

From the award-winning author of *All You Despise* and *The Nobody*

TOM PICCIRILLI

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MACABRE INK

Smashwords Edition published at Smashwords by Crossroad Press

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SHORT RIDE TO NOWHERE

Jenks and Hale aren't friends, partners, or even next door neighbors anymore. Not since they each lost their jobs and had their homes foreclosed. Not since they lost their wives and kids and whatever stability they'd fought for in the world. Adrift on the streets of New York, Jenks' dark path seems to parallel Hale's step by step.

After Hale is found nearly dead beside the corpse of a nine-year-old girl, and soon after committing suicide in a mental hospital, Jenks decides to find out just what the hell happened. What happened to Hale and the girl, what happened to the wayward American Dream, and what happened to his youth and forfeited hopes.

Because whatever happens to Hale happens to Jenks just a few months later.

THE FEVER KILL

Crease is going back to his quaint, quiet hometown of Hangtree.

It's where his father the sheriff met ruin in the face of a scandal involving the death of a kidnapped little girl and her missing ransom. It's where Crease was beaten, jailed, and kicked clear of the town line ten years earlier.

Now Crease is back. He's been undercover for so long that most days he feels more like a mobster than a cop. He doesn't mind much: the corrupt life is easier to stomach than a wife who can't understand him, a son who hates him, and a half-dozen adopted kids he can't even name anymore. He's also just gotten his drug-dealing, knife-wielding psycho boss Tucco's mistress pregnant.

A fine time to decide to settle old scores and resolve a decade-old mystery.

With Tucco hot on his tail, Crease has to find his answers fast. Who kidnapped little Mary? Who really killed her? Was his own father guilty? And what happened to the paltry fifteen grand ransom that seems to spell salvation to half the population of Hangtree? The town still has a taste for his blood and secrets it wants to keep. Crease has a single hope; a raw and raging fever driving him toward the truth that might just burn him up along the way.

NIGHTJACK

On the day of his release from a mental institution Pace is taken "hostage" by Faust, Pia, and Hayden, three escapees from the hospital who disappeared after the presumed rape and beating of Cassandra Kaltzas, daughter of the Greek munitions tycoon Alexandra Kaltzas. Each suffers from Multiple Personality Disorder, experiencing complex delusions and sometimes fantastical identities. Pace tries to piece together what happened when apparently one of their alternate personalities tried to kill Cassandra.

Pace himself is an alternate of William Pacella, a man whose wife died in a restaurant fire set by a local mobster for insurance money. William Pacella "dies" so that Nightjack can be born—a new personality who may or may not be Jack the Ripper.

For unknown reasons, Pace is able to see others' delusions—when alternates take over members of the group, Pace alone is able to interact with each persona. Included among them is Princess Eirrin, a ten thousand year old sorceress and heir to the Atlantean throne; Smoker, a half-breed gunman from 1880s Arizona; Thaddeus, friend and companion to St. Paul; and the ancient Greek architect Daedalus who soared among the clouds with his home-made wax wings and watched his son perish in the sea.

Now the four find themselves under attack from assassins sent by Kaltzas to punish the person who attacked his daughter. Conflicting stories abound about Cassandra—whether she was raped, if she was perhaps murdered, or if she and Pace somehow crossed paths even before the hospital. In fact, she may not even exist.

As the attacks persist, the group is forced to face their own personal traumas and terrors, and go in search of Kaltzas in Greece. There, on an island where fantasy, myth, and truth are all entangled, Pace and his many alternates must sift through madness and deceit to unlock the mystery. And everyone may wind up dead unless Pace willingly unleashes the most brutal killer of all: Nightjack.

The last time I saw the great, secret, unrequited love of my life, Gabriella Corben, was the day the talking monkey moved into Stark House and the guy who lied about inventing aluminum foil took an ice pick through the frontal lobe.

I was in the lobby doing Sunday cleaning, polishing the mahogany banister and dusting the ten Dutch Master prints on the walls. At least one of them appeared authentic to me—I'd studied it for many hours over the last two years. I thought it would be just like Corben to stick a million dollar painting in among the fakes, just to show he could get away with it. I imagined him silently laughing every time he saw me walking up from my basement apartment with my little rag and spritz bottle of cleaner, ready to wash a masterpiece that could set me up in luxury for the rest of my life.

And it was just like me to keep wiping it down and chewing back my petty pride week after week, determined to drop into my grave before I'd pull it from the wall and have it appraised. The chance to retire to Aruba wasn't worth knowing he'd be snickering about it for the rest of his life.

I stared at myself in the buffed mahogany and listened to Corben and Gabriella arguing upstairs. I couldn't make out their words from four flights away. He played the tortured artist well, though, and I could really bellow like a wounded water buffalo. He roared and moaned and kicked shit all around. He used to do the same thing in college. I heard a couple of bottles shatter. Probably bourbon or single malt scotch. They were props he occasionally used in order to pretend he was a hard drinker. The journalists and television crews always made a point of saying there was plenty of booze around. I had no doubt he emptied half the bottles down the sink. I knew his act. I'd helped him develop it. For a while, it had been mine as well.

Now Gabriella spoke in a low, loud, stern voice, firm but loving. It hurt me to hear her tone because I knew that no matter how bad it got with Corben, she would always stand by him and find a way to make their marriage work.

I kept waiting for the day when his hubris and self-indulgence finally pushed him into seeking out an even more dramatic flair and he actually struck her. I wondered if even that would be enough to drive her away. I wondered if I would kick in his door and beat the hell out of him for it, and in a noble show of compassion I would let his unconscious body drop from my bloody hand before breaking his neck. I wondered if she would gaze on me with a new understanding then and fall into my arms and realize we were meant to be together. I often wondered why I wasn't already in long-term therapy.

They owned the top floor of the five-story building. They'd had a fleet of architects and construction crews come in and bang down walls and shore up doorways and put in flamboyant filigreed arches. In the end they were left with sixteen rooms. I'd been inside their place but never gotten a grand tour. I'd mostly stuck to the bathrooms and fixed the toilet when it broke. I imagined the library, the den, the sun room, the bedroom. I didn't know of sixteen different types of rooms. Was there a ballroom?...a music room?...a solarium? I had a passkey to all the apartments in Stark House, even theirs, but I'd somehow managed to resist the temptation to comb through their home.

The other four stories were inhabited by elderly, faded film and television stars, one-hit pop songwriters, and other forgotten former celebrities who'd become short-lived cultural icons for reasons ranging from the noble to the ludicrous. They were mostly shut-ins who every so often would skulk about the halls for reasons unknown or appear, momentarily, in their darkened doorways, maybe giving a wave before retreating.

We had the guy who'd invented aluminum foil. We had a lady who'd given mouth-to-mouth to the former president's son after a pile-up on I-95 and saved his life. We had a performance artist/environmentalist who'd appeared on national television after soaking in a tub of toxic waste in front of the Museum of Modern Art twenty years ago. He was still alive even though there was only one

about 40% of him left after all the surgery. He rolled around the corridors with half a face, tumor packed, sucking on an oxygen tube.

Corben shouted some more. It sounded like he said, "Radiant Face." It was the title of his first book. He was going through his bibliography again. I sat on the stairs and lit a cigarette. The old love and hates heaved around in my chest. I looked around the lobby trying to figure out why I was doing this to myself. Why I was no smarter than him when it came to bucking fate.

Our story was as flatly clichéd and uninteresting as it was honest and full of bone and pain. To me anyway. Corben and I had been childhood best friends. We'd gotten our asses kicked by neighborhood thugs and spent two nights in jail trying hard to act tough and be strong and not huddle too close together. We nearly sobbed with relief the afternoon they let us out. We'd encouraged each other as neophyte novelists and helped one another to hone our craft. I'd taken thirty-seven stitches in my fights for him, and he'd broken his left arm and gotten a concussion for me. We aced entrance exams to the same Ivy League University.

It was a righteous partnership that went south our junior year in college. We were both getting drunk a lot around then. It had something to do with an older woman, perhaps. I had the memory blocked, or maybe it just bored me too much to care anymore, but I couldn't recall the details. Perhaps she was mine and he took her away, or maybe she was his and wound up on my arm or in my bed. However it played out, it released a killing flood of repressed jealousy and animosity from both of us and we didn't see each other again for thirteen years.

We settled in to write our novels. His career caught on with his second book, a thriller about a father chasing down the criminals who stole the donated heart on ice the guy needed for his son's transplant. I liked the book in spite of myself. When it sold to the movies it became a major hit that spawned several sequels. He ripped himself off with a similar novel that dealt with a mob hitman chasing a crippled girl who needed to get to the hospital within thirty-six hours to get the operation that might let her walk again. It aced the bestseller list for six months. Corben got a cameo in the movie version. He was the kindly doctor who sticks the little metal prod in the girl's foot and makes her big toe flinch.

My own books sold slowly and poorly. They received a generous amount of praise and critical comments, but not much fanfare. I brooded and got into stupid scrapes trying to prove myself beyond the page. I couldn't. Corben assailed me in every bookstore, every library, every time I checked the bestseller list. I wrote maudlin tales that sold to literary rags. I won awards and made no money. I took part-time jobs where I could find them. I delivered Chinese food. I taught English as a second language, I ran numbers for a local bookie until he got mopped up in a statewide sting. I kept the novels coming but their advances and sales were pitiful.

There were women but none of them mattered much. I never fell in love. I wrote thrillers, I wrote mysteries featuring my heroic PI King Carver. I didn't copy Corben but I was surprised at how similar our tastes and capabilities were. I thought my shit blew away his shit.

Thirteen years went by like that, fast but without much action. I lucked into the job as manager/handyman of Stark House. I lived in Apartment A½, a studio nearest the basement. So near was actually *in* the fucking basement. It was the basement. I hadn't sold a novel in almost two years. I kept writing them and sending them to my agent. The rejection letters grew shorter and more terse and formal as time went on. I'd lost what little momentum I might've ever had. Eventually all the manuscripts came back and I stacked them on the floor of my closet hoping I might one day have the courage to burn them.

Maybe I had been waiting for Corben, or maybe he'd been waiting for me.

We used to walk past Stark House when we were kids and discuss the history of the building. It had always accommodated misfits of one sort or another. There were rumors about it a little more cryptic

and wondrous than the rumors about every other building.

In the late nineteenth century, it had been owned by a family of brilliant eccentrics who'd turned out scientists, senators, and more than a few madmen. A number of murders occurred on the premises. Local legends grew about the shadow men who served the politicians. They said the Stark family carried bad blood.

In the early twentieth century, the place had been converted to apartments and became home to a famous opera singer, a celebrity husband and wife Broadway acting team, and a bootlegger who made a fortune from prohibition. They said there were secret walls. I searched but never found any. The place still called to life a certain glamour nearly lost through time. The wide staircase bisecting the lobby gave the impression of romantic leading men sweeping their lovers upstairs in a swirl of skirts, trains, and veils. The original chandelier still hung above as it had for over a hundred years and I waited for the day it tore from its supports and killed us all.

I knew Corben would eventually try to buy the building. I was lucky to have gotten in before him. Even his wealth couldn't purchase Stark House outright. When he and I finally met face to face again after all those years, neither one of us showed any surprise at all. We didn't exchange words. We shared similar blank, expressionless features. He must've mentioned something to his wife later on because I caught her staring at me on occasion, almost as if she had plenty of questions for me but didn't want to trespass on such a mystery-laden history.

It made perfect sense to me that I would fall in love with Gabriella Corben virtually the moment I met her.

Upstairs, Corben screamed, "Wild Under Heaven! Ancient Shadows!" I never quite understood what kind of point he was trying to make when he ran through his list of titles. Gabriella spoke sternly and more stuff got knocked over. I heard him sob. It gave me no pleasure hearing it. Finally a door slammed and another opened. The corners of the building echoed with the small sounds of the lurking outcast phantoms slinking in and out of shadow. The old-fashioned elevator buzzed and hummed moving between the second and third floors. I heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and she was there.

I briefly glanced at Gabriella Corben and gave a noncommittal grin. She moved halfway down the staircase and sat in the middle of the carpeted step, her elbows on her knees, watching me. She wouldn't discuss their argument and wouldn't mention him at all. She never did.

My hidden, unrequited love was a secret even from her. Or perhaps not. She was perceptive and understanding and probably knew my heart as well as she understood her husband's, which might've been entirely or might've been not at all. He and I still weren't that different. He was up there screaming out loud and I was down here braying inside.

I went about my business. I did my work. I waited for her to say what she wanted to say and willed the muscles in my back not to twitch.

I knew what I would see if I dared to look over my shoulder. A woman of twenty-five, comfortably beneath the finish of her own calm, with glossy, curling, black hair draped loosely to frame her face. Lightly freckled from the summer sun, her eyes a rich hazel to offset the glowing brown of her skin. Her body slim but full, her presence assured. I caught a whiff of her perfume combined with the heady, earthy scent of her sweat beneath it. I must've looked like a maniac, polishing one foot of banister over and over, so damn afraid to turn around.

Where she went a kind of light traveled. She carried it with her. It lifted my heart and left me stunned. It was a feeling I wasn't accustomed to and for a long while I fought against it. I had learned to live with resentment instead of romance. It was my preferred state of being until she came along. Now I burned in silence.

She said, almost sleepily, "You ever wonder what it would be like if you could dig down through

all the layers of polish, the paint and wax, peeling back the years, say going in a half inch deep, to a different time, and see what life here might've been like back then?"

A half-inch deep. Probably eighty years. "I suspect you'd find a lot of the same."

"Really?"

"Life wasn't so different. Maybe you wouldn't trip over a guy who sat in toxic waste in front of the MOMA, but there'd be somebody comparable, I bet."

"What could be comparable to that?"

I shrugged. "A lunatic juggling hand grenades. A World War One vet used to panhandle out from here back in the twenties, and if he didn't make enough coin he'd chase people around with a bayonet. He spooked the neighbors on the other side of the street by flipping around one of those German hand grenades."

She waited but that was all I knew about it. Most tales about real people only had a modicum of interest to them, and no real ending. I didn't want to lose her attention and said, "There's always been plenty of crazy."

"I think you're right. How about the rest of it?"

"The rest of it?"

"Life. Lots of happiness? Beauty? Romance?"

"Sure. This lobby is so nice that there's been a lot of weddings performed right here, at the foot of the stairwell. The publicity shots were gorgeous. They'd have horses and carriages lined up out in the street, and after the ceremony the wedding party would hop in, ride over to Fifth Avenue and down past St. Patrick's Cathedral. If the families of the bride or groom had enough pull, they could get the Cardinal's okay to have the church bells ring as the carriages went by."

"That must've been lovely."

Dorothy Parker and one of her lovers used to drunkenly chase each other through the halls of Star House in the raw, but that didn't quite have the right kind of romance I was going for. "A couple of silent film stars met on the fifth floor back in the twenties. They split their time between Los Angeles and New York and lived next door to each other for a couple of years before ever meeting."

"Which apartments?"

By that she meant, *Which of my rooms?* "I don't know."

"Okay, go on."

"When they did run into each other here it was supposedly love at first sight. They got engaged a week later. The press went nuts with it. They made five movies together too."

"I think I heard about that. Didn't they commit suicide? Jumped off the roof?"

I was hoping to skip that part. Corben had told her more about the place than I thought he might. Corben should've. Or maybe she'd been talking to some of the other tenants, though I couldn't figure out which of the shut-ins might actually chat with someone else.

"Yeah, when sound came in. They both sounded too Brooklyn, and no matter what they did, they couldn't get rid of the accent."

"Death by Brooklyn," she said. "How sad." She put her hand on the banister and floated it down inch by inch until she'd almost reached the spot I was polishing. She tapped it with her nail. The length of her nail, a half inch, eighty years. "I've heard there's been even more tragedy as well."

"Of course. Plenty of births, you get plenty of deaths."

"And not all of it by natural means certainly."

"Why do you want to hear about this stuff?" I asked. For the first time I looked directly at her, and as usual, the lust and the ache swept through me. She pulled a face which meant that Corben had been talking up the house history and she wanted a different viewpoint.

"Murder's pretty natural," I told her. "I don't know if that guy ever bayoneted anyone or if the hand"

grenade ever went off, but there's been a few grudges that ended with a knife or a handgun. One guy pushed his brother down the elevator shaft, and one of the scientists blew himself and his dog to hell mixing up some concoction."

"Scientists?"

"Some scientists used to live here."

"And their dogs."

"Well," I said, "yeah."

"Oh, I see." She chewed on that for a while. I moved up a couple steps, working the banister, easing a little closer. I could see her reflection in the shine. I fought down the primitive inside me trying to get out. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe she was just waiting for me to carry her down the stairs. But I didn't make the move.

Gabriella said, "Have you ever considered doing a book about it? The building?"

I didn't want to admit the truth, but she had a way of cooling the endless blazing rage inside me. My loud thoughts softened and quieted, even while I went slowly crazy with wanting her. "Yes, when I was a kid. I've always been intrigued by the building. There's always been a lot of talk, a lot of rumors."

"But you don't want to write one anymore?"

"No."

"Why not?"

It was a good question, and one I wasn't prepared to answer. It took me a while to say anything. "I have my own stories to share, I suppose. I don't need to tell this place's legends and lessons. And I don't need me to tell them anyway."

I turned and she smiled at me a little sadly.

I knew then exactly what Corben was doing and what was now ripping him up inside. The damn fool was trying to write a book about Stark House.

~ * ~

A minute later the front door was awash with a blur of black motion, and Gabriella and I wheeled and moved down the stairs together, as one, like I'd seen in a dozen classic films I could name.

Our bare arms touched and I tamped down the thrill that flared through me. She placed a hand on my wrist and my pulse snapped hard. It was odd and a bit unsettling to know that such small, commonplace human actions could still send me spiraling toward the edge. I hadn't realized I was quite so lonely until that moment.

And there it was, the first sighting of Ferdinand the Magnifico, looking dapper as hell in his ornate world Victorian-era black suit, lace tie. And this too, our initial meeting with the monkey, Mojo, leashed to his master by a sleek length of golden chain, who hopped around doing a dance in his little jacket and cap while holding his cup out. This also wasn't exactly the grand romance I'd been hoping for, but I'd take whatever I could get.

"Halloo!" Ferdi shouted. Behind him scattered out on the sidewalk stood crates, boxes, and a small assortment of furniture. He must've hired some cheap uninsured movers who would only carry your belongings curb to curb.

Mojo jumped back and forth as far as his chain would allow. Gabriella smiled and said, "Are you certain you can bring an animal like that into this building?"

"Animal!" Ferdi cried. "This is no animal, madam! I assure you! This is my partner, Mojo, a gentle soul no different than you or I, with a heart filled with benevolence and an obligation only to make children laugh!"

She ignored the side of his trunk that stated in bold yellow letters FERDINAND THE MAGNIFICO, and asked, "And just who are you?"

“I am Ferdinand! And this is our new home! Today we move into Apartment 2C of the Star Building!” He glanced at me, but, like all men, he couldn’t keep his eyes off Gabriella for longer than that.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Ferdinand.”

“Just Ferdinand, madam! Are we neighbors? Say it is so!”

“Just Gabriella, Ferdinand,” she said. “And it is so, we’re neighbors. And this is Will.”

“Well then, as you say!”

I bit back a groan. He was the kind of person who shouted everything with a joyous cry. If the decibel level didn’t get you, the enthusiasm might. The monkey looked more like my kind of person. He grinned when you looked at him but otherwise just kind of held back, watching and waiting to see what might be coming his way. Printed on the monkey’s little hat was the name MOJO. A button pinned to his fire-engine red jacket read THE WORLD’S ONLY TALKING/WRITING CHIMP. There was a pad with a pen attached by a string in a small bag around his neck.

Mojo pressed his tin cup out to Gabriella. He was insistent. She gestured that she had no cash on her and I pulled a quarter out of my pocket and snapped it off my thumbnail into his cup. I expected him to say thank you, seeing as he was a talking monkey, but Mojo only hopped twice, squeaked, took off his hat and bowed.

“If he talks, why does he have a pad and pen?” she asked.

“He prefers to write!”

“I see,” she said. She shot me a look. “Just like Will.”

A reference to me, not to her bestselling author husband. It took me back a step. Of course, she was also likening me to a chimp, so maybe it wasn’t quite the compliment I had wanted it to be.

“Well hello, Mojo,” she said, “how are you today?”

Mojo went, “Ook.”

Ferdi lifted his arms and clapped happily. “You see! He says he is fine!”

Gabriella laughed pleasantly and tried again. “It will be very nice having you in the building, Mojo. I hope we’ll become great friends.”

Mojo did a dance, held out his tin cup, and went, “Ook ook.”

Ferdi said, “Bravo, Mojo! As all can clearly hear, you have told them you are delighted to be a new neighbor to such gracious and wonderful people!”

“Why doesn’t he write us a note instead?” I said.

“I’m sure he soon shall! But at the moment he is enjoying this conversation so much, he has no need to give letters!”

Gabriella gave me the look again and this time I returned it. We were compatriots, we were sharing a moment. She was laughing and I was smiling. That was good enough. I drew another quarter out of my pocket and tossed it into the monkey’s cup. If nothing else, he was a smart chimp. He’d already taken me for half a buck.

“Are you with the circus?” I asked.

“No, nor any carnival! We are our own pair, a team! We have toured Central Europe, throughout Asia, New Zealand, and South Dakota! And now, we arrive here!”

“I’ll help with your belongings,” I said.

“Wonderful!”

Gabriella swept out past us heading for the door, and the overwhelming urge to touch her rose up at me and made me reach for her, maybe to grab her elbow and turn her to face me, so that I might finally find the courage to say something real and true to her, about myself or about Corben, or perhaps about nothing at all. Just a chance to spend more time with her, even if it was only a few more minutes. When you got down to it, I was as needy as Corben, and maybe even worse.

But my natural restraint slowed me down too much, and even before I managed to lift my hand she was already out of reach.

My last image of her:

A gust of wind whirling her hair into a savage storm about her head while she eased out the front door silhouetted in the morning sun, her skirt snapping back at me once as if demanding my attention—a curious expression of concern or perhaps dismay on her face—perhaps the subtle aftereffect of her argument with Corben, or maybe even considering me, for the first time, as a potential lover—moving across the street against traffic. A taxi obscured her, the door finished closing, the chimp chittered, and my secret love was gone.

~ * ~

I thought Ferdi and Mojo might have some friends or fans from New Zealand to help them move in, but they had no one but me. Luckily, they didn't have that much stuff. Mojo really did have monkey bars, a collapsible cage that when put together took up an entire room of the three-bedroom apartment. It was probably my duty to call the landlord and squeal on them. No pets were allowed, much less restricted exotic animals, but I liked the action they brought with them, the energy. Let somebody else rat them out.

We carried everything up the stairs rather than futzing with the tight elevator. It took less than two hours for Ferdi and me to get everything inside and set up.

Ferdi handed me twenty dollars as a tip, but the monkey danced so desperately and kept jabbing his cup at me with such ferocity that I finally gave him the crumpled bill. Ferdi had a real racket going and I wondered if I could talk him into being my new agent. I could just see him giving hell to my editors, the monkey using his little pen to scribble out clauses on bad contracts. Ferdi asked me to stay and share a bottle of wine with him, but I had a story I wanted to finish.

When I got back to my place I sat at my desk staring at the screen at some half-composed paragraphs that made virtually no sense to me. Being with Gabriella had inspired me, but now the words ran together into phrases that held no real resolve. I didn't know my own themes anymore.

I sat back and stared up at the shafts of light stabbing down across my study, feeling the weight of the entire building above me—all the living and the dead, the bricks and mortar of history growing heavier every year. A hundred and forty years worth of heritage and legacy, chronicles and sagas. Soon they might crush me out of existence. Maybe I was even in the mood for it.

I had a stack of unopened mail on my bed. I tore into an envelope containing a royalty check for \$21.34. I started to crumple it in my fist, but I needed the money. I decided that no matter how Mojo might push me, I wasn't going to give it to him. I picked up an unfinished chapter of my latest novel and the words offended me. I tossed the pages across the room and watched them dive-bomb against the far wall. There wasn't even enough air in here for them to float on a draft. I wondered if Corben was still up there howling. I wondered if Gabriella had returned to him yet or if she was out in the city enjoying herself, taking in enough of the living world for both of them. For all three of us. The claustrophobia started to get to me and I decided to go walk the building.

I hadn't gotten twenty paces from my apartment door when I spotted a man laid out on the tile floor of the lobby—a shallow red halo inching outward—with an ice pick in his forehead that vibrated with every breath he took.

I'd never seen him in the light of day, but I thought it was the guy who'd invented aluminum foil. I couldn't believe he was still alive. Blood and clear fluids lapped from his ears. A wave of vertigo rippled through me and I bit down on my tongue and it passed. I bent to him and had no idea what to do. He was finished, he had to be finished because there was three inches of metal burrowed into his brain, but he was wide-eyed and still staring at me with great interest. He licked his lips and tried to move his hands.

“Jesus Holy Christ...” I whispered. I didn’t have a cell phone. I started to turn and run for my apartment when he called my name.

“Will.”

It was astonishing he could actually see. Death was already clouding his eyes and gusting through his chest. His voice had been thickened by it. It was a sound I’d heard several times before. It sounded exactly like my father when the old man had about three minutes left to go. There was no point in leaving him now. I kneeled at his side. “I’m here.”

“I lied,” he said.

“About what?”

“I didn’t invent aluminum foil. Aluminum foil was first introduced into the industry as an insulating material. It later found diverse applications in a variety of fields.”

“What?”

“It can be used instead of lead and tinfoil in other specified applications. The aluminum foil thickness ranges from 0.0043 millimeters to 0.127 millimeters. It comes with a bright or dull finish and also with embossed patterns—”

“Shhh.”

“Foil is available in thirty-three distinct colors. In 1910, when the first aluminum foil rolling plant was opened in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland. The plant, owned by J.G. Neher & Sons, stood at the foot of the Rhine Falls and captured the falls’ energy. Neher's sons together with Dr. Lauber—oh, Dr. Lauber! Dr. Lauber!—discovered the endless rolling process and the use of aluminum foil as a protective barrier.”

The ice pick had ripped through his memories. Even if he hadn't invented aluminum foil, he surely knew a hell of a lot about it. I couldn’t quite figure why his head was full of all this, but it was probably no worse than thinking about stealing Dutch Master prints and heading to Aruba. I wondered what I would be spouting on about in my last minute if someone stuck a blade into my brain.

I should’ve offered up some kind of soothing words to send him on his way, but he looked animated and eager to chat despite the fact that his brains were leaking out of his ears and tear ducts. I should’ve asked him who had done this to him. Instead I said, “Why the hell would you lie about something like that?”

“I wanted to meet girls. Forgive me!”

In the hierarchy of sins I thought that lying about inventing aluminum foil in order to meet chicks, which in itself wasn’t particularly immoral—just didn’t rate very high on the damnation scale. I figured if a priest had been handy, he would’ve given dispensation without much of a problem.

“You’re forgiven,” I said. “Who did this to you?”

“Dr. Lauber! Dr. Lauber!”

“Tell me who—”

“God, the things I’ve done. I once struck my mother. I ran over a dog, someone’s pet. I broke the hearts of my own children. I hurt a woman, she bled. I shall surely go to hell. Please, Dr. Lauber!”

“Shhh.”

“Dr. Lauber!”

“Close your eyes.”

He finally did and died that instant.

~ * ~

The cops questioned me full tilt boogie. They came around in three teams of two. I got the Office Friendlys, the hair-trigger hardcase growlers, and the plaintive guys who just sort of whined at me and wanted me to admit to murder. I told them his last words and they thought maybe he had rattled out the almighty and vengeful aluminum foil powers that be. They quizzed each other about the name D

Lauber. They all said it sounded familiar, maybe a hitman working for the syndicate. Maybe a plastic surgeon who'd gone out of his tree. I suspected that if anybody Googled the name they'd find him to be the man who'd discovered the endless rolling process with the sons of J.G. Neher.

The whiners took me down to the station and put me in a holding room with a big mirror, where I stared at myself and whoever was behind it and started to re-evaluate the cops in my novels. I'd been trying way too hard. I'd been breaking my ass creating brilliant detectives who solved crimes with the sparsest clues. But these guys were never going to figure out who'd killed the aluminum foil liar, not unless somebody confessed out of hand just to stop all the bitching.

Eventually they cut me loose and I wandered the streets. I was the guy who had to clean up all the blood off the lobby floor back at Stark House. I didn't want to go back yet. I'd seen death before but not murder. I'd written about it and I recognized how far off I'd been from what it really felt like to be in the presence of homicide.

A certain sense of guilt lashed me as I thought about how close I'd come to walking in on the man being attacked. Maybe two minutes, maybe less. Perhaps I could've prevented it. If only I'd moved a little faster. If only I'd run out into the street to see what could be seen. Maybe I would've spotted the killer rushing away or hailing a cab.

I stopped into a bookstore and bought Corben's latest novel. His dedication read: *To all those who love the mysteries of life and death as much as I do.* It was followed by *And to my wife.*

Not even her name, her lovely name. The bastard pasted her in there as an afterthought. How could she read that and not be appalled? How could he expect her not to be upset? I didn't understand it and I knew I never would.

I read the first ten pages leaning against the window of a nearby bodega, and read another twenty walking back to Stark House. I sat outside on the front steps for a half hour and let the paragraphs slide by under my gaze. I didn't know what the hell I was reading. I was too full of my own anger and pain to even see the words. I flipped the pages by rote. I looked at the dedication again and tried to see the substance and meaning behind it. Corben didn't love the mysteries of life. I wasn't sure he loved anything at all. I left the book there and went inside.

The cops had put up little orange cones around the murder scene, with yellow tape cordoning the area off. The tape didn't say "Police Line, Do Not Cross" so I tore it down and got my mop, gloves, scouring pads and sanitizers out of the closet. It took me two hours to do an even halfway decent job of it. I had thought it would take longer. There was still a bad stain. I kept having to stop when my hands started to shake. I didn't know if it was because of all the blood or because I'd been so wrapped up in my own problems that I hadn't seen someone else's desperate loneliness. I'd thought I had been bad, but Jesus, dying with the dry facts of aluminum foil on your lips because you wanted to get laid was a whole other level of heartbreak.

~ * ~

Ferdinand the Magnifico and Mojo put on little shows for the neighborhood kids in the garden behind the building. It wasn't much of a garden, but by East Side standards it was practically the Congo. The monkey grunted with certain inflections and Ferdi appeared to honestly believe Mojo was chattering like he was playing Bridge with the Ladies Auxiliary Club. Mojo went "ook" and Ferdi responded with childish glee, raised his arms out and said, "You see there, clear as the chimes of St. Patrick's!" He said, 'I love you.' You heard it yourself! Did you not?" The kids said that they could. They giggled and clapped and tossed pennies and nickels. They chased the chimp and then ran away when the chimp chased them. It brightened the place up.

I didn't quite get how Ferdi made enough to pay Manhattan rent while nickel and diming it, but maybe he had tours booked. He could've really cleaned up in South Dakota. It seemed possible. For all I knew, Mojo'd sold out Fourth of July at Madison Square Garden.

I'd used three different bleaches and detergents doing additional clean-up work over the course of a week but still hadn't managed to get all the blood out of the tile in the lobby. It had become ingrained as deep as the aluminum foil liar's guilt.

Something had happened to me that day. My usual brooding and pathos took a left turn into a darker, calmer sea of purpose. I had the increasingly powerful feeling that my life held a greater interest and meaning now, though I didn't know what the hell it might be. I watched the front door. I waited for more murder. I could feel it hovering nearby in every hall. I thought about all the lies I had told and how they'd get laid, and wondered if they'd come back to haunt me in the end. What would be my last words? And would they sound dreadfully strange to whoever might be there holding my hand?

The media caught wind that Corben lived in the building and the camera crews started floating around. He showed up on television and made up stories about how close he'd been with the aluminum foil guy. He claimed to have a theory about the killer and said he was working closely with the NYPD to solve the case. They asked if he was afraid of potential retribution. He claimed to own a Derringer that he always kept on his person. A lovely reporter asked if he had it on him at the moment. He dared her to frisk him. I watched his last couple of novels bullet up the bestseller lists.

My agent kept calling trying to get me to ride his coattails, or more appropriately the murderer's coattails. He said I should be doing whatever I could to get my last few titles out to the reporters. I should carry my novels around with me, stick them in front of the cameras. I asked him if he knew how stupid that might make me feel. He asked me if I knew how stupid he felt representing an author who still couldn't garner more than a five grand chump change advance after publishing a dozen books. It put things into perspective but I still didn't go around clotheslining the reporters and shoving my novels under their noses. My agent quit calling.

My sleep filled with mad laughter and shouting. Some of it was my own. I occasionally startled myself awake making noises. I started smoking more. I wrote more and deleted more. I painted the foyer and caught up on all the minor fix-it stuff that I'd let slide the last several days. I got a close-up look at some of my neighbors.

I finally met the lady who had an affair with a famous televangelist's wife and was now something of a lesbian icon. She mildly flirted with me and prompted me to tell her how pretty she was. She seemed insecure and irritable. She told me she wasn't a lesbian at all but had just been fooling around with the wife for the fun of it, but she couldn't admit it in public anymore because of all the money she was making lecturing to various lesbian organizations. She had the televangelist's show playing on a high definition TV screen with the surround sound turned away up. He seemed to be preaching from every corner of the apartment. It was spooky. I fixed her broken toilet handle and blew out candles there.

The toxic waste guy said the old-fashioned elevator didn't accommodate his wheelchair. He was right. The chair was old and wide and well-lived in. He'd been in the building the entire time I'd been there. He was proud of his tumors and tried to show them to me as often as he could, turning his melted, half-eaten face this way and that so it would catch the light from the corridor lamps. He was so pale I could see the blood pulsing underneath his skin. I wondered how long it had been since he'd been outside in the sun. I removed one of the side rails in the elevator and it was a tight fit but his chair squeezed in. We tested it together. His oxygen tube hissed into the hole that used to be his nose. The tank clanked loudly whenever the chair went over a bump. I could just imagine it breaching and the explosion taking out the whole floor. He said thank you and rolled back to his apartment and shut the door.

The former child actor turned gay porno star turned sex therapist daytime talk show host canceled after three months now retired after writing his autobiography wherein he named names, was sued, countersued and won big cash off a couple of closeted politicians outed and forced to resign needed

couple of his electrical outlets rewired. He interviewed me like I was a guest on his show, asking me a lot of pointed questions about the murder. He wanted to know how finding a corpse had transformed me. I told him I hadn't found a corpse, that the man was still alive when I got there. He wanted to know how I'd been transformed by the discovery of a dying man with an ice pick in his forebrain. He wanted to know what I heard, what I smelled, if there had been any aftertaste to the incident. He licked his lips when he said it. He kept looking to one side like he saw an audience there staring at him. I knew he was working on more of his memoirs. When he got to this chapter he'd say that he'd found the aluminum foil liar and the dying man had spoken profound and wondrous lessons of good will.

A couple more days drifted past. I felt eyes on me and found myself constantly looking over my shoulder and checking down the ends of dark hallways. Muffled voices followed me but that was nothing new, muffled voices follow everybody in old apartment houses.

Except I kept hearing my name, or thought I did. For some reason, it made my scalp tighten.

The morning came when I awoke to a knocking—twin knockings—on my basement door. I figured it was the cops doing a follow-up, but instead there was Ferdinand with Mojo, both of them grinning. They were each holding a bunch of paperbacks.

“You are the wonderful writer called Will Darrow!”

“I'm Will Darrow anyway,” I told him.

“But why, why did you not let me know this the very day we were introduced? I await the new emergence of your tough guy character, stories of the brutal but heroic King Carver!”

That took me back hard. Mojo pulled on his chain and tugged Ferdi into my apartment. They must have been the first guests I'd ever had inside the place. I said, “You've read my books?”

“Yes, all of them! Will you please sign, yes?”

Mojo extended a novel out to me. It had a cover I'd never seen before, printed in a language I didn't know. Portuguese, maybe? Neither my agent nor my publisher had ever mentioned selling those sub-rights. Or any. My breath caught in my chest and I tried not to think about how much money might be skimming. The monkey wouldn't let go of the book. Ferdinand said, “Mojo, give! Finish signing! He will return it to you!”

A couple of the other books were in the same language, and two more were in a different one. Maybe Swedish. Danish? I had no idea. The rage climbed the back of my neck but there was also a strange sense of pride coming through, knowing people in other countries were reading my work. My hands were icy. I couldn't remember how to spell my name and just scribbled wavy lines inside the books.

“I ask now when shall I be able to tell my friends a new King Carver adventure shall soon be theirs?”

I didn't know what to say. My agent had sent all my recent manuscripts back. I tried to keep faith. “I don't know, Ferdi. But I'll let you know as soon as I finish a new one, all right?”

“That will be stupendous! Will it not, Mojo?”

Mojo went, “Ook.”

“You hear, he says—”

“Uh huh.”

“—he shall effort to have patience but he excitedly waits for more King Carver!”

“Uh huh.”

“Tell me now, how is Miss Gabriella?”

It was the first time I was aware that I hadn't seen her since that day he'd moved in two weeks earlier. A minor twinge of alarm sang through me. “I don't know, Ferdi, it's been a while.”

“If you see her, please say that I have inquired about her health!”

“I'll do that.”

I handed him the signed books back and Mojo got mad and started hopping and banging his fists against his knees until Ferdi gave him one of the titles. Mojo immediately quieted, opened the book and his mouth started moving, as if he really could read.

~ * ~

The cops eventually came around again. All three teams, about two hours apart from one another. The nice guys weren't so nice this time. The hardasses not as hard. The whiners still tried to plead with me to tell the truth and come clean about croaking the old man with an ice pick. I stuck firm to my story. Nobody hit me with a phone book or a rubber hose. No one asked any new questions. It seemed to have any other leads besides me. I started to get a clue as to why there were so many television shows about unsolved crimes. They asked if Dr. Lauber had shown up yet, if I'd seen some guy with a stethoscope and a doctor's bag creeping around the building. Maybe doing illegal abortions in the neighborhood. I blinked and reminded them that abortions weren't illegal. They discussed that amongst themselves for a bit. They invited my opinion but I chose to stay out of it. I stared at the floor and they stared at me.

I waited to catch sight of Gabriella. I did everything I could do in order to hang around the fifth floor. Fixing hall lights, bracing the handrails, polishing the footboards and wainscoting, polishing the floors. I put an ear to Corben's door and listened for their voices. I heard nothing. There were no more arguments. He'd quit calling out his bibliography. For all I knew, they were vacationing in Monaco.

It's sometimes a curse to have an imagination that can draw up detailed visuals. I thought of the entwined after having just made love, now feeding each other wine and caviar. I hated caviar the one time I tried it, but when I thought of romance that's what came to mind. The window open and a cool breeze pressing back the curtains. Moonlight casting silver across the dark. The sheets clean but rumpled. Her crossing the room with a hint of sweat carried in the niche at the small of her back slowly dripping over the curve of her *derriere*. When I thought of romance I thought there ought to be some French thrown in there too. The bright flare of the refrigerator opening, her body silhouetted the way it had been the last time I'd seen her. The refrigerator door shutting, night vision lost. Total darkness for a moment and then the pressure of her body easing back into bed.

You didn't need a lover to drive you to the rim, you could do it all on your own.

I wore myself down hoping to escape my dreams. I slept heavily but not well. I wrote a lot but not well. I dropped off with my head against the spacebar.

One morning, I found a note slid under my door.

It went six pad-size pages. It stated, in plainly printed block letters much clearer than my own handwriting:

~ * ~

A man made of aluminum foil stepped from my closet and confessed his sins. They were plentiful. His hands are red from a woman's blood. He is terrified because he has not yet met God, and fears he never will, and that God—if He ever existed—exists no more. Dr. Lauber, he said, commands his soul. The Rhine floods across the planets. This is not the afterlife he was hoping for. At the end of our days, we all fully expect to meet the creator, and, for good or ill, for Him to speak with us, even if only to judge harshly, perhaps with divine hate. An afterlife without God is one without parameters, without celestial design. Dr. Lauber, the aluminum foil man said, owns us all, though some of us continue to act as if there is such an abstraction as free will. I have come to this belief myself—that none of us are free—some time ago as well. It frightens me, it all chills me so. What say you?

The note was signed: **MOJO**.

~ * ~

You couldn't be better off dead. You were already a phantom in this city. The world spun by filled with the vacuous and the caustic and the fearful. They hunched down inside their coats and disappeared before you really knew they were there. They muttered to themselves and turned away from bright lights and loud noises. I'd raised my voice only once on the street in the past month, and that was hailing a cab. Sometimes I wondered if I'd even know it when my heart quit beating.

The 1976 one-hit-wonder lady who sang "Sister to the Swamp" knocked on my apartment door and asked if I'd repair the broken shower head in her bathroom. She still had an enormous afro and wore the kind of silky, streaming dress that she'd worn on Soul Train during the disco years. I got my toolbox and followed her upstairs. She had the gold record mounted on the wall near the window that the sunlight would send a molten yellow across the room. Everywhere I looked were photos of her with politicians, sports legends, and other musicians popular at the time.

When she spoke I heard very little beside the lyrics to "Sister to the Swamp." The heavy bass rhythm of the song pumped through my head. I got into the tub and worked the shower head until I got it fixed. When I finished, the 1976 one-hit-wonder lady was at the window staring at the rush of foot traffic on the sidewalks below. She held one hand up to the glass like she was trying to find her way through without breaking it. She wanted to go outside. She wanted to sing for the people. I'd seen that haunted need in her eyes and the eyes of the other shut-ins for a couple of years now. I wanted to ask her why she didn't just step outside and do her thing. But even I knew it was impossible. Time had moved on without her and she wouldn't be able to get back up to speed. Her photos and her gold record and the lyrics to her one song were all she had left now. She'd chosen that path and it would have to be enough for her. She said nothing more to me and I grabbed my toolbox and got out of there and back into the world. It felt very much the same on one side of the door as the other.

I got downstairs into my place and sat in front of the computer screen willing the words to come. They wouldn't. Every time I thought of King Carver in Danish, a flutter of nausea worked through my guts.

I shut my eyes. I let my fingers move across the keypad on their own. I started typing. Corben and I used to clown around with automatic writing back in college. I did it every now and again when I wanted to clear my mind. I forced my focus to some far corner of my brain and left it there. The typing grew louder.

My hands pounded away. I wondered who the hell was writing Mojo letters to me and why. There had been a craftiness to the note, a kind of witty petulance. It seemed a direct insult to the aluminum foil guy. Someone had done his online research on Dr. Lauber. But to what end? And why send it my way? And why pose as the monkey? A thin shard of fear scraped inside me and my hands seized for a moment. What if the note had come from the ice pick killer? Who even used an ice pick anymore *except* for killers? This was the fucking age of refrigerator door ice cube makers, baby. Sweat broke across my upper lip. What if the note had really come from Mojo? The paper was the size of the sheet on the chimp's little pad. Why hadn't I seen Gabriella in over a week? My focus snapped back into the keyboard and I felt my fingers type her name. *Gabriella*. What kind of a damn fool dedicates a book as a codicil to his wife, and does so by simply calling her *My wife*? My thoughts twisted to Corben's book on Stark House. What had he learned about this place that I should know? How far along was he? Who would he dedicate this one to? What if the chimp were dancing up behind me right now with a sawawl in his little monkey fist?

I opened my eyes and turned around. I was alone. My face dripped sweat. I checked the clock. I'd written for twenty minutes. I scanned the computer screen. Much of it was gibberish with a few random whole sentences found in the muck. I spotted *Death to King Carver* in there among a kind of repetitive bitter ranting about lack of royalties and stolen foreign translations. I'd fallen back into some of the same old traps. It was bound to happen. A few maudlin phrases cropped up. I wrote *Con*

get me, fucker and had a partially completed scene of a disemboweling. A filleting blade eased through flesh. There were slithering intestines and someone trying to hold together his fish-whipped belly with his fingers. I was getting the feeling that my mental state might currently be a bit skewed. *Where has he hidden my love?* Deep among the mire stood out *She speaks*.

It took some of the edge off but not nearly enough. I deleted the file and stared at the blank monitor willing some kind of answers that refused to appear. It didn't matter much. I didn't even know what questions I was asking. I wasn't even sure I wanted to try writing another novel. There didn't seem to be much point anymore. I wasn't as wrecked about not giving a damn as I thought I would be.

I picked up the Mojo note and read it again. I wondered if a man made of aluminum foil might be preparing to step from my closet as well. Why should Dr. Lauber command anybody's soul?

I hadn't talked to Corben on any kind of a significant level in fifteen years. If we passed each other in the halls we would nod and do no more. I had the phone numbers of everyone in the building, I grabbed the phone and called the apartment. I hoped Gabriella would answer. My back teeth hurt because I was clenching my jaws so tightly. Like a love struck teenager, I thought I might hang up the moment she answered. The phone rang ten times, twelve, thirteen times. Maybe they really were in Monaco.

I hung up and then gave it another dozen rings.

Finally Corben picked up, and with an exasperated growl said, "Who is this?"

"I'm coming up," I told him.

I tossed the phone down and moved out the door on a near-run.

~ * ~

I got to his apartment and we both took an extra moment for what was coming. I stood on one side listening at the door, and I knew he was standing on the other side, his eye to the peephole. We both waited. I had no idea what we were waiting for. I started forward and before I could knock he flung the door open so hard I heard the doorstop snap.

His face, once bordering handsome, had grown into a collision of sharp edges. His high cheekbones were barely covered with flesh. He looked like he'd been ill for days. His jaw line angled back severe as a hatchet. I hadn't seen him for several weeks and I could tell he hadn't been eating. His eyes were feverish, planted too deeply in his head, and he didn't seem able to completely close his mouth. His upper canines prodded his lower lip. I could smell the sourness of his breath beneath the mint mouthwash. His rapid breathing rustled loudly from him.

A lot of the old pain and jealousy sped through my blood. My pulse stormed along. I could feel the veins in my wrists clattering. I wondered if I was as ugly to him as he was to me.

"Where's Gabriella?" I asked.

The question hit him like a rabbit punch. I don't know what he'd been expecting but it sure wasn't that. His face folded into nine variations of anger, indignity, and confusion before it settled into outright surprise. It suited him just swell.

He couldn't come up with anything better than, "What?" and he hated himself for it. He grounded again and the peevish tone thrummed into his voice once more. "Who are you to ask that?"

"Who the hell would I have to be? Where is she?"

"She's not here."

"That doesn't answer my damn question. Where is she?"

His resentful front began to fall apart even faster. He couldn't maintain his outrage. I watched it crack to pieces and the sight startled me. We were getting down deep where the nerve clusters were always on fire for one reason or another. The venom began to seep from me but I held onto the desperate need to see her. He detected it in me and almost took a kind of pity as he said, "She's gone."

"What?"

“It’s true.”

~~I took a lunging step toward him and caught hold of myself in time. I looked over his shoulder and hoped he was lying, but I couldn’t feel her presence in the slightest. I couldn’t smell her perfume, got no sense of her at all.~~

“Gone where?”

“I don’t know, Will.”

The way he said my name tightened my chest. It was almost a whimper, an appeal to friendship. The sound of his own voice angered him and I watched his thin face harden further, his shoulders straightening. I took another step until we were toe to toe. “What the hell are you saying?”

“She hasn’t been home since the day the old man was killed in the lobby.”

“That was over two weeks ago!”

He steeled himself. “Yes.”

“Have you called the police? Filed a missing persons report?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t answer. His eyes softened and he dropped his gaze. He fell back a few steps like he was aiming his ass for the rich leather wraparound sofa I saw in his living room, but he began to stumble. I actually had to reach out and grab his arm to keep him from going over. I shook him hard once but he still looked dazed. The cops should’ve been called in long before this, but I didn’t push the point because I’d lost just about all my confidence in the police anyway.

Corben said, “I can’t speak to you now.”

“You damn well better.”

“I can’t. Later. Why don’t you come up tonight for a drink? It’s been a while since we’ve talked.” He slowly closed the door in my face. I had no idea how I’d gotten out into the hall.

~ * ~

I had three cards from the three teams of cops. I picked up the one from the whiners and started to call them, but before I tapped out all seven numbers I hung up. I was already a second-rate suspect in a cooling murder case. How smooth would it go down with the police if I called them about Gabriella? They’d question Corben and he was a New York celebrity, a personal friend of the mayor and the governor. He’d slick it over if he wanted, and they’d just have even more reason to presume me guilty of something. I couldn’t waste the time. I had to find her. I had to make him crack. I felt like there was something I had to do. Something only I could do. Audacity is sometimes its own reward.

Leave it to Corben to call a decade and a half “a while.” I decided to play along.

A few hours later we sat in his living room drinking bourbon. From the stink of his breath I could tell he’d been at it for a while before I got there. We skipped fifteen years and anything of substance. I wanted to let my gaze roam his apartment. I’d been in the place many times before. Whenever a toilet clogged. Whenever the garbage disposal backed up. I’d cleaned up Corben’s shit for two years, but I’d never been a guest and I’d never spent a minute taking in the personality of his apartment. I wanted to look at the photos with him and movie stars, on the sets of his films. I wanted to get up and hold a book of his rare, nineteenth-century first editions. There were many paintings, mostly small originals done by artists who resided in the world’s greatest museums. His tastes were similar to mine and I knew I would find many wondrous, beautiful, awe-inspiring aspects to his home.

But I simply sat and looked at him and waited.

He started off with trivial matters. We discussed our latest works—I mentioned the last manuscript I’d finished and made enough misleading comments for him to think it was still under consideration by my publisher. This one was a grand family drama delving into such an assortment of relationships and secrets and personal mysteries that I had no idea what the hell the story was about. He mentioned h

latest bestseller, the one I'd bought and left on the front stoop. He didn't talk about the Stark House book.

He was splitting his attention between our conversation and writing in his head at the same time. He was letting his mind wander the building. The slightest noise made him snap his chin aside. The muscles in his legs jumped. He was trying to kill his interest with booze. He wouldn't be able to stand it much longer.

I started in where I'd left off earlier. "Why didn't you call the police?" I asked.

"We had argued that morning—"

"I know. I heard you."

It did something to him. It got down beneath the layers of his created persona and dragged up his real self. I got a view of my old pal again, the kid he was back in the day before we blew our friendship. He was just a scared boy, alone without his mothering wife to lead him safely through the extent of his own life. He'd been coddled for so long that he'd lost any kind of veneer. His hard shell had cracked badly over the years of his success, and it had let in all his insecurities and reservations and doubts. No wonder he screamed out his titles when he was losing a fight. He couldn't apologize and he couldn't debate. It was all he could defend himself with.

It's sometimes a curse to have an imagination that can draw up detailed visuals, and when you go down to it, he was better at it than me. He had a worse affliction to bear.

"Why are you writing about this building?" I asked.

He reared in his seat but the bravado wasn't there anymore. "She told you that?"

"Not outright. We were talking that day and I got a hint of what you were doing. So why are you doing it?"

He poured himself more bourbon. His hands trembled badly but not out of fear. At least not merely out of fear. Gabriella had been his buffer between him and the rest of the world, and without her he was being rubbed raw. "You know why."

"No, I don't."

"You do!" He sank back into his seat, all knife edges and points. If he moved too quickly he'd slash open a cushion. He frowned and his eyes were already so deep in his skull that they nearly disappeared altogether. He studied me, unsure of just how far to go. Finally his voice leaked words. They fell from his lips so softly I missed them.

"What?"

He said, "You've seen those who share the house with us."

"Seen who?"

"Those who stalk these halls."

"The toxic waste guy bothering you?"

He lashed out and sent a vase sailing across the room where it crashed against the far wall. "You know of whom I speak!"

When his speech patterns grew more gentrified I knew he must be really upset. I tried not to let it get too good to me, but it did. I felt a warmth bloom in my guts. Corben was actually nervous, but not about losing his wife. He'd had dinner at the White House and given signings and speeches to crowds numbering in the thousands, but right here in his own living room he sat trembling before something he couldn't even name.

"What congress have you had with them?" he asked.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. I hadn't laughed in so long that once I got rolling I had a difficult time stopping. Maybe if I'd had more recent congress it wouldn't have been so funny. Corben stared at me in shock. It got me going even harder. Then I thought of Gabriella and the noise died in my throat.

“I came to talk about Gabriella, not any of your nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense and you know it!” He reached for something else to throw but there was nothing handy so he hurled his glass. It bounced off the sofa and landed right side up on the floor without breaking. “We heard the stories about this place when we were children.”

“We heard stories about every building in the city. The only reason you’re so scared of this one is because you live here now. If you were over in Trump Tower you’d be acting the same way.”

He shot to his feet, grabbed another glass, poured more bourbon and splashed some on the floor. He hadn’t been able to hold his liquor in college and wasn’t doing any better now. His voice was already losing its sharpness. “You mock me.”

“I ought to mock you just for saying ‘you mock me,’ asshole. People really let you get away with talking like that?”

He ignored me. He’d started to slip away. “I can’t rest. They don’t let me sleep. They work their way into the pages and ruin whatever I’m writing. Isn’t it the same way with you? Tell the truth. How can you find clarity with all the noise? All the tension and weight of their bearing and closeness.”

Even if I had the pity to spare I wouldn’t throw any his way. “You’ve got a beach house out in Southampton, a mansion in Beverly Hills, and a villa in Italy, right? So why don’t you leave and spend some time someplace else? Take a trip right after you tell me where your wife is.”

“I can’t leave, Will. I’m not sure I can ever leave here again. Stark House won’t let me go.”

“What happened to Gabriella?”

He dropped back into his chair and sat there blankly, withdrawing further into himself, gulping his drink. The ice rattled loudly. He snorted like a pig. A part of me wanted to beat the hell out of him and force him to talk, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. I wasn’t going to get any answers from him. He was willing himself to shut down.

“Lay off the sauce,” I told him. “I want you clear-headed. I’ve got more questions and you’re going to answer them. We’ll talk again soon.”

“What was her name?” he asked.

“Who?”

“The one you took away from me in college. Mary? Maggie? Melanie?”

“I don’t remember.”

“She visits me too,” he said. “She’s dead but she asks about you. She doesn’t remember your name either.”

~ * ~

The next afternoon, on the second floor, I saw a young handsome man and a beautifully delicate woman walking up the corridor, holding hands. I’d never seen them before. He was in a tux and tailcoat and she wore a lace dress that looked straight out of the twenties. They came toward me and the hallway on the back of my next rose. A warm, comforting draft swept across my throat. They both smiled and nodded to me. I couldn’t quite get my lips to work but I managed to nod back. I wanted to ask if they’d seen Gabriella but the words wouldn’t form. They went to the stairway and began to move down it. I held myself in check for about three seconds and then started after them. I knew what I would see by the time I got there. No one would be on the staircase.

I was wrong. They were still slowly proceeding down it. They murmured back and forth. He said something and she tittered mellifluously. It was a warm and enduring sound. They walked across the lobby floor and out the front door onto the street. Something touched my ankle and I nearly yelped.

Mojo stood at my foot and said, “Ook.” The chain that had connected him to Ferdi was gone. He held a piece of paper up to me. I took it.

It was blank.

He chittered and grinned and shoved his cup out against my shin. I tossed him a quarter and he

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