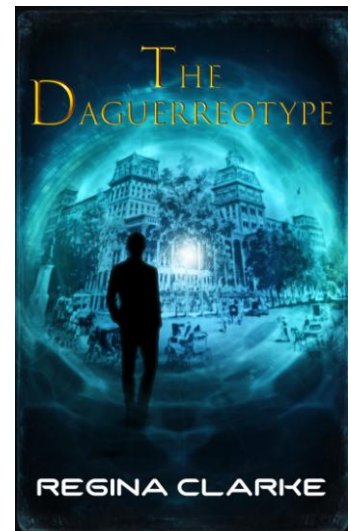
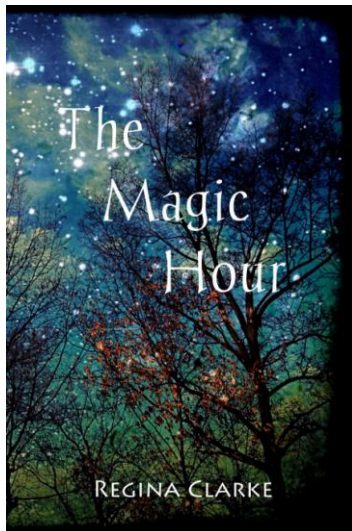


MYSTERY, TIME TRAVEL, ROMANCE



THE MAGIC HOUR

“It was not exactly dark, but a kind of twilight or gloaming. There were neither windows nor candles, and he could not make out where the twilight came from, if not through the walls and roof.”

—Childe Rowland

“The voices melted into the twilight and were mixed into the trees, and when I thought of the words they too melted away, and were mixed with the generations of men.”

—William Butler Yeats

Chapter One

NATHAN BYRNE WALKED up the steps of the police station and stopped before the polished steel and glass doors. An icy wind swept past him, sending debris flying down the street. He looked over at the coffee shop he'd just left. The commuters were starting to show up. He'd missed them by inches.

The sergeant at the desk was grinning wildly, waving a paper at him as he came inside.

“Hey, Nate, been waiting for you. Got a good one. Guy lost in the woods. He was taken, you know, by a shiny silver something or other. His fishing partner saw the whole thing.”

“Detective Byrne to you,” Nathan said, knowing it was a futile demand. “What the hell are you talking about, Manny?”

The sergeant couldn't stop smiling. “It's all in here,” he said, handing the paper over. “Captain says you're the one to look into it.”

“I'm not Missing Persons, as you and he know. So give it to someone else.”

“No can do. Captain wants to see you right away. Soon as you arrived, he said.”

Nathan studied the sergeant. He sighed and folded the piece of paper carefully and shoved it in his pocket. “Right.” As he walked away, he added, “Wipe that hyena grin off your face or I might think about doing it for you.” He heard the smothered laugh all the way down the corridor to the captain's office.

It was a nice office, a thick rug on the floor, pale ivory walls, and windows that let in daylight. His own ancient desk in the small room he shared with seven other detectives didn't have the same ambience at all, he thought. He knocked on the half-open door.

"Nathan, come in, come in." The captain was tending to a plant on the windowsill. Unsuccessfully, if the plethora of dry leaves that covered the floor nearby was any sign.

"Waste of time," he said, gesturing to the near lifeless plant. "My wife insists I need something green around. More trouble than it's worth. So, what do you think? How's it looking? I want you out there right away, but tell me what you see now, based on the report."

"I haven't read the report," Nathan said. "I just got here."

"Well, read it now, for God's sake, man!" The captain moved away from the window and sat down in his soft, high-backed chair.

Nathan pulled the paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read. When he finished he looked up at his superior. "It looks like a straightforward, run-of-the-mill case for Missing Persons, same as I told the sergeant."

"Did you look at the name of who went missing? What, is it too early for you to figure this out? Do I have to do that for you?"

Nathan stared at the man. It was unusual behavior for the captain. He reread the note. This time the name jumped out at him—Henry Jacobson. Their very own local hero. A man who'd saved three children from an elementary school fire a few years back. He also just happened to be the captain's wife's uncle, mad as a hatter in the opinion of some, owing to an early ingestion of mercury from his work in a coal plant. Wasn't mercury the same chemical used by hatters for making hats back in the 1800s? Nathan wondered. Now where had he picked that up? The captain's wife adored the man, and the captain loved his wife.

"I want you on it full-time."

"Wait a minute, I have five cases I'm working, and three of my detectives are out sick with the flu. Not to mention I have to be in court today. I promised Stamworth."

"He's a lawyer. He'll handle things just fine. I already told him to leave you out of it for now. Paulson's going to follow up on your caseload for a while and he'll temp the squad. Nothing for you to do but find Henry. This isn't a debate," the captain added. "I want a report every hour." He spun his chair around and faced the window, his usual method of dismissal.

As he left, Nathan couldn't resist adding one comment.

“You know, Colin, this isn’t the kind of work I should be doing.”

Still focused on the view of the city beyond the window, the captain answered him. “Captain is the rank. Captain Oberson to you. Don’t forget that next time.”

As Nathan closed the door behind him, he saw Oberson picking up more dry leaves from the floor.

Teams were already packing up when Nathan arrived at the site where Henry Jacobson had gone missing.

“Detective Byrne!” Ames, the officer in charge of the scene, was walking toward him. “They told me you’d be coming out. We’re done, for the most part, but I can show you what we have so far.” Although he’d been there for hours collecting evidence, his uniform looked as if he had just put it on.

“How’d you keep so clean in this muck, Ames?”

“Oh, changed, sir. Always keep a fresh uniform in the car. Once the heavy work is done. Don’t like a mess.”

Nathan nodded, repressing a desire to comment.

The area was idyllic, the river flowing over rocks, a soft wind high in the trees, green moss on the banks. It was cold, but everything was tranquil and contained.

“Two fishermen, right? One of them moved downstream when this all started?”

“That’s what he said. Then he rushed up to help his partner reel in what they thought was a prize trout, and all they came up with was some piece of metal stuck in the rocks underwater. The tracks are clear enough where they stood on the bank. We haven’t found anything else—except that one partner went missing in the middle of the river.”

“Yes. Unlikely, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would,” Ames said, his expression serious.

“So where is the one who didn’t drown, get abducted, or whatever it was?”

Ames pointed toward the cars lining the dirt road, where Nathan had parked his own. “That would be Parker Morris. Over there in the truck. Hasn’t said anything to anyone except over and over that his friend Henry was gone.”

“You know who Henry is, right?” Nathan added.

“Yes. I do. They pulled me away from my day off—it’s my son’s birthday. Emergency, they said.”

Nathan nodded again. “Where’s this metal object?”

The sergeant looked surprised for the first time. “Why, I—there wasn’t any. That is, no one on the team has reported finding it. I figured he’d imagined it, that fisherman, or wants us to think he saw something. I mean, what this is about, I don’t think it’s something they saw in the river.”

“You think they went at it for some reason and Henry lost?”

“Maybe. Before I go I’ll check that spot in the river again, just to be sure.”

“Fine, Ames, you do that.” Nathan started toward the cars.

“Detective?” Nathan turned around. Nan Seymour stood behind him with an annoyed look on her face.

“They take you away from something good, too, Nan?”

“Like, the first date I’ve had in six months. We were having brunch in a bookstore, not my first choice, but at least we were somewhere. He’ll disappear before I get back.”

“Speaking of disappearing.”

“Right. We don’t have a body. You can trust me on that. I’m done now,” Nan said, her eyes glancing over the scene as the last evidence bags were being hauled over to the crime van. “If I may ask, what are you doing here, Nate? You’re homicide. This is just a guy lost in the woods.”

“Henry Jacobson is more than a lost fisherman.”

“Ah, yes, that did register. Related to one of the sainted Obersons. That still doesn’t explain you. Oh, wait. You’re the prize, aren’t you, so the wife feels everything possible is being done for her dear uncle. Well, no traces of a crime as far as I found.”

“I was just going to interview the partner.”

“Well, I’d love to stay and watch, but I’ve got to examine those precious bags full of nothing but mud and leaves right away. A medical examiner’s life is always exciting. I’ll let you know what I find, you being in charge of this one now. Your lucky day.” She laughed and walked away.

Parker Morris was sitting sideways in the driver’s seat of the small truck, his feet on the ground. He was old, with wispy gray hair, wearing a yellow vinyl jacket and hugging his

knapsack against his chest. The man was trembling, more from fear than the cold, Nathan guessed.

Morris gave a start when he saw Nathan approach. “You the detective? About time. I’ve been here for hours. I was just playing a game, for heaven’s sake!” he said, his voice rising. “Henry wasn’t buying it—I mean he went to look and then he was gone. So what’s going on? You’re supposed to help, I know you are. You have to find him!”

“I need you to come with me down to the station. We can talk there. I want to hear the whole story and it’s cold out here.”

“Who’s looking for Henry? Where did everybody go, tell me that!”

“We’re doing what we need to do, Mr. Morris,” Nathan said in a soothing voice. “There’s a crew sweeping the river downstream, and we have four officers tracking your friend’s usual routines. If he’s wandered off, or he’s hurt, he might go to a familiar location. I can explain it all better down at the station. You can come in my car. I’ll have Sergeant Ames follow in your truck.”

Morris looked around doubtfully before getting up. He stood there with bewilderment in his eyes.

Nathan beckoned to Ames, who got in the driver’s seat of the truck and started up, waiting for Nathan to lead them out.

Morris didn’t speak on the way downtown. He just hugged his knapsack and stared straight ahead. If he was guilty of anything, he was likely to give it up right away once they started the interrogation.

As he drove, it occurred to Nathan that the job wasn’t giving him the same thrill it used to. Being assigned to this case didn’t help. He was tired, but he’d slept just fine the night before. How long had it been since the job had made him feel good? He was still making a difference, he knew that, and the tour of duty right then was atypical. There were plenty of real cases to solve, things to fix.

No, it was something else. He sighed. He considered himself a reasonably self-aware man. The source of his discontent ought to be apparent to him, but it wasn’t. *Nothing you’ll look at, Nate, right?* The thought came with the image of Jennie’s face rising in front of him. No, he wouldn’t go there. He wasn’t ready for that.

When he turned into the police station parking lot, Morris seemed to become more alert.

“This it?” he asked. Still clutching the knapsack, he got out and went into the station without protest.

Nathan had him checked into one of the interview rooms and went to get some coffee. As he lifted the pot that was, as usual, almost empty, Andy Paulson walked by and smiled.

“Solved the B&E at the Caine Center for you, Byrne. Owner acted in self-defense.”

Nathan set the pot down and stared at him. Then he remembered. The captain had given Paulson his roster of cases. The man was a kiss-up first-class. Whatever he was doing to fix the cases fast, Nathan knew there’d be shortcuts that would blow up later.

“Yesterday the medical examiner said the victim was shot in the back. Where I come from, that isn’t self-defense.”

“You have it wrong. In fact, I’ve found a few things you got wrong in other cases, too, Byrne, but I’m clearing the decks for you. Anyway, owner is the real vic in this. He’s a candidate for a heart attack and lucky he didn’t get one with the scare he had. Hey, don’t believe me. Ask your pal Anna at the morgue—she made the call.”

Paulson turned toward him at the door as he headed out. “I’m taking care of you,” he said.

Nathan poured coffee into his cup, took a sip, and grimaced. He threw it away and sighed. What he needed to do was finish this farce by finding Henry Jacobson and getting his real work back before Paulson wrecked everything.

Just as he started toward the interview room where they’d put Morris, a sergeant who had worked the scene out in the woods, approached him.

“Hey, Lieutenant, we’ve got a woman out here says she’s a witness to what happened to the missing guy.”

A witness? It could mean he had the quick break he wanted to close the case, or it could be a spanner in the works that would drag the whole thing out.

“Have someone sit with our guest in there,” he said, pointing his thumb at the interview room. “I’ll see her first.”

“I can stay with him.” As he opened the door he glanced at Nathan. “She’s one hell of a looker,” he added.

Walking down the corridor to the station lobby, Nathan felt the tiredness roll over him again. It was deeper than fatigue. There was no good reason to stay on the job, and no good reason not to. He was at a stalemate. He’d passed forty a few years ago. Maybe early retirement wasn’t a

bad idea, after all. But he knew better. If this job wasn't what he wanted, he didn't want a vacuum of time, either. He wouldn't last two years at home doing nothing. Be lucky if he lasted two months.

The front desk was in chaos, two men in business suits trying to attack one another, three officers pulling them apart. Manny had come around and cuffed both men by the time Nathan reached them.

"Put them in a holding cell—just make sure they aren't in the same one," the sergeant said to the officers, dusting off his hands and retreating back behind the desk.

"Nice going, Manny," Nathan said.

"Pain in the butt, the both of them. Ran red lights, rammed each other. Don't ask. Looks as if they were both at the same sales convention over at the Beaker. Racing each other like teenagers. Damn fools. Once they cool off, I'll send them packing."

"There's supposed to be someone out here waiting for me, and I—"

Nathan stopped. A woman was sitting on the bench against the back wall. The room seemed to fade around him. Her hair was black, in waves down to her shoulders, and her skin was unusually pale, almost translucent. She turned her head and looked at him and he felt as if he'd stopped breathing. Her eyes were deep black, like her hair. She seemed to be gazing right through him, yet he also had the feeling she was aware of him as intensely as he was of her. A current of emotion he couldn't identify rushed through him.

She stood up and walked toward him, holding out her hand.

"Hello, Detective Byrne. I am Naliv," she said.

Her grip was strong and sure. The room came back into focus and he remembered what he was there for.

"Your last name?"

"Just Naliv, if you do not mind."

He did mind, but he let it go for the moment. "You reported that you saw something happen out at the river?"

"Yes."

"You're a friend of Parker Morris and Henry Jacobson?"

"I do not know those names, but I did see two men out there. I know that one of them is missing. I think I can help you with that."

“All right. I need to hear everything. If you’ll come with me.” He turned around and started back down the corridor. Her step was so soft that he looked back in spite of himself to see if she was following him. When he opened the door to the second interview room he was dismayed to see that whoever had been there last had failed to clean up. An empty pizza box and crumpled soda cans littered the table.

“Hold on,” he said. He grabbed everything and threw it into the wastebasket and wiped the table down with a leftover napkin. He indicated a chair for her to sit in and he took one for himself on the other side of the table. Just then he heard a clicking sound that seemed to increase rapidly, until he realized it was rain against the window. To his surprise the sky had grown darker and even the streetlights had come on. Good thing they’d covered the crime site already—assuming it was one. The tiredness washed over him again.

“Perhaps it is because you do not take time to feel,” Naliv said. She sat watching him.

“What?” he said, startled.

“This sudden weariness you experienced just now. It happens because you do not take time to know what is going on. You do not take time to experience your life. You are always trying to catch up to it. Or to forget it.”

Where had that come from? What the hell did this stranger know about him? He took out his notepad and tried to ignore what she had said.

“So what is it you think you saw in the woods that will help our case, help us find the missing man?” he asked her.

“I cannot help you find him. I can just tell you what happened.” Her voice was rhythmic, with an accent he couldn’t name.

“First, tell me who you are, and what you were doing near the river.”

“I have only come here recently. I arrived there, at the river, where I was supposed to be. I know that the two men were fishing. They moved apart. One of them got his line caught on a rock in the middle of the river.”

“Yes, we know all that,” Nathan said. “What do you mean where you’re supposed to be?”

“And next,” she said, as if he hadn’t spoken, “the first man pretended to see something in the water. His friend doubted him and went to check for himself. What he found was an object that was not intended to be there. It was a mistake, a serious mistake. I am here to retrieve it.”

Nathan stopped taking notes and stared at her.

“I’m not unaware of how this must sound to you, but it is the truth. What was in the water was left there inadvertently. No one should have seen it or located it. I am so sorry this had to become an event for you.”

An event? What was she talking about? Something that was classified? Some kind of device, something dropped that was supposed to be top secret? Ridiculous, Nathan thought. He was losing it. The nearest military base was over in the next state. There was as much chance of any kind of secret government maneuver occurring in their town as there was of Henry really being abducted.

“I’d like to see some identification.” Why hadn’t he asked for that right away? Shape up, he told himself. She was just a witness, and maybe not even that. So far, she wasn’t making any sense.

“I do not have anything like that on me,” she said. “Let me tell you what I saw. When the second man—the man you are seeking—disappeared, he came to us. We understood immediately what had happened and that we had to take action. That is why I am here. We can give him back to you, but we need the device. We need you to give it to us.”

Nathan threw down his pen and leaned back in his chair. If he didn’t know better he’d say he was having some kind of dream and he’d wake up, find himself at his desk, his face stuck to a piece of paper and drool on his chin.

Take the short road, he thought.

“We didn’t find anything out there. No ‘object.’ I have the sergeant’s report and the medical examiner confirmed it. All they saw were a few tracks and camping gear. Nothing else.”

The woman focused on the window.

The drops of rain looked dazzling in the reflection of the streetlight. More beautiful than he’d noticed in a while.

“We do have a limitation,” she said. “We cannot determine where the object is now. We need you to help us do that. We need to find it. It is the only way we can return your friend to you. I assure you of this.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Nathan asked, against his will. She had to be a nutcase. He was sweating, and his mouth was dry. Maybe he was close to having a heart attack. No. Stress, that’s all it was.

“Please,” she said. “Just believe that there is no reason to delay this. We are glad to return your friend to you. We will do him no harm while he is with us, but we must have the device back.”

Play along, Nathan decided. What else could he do? He didn’t seem to have the strength to stand up or get someone else to come into the room for confirmation. He felt himself in deep water, as if he were swimming below the sea and couldn’t find the surface.

“Right. So, let’s say I do find this object of yours. It’s evidence. I can’t just hand it over to you. It’s not how we do things. I’ll say it again—I need your full name and address.”

Naliv studied him. “When you find the device, I will know. I have linked with you. I know your name is Nathaniel. I just wanted to be sure you would look for it. I will be with you when you are successful.” She looked around as if searching for something and shook her head.

“Thank you,” she said, standing up and holding out her hand again. Nathan felt once more the strength of her grip. He noticed that her black hair seemed to shine even under the fluorescent light, falling onto her shoulders now like strands of silver.

“You do realize we need to be able to reach you. You’re a witness,” he said.

“Not exactly,” she said. “Can you hold me here?”

“No,” he said.

The next moment she was at the door and gone. Everything was silent, empty, like a vacuum, it seemed to him.

No one had seen her leave, when he asked.

“Lieutenant? You want to interview that fisherman guy now? He’s real edgy.” The sergeant was standing outside the door of the interview room where Morris still waited.

“What? Yeah, I’ll go in now.”

As he entered the room he nodded back at the sergeant. “Hey, listen, check with Manny. Find out if he got any ID on that woman who claimed to be a witness.”

“I thought you just interviewed her,” the sergeant began.

“I did. Just check, okay?”

Morris was sitting hunched over still wearing his yellow jacket, an untouched soda can in front of him. Nathan could hear the rain coming down even harder, the wind pushing at the glass.

“I want to go home,” the man said plaintively.

“Soon, Morris, soon. How about you tell me what’s going on, and who Naliv is,” Nathan said as he sat down in a chair beside him. Keep it friendly, he thought. The guy was wired. Calm him down and finish the damn interrogation. The day had already been long enough and he was missing lunch.

“Who? Don’t know any Naleef. What are you doing about Henry? It’s raining, and cold. He’s probably already frozen to death. You’ve left him out there to die!”

“Have you got someone you can call?”

Morris shook his head. “There’s just Henry. Everybody else is dead.”

“What?” Nathan sat up, interested.

“Well, look at me. I’m 76, same as Henry. Everyone I know has passed on, just about. Except Henry. And that niece of his, the captain’s wife.”

“Ah, I see,” Nathan said, leaning back in the chair again. The whole morning had turned out to be a bust.

“So, can I go?”

“Just run your story past me, okay?”

“I already gave it twice, to the sergeant here and that sergeant out in the woods.”

“Sergeant Ames, yes, I know. I just need to hear it for myself. Then we’ll see about what you can do next.”

Morris sighed. He rubbed his face with his hands and clutched at the knapsack again.

“It’s what I already said. Henry and I go fishing every weekend, usually over at the pier. This time we wanted to do some fly fishing on the river. He’d never done it before, and he was no good at it, kept messing up my line. So I went downstream a little ways, where his line couldn’t reach mine and I could get some honest fishing in. Well, he hooked one and yelled for me to come see, pleased as could be. He knew I’d be surprised he’d done something right.”

Morris stopped and stared at the wall where police bulletins filled an old cork board. He moved his head slowly from side to side.

“So I put my own rod in its cache on the bank and went up to where he was. He was pulling on the line, his rod bent so far I expected it would break, and he kept saying something was stuck. The old fool thought a fish was stuck in the rocks. Like that could ever happen. I told him I’d check on it, and went out to the spot. I didn’t see any fish or anything, of course. Then I—”

This time he stopped and looked down at his hands.

“Keep going,” Nathan said.

“I pretended like I’d seen a shark or something—ran over to him and told him to get out fast, just like something was chasing me. He usually fell for it, but this time he didn’t and he went over there himself, into the middle of the river. He just stayed there awhile, looking in the water, and after a bit he moved in a circle around the spot, peering in. I thought maybe he was having me on, getting back at me somehow, only he didn’t say anything. The next thing, he just looked around, for all the world like he’s admiring the scenery, and he was gone!”

“What do you mean, gone?” Nathan insisted.

“Blast it, how many times are you people going to make me say it? He was just plain gone! He was there, and then he wasn’t. I waited, but I got afraid. I called his name, but nothing. That’s when I went and got help. Only none of you have been any help at all. He’s probably dead by now. Only friend I have.”

“What about Naliv?”

“I told you before. I don’t know anyone called that. Can I go? I want to go home.”

“Fine,” Nathan said. “The keys to your truck are at the front desk.”

Morris got up so fast the chair scraped across the floor with a loud, screeching sound. “Only, you’ll let me know you hear anything about Henry, right?”

“We’ll be talking with you soon enough,” Nathan said. He watched Morris walk with a halting gait down the corridor to the front entrance, still holding the knapsack as if it were a life jacket.

Chapter Two

WHEN HE OPENED the door to his apartment the stillness hit him. It felt like a dead thing. He hung his raincoat on a hook near the door and kicked off his shoes. In the kitchen he put leftovers in the microwave and went into the living room and turned on a lamp. The soft light made him feel better. He poured out a glass of wine, determined to think about nothing at all.

That wasn't so easy. What was it about her? Naliv. What kind of name was that? Maybe Russian, Eastern European. That could account for the accent and the formal way she spoke. He swallowed the wine and poured another glass. It was too expensive to guzzle down, but for once he didn't care.

How long had it been since he'd cared about a woman? Not that he cared now. Georgia had left a long time ago with most of his worldly goods and his best friend. He'd always been aware that he was the victim of the classic cliché. That still rankled him more than the actual fact she'd left at all.

There was Jennie. Again he pushed the thought away. Not now.

He sat down to his lukewarm supper, finished it quickly, and threw the container into the trash. Hands in his pockets, he paced the floor, and finally stopped and looked out the window. The rain had stopped. The streetlights left the wet road in amber light.

"Who are you, Naliv?" he said softly into the room.

Nothing she'd said to him made any sense. She wasn't a viable witness. She'd just shown up at the station. He had no real proof she'd been at the scene, and he hadn't managed to find out anything about her. "Like she had me in a trance," he said into the glass, "only that's no excuse."

When his cell phone went off he let it ring several times before answering. "Yeah, Byrne here."

"Well, Detective Byrne, it's your friendly medical examiner with a late bulletin."

"Nan. What do you have? Something I can use?"

"That's for you to find out. I need a shower after grubbing through this junk and debris, that much I know. At least the bodies I get are in one piece most of the time. Here's the thing. I found trace elements on some of the leaves they packed up. Nothing I've identified yet. The only part that matters is that it showed up on the stuff they collected from the east bank, where the guys

were fishing. Where they had their camp. I'm analyzing it now. If I had to guess, and I don't do that, it could be cleaning fluid, or some kind of solvent."

"That's it?"

"That's all there's likely to be till the analysis is done, but I'm not expecting any surprises. Seems an obvious outcome, doesn't it?"

"You mean that the whole river story is made up, that something happened between them on shore."

"Yes, and I'm assuming that already occurred to you ages ago. That's exactly what I'm thinking. Happily, I don't have to prove it, you do. Gotta go."

"Another date?"

"Oh, sure. No, that happy camper has bolted away. My job is such a turn-on to the men I meet. Try as I can to prevent it, they always find out. The call to the woods gave me away, didn't it, yes indeed. Now I really have an agenda to keep, so bye, bye. I'll let you know when the results come in."

"Wait, Nan. Different issue. Did you tell Paulson that the Lewis case is self-defense?"

"Andy's such an eager fellow, isn't he, in his climb to the top? No, I didn't. You should know me better than that. What I told him—and what is in the report update I sent him at his request—was that the bullet entered on the right side at a downward angle of sixty degrees, meaning Lewis shot the burglar invading his home from halfway down his staircase just as the man was turning away from him, probably trying to escape, since silver and jewelry weren't in evidence, or any other pretties. Andy seems to think it was a fair fight because even though the victim had no weapon, he was after all where he didn't belong. I'd call him an idiot but that's just me. Are we done here?"

"Sorry. Thanks."

"By the way, the guy wants your job. It's his baby for now, and he has no doubt he deserves it permanently. I know you didn't know that," she said, laughing as she rang off.

Nathan stared at the glass of wine he was holding. He had a sudden visual of the fisherman he'd interviewed. Had any of the officers checked out Morris' knapsack? He'd been with him at the riverside and in the car and at the station and Morris had carried it the whole time. The man had held on to it like it was his baby, his arms wrapped around it. As if he was protecting it. Or hiding something?

He punched in the speed dial for Ames. The shrieks of an unhappy child greeted him at the other end when Ames picked up.

“Detective Byrne? Listen, I’m just—could you wait just a minute, sir?”

Nathan heard a series of clicks and then Ames was on the line again, the background noise gone but a faint echo surrounding his voice. “I’m in the cellar, sir. Quiet here. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Morris—the man we brought in from the river—he was carrying a canvas knapsack. Did anyone search it?”

There was silence on the other end. “Knapsack?” Ames repeated. “Why no. I think I can fairly say, no.”

To his credit, he didn’t try to defend himself, Nathan thought. Ames knew the oversight was serious.

“Okay. Never mind. I never did, either.”

“Is it—do you think—”

“Sergeant, see me first thing in the morning. We’ll go visit him and find out what’s in it, unless he demands a warrant.”

Poor Ames, he thought as he hung up. His night at home with the family, crying baby or not, had just gotten worse.

The thought struck him instantly. What was he doing? This couldn’t wait until morning. It was a case, and time was everything. What was the matter with him? He called the front desk.

“Address for that Morris guy?” Manny said when Nathan asked. “Got it right here. He lives in that new development over on Isleton, 2013 East Isleton. Want some backup?”

“No. I just need to ask him a few more questions.”

On the drive over, Nathan thought again how the man had held on to the knapsack, and wondered for the fifth time that day if he was losing it. It was something he shouldn’t have missed. He thought about calling Morris first, but he’d rather surprise him with a visit. Henry’s friend or not, he knew more than he had told them, and no one had challenged him on that.

“Damn it!” he shouted at the windshield, but in his voice he felt a frustration that came from a lot more than failing to check out a man who might have killed his best friend. Pay attention, he reminded himself. Be ready.

At 2013 East Isleton all the lights were on. It looked like a Christmas tree. Nathan used the brass knocker and heard it reverberate through the house.

Morris peered out through one of the glass panels that flanked the door. He disappeared but after a moment there was the sound of a deadbolt being released and clicks as two more locks were opened. The door swung inward.

Nathan entered into a foyer, wall sconces lighting the oak wood floor.

"It's about that pack of mine, right? Thought you might be by, would figure it out," Morris said, his voice resigned. "Fact is, I was sure someone would've asked me about it when I was down there in the station."

"Someone should have," Nathan said. "As yet, though, I haven't figured out anything."

He followed Morris, who walked into the living room and took a stand near a fireplace set with logs but unlit. An old green sofa was to his right.

"I do know you're lying to me with this story of yours."

Morris looked at him. "You're a man with the best years of his life still happening. You don't know anything."

"I need to see the knapsack," Nathan said.

"I'm not hiding it. It's right there," Morris said, pointing to a chair in the corner that was covered in blue velvet. The dirty yellow canvas looked incongruous on it. "Go on. Look inside. I don't want to anymore. Henry's gone for good. I know it now. Has to be."

Nathan walked over and picked up the knapsack. It was heavy.

"What is it?" he said.

Morris shrugged and sat down on the sofa, where he compulsively smoothed the worn nap over and over with his hand.

Nathan pulled a pair of latex gloves from the coat pocket where he always kept them, put them on, undid the straps of the knapsack, and pulled back the canvas flap. He lifted out the object that lay inside and held it up, looking over at Morris in surprise. As far as Nathan could tell, it was nothing but a large river rock. Why would the man carry it around with him as if it were something precious?

Suddenly he understood. It was the weapon. It had to be. Morris had used it to strike at his best friend, probably not intending to kill him, and in shock, kept the evidence. Nathan almost felt sorry for the old man. He seemed to have shrunk in size just in the last few minutes.

“You’ll have to come with me,” Nathan said.

“Uh-huh,” Morris said, his head still down, his eyes now fixed on the floor. “You going to find Henry? You have to find his body. I can’t stand thinking he’s just going to rot in some part of the river, or maybe all tangled up in the branches that hang out over it in places, you know? You going to keep looking for him?”

“Yes, we are. That much I can promise you.” Nathan went over to Morris and took his arm. There was no need to use the handcuffs, he was certain of that. “Come along now.”

Only then did Morris look up, his eyes going directly to the knapsack and resting on the rock that Nathan had left on the chair.

“What’s that?” he said.

Nathan followed his look. “It’s what killed Henry, isn’t it?” he said, keeping his tone level.

“What the hell are you getting at? What’d you do to it?”

“Calm down!” Nathan said. “It’s what it is, Morris. You know that as well as I do.”

“That’s a goddamn rock. That’s not what I took out of the river! You brought it here! Trying to fool me into saying what isn’t true?”

“I didn’t bring anything. This is what was in the knapsack. You saw me open it. You had it with you all day before now.”

Morris was an old man, but almost as tall as Nathan, and whatever was setting him off had gotten the adrenalin going in him. Nathan held in a sigh. He’d need the handcuffs after all, along with some backup. He stepped back a few feet and took his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Manny—hey, you ever plan on going home? Yeah, that backup. Send Ames here. Yes, I know he’s off duty. Tell him I want him to secure things, so he’ll need to stay here after I leave.” As he talked on the phone he watched Morris, who had gotten up and began pacing back and forth. Nathan stayed between Morris and the chair and its contents. He snapped the phone shut and let the man pace a few minutes longer, watching him closely.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you,” Morris said, stopping and facing Nathan. “Why, you even think I did something to Henry! Maybe hit him on the head with that rock? I’m not stupid. I know how a cop’s mind works. Always suspicious. You don’t know what you’re talking about, you hear? We came over together, Henry and me, on a freight ship! Yorkshire boys, the both of us, all the way to here from Sheffield, expecting good things to happen. Not much came of any of it, but we always took care of each other. You’re dead wrong. Dead as Henry must be.”

Morris ran his hands over his face and then, startled, looked up as the rotating blue lights from Ames' car flashed through the window. Nathan wished he'd thought to warn Manny to have Ames cut the lights when he came in.

"I'm telling you the absolute truth," Morris said, his face drawn and his eyes brighter than they should be. "Only, you don't believe me, do you! What was in the river is what made Henry disappear, and I got it and put it in my knapsack and left that spot as fast as I could. I told that police sergeant what happened."

He took a step toward Nathan. "So where'd it go?" he said, his voice rising as he moved closer to the chair, staring at the dirty knapsack and the river rock beside it.

Ames was in the doorway, his gun in his hand.

"Put that away, sergeant. Morris isn't armed. He's going to come with us, no problem." Nathan went over to the old man and cuffed him, feeling somehow that what he was doing didn't make sense, but for the life of him he didn't know why. Morris seemed to crumble when the handcuffs went on, as if all the energy had drained out of him.

"Get him in the car," he told Ames. "After that, come back in and secure the house. Forensics can wait till morning. I have what we need for now."

"What's that?" Ames asked, looking around the room.

"The murder weapon," Nathan answered, pointing to the knapsack and the rock.

"It's not bagged."

"It will be, sergeant, in about sixty seconds," Nathan said.

"We don't have anything big enough."

Nathan felt an intense irritation. What was that about? Not the hour. Not the old man. It must be Ames. The literalness that marked the man drove him nuts. But no, it wasn't really Ames, either. He brushed the feeling away and focused on the situation.

"Trust me, it'll be fine. I'll put it back in the knapsack. I'm wearing gloves, see?" Nathan waved his hands with their latex skins. "Just get him in the car. I'll be out in a minute."

With Ames and Morris out of the house, Nathan took time to study the rock again. He couldn't see any blood, but the river water could have taken care of that. Still, if there was something to find, Nan would find it.

It was such an awkward weapon. He could see it happening, some sudden rage possessing Morris, and his picking up the nearest thing he could find and using it, then coming to his senses,

probably horrified at what he had done. A lifetime of friendship, a few seconds of rage. It made no sense, but he thought about how often it was an outcome he'd seen, maybe a hundred times over the years. Repressing a sigh, he hefted the stone, laid it carefully back into the knapsack, and took the yellow canvas bag out to Ames' car.

Morris was in the back seat behind the grille. The blue lights were still flashing but no neighbors had come over to see what was going on. It seemed odd, but what didn't, just now, he thought. Here he'd been sure Oberson was using him on a trivial case and it turned out to be a homicide after all, right up his alley. Yet he didn't feel any thrill in finding that out. The story didn't really seem to have a good side.

"Tell you what," he said to Ames, making a sudden decision. "You take him on down. I'll finish up here instead and follow."

"Yes, sir," Ames said, reaching out for the knapsack.

Nathan stepped back. "No, I'll hold on to this, bring it with me when I'm done here."

Ames looked at him curiously. It was against protocol not to bring in the evidence along with the suspect, but he wasn't going to question anything his superior wanted to do. That wasn't his job, or his inclination.

"All right. I'll get him booked and ready for you to interview."

The night was cold, with fog settling in. The house was still burning lights in every room. Nathan wished he'd grabbed his winter coat instead of his raincoat.

"I won't be long," he told his sergeant. "Just going to shut off all these damn lights and tape the doors. You be sure to put in the paperwork for forensics. I want them here at daybreak."

Ames had gotten back into the driver's seat. To Nathan's relief he shut off the blue strobe.

He stood in the driveway until Ames' car was out of sight. Back in the house he went from room to room checking what was there and shutting off the lights one by one. Nothing seemed particularly out of order. It wasn't a clean house, it had a smell to it, but it was tidy. The furniture was expensive, too, but old. An old man's house, Nathan thought, and suddenly he saw himself a few decades down the road living the same way, a clone of Morris. He pushed the image away.

It took another half hour to finish surveying the house and to tape the entranceway. He pressed the switch on the inside knob to lock the door before shutting it, but then realized he had to leave the deadbolt free and swore when he remembered he hadn't taken the key from Morris. Forensics would need it. Hell, what was the matter with him?

He walked down the driveway to the street where a halogen streetlight sent out its harsh white glare. How he hated that invention, so ugly, uncompromising. Give him the old sodium lamps any day, even with their shadows.

Nathan looked back at the house. It'd be awhile before Morris saw it again, if ever. With all the lights out he felt its emptiness like a living thing.

"You're one dissatisfied, morose bastard, Byrne," he muttered as he opened the car door and slid inside.

The fog had thickened. He drove slowly and met only a few other cars, even near the ramp to the highway. His preference was to take a back road whenever he could, and after spending eight years in the same city there wasn't a cutoff he didn't know. He decided to take the route past the local vineyard, knowing its hills would likely be above the fog layer. It was also a shortcut to the station.

Ten minutes into the drive he couldn't see anything at all. Shifting down to second gear, he calculated how far he had to go. Four miles to the station, but only one to reach the hills. As long as he didn't meet anyone or hit a deer, he'd be fine, even if it took him an hour. They'd know at the station that the weather was holding him up. Ames had probably just missed the worst of it.

Nathan glanced over at the knapsack on the seat beside him. Odd how Morris kept hugging it to himself the way he had. Normal behavior would have been to throw the stone back in the river, where there'd be no chance of any traces surviving and most likely it'd never be found. Only a certain kind of man keeps the weapon he's used to kill his best friend, like a souvenir. Morris wasn't the type. In Nathan's book, he didn't read like a killer at all. But then, provoked, anyone had it in them to kill. Of that he was entirely certain.

"You are wrong."

He almost swerved off the road before braking and coming to a full stop. Outside the glass he saw the fog surrounding the car, his headlights hardly penetrating the thick mass that swirled before them.

He forced himself to take a deep breath and looked behind him. There was nothing there. The voice had sounded in his ear. He'd have sworn he felt the exhaling of air against the side of his face as the words were spoken.

He waited, but there was nothing else. Shaking his head with impatience at his own folly, Nathan started up the car again and moved forward. He was already on an incline and a few minutes later the car crept out of the fog into a star-filled night. He was in the hills.

It had seemed peculiar to him, people setting up a vineyard in that part of the country, but the grapes flourished in a landscape where flooding wasn't unusual. For now, he was just glad to see the rows of vines in the ambient light. The branches were bare in the early December cold, the vineyard dormant, waiting until the warmth came again, all of it waiting to unfold.

He was exhausted, but he'd have to grab sleep at the station if he wanted to be around when the crime scene crew showed up. That was fine with him. At least at the station it'd be noisy, and he'd have less time to think. Lately, his train of thought in general hadn't been inspiring. If he went home, it'd be worse.

He opened the side window and breathed in the crisp, clear air. "So let's find out what you did, Morris, old boy, and close this out. It's depressing me, okay?" he said into the night. He looked at the clock above the car radio. In fifteen minutes he'd be there and his first act would be to tell Manny to go the hell home.

"You will not be able to do that," the same voice said. Nathan swerved again and found himself riding the bank until the car hit a tree that had grown sideways on a massive boulder fronting the road. The tree buffered the impact. He was shaken, but seemed to be unhurt.

"You must come with me," he heard her say. He had no doubt this time whose voice it was.

The Daguerreotype

“EACH PLATE WAS UNIQUE. It first required a thin layer of silver. Fumes from iodine crystals ensured it was light sensitive. Once the plate had been exposed, the artist would develop the image using mercury fumes. The last step was to fix the image, which could be done using ordinary salt.”

The speaker used his laser pointer to show the various stages of the process to his audience. They were a restless crowd, about as interested in the history he was offering, he knew, as the spider he’d observed making a web at the base of the lecturn.

“I’ll be glad to answer any questions.” It was a required statement but a doubtful one, he thought, looking out at the sea of faces bent to their handhelds, engrossed in their texting. The class of 2016 didn’t thrill him, but their behavior wasn’t just a lack of respect, he mused. Maybe, in fact, that had nothing to do with it. It was more likely an engrained lack of curiosity, a generational incapacity to realize how vast the world around them was, or maybe, he considered as he watched them, they knew it all too well, and it was a fear of what that world was. He could understand that, if it were so.

“How did they get the image, again?” The question came from a young woman in the third row. It startled him enough to discover someone was listening to him that for a moment he didn’t answer.

“They used the camera obscura,” he began.

“Hey, I know them! Tracyanne’s band from Scotland!” The voice echoed from somewhere in the middle of the hall. Laughter followed. The young woman in the third row turned around and called out “Not that camera obscura, idiot.” More laughter.

He glanced around the room. A few had stopped what they were doing and were paying attention, much to his surprise.

“Camera obscura is Latin for ‘dark chamber,’” he went on, encouraged, “and its principles have been known for over two thousand years. Light from a setting or view outside is projected through a pinhole into a dark space where the setting then appears on the opposite wall. This can be an entire room or a small box. It was the inspiration for Daguerre, and thus a major part of his invention of the daguerreotype I’ve been describing.”

“So what, teacher?” Another anonymous voice called out. A responsive titter ran through the audience. It interested him in that moment to realize he was actually happier when they were all busy using their devices of distraction.

“It’s Professor Inman, thanks, and you may think this is irrelevant, but there are some people who practice capturing images this way even today as an art form. More to the point, they achieve something our digital photography can’t manage.” This time the laughter was brief and he was sure, derisive. It didn’t matter. He had ten minutes left of this dreary time. He’d say what he wanted to say most of all, comforted by knowing none of them would perceive the underlying meaning.

“Resolution is how we perceive reality--the degree to which we're able to see what is there, and sometimes, what doesn't appear to be present, but is. Think of it this way.” He stopped a moment and smiled to himself. Not likely anyone would think of it at all. “If you cover a camera lens with a sheer piece of cloth, you can still see everything, but there is a vagueness to some of the detail. The same is true when we compare a digital image and a well-exposed daguerreotype in a large format. The digital image with its pixilation can't match the fine detail acutely perceived by the daguerreotype. In fact, the daguerreotype gives a reality...that is, an access to reality that no other medium has matched since.”

“It sounds fascinating, but what use is it? Even artistically? Aren’t we all about manipulating images now?” Again the young woman in the third row.

“Ah, yes, the proliferation of CGI. That’s a different area. It holds no desire for truth.”

She entered a dialogue with him even though it was obvious no one else would join in. “So you think in this old-fashioned form of photography, this pre-photography, that there’s some kind of truth? Even the people posing for it don’t look real.”

“That’s a product of exposure times. They had to stay still on average for thirty seconds. Their expressions often appeared rigid.”

“I know. But what has truth to do with it?”

What indeed, he thought as he made his way home on foot through the narrow streets of the campus. It was the right question. He studied the light from the street lamps, observing the shadows he created when he walked under them. It reminded him that he’d forgotten to mention how film noir was an example of the only medium that had at least drawn the viewer into a level of detail similar to the daguerreotype. Both used the setting of black and white, with the inevitable variable of gray shading underlying every object. Both presented information not always apparent without close observation, but definitely contained within the frame of the setting. That was what mattered most. That information was truth. He had found evidence that

proved it. Yet who could he share this with? No one. They would mark him as eccentric at best, and a fool. Even with all the technological advances, there was still no room for the unknown. Not really. Things still had to be nailed down, or people grew uncomfortable with what they were seeing.

A wave of loneliness rushed through him, gone as soon as it had come. He wasn't going to let self-pity affect his research. What he had found was too precious for that. Yes, that was the right word, precious.

"Hey there, wait up!"

Inman spun around at the voice, seeing nothing but a dark figure running toward him. He rested his hand against his side, reassured by the feel of the handgun in his pocket. The campus was like most, giving the illusion of safety that once upon a time had been real. He'd bought the weapon on a whim and become a fair shot. He knew carrying it was against policy. When had he lost trust in things so much, he wondered? As the caller came into view, he relaxed. The young woman from the third row.

"Professor Inman! I was afraid I'd lose you in the dark." She wasn't as young as he'd thought. She was closer to his own age, he saw now in the cone of amber light that surrounded them. An extended education student, perhaps.

"Well, here I am. What is it?" He didn't want to talk anymore, or explain anything to anyone. He'd done his job and he wanted to go home and sit in his study with a glass of bourbon and consider his alternatives. There wasn't much time left to make a decision he knew he had to make.

"It's about what you said. That the digital image isn't as accurate."

"Students are welcome to come to my office to discuss anything. Thursdays between three and five."

"Well, I am a student. That is, not here, but in a way and--"

"What's your question?" It was better to get it over with.

"I know you must be anxious to be alone. I don't blame you after that session. It can't be very satisfying talking to an empty room."

"It wasn't empty."

"You know what I mean. But what I wanted to say is I saw a daguerreotype from 1838."

"Yes, yes. One of Daguerre's earliest. The Boulevard du Temple in Paris."

“The thing is, there are cars on the street, but they don’t show up because the exposure was ten or twelve minutes long. But two people do appear in the image.”

“I’m vaguely familiar with it.” He couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He didn’t understand why he was even listening to her, but he waited.

“I know you’re aware of it all. The thing is, we assume those two people show up because one of them is having his shoes polished, and the figures are still enough for the camera to capture them.”

“Not a camera. The camera obscura.”

“Of course. What I want to know, what I need to know, is how can you be sure those two figures are there...were there?”

Inman laughed in spite of himself. “Daguerre wasn’t acquainted with image manipulation.”

She was silent, long enough that he hoped the conversation was over. He started to move away.

“How could he be sure what happened? How can you?”

He turned halfway back to her, the obvious question annoying him. “We see them and in 1838 they wouldn’t show up at all if they weren’t together on the street, although as I am sure you’ve observed, their heads and hands moved and therefore are not as distinct as their bodies.”

She sighed. “This is so difficult to explain. I’ve used the wrong words. I don’t mean the two figures aren’t real so much as not originally part of the picture. Not the one Daguerre was taking. What if they were another variation that just impressed itself on the plate after Daguerre began the exposure? It can happen. The plates are degrading and anything can happen. Those two could be another probability that really wasn’t there at the beginning, do you see? They can do that.”

“Who can do what?” It occurred to him that she might be unbalanced. She wouldn’t be the first student he’d encountered in that state. Again he let his hand rest against the pocket that held his gun, but the action seemed suddenly absurd to him. He wasn’t in the old Wild West.

“Professor Inman, please. You spoke about truth. I’ve had an experience that I need to tell you about. A plate I own, a daguerreotype, it changes, it changes all the time. It alters the image. I’ve seen something impossible, but I know it’s real. You have to listen to me.”

The intensity of her voice and manner worried him, but what she was saying frightened him more.

"I don't have to do anything. Just leave me alone." He walked away, feeling the tension in his body from the expectation she would come after him. But she didn't. At the end of the short street he took the risk of looking back. She still stood there under the lamppost. She lifted her hand as if in a wave, turned around and left. In a moment she had been swallowed up by the shadows.

It wasn't until he was in his study, drink in hand, that he let himself consider her words. Of course she was right. He should have asked her how she knew what she did and listened to her. It was remarkable that someone else should have encountered such an aberration. But he was afraid. He had enough to deal with trying to grasp what he had discovered on his own. None of it made sense. For a while he stayed in his chair, watching the fire he'd lighted and listening to the sound of the logs snapping. Small explosions scattered embers against the screen.

"This won't do!" he said, bringing his glass down on end table next to him, hard enough that some of the bourbon splashed out. He buried his head in his hands. Maybe he was going mad. He would look into the evidence one more time. If he met with the same thing, then only one option was open to him, and he'd take it. It wasn't as if anyone would notice he had left. He couldn't think of a single person who would mourn his absence.

"How melodramatic of you, Inman," he said aloud. So it was. That didn't make the option any less likely.

He got up and went over to his desk and opened the bottom side drawer. Maybe he should keep it locked, but he never had anyone over, and he was a university professor. They weren't a breed known for their wealth. No one was going to break into the place, much less into his desk. Maybe he'd be better off if they did. The idea of that made him laugh but he stopped right away. It might turn into hysteria. That wouldn't surprise him in the least.

The daguerreotype was so fragile. If he chose to brush his finger across its surface the image would be erased. The protective cover was old, the leather frame crumbling in places that left gaps through which air could enter the case, allowing for some tarnishing. If there had ever been a glass cover, it was gone now. The tape that had been pressed against the frame to further prevent oxidation had dried and would flake off when he touched it. At least the velvet case he had placed the whole thing in allowed him to look at it without inflicting any more damage than was already apparent, or that to his dismay he had already inflicted inadvertently by carrying it home.

He studied the plate a few moments before reaching into the top drawer and taking out a magnifying glass, but hesitated before applying it to the image. What would he see this time? The caption printed in old script called it a view of the Grand Union Hotel, Saratoga Springs, New York, 1847. The artist's name embossed in gold leaf on the frame was too worn to read, though at times he thought it might be Samuel Morse, but that was just wishful speculation. Morse had introduced the daguerreotype to the country around 1840 from his residence in New York, instructing Matthew Brady, among others. The Meade Brothers were well-known daguerreotypists who had established themselves in Saratoga Springs for a while. Itinerant practitioners flourished in the U.S. after that. The image could have been made by any one of them.

With a sigh he bent close to the scene that showed itself. He knew the history of the hotel, or at least what online data could tell him. In its heyday it had over a thousand rooms and entertained royalty and politicians, literary figures, and the wealthy elite. The mineral springs nearby with their healing elements drew crowds in the summer. Ornate arched columns fronted the place. The dining room alone was over two hundred feet long, filled with frescoes and mirrors.

The depth of detail was the trick--the magic--of the daguerreotype. He could zoom into one indefinitely, it seemed to him, no blocks of pixilation ending entrance into the image, but rather allowing him to explore the details as if he were detecting an infinite universe. No modern photograph could come close to that.

What wasn't possible was to have the sight of well-dressed people walking under the massive elm trees near the entrance and of horse carriages passing along the Broadway that was one of the busiest streets in the small city. Stillness was required for these early images to present themselves. Exposure times had been reduced from hours to minutes to seconds, but even then, anything that moved would have a ghost image attached. He had seen the evidence. In a daguerreotype taken in Cincinnati by Charles Fontayne and William Porter in 1848, a horse carriage appeared in realistic detail in one place on a street, but its shadow image appeared somewhat at a distance, the effect produced because the vehicle had traveled through that space during the long exposure time. He had seen Babbitt's remarkable capture of Niagara Falls, with a row of men in stovepipe hats observing it, their backs to the camera. It was said the men could

have strolled down to the site after the shot had begun, arriving before the process was finished and inserting themselves into the picture at the last moment.

What such a process meant was that in Saratoga Springs, in 1847, outside a hotel of such massive proportions, facing a busy street as it did, everything should be a blur, with one image superimposed over another as the exposure continued. Nothing should be articulated or precise. The scene he was looking at should be mobbed with overlaid images, if any could be articulated at all--not holding this perfect clarity. And it held more than that, he knew now.

He gave his attention to a woman wearing a white dress, the almost spectral quality of the light within the garment that was so familiar in daguerreotypes, something luminous and secretive at once. The source of that ethereal effect still eluded him. Yes, it had to do with the unique process of developing the image. Yet there had to be something he was missing, not seeing, that accounted for the sense it gave of being a three-dimensional object, which it clearly was not.

WINTER'S EDGE

I would not want to forfeit seeing the leaves in the wind, even if they are an illusion.

--Ena

FALL SIGNS

CHAPTER I

I found myself on a deserted back road just before winter set in. Fields lay to my left, their high grass gold-tipped in the last light of day. On the other side, I saw the Ridge, its white cliffs half in shadow. I think you can hold moments, feel them like something solid and know they matter, even when they flicker away when you start to notice them. Everything I looked at on that road was like that, one long series of moments to hold, and I felt as if maybe, if I died right then and there, it'd be okay, because everything I saw all about me was perfect, and that ought to be enough for anyone to say she'd lived a good life, no matter how short or long it was.

Dusk came fast, though, and most of that good feeling started to slip away in the dark. It was cold, but I had a promise to keep. As it turned out, nobody was home when I got to where I was going, so my visit came to naught. The family—my mother's family—had gone to visit friends in Arizona, said a neighbor who shouldn't have told me anything. I would have to wait until they returned. But it's easy, waiting, once you've set your mind to it. There's something to be said for training ourselves to be calmer when we don't get our own way right away.

This town of Harlow where I live is small, maybe 1500 people, no more, but that number swells up to 12,000 in the fall when the students come in from all over to go to the college. They seem to come out of the woodwork.

Still, they weren't my concern. I had to focus on what was important, which was finding my mother. She had abandoned me in her heart the day I was born, I'm pretty sure, though she didn't

leave me at the state hospital until I was four years old. Imagine doing that, setting a small girl down on stone steps and driving away without so much as a single look back! I have to see her and understand why she did that. I have to make her understand what it did to me.

The nurses and staff at that hospital always said I was gifted, just prone to fits sometimes because I had TLE, temporal lobe epilepsy. Maybe I did. I had visions, and heard voices, but who wouldn't in that place? It had opened in the 1890s and was first named the State Asylum for the Insane and Inebriates. Some compared it back then to the infamous Broadmoor Hospital over in England, which had opened thirty years earlier. They didn't change its name to Creedmore until the 1940s. I've spent a lot of time online exploring such places, studying not only what happened inside them, but why they existed in the first place, and then later, why they were closed.

They took a photo of me a few weeks after I was left there, sitting on the bed they'd assigned me in the ward. I was dressed in a coat because it was winter and someone was going to take me for a walk. They gave me a last name, too—Williams. I don't know why they chose it. My mother had never told me our last name. All I knew was my first, Ena. I have that photo with me and look at it often. Behind the bed was a wall already a hundred years old. There were markings on it, crazy things drawn by inmates over time. I carved my own initials into a side beam.

It was hard leaving them all when the time came. Sad, like leaving home, I suppose. I wandered through the ward on my last day and there was nothing to see, not really, just the white sheets and worn blankets and the clean floor. They always kept everything clean. I don't know how they managed that. A lot of the patients were much less lucid than I was, and a lot less inclined to good behavior.

But I had turned twenty-one. It was time to make my way in the world. They warned me not to reveal where I'd grown up. I was already good at research by then, thanks to visiting volunteers who trained me so I could help in the admissions office. One of them was a programmer who didn't care about protocol. He liked showing me how to get through encrypted passwords and firewalls. In the end, there wasn't much about computers that I didn't understand, and it was easy enough to create a false identity. I could hack into private systems and alter records, give myself any background I wanted. I stayed away from government sites, though. I didn't want anything to do with the men in black.

What I hadn't found out was the identity of my mother or where she lived. It was wanting to know those two things that occupied most of my attention for a long time. I was twenty-seven years old before I discovered the answers.

My mother's name is Madeline—Maddie—Sheppard, nee Holloway. She has a husband, Cal, and two other children, my half-brothers—Henry, who is seven years old, and Sam, who is ten. Cal has no knowledge of what my mother did (as I came to learn), for she moved to the other side of the country, away from the southwest. Her parents died when she was fifteen, the year I was born. She lived with me in her parents' house in the Mojave Desert in Victorville until she dropped me at the hospital and drove away east. She's a housewife, from all accounts a good one, involved in the community, a regular churchgoer, president of the school PTA. She also is the driving force behind annual fundraising for the local hospital. A nice touch.

I learned almost everything about her life and the way she lives now by exploring the local gazette that Harlow publishes online every week. Before deciding to move to Harlow, too, though it wasn't really a decision, more like a compulsion, I went out to what I discovered was the family home in the high desert, a derelict building standing now in a field in the back of nowhere. I went through the house, wishing, like the old cliché, that walls could talk. They had heard my voice for four years. They had to remember it. I spoke out loud as I went into each room. Nothing registered, though. I had no memory of the place at all. Just the field—that open space—seemed familiar. I had the feeling no one had ever visited us there, either. According to the nurses and staff, I had no recollection of anyone but my mother, and the only thing I could tell them was my first name and age.

The actual way I found my mother at last, though, that was the victory in Victorville. Such a bad pun, but true! Creedmore was the only hospital of any kind in a hundred-mile radius. I really doubted my mother would drive over a hundred miles to drop me off anywhere else, so I did an online search for children born the same year I had to have been, within that radius. It was a black hole of missing data, since most small towns hadn't moved their microfiche records into virtual files. Nothing showed up that I could track, until I came across a photo in an online archive about the opening of a new shopping mall in Victorville.

The name of the newspaper it was from had been cut off. A crowd stood in the small plaza, smiling into the camera, sure they'd be on the eleven o'clock news. I glanced at it and started to move on and then looked again, and froze. I was looking at myself—for a split second, that's

what I thought. I tried to remember when I was last there, but the city was seventy miles from the hospital and this was, after all, a long time ago. It wasn't me. Then it penetrated my mind—inconceivable as it seemed. The face I saw so much like my own was my mother's, and she was clearly in her last month of pregnancy.

What are the odds? Pretty good when you have my skills at research and the databases I can access. But even with all that, this was a real long shot, a fluke. I had found her. I knew what town to look at. I didn't even try to find out anything else that day. It was overwhelming to see that evidence. I needed time to absorb it. Everything screamed at me to do more right then and there, but I couldn't. I had to adjust.

The next morning I skipped the freelance jobs I was being paid to do and drove out to Victorville. Who would remember anything after two decades? But someone always did, and that person could be found, even in a city of a hundred and twenty thousand. And there were the libraries, where storerooms held musty old editions and boxes of microfiche filled the shelves. I went to the main library, figuring it would have everything.

I liked using the old-fashioned machines, turning the mechanical knobs that with a whirring sound pulled the pages of film across my vision slowly or fast, whatever I wanted. There was more news than ads back then. It seemed that way to me, though I don't like to make assumptions. I like to know exactly what is, or isn't. But my focus was on getting the films for the year and month when the mall opened. Five local papers carried the news, one for each district in the city. It was a big deal because it was a lucrative chain that had scorned building in the high desert for a long time, but had finally been persuaded to do so if other businesses complied. Venture capitalists have a lot of money because they are very careful where they put it. That said, the story lasted for three days.

The same photo showed up each time in four of the papers and that was all, but in the fifth one, the *Victorville Journal*, there was a caption. It told me fifteen-year-old Madeline Holloway and her father Russ Holloway were standing in the front row. So she wasn't married. My grandfather was smiling, so I knew an illegitimate child didn't bother him at all. He would have been in his mid thirties, not much more, by any account. I liked his face.

I had the reference librarian make a copy of that page for me, but when I tried to enlarge the photo, it dissolved into a sea of dots, the print resolution inadequate. The librarian explained that,

to her regret, the original files and photos from the *Journal* had been discarded, for they needed the space.

There were no Holloways in the white pages website for the city that fit the profile. No relevant data showed up in the extensive archives of the Victorville California Family History Center, which covered the entire High Desert area. It was like tracking ghosts. Then, two days later, I logged on to a database listing patients in hospitals and under care and came across Willa Holloway, aged eighty-four, in a nursing home on the west side. Her only listed family contact was her son Andrew, deceased. I arranged to visit her immediately, saying I was a relative, which I felt sure was the truth, and was informed she remembered very little, due to the onset of Alzheimer's. I knew that disease all too well. More than one resident at Creedmore had been afflicted with it, including my best friend, an old woman I called Essy but her real name was Esther. I knew how to talk to people whose minds had gone. I knew Essy had always been aware of me, and happy to see me. Her mind betrayed her, but not her spirit. I'd find a way to talk to Willa. She was the only link I had.

The nursing home was a sin, just the pits. Some of the staff were nice enough, but the son who'd put Willa in there hadn't been too concerned about her overall health and welfare. Not by my count. That's not a judgment, but it is a fact. I'm not that interested in what motivates people to do what they do. It's really their business. Except for my mother. I want to know her motivation.

Willa was sitting in a wheelchair in the TV room where I was told everyone was put after their eleven o'clock lunch. Her bib was askew and stained and there were crumbs in the corners of her mouth and on the sweatshirt she wore. A game show was blaring, with happy people jumping up and down and clapping their hands, but no one in that room was paying attention. It was obvious none of them had any interest in or understanding about what special prizes the television was offering. Music was playing through the ceiling, some young singer I recognized whose voice was pretty much buried by the game show. I couldn't talk to the woman in that place, and said so. A volunteer agreed, to my surprise. Her badge gave her name as Miriam. She was young and competent, and I couldn't imagine why she would want to work there. She pushed the wheelchair and led me back to Willa's bedroom, which had four other beds in it besides hers. The sheets were gray in color and the floor was sticky.

“It’s crowded in here for the patients,” I said. I wanted to say it smelled really bad, too, but some things aren’t going to be changed because I think they should be.

“They sleep most of the time—most of them need drugs because they can get so agitated, you know? We can’t have that. We call them visitors, not patients,” she added.

“That’s useful. Given the environment, they wouldn’t want to stay long, anyway. I imagine life expectancy’s drastically reduced the moment they arrive.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Thank you. I’ll just chat with my great-grandmother now. Or she could be my great-great-grandmother, I suppose.”

“Wouldn’t you know?” The suspicion in her tone was curious. No one had great concern personally for the “visitors” that I could see, and I knew it was likely almost no one there got real visitors, aka family and friends, more than once a year at Christmas or Hanukkah or some other annual holiday. “A forgotten tribe” is how the floor nurse at Creedmore described the ones with Alzheimer’s. That pretty much described everyone else at Creedmore, actually.

“Sure. She’s my grandfather’s mother. That makes it one ‘great’.”

Miriam looked relieved, told me the other four visitors who lived there with Willa would be returning to the room in a half hour, and left.

So far, Willa hadn’t even looked at me. She stared out the window, which thankfully faced a small stone courtyard that had a tree in it. One tree, more like a sapling, but at least something natural, even if it was surrounded by concrete. The sky was overcast and the gray walls of the room didn’t help. I moved a metal chair from the wall to the window and sat facing her. I could see my own face in hers, in the square jaw and high cheekbones and the pale, pale skin. I had no doubt. Genetics will out. We were, as they say, kin. I used a tissue to wipe the crumbs off her mouth and removed the bib and threw both things in the trash.

“Hi Willa. I’m Madeline’s child, remember me?” Of course there was nothing, not so much as a flicker in her eyes. For all intents and purposes, I wasn’t there—I didn’t exist for this woman who had lost her mind. But I knew better. Essy had taught me what to do. The secret was to tell stories. I had one ready.

“I know who brought you here. That son of yours—not Russ, I mean the other one, Andrew—he didn’t know any better. He was so scared when you were ill. He didn’t know how to handle it, you see. Men are that way a lot of the time. It’s as if they think women, especially

mothers, are supposed to always be the same. No extra bandwidth for her. Your son wanted you out of sight. He had enough money to make things better for you, but who knows why he didn't want to spend it on something decent. You've had a hard time of it."

"He hated me."

I had been looking out the window as I talked, figuring this first visit might be me listening to the sound of my own voice and I'd have to start all over again the next time because she wouldn't remember I'd been there. Her words made me jump, but all I saw was the vacant, slightly bewildered look so common in those with her condition.

If I'd been watching her I'd have seen the lucidity for the fraction of a second it had to have existed and been able to catch it and hold it a second longer for her. That's how it worked with Essy. The nurses said I had a way of getting that to happen. I think it might have something to do with my TLE, or whatever it is that I have. I can get below and above normal vibrations, sometimes, with the tone of my voice. I don't think people with Alzheimer's are ill so much as operating in a different dimension of perception, as if the plaque or whatever it is that stops them acting like the rest of us has covered up the 3-D world and given them access to a whole lot more. Sometimes I know how to bridge that, though more often than not I think they would rather I didn't, because life is not so peaceful for them when they see things in the normal way.

Willa's words had sounded so absolute when she said them. I had no way of knowing if it was the truth, though the fact her son had left her in that nursing home pointed in that direction. I had planned to mention that he was dead, but decided it didn't matter. I doubted I'd have any more success that day, which was frustrating. I wanted to know about my grandfather, and about my mother.

It wasn't until my fifth visit that she said anything else.

I went straight to the television room and started to wheel her out into the courtyard where there was a single wooden bench.

"We don't let them outside," Miriam told me when I asked her to release the exit alarm.

"There's no escape route, only one way out and in. You can see us from the reception desk. You folks have a really nice view. It'll just be for a short time. A gift for Willa from me. I have to leave the area soon. I want to let her have some respite from the ward."

"We work hard here. We don't have time for this kind of thing."

"Which is why I'm glad to do it for Willa on my own."

Defeated, Miriam released the exit alarm, and I went outside with Willa and settled us on the bench under the sapling, which rose eight feet above us. It was a cool day and I tucked a heavy shawl I'd brought with me around her legs.

The clouds were racing overhead. A storm was brewing. Willa looked up as if mesmerized by the sky. I was pretty sure it had been ages since she'd seen it in person. Maybe years. I looked up right along with her and began another story. Wherever she put her attention, I looked at the same place. She seemed aware of the courtyard, or found it just as mesmerizing, I couldn't tell. I opened with my usual greeting.

"Hi Willa. I'm Madeline's child, remember me?"

Not even a glance in my direction. My words were just a jumble of sounds to her.

"The thing is, I have to find my mother. I was hoping you would tell me something about her and her dad. I think they were close, but I can't find him anywhere. He's your other son, Russ. That's all I have to go on. She left me. Madeline left me at a hospital seventy miles from here when I was a little child. Did you know? Did anyone know? I'm thinking the answer is no one did, or they'd have come and rescued me. A whole family wouldn't just leave a little girl on her own like that, no matter what, right? So if you could tell me about Madeline it would be wonderful. You would have been in your late fifties when I was born."

"I favored Russell. Now he's dead. Maddie didn't want me around. Goodbye."

I felt as if I was soaring in the clouds. The whole time she spoke Willa had focused on me, on my face. With complete lucidity she had looked into my eyes.

Then it was gone. Whatever had impelled her twice, she never did that again. I had been so close, and then outwitted by the disease. I would have cried if I could, for me and for Willa. I'd come too late to reach her anymore.

Two months later I got the call from Miriam telling me Willa had died. Did I want a funeral? I had no idea. Did I? I said I'd get back to her. She had called for another reason, too. They must have gotten used to seeing me in that terrible place. Would I be willing to visit another patient? She had been a friend of Willa's and was now very depressed at her death.

I had to wonder again about Miriam, why she was working there. She was a contrary personality, both caring and a stickler for rules at the same time. I don't know why I said yes. I never wanted to see that nursing home again. But I told her I'd visit the friend once.

That's how I met Dora Raymond. That's how I found my mother.

Dora's room was at the far end of the hall. The other three women in there with her were asleep. It was mid afternoon. She was sitting in an armchair by the window knitting a scarf. Her hands were arthritic and the work went slowly, but she kept on with it the whole time we were together.

"It's not like I could talk to Willa, I mean, you know, she wasn't all there. She wasn't any there. But I'd known her since she was a girl. We were in high school together. I can tell you we never imagined back then we'd be kicked to the curb by our families, dumped in this happy hour of a place. Willa didn't have any to speak of, any family, I mean, except those sons of hers. Russell, now he was a good boy. Andrew was a piece of work, but he got the inheritance from Willa's old man. Then Russell and his wife got hit by that car, such a shame, and Andrew finally died from his drinking a few years after he stuck Willa in here. Joke's on him. All his money went to this haunted house for Willa's keep. Hell in a basket. Look around, what do you think? It costs eighty thousand a year for each of us to stay in this hotel, only half of it paid by the government. I'd say someone high up in the food chain of this business is having a ball at our expense."

I felt like taking a deep breath for her. If this was Dora feeling depressed she wasn't too hard up. I'd just assumed she'd have Alzheimer's, but she was in there because she had something wrong with her spine and a clot in her brain. She couldn't walk. Well, I have to admit, she was somewhat hard up.

"I could go at any second. Keep asking myself what's keeping me from the good sleep—why would anyone choose to end their days this way? I ask myself that a lot because, you see, I'm positive we choose how we're going to die before we're born."

I didn't know what to say to that. I didn't know what she was talking about. I wondered how I was going to get her to tell me about my mother, because she had to know, but then she did it for me.

"You look so much like Willa, and Russ, and Madeline, of course. Broke Willa's heart when Maddie moved away to somewhere in the northeast and never sent a letter or a card, and so she never had a chance to see you again."

The words ran through me like an electric shock.

"You know who I am?"

Dora put down her knitting and let out an explosive laugh.

“What do you think, I’m stupid? I know that Miriam told you to come here. She’s always nosing into things. Sees herself as a savior only then she acts like a sergeant in the army. No gray area for Miriam. Likes to take credit, too. Sweet as pie, she tells me she called you.” She picked up her knitting again. “But I knew as soon as you stepped into this room. Like I said, you look like all of them. Especially your mother. May as well be twins.”

“Did you know her well?” I asked because I had to, but I held my breath. In that single moment I wasn’t sure I wanted an answer.

Dora nodded her head. “I knew her when she was pregnant with you. Everybody was happy about that—about you, I mean. Your grandfather most of all. No judgment, except for the no-good neighbor who got your mother in that way. She’d known him since she was an infant. His wife was very sick. He said he needed something to make him feel young again. I’ve met some fine men in my time, but most of them are no good, you ask me—can’t handle anything that makes them sad or that makes them have to deal with how someone else feels. They—well, you ask me, they resent it. But that’s not the point. Russ wasn’t typical. He was Willa’s pride and joy, and he just thought the best of everyone. He never spoke to that neighbor again, though. Back then you didn’t get arrested up here in the high desert for fooling around with a teenager. That man—your father, such as he was—well, his wife died and he left his house one day, didn’t take anything with him, left the door open and a cup of coffee on the kitchen table. We never saw hide nor hair of him again, just the notice a year later in the paper that he’d had a heart attack, over in Adelanto. A fit end, I’d say.”

“But my mother left, too. Why?”

Dora stared at me in surprise. “Didn’t she tell you?”

“No.”

“Huh. Maybe it made her too sad, and you were so little, just four months old, when her parents had that accident on the road, swerved on a slick section and crashed down a hill. Russ and Mina, they died right away, the coroner said, which is something to be thankful for. It was tough on Maddie most of all. She went out to their farm up in the hills, wouldn’t let Willa near her or the baby—I mean, you. She said Willa looked too much like Russ, so she couldn’t stand it.” Dora stopped and looked at me in curiosity.

“Why are you here? I mean, why’d you come all the way out here to see Willa? After all these years? Why not before? Why’d your mother take you away? Willa started acting up after

that. Took her no-good son Andrew a long time but he finally got her put away in here. She didn't get the Alzheimer's right off, so she knew what was happening to her. Better she'd been dead than know that, she often said."

"Where is this farm?"

"She didn't tell you that, either? Maddie washed her hands of everything, didn't she? It's a pity. Well, last I knew the old place was up off the Ransom Road bypass. North of town. It's not likely anything's left. The land, maybe, that's all."

All of a sudden I felt claustrophobic, as if all Dora's words were imploding on me. I hadn't imagined really finding out anything, even though I wanted to. It's odd, but sometimes we can be better off not knowing the very thing we go looking for.

I left her with a promise to come back, aware that I never would. I think Dora already sensed this. She was smart, and she wasn't sentimental. If she didn't see me again, she'd accept it, just like that. People who can do that are more free than most.

I set up Willa's funeral at the crematorium. There were no instructions in her file. Just the two-year-old old entry about her son Andrew's death and the money going to Willa now that Andrew pre-deceased her, a clause written into her husband's—my great-grandfather's—will. I'd have preferred an outdoor pyre, but it wasn't, of course, an option. I hadn't known her, and felt little, but we are meant to honor our dead when we can. I scattered the ashes on the farm.

I learned from my research that there is an unavoidable consequence of cremation. An infinitesimal residue of bodily remains is left in the chamber afterwards and mixes with subsequent cremations. It seems an interesting way for strangers to connect.

Finding Madeline—Maddie—Holloway was easy, thanks to Dora. My mother had indeed headed to the northeast. It hadn't been a lie or a subterfuge. She'd gotten married and changed her name ten years later, but to my surprise she'd kept her real name until then. Willa could have found her if she'd hired a private detective. But people don't often do such a thing. It isn't familiar behavior. In the end, they accept what has happened and move on, or like Willa, they stay where they are.

When I was ready, I got into my car and drove to Harlow, New York, two thousand seven hundred miles away. It hadn't been difficult to get a job there, especially for someone capable of doing not only research but synthesizing disparate bits of information into abstracts. I was an ideal candidate, since my resume included my extensive computer background and work as an

assistant in an anthropology lab. The nearby college didn't need lecturers in that subject area, just a skilled collator, someone to bring field data into proper order from professors studying local prehistoric rockshelters, allowing them to publish their findings faster. They hired me after one interview on Skype, during which I told them I was moving to the northeast in a couple of weeks, anyway. No one called any of my references, but then, I'd been pretty sure they wouldn't. After all, the job wasn't rocket science and they needed the help fast. I sounded so reasonable, after all. You learn how to be that way in a place like Creedmore.

CHAPTER II

At a motel in Oklahoma there was a small lending library for customers to borrow from if they couldn't sleep. I told the proprietor that he must have to fill it up often since people would probably walk off with the books. He said it never happened. I found that amazing. Most were well-worn, a lot of romance and mystery as the subjects. Good books. I read two that night. There was one very old one that I didn't read but the title made me wonder. It was called *You Can't Go Home Again*. In my head I argued the point. Maybe you could, so long as you knew for sure where home was.

The drive took me seven days. That was long enough.

When I reached the road leading into Harlow I stopped the car and got out to look around. A cold wind cut across the fields. The distinctive white quartz cliffs of the Shawangunk Mountains lay to the west. I'd read about them at length before arriving, since they were of special interest to the college. A low-lying mist outlined trees that were in full autumn color.

At first light I'd left my last stopover—Elmira, New York, which lies just over the Pennsylvania border. Since then I'd driven through a lot of small towns and counties with unusual names, some of them, I knew from my research, originating out of the Native American past, and others out of the colonial period: Owego, Chenango, Wurtsboro, Pine Bush, Walker Valley, Napanoch, and Warwarsing. Signs kept showing up for a place called Cragmoor, a hamlet on top of the Shawangunk Ridge, population four hundred forty-nine. A note in my files mentioned it was originally named Evansville, founded as an art colony in 1879.

The area had once been inhabited by the Munsee, a tribe who lived along the Hudson River before they were dispersed by colonial invaders and fake treaties. I took it as a good sign that because of their principal totem they were called the Wolf tribe of the Lenape. I had adopted the Gray Wolf as my animal totem not long after I left Creedmore. I don't know why, precisely, except that I felt an affinity. The Munsee had a warlike reputation, but it wasn't enough to defeat the Europeans. There are only fragments left of the tribe now, in other parts of the country. Yet again, invaders won the day. But if they hadn't, where would I be? What counts most, me now, or someone who once was?

Walking across the two-lane highway, I stood on a soft bank still green from summer. What had been a creek was now a river roaring down a narrow gorge. Rainstorms that had been continuous for over a week had caused mudslides and flooding in places. "Watch where you go," the innkeeper had told me that morning as he carried my climbing gear and suitcases outside. "Any hiking you're planning could be the death of you." The equipment was for show. I wanted to say I'd never hiked a trail, much less a mountain, but I didn't.

The river was wild, whitewater cascading over small boulders, dragging with it immense tree branches that grabbed at the soft earth as they passed. I moved back a couple of steps onto harder ground. Just as I did, the blast of a horn sounded behind me and I almost fell, saved by backing into an oak that grew close to the road. A red semi was careening past as if it were on the interstate. The driver had used the horn for fun, I realized, when for a split second I saw him looking at me through the driver's window and laughing. He was so unaware, poor man, like some of the doctors I had encountered at the hospital, the ones who walked as if they were gods.

In the car I checked my map once again, unfolding it and tracing the blue line I'd drawn on it. There wasn't much farther to go, but I was hungry, having taken off without breakfast. I'd seen a diner a couple of miles back. I had plenty of time. Or maybe no time at all. I could toss a coin and either way, it wouldn't matter now. I was where I was meant to be. I made a U-turn.

Only one other person was in the place. The woman sat in a dark purple overcoat, resting her head on her arms, surrounded by a shopping cart and several large trash bags. Strands of red hair escaped from her multicolored hat. Her face, what I could see of it, was pale and marked with fine lines.

"Don't worry about Meg," the owner said as he came over with a menu. "She'll leave soon as I give her something to take with her. She doesn't like to eat in company."

“I’m not worried.”

“Tried to keep her away for a while, then thought that didn’t make any sense. So long as she comes in my quiet time, that’s all. She understands.”

“They always do.”

“She might be what they call a bag lady now, but once upon a time Meg Trelayne was like you and me. Still sharp as they come. She wouldn’t welcome your pity.”

“It’s not pity I feel.”

I chose to sit at the counter. It felt safe to do that. Why? Some vague memory stirred in my mind, but it was elusive and gone in the instant. It’s one of many things I’ve sent to a mental file I call “phantoms.” There were a lot of those, wisps of things that had no substance, that didn’t stay long enough for words. Sometimes, you just have to live your life. Not everything has to be figured out and excavated. Sometimes it can be left alone.

The owner set a cup of coffee down in front of me. “What’ll it be?”

I gave him my order.

“Used to be busy here right after seven in the morning, in case you’re wondering.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You’re a real talker, aren’t you? Well, all this rain’s kept folks away, just the same. I’ve lost close to a month’s worth of business because of it. Don’t mind a good thunderstorm—that washes the air clean. But this is different. Anyway, things should get back to what they were soon.” He went away toward the kitchen.

The coffee was strong and hot. The room had an old-fashioned feel about it. Through the window, I saw storm clouds had covered the range opposite.

He returned in five minutes with my breakfast. “My name’s Harry, by the way.”

“Like the sign says.”

“That’s right.”

He held a small bag in his hand with a grease mark on it that he took over to Meg’s table. When he came back he nodded and began to wipe down the counter. I concentrated on the food, which was as good as promised.

“Have my own chickens. Wife makes all the bread and cakes,” he offered, as if he’d read my mind.

He leaned back against the wall behind him that showed photographs of what I assumed were famous people or local politicians—it was hard to tell.

“About Meg. She won’t mind my saying. Like as not she’s listening to every word, and not really sleeping, but then again, I could be wrong.”

There wasn’t a sound from the table.

“She used to be a forensic anthropologist. I don’t know what that is, exactly, but I know she was good at it. All kinds of honors and awards. She was always off on some trip or other. Lived here in Harlow and gave a course over at the college, though she didn’t have to. They happened to have a state-of-the-art lab, thanks to some big endowment by one of her sponsors. That’s what she told me. Of course, I didn’t know her then, not until she came in here, with all that.” He gestured to the shopping cart and trash bags.

“So what happened to her?”

Harry poured more coffee into my cup.

“You mean why’d she give it up?”

“She wouldn’t voluntarily give all that up.”

Harry got thoughtful and quiet before going on. I understood his kind, people who loved to gossip but did it without malice.

“She had family. She went exploring somewhere in South America for quite a time, around six months. Her eleven-year-old daughter and her husband both were killed in a house fire, a faulty heater. She came back to a burnt shell of a house and two funerals. When it was all over with, she chunked her job and started living on the streets. Better here than in the city, at least. She knew enough people that no one hassled her, and the sheriff didn’t put her in jail. People around here accept her the way she is. Besides, nothing wrong with her head, just her heart.”

“I wonder what she was investigating in South America.”

“That’s your first thought after what I’ve told you?”

“No. That’s not how I meant it,” I said, seeing his expression. “What was so important to her? Six months is a long time to be away.”

“You know, scientists are exactly like artists—there’s a lot of artists around here. No one else matters when they’re doing their thing. They’re a selfish lot, maybe—no offense if you’re one of them.”

“I’m not, and it’s true, in a way.”

“That’s why I like what I do. People are the main focus here—feeding them and talking to them. Keeps me grounded, as some of our woo-woo folks up here say.”

I had to smile. “So not only don’t you care for self-absorbed scientists and artists, you’re not keen on people who delve into metaphysics?”

“I can’t say I am, since I really don’t know what that is and I’m not pretending. But I’m not keen on crystals, those Tarot cards, or sitting in one spot waiting for some revelation to hit me. Not keen on that aromatherapy, either, or drumming circles.”

“I think we can safely say you’re not a believer.”

This time Harry laughed. “I believe in plenty. Only not the things those people do.”

“Then all’s right with the world!” Meg’s voice startled us both. We watched her get up and gather her possessions and the breakfast bag and head for the door, pushing the cart in front of her.

“Next time, Meg,” Harry called out.

“Maybe.” Then she was gone.

“Next time what?”

“I made a bet with her. I said if she came in without that cart and sat at the counter I’d give her a free meal for a year.”

“Isn’t that what you’re already doing?”

“No way. She pays every time, or her sister does for her. It’s no handout from me.”

Two cars drove into the parking lot out front.

“Hey, business is picking up,” Harry said.

I handed over cash for the meal.

“Be sure to come back, and if my wife’s here, she’ll make you pancakes to die for. That’s what she calls them, pancakes-to-die-for.”

“Got it,” I said.

A few minutes later driving along the highway I saw Meg with her cart. The clouds overhead had grown dark and menacing. More rain. I stopped the car and waited for Meg to catch up to it.

“Can I give you a lift?”

“No! I have places to go, and can’t take you with me. Get on with you.” With that, Meg turned her cart into a path that had opened up in the field.

As far as I could see, there was no place for her to go at all. The fields had been mowed down for the winter and not even a lean-to or overhang around for protection against the elements.

“Go on with your finding and seeking and leave me to myself,” Meg called out.

I shouted to her “How do you know what I—” but she was already in the middle of the field, pushing hard against the rutted earth, using the cart like some kind of brace. A minute later she had disappeared down a small slope on the other side.

A weird life for a woman to choose. Or was it? She was free of all the rules now, all the expectations, her own included. Free of old agendas. I wondered what that felt like.

As I pressed the accelerator and moved back onto the highway the rain started, light at first but fast becoming a deluge, forcing me almost to a crawl. It was like being in a flash flood in the desert. I’d encountered several of those on my drive east. It gave me time to think. What was waiting for me now? My ostensible business lay in helping anthropologists and archaeologists record their findings of rockshelters discovered in the Shawangunk Mountains. My real business was to find my mother. I could make a decision then to stay or not. As I kept telling myself, plenty of time.

Plenty of time to put things to rest.

A crack of thunder sounded above me and the lightning lit up the ridge like an old photo negative. I had read a great deal about the mountains here, to back up my resume. I’m a natural quick-study, and at Creedmore they gave me an I.Q. test my last year there, to help out graduate students who were practicing for their psychology exams. I scored a 146. Not Mensa level, but way up there, they told me. They did an E.Q., too, a way of testing my emotional maturity. They were very surprised when that was a high 87 out of a possible hundred. I was, too. I think that’s why, in the end, they released me. Not everyone left the hospital. Not many at all. I was the only one I knew about.

It is old, this New York landscape. Where I grew up is new. Geologically-speaking, that is. I find this fascinating. The Shawangunk Ridge lies at the northern end of a ridge that is part of the Appalachian Mountains. At the southern border of the state they’re called the Shawangunks. They were formed during the last Ice Age, or so I call it. Scientists nitpick at that terminology as only they can do, for their truth is that the “last” Ice Age hasn’t ended at all and what we are really referring to is a “Glacial” interval. So to be clear, the end of the last glacial period was

almost eleven thousand years ago but the end of the last ice age has not yet come nor is it expected to arrive in the near future.

The Shawangunks rise more than 2,000 feet above sea level, forming part of the western edge of the Great Appalachian Valley. Below the Ridge a wide, high plain extends to the Hudson River on the east. I was drawn to that river the moment I saw it, when, for history's sake, I made a point of circling around and driving near it before heading full north. I had the feeling I was meant to live within access to it, something that makes no good sense, but it's what I still feel. Foothills to the west are interspersed with flatlands. Through these run the Sandburgh Creek and Rondout Creek, the Basha Kill and other, smaller, kills. In old New York, when it was a colony called New Netherlands, a kill was a body of water of any size, including tributaries leading out to the sea. To the south is the Delaware River, which rises in two main branches that flow down from the western side of the Catskill Mountains. At the southern end, the Delaware is actually part of the border between New York and Pennsylvania.

While the Shawangunk Mountains may be a younger chain, they are also the result of the earliest continental collision of the Appalachians, which are among the oldest mountains on earth. There is still extensive evidence of tectonic faulting at Sam's Point Dwarf Pine Barren Preserve.

The actual rocks of the Shawangunks (the name, as I also learned after arriving here, is pronounced ShaWANgunk and sometimes "Shongum" by the local population) were formed 430 million years ago out of ground quartz. It is impossible to conceive that kind of time. I wonder geologists don't go mad dwelling among such bits of data that can never be felt as real, and here I am trying to handle the first four years of my life, which are equally inaccessible. That ground quartz later crystallized and combined with sand to create what geologists call a quartz conglomerate. This rock was too hard for the glaciers to flatten. It formed a complex entity of cliffs and talus slopes and ice caves.

I've decided what pulls some to the area, what draws the woo-woo people, as Harry described them—and maybe others—could be based on this original matter, a tangible bridge to something vital. Quartz is a mystical substance in the beliefs of the Australian Aboriginal people. Ancient monoliths apparently contain items of quartz, in passage tombs like Knowth in Ireland and some artifacts in the Orkneys of Scotland, and in burial sites in Europe. I have begun the habit of buying pieces of quartz and having them in the house. They each have a presence that I

can sense, even though I haven't been inclined to ask why or what, and I don't use them in any particular way.

The heavy presence of quartz is said to be the cause of the low pH found in each body of water in this region. At the northern edge of the mountains, five lakes exist called the "sky lakes" because of their pristine clarity and aquamarine color. These include Lake Maratanza, Mud Pond, Lake Minnewaska, Mohonk Lake, and Lake Awosting. Only Mohonk Lake is closer to having a neutral pH because of its proximity to and interaction with shale deposits, though when I looked it up I found that even the shale has particles of quartz in it.

There is also an inland cypress swamp, along with bogs and pitch pine-blueberry peat swamps and red maple. I have visited these, and they have a strange, compelling nature. I keep watch, standing still for minutes at a time, as if I could see them form and shape themselves across millennia—I would like to be able to do that. The diversity of vegetation everywhere is astonishing, given the terrain, with plants usually found much further south on the east coast and other, rare plants existing, even flourishing, on the Shawangunks at, I am told, the utmost edge of their possible true range. Some rare species have adapted to the harsh terrain of the ridge, like chestnut oak and mixed-oak forest, pine barrens and the dwarf pine, and the hemlock-northern hardwood forest. The hardwoods include sugar maple, yellow birch, and beech. The colors their leaves show in the fall are remarkable, like a gateway, it seems to me, a ritual of the earth before it enters the dark of winter.

For some of those who have chosen to explore the Shawangunks, who seek to know them through the prehistoric shelters of the men and women and children who lived thousands of years ago, there is a detached scholarship and an eager, almost predatory desire to unlock the past. For others, and I am one of them, who are also there to analyze and scope out and reveal what is hidden, there is instead a feeling of attachment, and connection, one they understand but cannot explain, even when asked.

THE WINNING OF OLWEN

THE GRAVEYARD APPEARED EMPTY. I went inside the gates and wandered through the tumbled headstones until I found one large enough to sit on. I took out the brown bag I'd packed for my lunch. There were worse places to think about the end of the world, I thought. I laughed and let the sound die a second later. My world, anyway. Ten years of sixty-hour weeks had meant nothing to the ones setting up the company merger and implementing the "necessary" downsizing. My manager, safe in his job, this time, at least, didn't even bother to say goodbye. No matter. Soon enough the man's toadying would backfire.

It was a peaceful place to be in late summer. I'd never come there before, since lunch was always eaten at my desk as I concentrated on the next project coming my way. Yet I wasn't a workaholic. I'd never wanted that way of life. The joke was on me. You get what you focus on, I'd read once. In hindsight, I'd been using tunnel vision, maybe. And now? Plenty of time to think, but no time for feeling sorry for myself. I wouldn't be self-indulgent that way. Show no emotion, that had been my mother's mantra. Strange, I thought, how a parent's flaws can become the child's way, by agreement or rebellion, and lie hidden in the days that come after.

The singing came on the wind, high-pitched and sweet, like faint chimes, and then it stopped. I almost got up to see where it had come from, but I didn't care enough. My sandwich was finished, my coffee gone. The afternoon stretched before me as empty as the graveyard. Job-hunting could start tomorrow. Today, I would forget everything. Otherwise, I might scream.

"Hello!"

I jumped in surprise. A young woman stood several yards away, near an ash tree. She had flowers in her hands, pink and white blossoms that released their petals in the wind so that they flew over and around me.

"I didn't mean to startle you. It's just that no one comes here. I usually have the place to myself."

"I'm leaving," I said, stuffing the brown bag and crushed coffee cup into my jacket pocket and standing up. The sun was high and burnished her hair to gold.

"Oh, don't, please, not on my account, unless you have to hurry somewhere."

Nowhere at all, I thought, but said aloud, "I do have an appointment."

"I see. What is your name?"

"Goodbye," I said, not answering, and turned away, but not before I saw disappointment in her dark eyes. For some reason it stopped me.

"All right. Culwich. That's my name, and don't laugh at it."

“Of course not. I’m Olwen. Perhaps we’ll meet again.”

Before I could say anything more she had turned and run back toward the other side of the graveyard, out of sight between the trees and the stones.

I laughed again, but this time for real. A modern meeting of ancient names, what were the odds? Bizarre as it was, it pleased me. I had cursed my name from the outset, changing its spelling against my father’s wishes so my friends could pronounce it and wouldn’t make fun of me as much. But I’d grown to like it. I’d been told the story a hundred times and more, the legend that claimed King Arthur himself helped the hero Culhwch meet the demands of the giant Ysbaddaden so as to win the hand of his beloved Olwen. And Culhwch had succeeded in the hunt for an enchanted boar, in rescuing someone from a watery prison, and in finding a magic cauldron, which might also have been the Holy Grail.

“None of which are on my agenda,” I said out loud into the stillness.

But it begged the question. What was I going to do? I’d spent my life racing through one product launch after another. I’d given hundreds of boring but suitable presentations. My success rate had been eighty-five percent. That meant almost everything I touched had meant more gold for the company coffers. They’d paid me well enough in return, and I’d been a successful investor in my own fortune. Why did I suddenly feel as if I had wasted the years, that I had nothing to show for all that time, all that work? Maybe it would have been better if I had been the true Culhwch calling on Arthur in his court at Celliwig, among his warriors. The lines came to me suddenly across the years, memorized by force and now welcomed, “From here, one of my Warband, Drem, could see a gnat as far away as Scotland; while another, Medyr, could shoot an arrow through the legs of a wren in Ireland!”

But the thoughts were make-believe, and I recognized the onset of a maudlin mood. Not my style, remember? I agreed and walked out of the graveyard and home to my loft, my incredibly expensive domicile, the place I had set up like a museum of art. How much of my collection would I have to sell? It occurred to me that I had spent an average of one waking hour a day in the place, except for Sundays, which were spent worrying about the project for the upcoming week. It was easy to keep it in order, though I’d insisted on a daily cleaning service. Now that was out of the question, too. I saw the airplane ticket as I dropped my keys on the front hall table. The first vacation in five years to an island in the Caribbean, highly recommended. Already paid for. Maybe I’d go there and stay and become a busboy at some tourist restaurant, and spend my free time lying on the sand. The idea was appealing for about a minute.

Tall, narrow windows fronted the street four floors below. When they were closed, the loft was as quiet as the graveyard had been until Olwen started singing. I hadn't asked, but I was sure it had been her voice. I lay down on the sofa, intending to take a short rest before thinking any more about my future.

A piercing ring pulled me out of a deep sleep. It was a few moments before I realized it was my cell phone and not the wailing sound from part of a dream that I forgot as soon as I opened my eyes.

"Cully, what the hell's going on, man? No so long, nice to know you? This place is a freaking zoo right now. I could get axed tomorrow. There's something you need to know. Meet me at Buzzy's at six." The call was disconnected. Jack Pencar, who'd won more deals than I could claim and had the personality of a used-car salesman. But he was right, I should have let him know. There'd just been no time. No time I could spare. I'd wanted to get away, sort it out. Even as I had the thought, I knew reaction was setting in. There was a sense of more than displacement. I felt a sadness growing that I hadn't felt before. At least, I didn't think I had, though something about it was familiar. I didn't want to talk to anyone about that, or the job, or the future. Still, Jack was a known element, at least from work, and a drink or two, or more, wouldn't hurt right then.

The place was crowded but Jack was there ahead of me and had managed to grab a small table over in a corner. That wasn't like him. He liked to work the bar the same way he worked a room at a conference, the one who was the star player, front and center. He waved me over.

"Guinness for you, a double scotch for me," he said, pointing to the drinks in front of him. It was obvious he'd already had a round or two on his own.

"What's up, Jack? What am I doing here?" The Guinness was almost draft quality, which was why Buzzy's was a draw for me. I looked around and saw some of the marketing group were there in their usual noisy way. One by one they'd glance over at me, their faces showing pity. I didn't care. For all they knew, they could be looking in a mirror when they saw me, come week's end. The layoffs weren't finished yet.

"Listen," Jack said. He downed his drink and gestured to the waiter for another. "You got stock options, severance, right?"

"I'll cash in the shares. The severance package is just three months' salary, a joke."

"No, it isn't. Or all of it is. I mean, none of it exists—except on paper. You try to sell, you'll come up empty."

"That makes no sense. The merger is a fact."

“But it isn’t, you see. It’s a fake. Beringer has done a bunk. The company was in debt. He fooled his buyers, took what they gave him, and by now I’ll bet he’s disappeared. Everything the company had on the books was fake, too.”

“We were getting paid,” I said.

“Loans, credit, whatever it took until Beringer found someone who wanted to acquire his precious firm. I would say the guy who set up the deal for the other side is going to find himself out of a job.”

“Not everyone’s been laid off. You, for instance.”

Jack went slower on the next drink when it arrived. “What I’ve just said, well, I learned this all because I was in Beringer’s private bathroom four hours ago. I always wanted to see the gold fixings for myself and his secretary was away from her desk. So sue me,” he said, seeing the look on my face. “Then he came in, talked to someone on the phone. His words were ‘By the time they figure it out, I’ll be in Mexico. Let Harris explain the books. I’m done with the whole mess.’ He hung up and good old Harris came in. Beringer told him an audit was pending. I could hear Harris pulling his hair out. I mean what did he think, no one would bother to check? Anyway, he pointed out that they’d both be in prison before the week was out. Beringer said ‘Not me, you’ and left. I heard Harris moaning and getting a drink from the minibar. I was afraid he’d find me there, but he just made a kind of wailing sound and went out, slamming the door. I left right after, and Sandra was back and didn’t blink an eye as I walked past her desk.”

“What did Beringer get out of it, besides escaping?”

“The company acquiring us has already laid out seven million up front, the other two hundred mil pending that audit.”

“And Beringer’s taken the seven million and left what he calls the ‘whole mess’ for the rest of us? That’s what you’re saying? So you’re telling me I have nothing?”

“You don’t, I don’t, and none of the happy hour people over there do, only they don’t know it yet.”

“They gave me a check.”

“Try and cash it.”

I felt numb. It was one thing to lose a job, another to realize I had no money. I’d never been a saver. What was the point? I’d spent everything on buying art, originals. My loft was my only insurance policy now, if what Jack was saying was true.

“How sure are you? You could have misunderstood that call. One call. That isn’t proof!”

A commotion had begun over in the marketing group. They were all staring at the television. The newscaster had just displayed a photo of Craig Beringer, CEO of Brumell Industries. I couldn't hear a word, but the screen ran a scroll of the dialogue. Beringer had vanished and seven million with him from a pending merger payout, plus twenty-five million for stock he'd sold the week before. That same stock was worthless now, for us. The company was bankrupt. I could see the shock on the faces watching the report. I felt the same way.

"So this is what you wanted to see me about? You could have told me on the phone. Then I could have thrown something while I watched the news."

"You? Mr. Calm? Besides, all of us here are in the same boat, right? I didn't expect it to be on the news so fast, though, and you know more than they do, anyway. But that isn't the only reason I called you down here."

I waited while he finished his scotch and ordered a third, or maybe it was his fourth. Jack held his drink well, though I've never understood why that's considered a virtue. Sitting there, an image flashed through my mind, a sudden view of a waterfall in a green meadow and small lights that danced over it, and in the distance the sound of wind chimes. It was gone as soon as it came, but I knew with certainty it had come from the dream that Jack's phone call had interrupted.

"Here's the thing," he was saying. "A deal's come up, and I want to close it, but I need someone who knows art, paintings and all that stuff, to help me carry it out. You're the right fit."

I finished my Guinness and another one arrived before I'd asked for it.

"One more won't send you over the edge," Jack said, smiling at me.

"Just make me more gullible, is that what you're thinking?"

"Not likely. You're a hard sell, Cully, always have been, and that's exactly what I need."

If I'd had anywhere else to go, or any project to work on, I'd have left him to his shady prospects. Like I said, he was a used-car salesman at heart. But I didn't. I had nowhere to go and nothing to do.

"So what are you into? Something from the dark side, no doubt."

"I didn't take you for a cynic, Cully. Never mind. I think you'll be more interested after I tell you what it's about." He leaned across the table. "Only, it doesn't go past here, okay?"

I crossed my heart and drank some more Guinness. The second one was always the best, and I never had a third, but I was open to anything that night. I couldn't shake the sadness I felt rolling around inside like one of those silver balls in a pinball machine, only going really slow. Listening to Jack's story kept it on a back burner.

“It has to do with Dirwick Productions—they’re filming right here in the city and I met the producer. The movie’s about some search for hidden treasure, but who cares. What’s interesting is he’s got an itch to be respected among what he calls the gentry, wants to get more familiar with the kind of people who go to the galas at the Met. Right now his work gets the respect of home movies. He thinks this treasure hunt is the ticket, but he needs backers—not real ones, just some for show. Who better, I thought, than you? You know people at the museums, they keep wanting you to donate some of your stuff, right? You could introduce him around.”

“Fascinating. Let me ask the obvious. Why would I want to do that, for a stranger, for a bomb of a movie, or for you?” Maybe the second Guinness was working on me after all. I usually aimed for more civility.

“That’s the good part. The guy wants to be noticed. He wants an invitation to the event coming up on the 4th and if he gets it, he’s willing to make us silent partners in his company. And before you say anything—he doesn’t need money. He’s got a ton of it. It just isn’t opening the doors of the higher-ups in the northeast. He’s a boy from Texas with connections in Tinseltown.”

“Yes, the blessed higher-ups. I don’t go to those things. I never have time.”

“You have time now, if I’m not mistaken. And you get invitations, right? Like to this thing on the 4th?”

“This ‘thing’ is to honor the work of J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Moran, and Jacob Fremor. No small talent. What could your Mr. Dirwick possibly say to anyone there? I’m going to guess he doesn’t know squat about painting.”

“So that’s where you come in. You coach him, you take him to the ball, so to speak, and tell him what he needs to know without anyone noticing he’s a newbie. In return, you become a silent partner with a six-figure salary. We both do.”

“And then what?”

“He’ll keep you on as a coach, and I’ll be involved in the marketing end of the movies.”

“I have the feeling that being a part-time tutor to a blowhard Hollywood producer isn’t the card I was dealt to play, no matter how it looks to you.”

“You own one of Jacob Fremor’s artworks, don’t you?”

“A mixed media. How do you know that?”

“I looked it up. Some collections are anonymous. Not yours. It’s free to the public to know. What I’m thinking is, what if he buys it from you, and then donates it to the museum—he’ll be given the status he wants with that gift. So long as he sounds like he knows what he’s talking about.”

Jack was right. I'd purchased the Fremor five years before when the artist was a cliché of artists, living in a cold walk-up and selling his work on the street. I'd bought it for five hundred, and apparently I was his first sale in a year because he gave me another one in gratitude. But no one knew about that one. Three years later the poor man died of pneumonia, making the cliché a certainty. One of his paintings sold for three thousand, and from then on a Fremor was another word for gold. The one I had listed was worth at least a half million. The thing is, I never thought of my paintings, my collection, as available cash. They were like children. I would rather be homeless than part with them. That was how I thought before I got laid off.

"So you're telling me Dirwick is willing to give me what the Fremor is worth and then give it away?"

"He'll shell it out in a heartbeat. I've already checked."

"You've made this deal before talking to me?"

"No. Give me some credit. Your name hasn't even been mentioned. So what do you think?"

What I thought was worse than what I said, because either from the drink or from fear or from that elusive sadness, I said yes.

It was a week before I heard from Jack again. I'd begun to think the deal was off. The news about Beringer was old, except for the fact that five hundred plus white-collar men and women from his company were looking for work. I had spent the time doing nothing at all, or almost. I went to the graveyard again, more than once. I ate my lunch and waited for the sound of chimes and someone singing, but no dice. Maybe I imagined Olwen in the shock of losing my job, I thought.

It was Friday when the ringing of the phone woke me out of a sound, but this time dreamless, sleep.

"It's six in the morning!" I spit out on hearing Jack's voice.

"That it is. Movies start early. I'm on the set. It's great! Getting to know how things work. Listen, Dirwick says he'll meet you at Buzzy's around nine tonight—I'll be there, of course. He's all set to go, so bring some info about art in general and Fremor in particular. You got a copy of the painting? Never mind—I'll bring that catalog I borrowed from the library on Fifth."

He hung up before I'd said another word. I lay back and pulled the covers around me. I didn't want to leave the bed. What was wrong with me? Plenty of people lost their jobs. I was good at what I did. I could find another one, though it might mean leaving the city. I had to shape up. Even if

Jack's plan was a wild goose chase, at least I'd keep myself occupied. A thought chased me enough that I got up and made coffee and sat on the sofa near the window looking out and wondering about it. What if it wasn't losing the job that was making feel down, but knowing it hadn't been the right job to start with, that I'd wasted the years doing something that didn't matter to the world, to my bosses. Or to me. I'd hit on it, I could tell. Why all the persistence, all the effort, all the energy? To what end?

STOPOVER and
Other Stories for a
Rainy Night

[Stopover](#)

[Keeping Watch](#)

[Story Time](#)

[Real Predictions](#)

[Persistence Can Be Fatal](#)

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Stopover

INTERSTATE 84 FROM EAST OREGON to southern Idaho goes past more than one broken-down building left over from better times, especially if you take an off-ramp into one of the U.S. 30 alignments. Once past Idaho I could follow that old U.S. 30 route all the way to Atlantic City, though that wasn't my plan. Still, I'm a history buff and I liked driving on what used to be called the Lincoln Highway, the first road built cross-country from New York City to my home town of San Francisco.

About a hundred miles along the interstate I saw a sign for one of the alignments and swung off, looking for a place to eat. I wasn't in a hurry. I wasn't on anyone's timeline but my own. A diner would do just fine as a stopover for a couple of hours, even it meant I was taking a risk with its fry-up. Janie wouldn't have let me hear the end of that, if she'd been with me. Only, she wasn't.

Funny how you can live twenty years with someone and never know who they really are. People thought we had the perfect marriage. So did I, but my best friend proved me wrong. I couldn't figure out if I was more upset by the way they both fooled me or because it made me the butt of the classic cliché. Jim and Janie were gone before I even knew something was up. It was a hot day and I was tired from work. We were going to go see a movie, Janie and me, catch the air conditioning for a while. I hadn't gotten around to installing it in the house. Instead, I found a note on the kitchen table, empty closets and drawers, and her favorite set of china taken from the glass display we had in the dining room. The rest was mine and good luck to me, her note said.

Right. Thing was, as a private investigator I tracked people who were missing for a living. Did they think I wouldn't go after them? Wouldn't find out they'd set up house in Twin Falls, Idaho? Maybe that's exactly what they thought. Maybe they didn't know me any better than I knew them. So I didn't do anything for a few weeks. I knew they'd start to relax. That's what I wanted.

Tracking people is an art, has its own choreography, you might say. Being a Federal Agent for a few years before they threw me out helped me hone the process. Leaving that job and

forming my own business let me break into areas that had been limited before by too many rules. My license said I was legitimate, and no one had to know how I really conducted my operation or how much I charged. With my success rate, I could afford to do what I wanted.

Or that used to be the case. The last thing Janie mentioned in her note before she wished me good luck was that she'd taken seventy-five percent of our shared bank account. Did she really think I was going to say fine to that?

These thoughts filled in the spaces of that long and boring drive. But I was still hungry. The alignment hadn't offered up so much as a concession stand. It was dusk and I was about to head back to the highway when I saw a building in the distance. Lights were on. Even if it was just somebody's house, I decided I'd stop and ask for directions to the nearest restaurant, or whatever.

But it wasn't anyone's anything. It was an abandoned motel falling apart at the seams, literally. The sign claiming it was also once a cafe was a faded gray on darker gray. The front awning sagged over two thin poles. The rest of the roof had waves in it like something was pushing at it from underneath. All the windows were boarded up, plywood nailed against peeling white paint.

I got out of the car and walked around to stretch my legs. A small tree crowded the side of an attached shed where the door hung off on its hinges. What looked like a baby carriage off its wheels lay on the ground along with a dozen other rusted this and that. There was an armchair facing the front door. I don't know why, but I found that amusing.

It was then I noticed the cars. There were six of them on the other side of the road, a few yards into the trees, all pointed in different directions. A couple were in fair condition, one of them on the newer side, but most looked as if they'd been abandoned for some time.

It was almost dark and a chill wind came up. Suddenly I felt uneasy where I was, though for no good reason. No one else had stopped there. No one else had even driven by, for that matter.

Just as I was getting back into the car I remembered the lights. I was sure I'd seen them. Against my better judgment—I had no idea how far I had to go to find a place I could sleep for the night—I got out again and walked around some more. This time I went toward the back, expecting to see more wild grass and bushes, but instead I found the source of the lights. A huge tent was set on a field about a hundred yards away, and the light from inside it flickered like candles do. I could see the shadow of someone walking back and forth.

I rested my hand on the pocket of my windbreaker. My gun was easier to carry there, easier to grab that way, though the permit I had to carry a concealed weapon did actually require a holster. No one was watching. You never know who—or what—you're going to meet up with in unknown places. One time when I was sent north of Mendocino, California, back when I was working for the government, I walked close to the edge of a massive field of marijuana that had taken an hour to reach on foot, and there were guards everywhere. It was like a damn fortress, and I was new at the job. If it hadn't been for Waite, my trainer, I'd have been seen and had maybe an instant to live. There'd have been no time to unbutton the holster and draw the gun, much less use it. I never bothered with the holster after that on solo assignments. I was always prepared, just like I was when I approached the tent.

"Take yer hand away from the gun. Whatcha lookin' for? This here's my land. Maybe y'jist better get off of it."

The voice had a twang in it but it was calm and cold. I felt the barrel of a rifle in my back. The shadow inside the tent had stopped moving.

"I'm looking for directions," I said, my own voice calm in return. I never panic. I get scared sometimes, but not for long. As soon as I figure out what's happening, I get as peaceful as stone, Waite would say often. "From a jack-rabbit rookie to a stone-cold avenger, that's you." Like a superhero, only always the same, no double identity—what you see is what you get. That's what I told him and he didn't disagree. "The thing is, you have to be careful all the same. Boundaries. Don't forget about boundaries," was all he'd answer.

Right. Sometimes, that idea just doesn't make sense to me. Other times, like if I'm standing in a dry grass field with a crazy tent owner, it does. Best path then is to at least pretend to go along. The man behind me could be open to a reasonable discussion, or he could be a rattler who'd spring if poked the wrong way, or any way. My bet was on the profile of the rattler.

"I'm hungry. I need to find a place to eat and stay for the night. Obviously, this motel isn't it."

"Good thinkin'. So just walk outta here and get in that shiny limo o' yourn and go."

"It's not a limo. It's a 2.5 S Special Edition Nissan Altima, brand new."

I heard a chuckle behind me.

"What kind of jackass corrects someone holding a rifle on him? I squeeze this trigger and you're dust. You are either an arrogant fool or a man on a mission. My vote is for both." The

country accent was gone and in its place was a syntax and tone worthy of an NPR announcer. I started to turn around.

“Nah-uh. I won’t pretend to be a backwoodsman and you will still go back to your car and drive away. Now. I can use this rifle, if you have doubts. I’d just rather not. But I also have a mission, you see, and part of it insists no strangers allowed.”

I wanted to say more, and I wanted to see the face of the man who was talking, and I wanted to know who was in the tent, but the rifle was pressed into my back with more force. I decided to suspend my curiosity and started walking toward the front of the motel.

“Let him stay, John. For heaven’s sake, the man said he was hungry.”

I heard a long, deep sigh. “All right, whoever you are, come back to the tent. We’ll do as she says.”

He came up beside me. I saw he had white hair but a young-looking face. He’d pointed the barrel of the rifle down and gestured for me to go ahead.

The woman stood at the entrance tying back the flaps. Inside I could see a long pinewood table and chairs. A tapestry of some kind divided that from what I imagined must be a bedroom behind it.

“Hello,” the woman said, her voice warm and silky as honey. Her hair was a dark auburn and her eyes very pale in color, a light gray or blue, I couldn’t be sure in that light. “I’m Emma. This very rude—but protective—man is my husband. Please, have a seat and I’ll get you something to eat. We were just going to have our own supper, and it’s nice to be able to share it with someone else.”

“I’m Alex Somers,” I said.

“He’s not staying long, Em. He’s got places to go, don’t you?” John gave me a look that suggested I answer in the positive, which was the truth, anyway.

“Yes, he’s right, but I am very grateful for the food. There doesn’t seem to be any place to get something on this road.”

“There isn’t,” John said. “That’s why we’re here. Get some privacy. Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work out.”

“So others have found you, too?”

“You might say that.”

He took a chair for himself, the rifle still at his side. I took the chair opposite.

“That’s a Winchester Model 70. Bolt action, right? Nice.”

“Much better than that piece you’re carrying. This rifle has good aim, reliable. Full magazine plus one,” he added, I assumed in case I might think it was just for show.

“The safety’s on.”

He gave another chuckle and patted the stock, its wood polished to a sheen. “As I said, I would rather not use it.”

Emma put a plate of cold roast turkey and new potatoes in front of me, with a mixed salad on the side.

“This is wonderful,” I said, trying not to inhale the food. The last time I’d eaten anything had been breakfast that morning before starting for Idaho.

“No need to hurry with it—there’s plenty more,” she said. John didn’t say anything. I noticed all he’d eaten was some of the turkey.

The candles flickered in a breeze from the entrance. There were ten of them placed around the tent and they gave a good feeling to the place. She seemed to read my mind.

“I like candlelight. It’s much more intimate and welcoming, don’t you think?”

I had the sudden feeling I had stepped close to the edge of quicksand, though I couldn’t have said why. I know it was the same feeling of apprehension I’d experienced near the marijuana field, and there was no Waite to offer advice. But I didn’t need his help, hadn’t needed it for a long time. I could read John’s face as if it were an alphabet, and I took the warning.

“Always worries me, given the chance of a fire,” I said.

Her eyes seemed to narrow for a second and then she smiled, lighting up her whole face. In that light, her beauty seemed ethereal.

“So, what made you take this road? You’d have a lot more luck on the interstate,” John said. He held out his hand to take the glass of wine that Emma offered. She gave one to me, too.

I held it up to the light. It was deep ruby red, and had an appealing smoky aftertaste when I tried it.

“Just chance,” I said. “I’d been a couple of hours on the highway and nothing showed up, and like I said, I was hungry.”

“Yes, I believe you,” John said, with a brief smile.

Outside, a steady chorus of tree frogs mingled with the sound of the wind in the trees.

“Here,” I said, gesturing around with my glass, “you’ve got a really nice place to camp out.”

“Oh, we aren’t camping, Alex,” Emma said, and her voice seemed to have a smoky edge, like the wine. “We live here. This is our home!” She gave her brilliant smile.

I looked at John, who was focused on his own glass, staring into it as if he expected to find some kind of answer to a question there. When he looked up at me I saw for a split second a man in such emotional pain it was all I could do not to react. Then it was gone.

“This is our third year. It suits us,” he said.

“Well, I guess it must, because it’s pretty isolated. What about friends?”

“I do miss having them around,” Emma started to say, but John interrupted with “We don’t need anyone.”

“That’s true,” Emma said thoughtfully, as if she was considering new information. “And after all, I have my vegetable garden.”

“You do a great job with it, if this meal is any indicator,” I said.

“How nice of you to say that. It’s hard work, but I enjoy it, and everything grows so fast, sometimes I have trouble using it all up. John won’t eat anything from my garden, which is a shame. Still, I always have enough for strangers when they come by. It isn’t often, but it’s nice when it happens.”

“You’re missing out,” I said to John.

“Oh, John has his own garden, on the other side of the field. He grows roses. If it weren’t so late he could show you. They take up a lot of his time, but I don’t mind.”

“They’re fragile, roses,” John said, “but so beautiful they’re worth it.

“Some are, I guess,” I said. “Some can be as hardy as desert flowers if you treat them right.” I could hear my sister-in-law Maralei telling Janie how shrub roses would last through a Montana winter. That had been on her last visit out to see us. The sisters got together once a year and I knew Janie wanted to go visit Maralei the next time. It occurred to me maybe that was just what she had done, bringing Jim right along with her. Maybe they did know me, and Twin Falls was a decoy trail till they worked out a final plan.

“Now that isn’t a detail I’d expect to hear in passing,” John said, watching me.

“I pick up a lot of information in my job.”

“And what work do you do, exactly?”

I decided to be truthful. I had the feeling they’d both know if I wasn’t, but more than that, I didn’t see any reason to lie. “I’m a private investigator. Just now I’m on a personal errand.”