, Erwan—It was just *you* all along?"

"I didn't have a chance to talk much with my brother about his little tale but my guess is that you're probably right."

"You arranged for your father's death?"

"Did he say that?"

"No, he said it was an accident."

"So, he told it right. It *was* an accident."

"A planned accident."

She had a brief nervous chill but responded without emotion.

"I loved my father; I would never have done anything to hurt him. Destiny was the planner that night."

"Duncan told us about your depression after your father's death. If you had nothing to do with it, why did you fall apart shortly after?"

"Depression?" Mary Ann smiled. "I'll have to ask Duncan about that one. When I lost my father, I was very sad of course, but I knew that his health wasn't good. I had been prepared to say goodbye to him for years."

I stared at her with contempt as I shook my head. She raised her gun back and stood up.

"One more thing..." I said, trying to buy time. "What was Duncan doing at Tashia's in the middle of the night if he had brought her here earlier in the evening?"

"He had lost his watch. He thought that it might have come off during his struggle with Tashia. That's an expensive Swiss watch with a serial number; the police could have traced it back to him. So, he drove all the way back there just to look for it and he ended up reeling the three of you back here! Did he find the watch by the way?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Duncan had stayed in Tashia's house for a couple of minutes after we had exited but he did not seem to have found what he was looking for. When she saw that I would not respond, Mary Ann waved her gun.

"Come on Richard; an old friend is waiting for you."

She escorted me to a closed door by a corner of the living room.

"Open it," she said.

I turned the key in the lock, pulled the door open and stepped past it. The lock slapped shut behind me.

It was not dark. A weak, bare bulb dangling above the door dispensed light down a flight of rough wooden stairs. At the bottom of the staircase stood Tashia, looking up at me.

"I should have known..." she said with a resigned voice. "Men like you never really go away, do they?"

I could not answer. Tashia continued to stare at me.

"Well, come on down, take a look at your job," she said. "Isn't that what you came for?"

The anger in her eyes belied the jovial tone of her voice. I walked down the stairs. She stepped back and swung her arm around to the right of the staircase.

Yuan and Maggie lied flat on their back on the bare ground.

## Chapter 27

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July 29, Year 2.

Yuan and Maggie breathed normally but they remained unresponsive to my attempts to shake them awake. As far as I could tell, they seemed to have been knocked out. By now, I had realized that we were not in a real basement, rather in a small cellar dug under the house to shelter about a hundred bottles of wine aligned on dusty racks along the walls. The room was not even ten square feet, and the ceiling was just a few inches from the top of my head. The staircase rose above the ceiling and to the living room door.

I climbed the stairs and kicked the door with as much rage as I could muster. It did not even vibrate under my hits.

"I already tried," Tashia said with spite, "the door is thick and the lock sturdy. Don't waste your energy; you won't break it down."

I stepped back down the stairs and looked around the room. Aside from the wine racks, there were a bunch of deflated air mattresses piled up in a corner, a couple of smudged cans of paint and a red plastic sled. Not a single tool that I could use to attack the lock.

Just as the situation was turning gloomier, the light in the room went off without warning. I used my lighter to guide my way back up the stairs, but did not see any switch; it was probably located outside the cellar. I was reluctant to turn off my lighter. In less than a year, this was the third underground in which I had been forced to take residence. I did not mind the confined space as long as there was some light—it kept claustrophobia at bay. Still, I let the flame go off when the heated metal ring atop of the lighter started burning my fingers.

"What now?" said Tashia with a weary voice.

"Do you have any kind of metal device with you?" I asked. "Nail clippers, a hair comb of some sort, anything I could use to try to pick the lock?"

"No, I was home when the guy got me, and I had already changed into my jogging suit. I didn't have anything inside my pockets."

"How did it happen?"

"He knocked on the door and pretended that he was a friend of yours, that you had asked him to deliver something to me. I peeked at him through the window; he didn't exactly look like a threat, and with that smart British accent... I fell for it and let him in. When I turned my back to him to lock the door, he zapped me on the side of the neck with a stun gun—the kind you use for self-defense. I tried to fight him back but I was paralyzed and he laid me down onto the floor. I was more or less conscious but I couldn't move my limbs. He picked me up, carried me out, and stuffed me into the trunk of his car. When he closed it, I had a panic attack; I thought I'd choke to death

in there. I ended up passing out from the fear. I woke up down here. Why did they take me? I'm sure you have an idea of the—"

She suddenly grabbed my arm and after a few seconds, whispered: "Can you hear that?"

I could. A hissing sound coming from the top of the stairs, soon followed by the faint scent of propane gas. I lit my lighter and Tashia and I both climbed the stairs.

Through the small space under the door, a white rubber tubing had been slid and the much stronger smell of propane around it left no doubt of its purpose. Tashia opened her mouth, but before she could say a word, I covered it with my hand and whispered into her ear.

"Shhh... don't talk; they probably plan on us not finding out where the gas comes from until it's too late. It could just be a leak in a pipe somewhere."

I had figured out that much but had no idea on what to do next. I tried to pinch the tubing between my fingers but the rubber was hard and the gas was under pressure. It just came out with more rage, hissing louder like a snake held behind his head. The smell was getting more oppressing and was starting to bother me. Moved as much by panic as reason, I went back down the stairs, grabbed one of the inflatable mattresses and returned to the door. With a sign, I instructed Tashia to hold the lighter, whose flame was becoming more of a threat as the level of gas continued to increase in the small room. Without a word, I fit the propane tubing tightly into the inflation stem of the mattress. Immediately, the gas flowing into the deflated mattress started ironing out its wrinkles around the neck.

Tashia understood immediately. She went to get the second mattress, pulled out the stem, and made it readily available for me to switch when the first mattress would be filled up. I signaled to her that it was okay to turn off the lighter now, mainly to conserve it for later. I was no longer concerned about a possible explosion, the level of gas in the room had stopped rising, the mattress was doing a great job containing all the incoming gas so far. The problem was that I had no idea how much gas would come out of the kind of propane tank that you attach to a grill, which I assumed was what Mary Ann was using.

The mattress was steadily inflating by my side, trying to push me away. I positioned it in such a way that it would be able to unfold fully, and it did just that, in less than fifteen minutes. When the pressure inside had made it hard enough, I whispered, "Light," and Tashia flicked the lighter on. I removed the tubing and capped the inflation plug as fast as I could, and then immediately plugged the tubing into the second mattress. Tashia doused the lighter and carried the first mattress down the stairs as silently as she could. The second mattress inflated just as fast as the first one and we switched to a third one.

"There's only one more down there," Tashia whispered into my ear, "and it's a kid's one."

The hissing continued inside the plastic envelope, unabated, and the mattress kept growing around me, as in a deadly embrace. A great frustration took hold of me. It might just come down to a few cubic feet in the end. Just the amount it took to grill a couple of hamburgers. Just the amount it took to displace enough oxygen in the room—and our veins—to asphyxiate us.

This time, *finally*, the balance tilted on our side. After the first two-thirds of the mattress had inflated, the hissing gradually weakened and ended up turning to a faint whisper. I prodded the mattress at several locations; it remained flabby—as if life had suddenly stopped flowing into it. I approached Tashia's ear.

"The gas has stopped!"

"What do we do now?" she whispered back.

"We wait. Let's hope that Mary Ann doesn't leave the house without making sure that we're dead."

"What will you do if she *does* come to check? She still has a gun, remember?"

"Let's just stay here by the door as quietly as possible. If she opens it, we jump her. She won't be able to shoot us both at the same time. Besides, it's not like we have many options. If we give her a chance to close that door back on us, this time she'll make sure to finish us."

I was determined to get us out of there. It was not courage. I had just escaped a gloomy end and was still in the gray area between life and death; I was mentally prepared to go either way. That resolve, however, eroded as time went by. Nothing was happening; there was not a single sound in the house. Tashia and I did not talk for fear of alerting Mary Ann of our conscious state. We just changed position very slowly from time to time, crammed on the small platform at the top of the stairs. I finally found a more comfortable position, and my eyes started drooping on me. I had not slept in two days. I fought the torpor for a while, and then let go...

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The sound of a car outside the house brought me back. It was soon followed by Duncan's voice on the other side of the door.

"Mary Ann, I'm back!" he shouted. I did not hear a reply but Mary Ann's voice materialized into the living room a moment later.

"How did it go?"

"It's all good," Duncan's voice replied, "but before I tell you about it, how did you manage with *the others* here?"

"It's done. They've been gone for hours now. You were right, a tank of propane was plenty, and it put them down fast, too. I never heard so much

as a peep out of them. They never even tried to push the tubing out—they probably had no idea where the gas came from.”

“Well done, Mary Ann. Still, we need to make sure; we can’t run the risk of having one of them be discovered alive later.”

I grabbed Tashia’s arm and she placed her hand on mine to let me know that she was awake. She stood up. Still sitting on the ground, I slid closer to the door, facing it with my legs folded back. The lock was disengaged. As soon as the door cracked open, I catapulted my legs into it. It swung back violently, triggering a cry of pain on the other side. Before I could get up, Tashia rushed in and threw herself on Mary Ann, who was standing a few feet away. She had the gun in her hand but did not have the reflexes to raise it in time. She fell back as Tashia tackled her.

I jumped up and saw Duncan crawling away, leaving behind him a trail of blood that appeared to come from his face. He was not armed and was trying to make it to the front door. I clasped my hands and hammered the back of his neck with all my weight. He collapsed and passed out. I rushed back to help Tashia, who had pinned Mary Ann to the floor but was struggling to wrestle the gun away from her. I grabbed a fire stoker from the fireplace and swung it at Mary Ann’s arm without pity. She screamed and her hand flung open under the pain. Tashia grabbed the gun and pulled away as Mary Ann folded into a fetal position on the floor, holding her arm, her face livid with pain.

While Tashia—gun in hand—monitored Mary Ann and Duncan still on the floor, I rushed to the garage adjacent to the house and came back with a handful of long cable ties that I used to restrain their legs and hands. Duncan was still unconscious; Mary Ann did not resist when I folded her arms behind her back; she just looked away.

“Where’s your father’s hard drive now?” I asked her, as Tashia went for the phone.

“It’s upstairs in one of the bedrooms,” Mary Ann replied, without resistance.

“Your brother hadn’t sold it yet?”

“He drove to the San Francisco airport to meet with his client today. He was happy when he came back, so I suppose that they had closed on a deal, but he wasn’t supposed to deliver the hard drive or get the money today.”

“I cannot believe that you tried to kill four people in cold blood for that deal,” I said, almost speaking to myself.

“It was a very big deal, Richard, and Duncan and I don’t know how to live without money. It was a *lifestyle emergency*,” she concluded with a cynical grin.

Tashia hung up the phone and confirmed that the police were on their way. In the kitchen, I filled a small bucket with cold water and ice cubes and took it into the cellar. When I poured the glacial mix slowly over Yuan’s face, she swung her head aside to avoid it. I got a similar result with Maggie. I

rubbed their hands vigorously in turn until they emerged from their lethargy. Yuan was the first to recover, and she helped me get Maggie up and back to the living room where we sat her down on the sofa.

"What happened to you two?" I asked Yuan.

"When you went to the house and disappeared from sight, Duncan stepped behind us and used the nerve gas spray on us. It was so fast that we didn't even have a chance to say a word," she replied, looking in turn at Duncan and Mary Ann. "What happened here?"

"I'll tell you later. Make sure that Maggie is okay. I need to get the hard drive. That's the only evidence we have for the police."

I climbed the stairs and peeked into the bedrooms. A small metal suitcase was open on the bed of one of the guest bedrooms. As I walked up to it, I discovered the hard drive lying in it.

When I went back downstairs, I laid the metal suitcase by the side of the sofa.

"There's the hard drive, Yuan," I said. I noticed that Duncan's eyes were now wide open even though his body had not moved. The expression on his face was not one of hatred or defeat. He stared at the suitcase intensely as if concentrating on trying to find a way to retake control of the situation. He did not have the time to think long, though. Maggie slowly stood up from the sofa, walked up to him and kicked him in the chest in a controlled and cold strike.

"You, filthy worm!" she said without raising her voice, towering over him with contempt.

Duncan had curled up under the blow and seemed to await the next blow with resignation.

"That's enough, Maggie," I said. "The police are on their way. He'll get what he deserves this time."

Maggie nodded and retreated to the sofa.

I looked around the room to fix the moment in my memory. Next to Maggie on the sofa sat Yuan, whose pencil was feverishly scratching a piece of white paper. Mary Ann was still on the floor, under the watchful gun barrel pointed at her by Tashia. She was attempting to make eye contact with her brother, also on the floor a few feet away, but he had gone back to staring at the suitcase and did not pay any attention to her. No one was talking. The abrupt end of the ordeal had returned us to a flat reality too fast, and we were all trying to prepare for what would undoubtedly come next. In light of the magnitude of the *Fade Out Syndrome*, it was quite clear that we were headed for very long hours, if not days of inquisition from the police and the FBI.

On the entertainment center, I noticed a set of car keys. I strolled across the room and picked them up casually before proceeding toward the front door. Tashia had her back turned to me and Yuan was still leaning over her

paper, writing. Only Maggie had taken notice of my maneuver. She looked at me with sadness and shook her head, but did not speak.

I stepped outside, got into Mary Ann's rental car, and drove away.

## Chapter 28

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July 30, Year 2.

I drove for a few miles, but I was exhausted and ended up parking in a rest area where I reclined my seat and fell asleep in seconds. I did not wake up until noon the next day. At the nearby gas station, I grabbed a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and then got back on the road. I reached the suburbs of San Francisco a couple of hours later and navigated the familiar streets with some tension. Seeing the driveway of my house empty released it in a single burst. Life would not flow back into the house until Alana brought the kids back after work. I parked the car, walked up to the front door, and opened it without hesitation. In the past ten months, I had never parted with my keys, even when I had drifted so far off that the thought of ever coming back to this house felt like a delusion.

Once inside the house, I tried hard to avoid looking at any specific object that would speak of my wife and kids. I went straight to the master bedroom upstairs and opened the top drawer of the dresser. As expected, that's where Alana had stored my wallet. The driver's license was still in it, confirming what Yuan had told me. In the drawer, Alana had also kept my passport and the debit card for an account to my name that held a couple of thousand dollars. Alana and I had thought it wise to each own such an account for personal emergencies or to buy surprise presents. I shoved the wallet, passport, and debit card deep into my pants pockets, walked down the stairs and headed out. I locked the front door behind me and looked around. The street was deserted at that time of the day; even I had only been a shadow that would not leave any prints.

At the bank, I was surprised by the ease with which I was able to cash in the whole contents of my emergency account. The clerk did not show any reaction to the name on my card and driver's license, and sent me off with a laconic, "Have a good day," her eyes already propped on the next customer in line. They had never bothered to freeze my accounts; I guess I had never been such a high-profile criminal after all.

I headed straight for the harbor. One night at Nam Palm, I had been able to follow, despite the usual noise, a private conversation between the boss and one of his friends. They had been standing on each side of the bar for a while. Already quite imbibed, they were trying hard to carry on a serious exchange despite the slurring of their speech, and they were not paying any attention to me. I understood that the friend was in trouble somehow and needed to leave the country.

"Do you know someone who could help?" he asked my boss.

"Maybe. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care, as long as it's abroad, but crossing a border by car or by plane is too risky."

"Yeah, not a good plan. Listen, since you don't care about the destination, you pay a visit to my amigo, Ernesto Rambles. He runs a waterhole called *Pixies*, by Fisherman's Wharf. You tell him that I sent you and that you need to *travel*. He'll understand and he will hook you up with a cargo ship. Some sailors rent their cabins to passengers to make extra cash; they sleep in the cabin of one of their mates and give them a cut. They don't have the right to do that, and they would get fired if the ship's owners found out, so they don't mind ferrying men in trouble who aren't likely to speak about that little arrangement. Don't ask questions, and they won't either, but you will need a grand or so in cash for the passage. Do you need a loan?"

The friend said he had the money and thanked the owner with fervor before leaving the bar. I never saw him again.

*Pixies* was not hard to find. It was a run-down pub with plastic garden tables and chairs as furniture; it was pretty much empty at that time of the day. A heavy-set, older woman was mopping the floor and did not pay any attention to me.

"Can I speak with Ernesto?" I asked.

"He is not here," she replied with a strong Hispanic accent, her head still down.

"Peter Schwag sent me," I continued, hesitantly. That was the name of Nam Palm's owner.

The woman did not reply and kept on swabbing the floor with a mechanical motion.

"Let me have a J&B," I ordered while sitting at one of the white tables facing the TV.

The lady went behind the bar, fixed my drink, and put it down in front of me without a word. She went right back to her mop.

The TV was featuring a rowdy talk show. Whatever had happened in Davis had not reached the media yet. I sat there for a couple of hours and two more whiskeys, eyes glued to the TV and mind as dull as cubed steak. Around five o'clock, as customers started drifting in, a short man in his late fifties with a prominent mustache walked in and went straight through a door by the side of the bar. The woman who had served me followed him to the rear. The man came back out after less than a minute and walked straight to me.

"You're a friend of Peter's?" he asked. He spoke with very little accent, and the tone of his voice was clearly suspicious.

"Yes, I worked for him at Nam Palm's. You can call him if you want to verify."

The man eased up a bit and sat down across the table.

"What does he need?"

"It's not for him; it's for me. I need to *travel*."

"I see. You're the second one he sends me this month. It's getting a bit hot around him these days..."

I did not answer. He looked straight at me for a long moment, stood up, grabbed the cordless phone sitting on the bar and took it with him to the rear. When he returned fifteen minutes or so later, he headed straight for the door and motioned me to come along. We got into his car and drove a few miles down to the docks in silence. He stopped on Pier 96, right in front of a huge and pretty rusty cargo ship being loaded by cranes with large containers full of colorful stickers.

“Okay, here’s the deal, make sure it works for you before we get rolling. This freighter is headed for Buenos Aires, in Argentina, leaving tomorrow. I spoke on the phone to one of the guys in the crew, a distant relative of my wife. He will rent you his cabin for a grand, paid upfront in cash and in full. His name is Raúl. You can trust him—he has helped us before. The ship captain won’t be aware of this arrangement, so you’ll have to stay in the cabin at all times. Raúl will bring you food twice a day. The trip will last three to four weeks depending on the weather. Once you get to Buenos Aires, Raúl can help you get set up, but that’ll cost extra. Do you speak Spanish?”

“A little. I had to take a course for my work.”

“So you want to go through with this?”

“Yes. When do I get on the ship?”

“Just hang around here for a couple of hours. Raúl said that around seven, the boss and most of the crew will head to town; he’ll come get you here and he’ll get you set up on the ship. Make sure you have the cash ready for him, I don’t want any waves.”

The silent threat in Rambles’ tone was very clear. I reassured and thanked him before he drove off. I was scared. If Rambles did call the owner of Nam Palm, I might not have gotten an endorsement, and he now knew much more about me than I would have wanted. He had set me up for *something*, but I was not exactly sure what. I decided to move forward as planned and, since I had some time to kill, I walked back toward the city and managed to find a supermarket. I bought some cheap clothes, toiletry items, a small shortwave radio, snacks, two bottles of generic vodka, and three notebooks, along with a duffel bag.

When I returned to the pier, I remained at a safe distance from the ship and waited until I saw a dozen or so men walking down the gangplank and push and shove themselves with rowdy laughs inside two taxi vans waiting for them. After they had left, I started casually strolling toward the ship. Before I reached it, a young man appeared on the deck and looked down at me for a moment before waving his arms to signify me to hurry up and come on board. I ran to the ship and up the gangplank, and followed the young man across the bridge and down a flight of stairs. We hurried all the way down a narrow corridor that ended in an array of doors. The man opened one of them, told me to get in, and said that he would be right back with some food. He spoke a slow, clear Spanish, and—to my relief—I had no

trouble understanding him. He would be my only airway in this humongous steel coffin.

The cabin was tiny, but it had the two components that I had most dreaded missing: a toilet and a porthole that could be opened. A narrow bed, a round table, and a chair occupied most of the space. It felt as if my old college dorm room had been transported onto the ship along with the other containers, with me in it.

Raúl knocked at the door before entering, which somehow made me feel safer. He handed me two plastic containers and explained that since he could only get food for me in the kitchen in between mess times, I would have to eat cold dishes. I looked into the containers; one held a mix of rice and beans, the other a grilled chicken breast. Raúl then stood in front of me in silence, as if expecting a tip; I realized that I had not yet paid him for the passage. I handed him the bills that I had prepared and we shook hands to close the deal. He gave me a few more instructions, most of them revolving around silence and discretion. Only a couple of his mates were aware of my presence in his cabin, and the others could *not* find out. When he left, I pulled out one of the notebooks and a pen from my bag and sat at the table.

## Chapter 29

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August 25, Year 2.

The trip lasted almost four weeks, but I never got restless, except on a couple of occasions when a rough sea turned my insides out. In fact, this ship—which, at first, had felt a bit like a coffin—had morphed into a cocoon. At times, I found myself wishing that the trip would never end. Within the confines of my cabin, which rocked most of the time with the consistency of a slow metronome, a great calm inhabited me since the first hours of the trip. It helped me to process the events and emotions of the past year with as much detail as I could pack on the blue lines of my notebook.

I relived my story as I would have a treasured old fiction. I wrote and I slept, I slept and I wrote, in no particular order, at all times of the day or night. I became oblivious to the metallic sounds and loud voices descending from the main deck above. The area around my cabin was always quiet; the crewmen only seemed to come to their quarters to sleep. I was so immersed into the past that Raúl's meal deliveries, in early afternoon and late at night—albeit very brief and restricted only to a few whispers—would feel like disruptions.

I had rationed the vodka to a couple of sips a day. These usually kicked off a half-hour break during which I rolled up and down the dial of my shortwave radio in unnerved attempts to catch a clear broadcast. During most of these sessions, I would end up blasting static through my earphones, but during the third night at sea, I managed to lock onto a clear *Voice of America* broadcast. The *Fade Out Syndrome* still topped the news and a long segment of the program was dedicated to it. A long segment that felt a bit like a journalistic wake, as the two news anchors on duty reviewed the events with as much melancholy as fervor.

*“Since the arrest of Duncan Winford and his sister, many questions remain unanswered, not least of which is why did Richard Keiffer— ‘Patient Zero’—disappear? He seems to have been at the center of this whole ordeal from start to finish. The FBI stated that he had been cleared of all charges previously raised against him, yet they still seem very eager to locate him. If he is a free man, why does he continue to hide, not only from us, but from his family as well?”*

*“Last night, Kate Linder, host of the popular news show PrimeLine, received three women who had been involved with Keiffer and the Duncans at different stages of the ordeal. First was Tashia Johnson, a single mother from the Cantero district in San Francisco, who described how a beat-up Keiffer had found shelter in her basement last fall and how she had wounded him in a moment of panic, before realizing that he was more confused than dangerous. She still didn't understand how Keiffer— who himself did not seem to realize exactly where he had drifted—*

could have received at her house the passport and plane ticket that would take him away after just two days there.

*“Yuan Miller, a reporter then working for a Chicago newspaper, located Keiffer five months later in Detroit, where he lived and worked under a false identity. Once she finally managed to convince him to talk, the story he handed her seemed totally extravagant. Some old British gentleman—Lord Winford—had manipulated him through a hypnotic computer image posted online to force him to withdraw from his life and attract him to his estate in Ireland.*

*“This gentleman turned out to be the father of Duncan and Mary Ann Winford, who are now behind bars. Lord Winford had explained to Keiffer how and why he developed the psychotropic image. His goal was to help treat patients affected by a rare mental disorder, as a tribute to a son that he had lost to that illness. He hosted a dozen or so severely affected patients in his villa and tested prototypes of his visual therapy on them. Still according to Yuan Miller’s account of Keiffer’s story, Winford senior died, along with all of his patients, in a fire that destroyed his villa. Keiffer returned to the U.S. shortly after.*

*“Miller did go to Ireland to fact-check Keiffer’s story and met Duncan Winford there—she even stayed at his castle as a guest for several days. Winford and his staff dismissed all of Keiffer’s claims and stated that he had indeed been employed there for a short while and had vanished after abusing Winford’s sister one night; an allegation that has since been dismissed. Once Yuan Miller returned to the U.S., Keiffer came to her apartment to confront her since she had never gotten back to him. During the altercation that ensued, and fearing for her safety, she sprayed Keiffer with nerve gas, but he still managed to escape the police.*

*“The third guest on the show, Maggie Eswald, who runs a shelter for Vietnam vets in San Francisco, reported seeing Keiffer for the first time a couple of weeks later in a night bar of the city, where he worked behind the counter. Intrigued by the man, she had him followed by a friend and found out that Keiffer appeared to live secretly in the basement of a nearby house, which turned out to be Ms. Johnson’s again. When asked why she did not notify the police, Ms. Eswald replied that she didn’t have any evidence that Keiffer was doing anything wrong.*

*“The three women took turns during the show to explain how Lord Winford’s children—Duncan and Mary Ann—had gotten a hold of his hypnotic program and tested it on thousands of people in three U.S. cities, to demonstrate its power to potential buyers. The execution of that test gave rise to what is now known as the ‘Fade Out Syndrome’. The program, of which only one copy exists, was handed to the FBI by Yuan Miller at the time the Winford siblings were arrested. Shortly after his incarceration, Duncan Winford told the FBI agents that he had removed the therapictorial from public view well before his arrival to the U.S. and that most victims who had been programmed by it had already been affected.*

*“Indeed, in the past two days, the number of new cases of the Fade Out Syndrome reported from Boston, Denver, and San Francisco has trickled down to a couple dozen. Other than that information, though, the Winfords are not collaborating with federal agents, who are now very frustrated with the many gaps*

*in the story and concerned about the possible resurgence of the syndrome. They have asked Yuan Miller to reach out to Richard Keiffer, who probably holds many of the missing pieces. She reached out to Keiffer last night on the show, asking him to contact her and guaranteeing him complete confidentiality."*

The broadcast went on, but I had heard enough to close the loop and validate my plan. By the time I reached Buenos Aires, I would have written a full draft of the *Fade Out Syndrome* story as I had lived it. I would mail a copy of the manuscript and ask her to co-author the book. I trusted her to edit the text with objectivity and protect my interests. It would not be hard for her to find a publisher; they would fight to get that first-hand account of the syndrome. I would ask her to make sure that my part of the royalties on the book be paid to my wife. It was a pitiful counterweight to my fleeing even further away from her and the kids, but I could no longer envision any other way to contribute positively to their lives, at least in the immediate wake of the ordeal.

During the radio broadcast, the journalists had emphasized how eager FBI agents were to *talk* to me. They speculated that the FBI was puzzled by the fact that even though I had been exposed to Winford's program, my reasoning had remained functional, contrary to all other victims. The journalists were missing some clues on that one.

The main reason why the federal agents were so eager to get a hold of me was that, by now, they had figured out that the computer Yuan had handed to them was nothing but an empty shell. Its hard drive lay at the bottom of my duffel bag, right there in the corner of the cabin. It had taken me less than a minute in Davis to remove it from the computer and shove it into my pocket before closing back the case and taking it downstairs. I had not planned that move, but the moment I had seen the computer again, it had taken me back to Ireland and I had realized that it held too much power for any man, organization, or nation to control.

I waited until the last day at sea to dispose of it. I wanted to make sure that my detailed review of the past year would support that decision. A few minutes after writing the final sentence of the manuscript, I walked up to my duffel bag, grabbed the hard drive, and let it drop into the ocean through the porthole. Winford's creation plunged into the water in the same way his son had—without a sound.

I never figured out why the hypnotic program did not destroy my mind. I never even recalled hearing the *October 4* trigger at the train station on the day of my disappearance. After a while, I stopped trying to understand. I was afraid to be brought to the conclusion that the program had never had a real hold on me; that my drift had only been the crystallization of too many sleepless nights and unabated dreams. A crystallization that would have made me fall out of the clear solution of my family.

Not a forced drift. Just *a feeble drift*.

Thank you for reading this far!

If the story resonated with you, I would be grateful if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or your preferred platform.

The Amazon page for this novel is at:

<https://www.amazon.com/Feeble-Drift-Book-Fugue-Trilogy/dp/1467901318>