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The takings: a novel

Andrew P. Golden
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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE TAKINGS: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Andrew P. Golden

2000

To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis written by Andrew P. Golden, and entitled The Takings--A Novel, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Dr. Richard Sugg

Lynne Barrett

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 16, 2000

The thesis of Andrew P. Golden is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Richard L. Campbell
Division of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 2000

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mother, Sheila Golden.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Les Standiford for all his help. This book would not have been possible without his guidance. I would also like to thank Lynne Barrett whose knowledge in the workings of plot proved invaluable. I want to especially thank Lilly Golden and Garth Batista for providing the space and love that allowed this work to take root. Also, thanks goes to Leonard Nash, Polly Roberts, Campbell McGrath, and Steve Harris for all their encouragement and helpful advice. Thanks to Monty's Raw Bar and the management staff for giving me the bar shifts I needed to finish this book.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE TAKINGS: A NOVEL

by

Andrew Golden

Florida International University, 2000

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

The Takings is a mystery novel set in present day New York City and upstate New York. The novel is told in the first person point of view by its main character, Reese Coppage. Reese is a Sandhog involved in the construction of City Water Tunnel #3, the city's largest public works project ever. When completed in the year 2020, it will carry enough water to temporarily replace the existing two water tunnels, which are in bad need of repair. Reese witnesses a crime within these tunnels that he doesn't understand and finds himself wanted by both the police and a villainous group led by Vincent Cresswell. Enacting a plot of his own to contaminate New York City's reservoirs, Cresswell hopes to win a six billion dollar contract to build the city's first filtration plant. As Reese tries to untangle the web spun around him, he becomes an unwitting pawn in Cresswell's plans, and ultimately finds himself in an impossible position. How Reese survives and manages to free himself is at the heart of this novel.

Within eighteen chapters, Reese's journey takes in the historical, political, social, geographical, and geological considerations of contemporary New York. Embedded into the

structure of this mystery are *plot points*, *tokens*, *recognitions*, *reversals*, and *rites of initiation*. These plotting techniques-Jungian, Aristotelian, and Syd Fieldian-are designed to create dramatic tension and bring the resonance of all effective storytelling to this contemporary adventure.

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Chapter One

We'd finally broken through the head of the tunnel leading out from Shaft 24B and connected it to the Van Cortland Valve Chamber six miles away. Under my supervision, we'd been working on that section of tunnel for over a year, boring through granite millions of years old, so when the last holes were filled with Tovex and detonated, exposing the inside of Shaft 24A instead of just more rock, our cheers echoed along the tunnel walls.

Later that night, I was kicking back with some of the other sandhogs at O'Rourke's and enjoying the bone-tired feeling of successful hard work. That City Water Tunnel #3 wasn't scheduled to be finished until the year 2020 didn't stop me or the others from having a sense of accomplishment about the small hand we'd have in its making.

Of course, hardly anyone on the outside knew about us. About sandhogs. Of the hundreds of people who passed the poster-covered plywood walls that lined the sidewalk for an entire city block, few had any idea we were boring through rock some 750 feet below the surface of the street, almost as deep as the Woolworth Building is tall, all for their benefit, to insure the delivery of 1.5 billion gallons of water used every day by the City of New York. Only when our detonations accidentally set off a bank alarm somewhere would anybody notice, and that was hardly ever.

Most people don't give it a thought when they turn the handle on their faucet at night to get a drink of water that someone had to dig six-thousand miles of tunnel to make that happen, enough to reach California and back; someone had to build dams and reservoirs and dig beneath river beds and under mountains to make it all possible. But that's how people are.

They thinking water's like breathing air, something they have a right to and shouldn't have to pay for.

"Reese, you son of a bitch. We did it," Sammy said, coming up behind me and pounding me on the back. At fifty-two, he was the oldest sandhog among us. He was missing two fingers and was almost completely deaf, but he could handle a hundred-pound jackleg drill better than anybody.

Half the sandhogs were older than me, but I didn't think they resented me or my position as Shaft Gang Foreman: Blaster. They were glad one of their own ended up going to college, and though a little surprised to see me come back after getting my degree, they'd all known or heard about my father, one of the best sandhogs who ever lived, and figured it was just in my blood, nothing I could do about it. And they were right.

"What's this I hear about the mayor showing up tomorrow?" Sammy yelled through his crooked smile and yellow teeth. He'd been my father's closest friend and every time I looked at him, he reminded me of Dad.

"That's the rumor," I shouted back. "Holdings wants to get a couple of pictures taken of himself down in the tunnels."

"He better be careful it doesn't backfire on him like it did for Dukakis when he rode that tank," Sammy said. He was laughing when the music from the jukebox suddenly went mute. His hee-haw became the only noise in the place, bouncing off the pine walls and practically shaking the ground beneath us, but he didn't seem to notice. Kept on laughing.

I turned to Jack, the bartender. He was reaching for the volume on the T.V.

"That's my money in the jukebox," I said.

"It was a shitty song anyway," another sandhog said.

"Better than the shit you play," I responded.

"They're talking about the water," Jack said, leaning back against the well of liquor bottles. "I figured you'd all be interested."

I looked up at the T.V. A debate between the mayor and his challenger, a young Republican named Milton, was on.

"I'm interested," said Lykes. He was Karl's cousin visiting from upstate. I didn't always get along with Karl on account of his bad habit of showing up drunk to work, and the truth was, I didn't care much for his cousin either. Lykes was the complaining type, always griping about the prices in the city, of its pollution and crowds. For a guy supposedly on vacation, he sure seemed to hate everything around him.

"Let's hear what the cocksucker's got to say for himself," Lykes said, pointing at the T.V. I saw Lykes in profile and noticed little family resemblance between him and Karl. He had a pinched face, with features pulled toward the center as if drawn by a gravity deployed by nose. Karl's face, on the other hand, seemed rootless. His eyes had moored themselves haphazardly along uncharted forehead, and his mouth hung loosely to one side. Aimless as his features were, they grew even more scattered when he was drunk.

"Take it easy," Karl said, appearing more sober than usual.

The debate was about whether or not there was a need to build a filtration plant for the city's water supply. Holdings explained how our upstate reservoirs were a natural filter, and how every sample taken from them, and at various points throughout the water system, checked out fine. The chlorine already added to the water was all that was needed. Besides, he said, everyone knew New York's water tasted the best. It's what made the bagels so good. He also insisted that the city couldn't afford a six-billion dollar filtration plant and that they

were having trouble selling the last of the bonds for the new City Water Tunnel that was under construction.

"Great," said Karl. "That mean our pay check's gonna bounce?"

"Fuck 'em," Sammy said, still standing behind me.

"Shh," said Jack, turning the volume louder.

"Money would be taken away from crucial conservation easements and that would increase the flow of animal waste and fertilizers into the watershed area," Holdings said, his famous double chin quivering under the bright studio lights.

"Blame it on the farmers. It's always the farmers fault," Lykes said, shaking his thin face in disgust. "Such bullshit."

During rebuttal, Milton explained we were the only major city in the U.S. that didn't filter its water and that sooner or later we'd be forced to do it by the Federal Government. He insisted that the sooner the better, for the safety of all our residents. He said that E. coli bacteria had already been found in reservoirs as close to the city as Kensico.

"He's slick," Jack said.

"How much you think his suit cost him?" I asked.

Holdings, his bald head gleaming with perspiration, was demanding to see this report, accusing Milton of using junk-science and paying off scientists. Then it became a shouting match and the whole debate ground to a halt.

"Politics as usual," I said.

Jack switched the T.V. to a ball game and turned the jukebox back up.

"A filtration plant's exactly what we need," said Lykes, pounding on the bar. He knocked over a beer. Jack came over with a rag. Karl apologized for his cousin.

"Bring back the farms to the Catskills," Lykes went on. "Stop regulating us so damn much. Did you know we can't even put down a stretch of asphalt driveway in our own back yards without getting permission first from New York City?"

"You're kidding?" Jack said.

"If I wanted to pour some concrete to put up a basketball hoop for my son, and I was within 50 feet of an intermittent stream or 100 feet of a perennial stream, I wouldn't be able to do it. Yet, I could go out there everyday and piss in the stream that runs across my property and into the reservoir and they'd never know."

"Shut up, Lykes," Karl said. "No one cares."

"It's the takings all over again," Lykes said, ignoring Karl.

"What's the takings?" Jack asked.

"Ever hear of Shaver Town? Arena? Union Grove?" he said. Jack stared back, blank. "Course not. They're sitting under the Papacton Reservoir right now. The most fertile land in the Catskills taken away from families that'd lived there for generations, fought the Indians over, then condemned and flooded because a couple politicians just like Holdings believed their city was entitled to take our livelihoods away for the greater good of their constituents."

"That's enough, Lykes," Karl said, grabbing Lykes' arm and pulling him away from the bar.

"Let him speak his mind, Karl," Jack said, but Karl was shoving Lykes out the bar. Apparently Karl had enough of his cousin's whining. He opened the heavy oak door and pushed him through it. Then he came back to retrieve his jacket.

"You coming over to the game tonight?" Karl asked Sammy. Karl played poker at

Rich's house every Thursday. Richard Pritchett was a former sandhog and was now responsible for security at our shaft site since an accident rendered him unable to lift heavy equipment.

"Can't tonight," Sammy said. "I promised the old lady I wouldn't."

"What about you, Reese?" Karl asked. "Plan on making one of your rare appearances? I could use a couple of hundred bucks."

"Sorry. I'm meeting Claudine for dinner in an hour."

"Aw, you're both a bunch of lame asses," Karl said. He grabbed his jacket off a wooden peg from the wall and left, leaving behind his full beer glass. I'd never seen him do that before.

I turned back toward the bar and took a sip of my own beer.

"I didn't know about the reservoirs flooding out those towns," Jack said. He turned on the faucet in one of the stainless steel sinks below the bar.

"We're talking over fifty years ago, Jack. That's a long time to keep a chip on your shoulder," I said.

Jack began to clean his glassware.

"Not if the land was taken away from your momma," Sammy said, surprising me. I looked at him, at the rock dust buried deep in the creases around his eyes, and figured he might be right. If it had happened to my own family, I might have felt differently. I might still have been angry.

* * * *

An hour later, I was in fresh clothes and sitting in Cousine De Pesca, a little Italian restaurant off St. Marks Place I'd heard about from Nancy, one of the geologists. I was sure

I was the first sandhog ever to set foot in the place. As per Nancy's instructions, I bribed the maître d' and got a table fairly quickly in the back room near the outdoor terrace. Lining the walls, small statues of angels sat on pedestals and half columns. Claudine was going to love the place.

I was early, she was late, so I ordered a bottle of Chianti and drank a glass. I ate all the Focaccia they gave me. I was nervous. I'd been carrying a ring around for weeks now, waiting for the right time to pop the question, always finding some dumb excuse to put it off, but tonight, I thought, could be the night. Claudine and I had been dating for two years, had known each other for more than three, and I couldn't think of a reason not to marry her. She was the only woman I'd ever met who had a career she loved and still found it possible to enjoy the other aspects of her life. Like me. Like kayaking. Like singing. She had an amazing voice.

Somehow, I had managed to miss her entrance into the room. When I looked up, she was walking toward the table. She smiled and glanced around. The whole room seemed to come to life under her gaze, each painted Italian landscape and every marble angel vying for her attention. All the busboys and waiters converged on us at once. We quickly ordered just so we could be left alone.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, taking my hand. She had a hint of make-up left over from the day around her green eyes. With her long, blond eyelashes and short auburn hair, at times she looked like a peace-loving teenager, though once you heard her voice, there was no mistaking you were dealing with a woman. I kidded that if she ever lost her job, she could always be a phone sex operator. It wasn't her favorite joke.

"I was visiting with Michele for a follow-up article and lost track of time. She had to

show me how well Symour was doing."

"And how's Symour doing?" I asked. Symour was a walrus at the zoo who'd gone bananas. Michele, along with her new staff, had been working on restoring his sanity.

"Symour is doing great. He has all these new toys to play with and now has to hunt for his dinner instead of having it tossed down his throat." Claudine paused to sip her wine. "Mmm, this is good," she said, licking her lips.

A waiter came with the salads. We both dug in. "I take it Michele is happy," I said between forkfuls.

"She's so busy now. She misses the hands on thing with the animals, but she's okay with it. Yeah, she's happy."

"All thanks to you," I said.

"I just wrote the article. I didn't actually do anything." Claudine had written the article about the city zoo last year concerning, among other things, its deplorable conditions and the embarrassing lack of funding. Michele Ruez, who was just a volunteer veterinarian at the time, had called Claudine and asked her to please investigate. The end result of the exposé was that a new board of directors was established. The first thing they did was fire the old zoo director and several other vets for animal neglect. (They suspected them of embezzlement but it was never proved.) They tripled the annual budget for the zoo and made Michele Ruez the director.

Michele practically lived there now and a couple of times Claudine and I went by on our day off to see how she was making out with her new staff and bigger budget. Michele loved Claudine and always promised to one day repay her for writing the article.

"You're so modest," I said. "But it becomes on you. You look beautiful."

"Stop," she said, pretending to get embarrassed. "So, how was your day?"

"Oh, you know, the same old thing. We broke through the head of the tunnel."

"You're kidding!" she said, jerking her arm up and almost spilling her wine. The couple at the table next to us looked at her. "That's fantastic. I've been babbling all this time and you've accomplished this amazing feat today. I'm so proud of you. How does it feel?"

"Pretty good, I guess. The mayor's supposed to come by tomorrow."

"Is he really? That's funny."

"Why's that funny?"

"Oh, I don't know. Like he had anything to do with it."

"Of course, now we have to pour the concrete and that will take us another year."

"But you should be enjoying yourself now. It's a huge accomplishment. Is that why we're here? I love this place. How did you find it?"

"Someone at work told me about it," I said, thinking of the ring and wondering when I should propose. I figured during dessert would be the best time. Maybe I'd have the waiter put the ring on top of a piece of cake. Or was that tacky?

Our meal came, and we talked and ate. I was getting more nervous and hardly tasted my food. We both cleaned our plates and when I ordered dessert for us and coffee, Claudine was surprised. We hardly ever did that.

"This *is* a special occasion," she said, smiling. I wondered then if she knew what I was up to. My hand, of its own accord, reached into my pocket and clasped the box. Should I get down on one knee? Before I knew what was happening, I had it out and open on the table. Blood pounded in my ears. I felt disconnected, as if I was floating above the scene. This was someone else's ring, and Claudine belonged to another man, a construction worker

with a college education who thought he deserved a smart, pretty girl, all to himself. I immediately knew something was wrong.

When I was able to focus in on Claudine's face, she looked pained, her eyes sad, like she was looking at a puppy who hadn't yet been house broken. I clicked the box back shut.

"I'm sorry, Reese. I wasn't expecting this. I don't know what to say."

Our desert arrived, and coffee too.

"You know my history where marriage is concerned," she said.

"That was six years ago," I said, sliding the box off the table and putting it back into my coat pocket. We were referring to her ex-husband, Jason, who flew off to Belize with a teenage heroine addict named Star. I didn't believe the story at first either. I was sure it was a fiction created by her to cover up a more mundane finish to a typically unhappy marriage, but when a photo arrived of Jason holding Star holding a baby, all three in front of an active volcano, I believed.

"I need more time," she said. "My career is just taking off."

"I wasn't asking you to quit your job," I said, looking down at the tiramisu I'd ordered.

"To me, marriage means I'm ready to start a family. Have kids." When I looked at Claudine again, she was also staring at the dessert. "Well, I'm not ready. I still have that screen play to write. I still haven't kayaked along the Daintree Coast. I want to live my life a little first, and, yes, I want to have you with me as much as possible, but. . ."

"I get it, Claudine," I said. "My life isn't exciting enough for you. No problem. I'll just go rob a bank or something. Maybe that will hold your attention."

She looked up at me then. "Come on, Reese. It isn't that. . ."

"Is it the kids thing?" I asked. Claudine had had a miscarriage when she was eighteen

and it changed the way she felt about have and raising children.

"Partly, I guess."

"Well, forget about kids. I can wait. I've told you that before."

"Reese, as far as I'm concerned, things are fine the way they are. They're great!"

"What am I? A breakfast cereal?" I thought of saying.

"So why change things? Not right now, anyway," she said.

I pushed the dessert plate away from me and signaled the waiter for the check. I was mad at Claudine for letting me get this far ahead of her. I wondered how it was she didn't see it coming. Was I that subtle? I doubted it.

"Reese, you don't have to explain anything. I know you love me, and I love you too. It's just that I'm not ready to get married, that's all. As far as I'm concerned our relationship is fine the way it is. Why change something that isn't broken?"

The check came. I paid. We got up and left. Neither of us said much more after that. I wanted to pretend it never happened, this night, my proposal.

After putting Claudine in a cab and refusing the kiss she'd offered me, I decided it was a good night to get hammered. Then I could go over to Rich's apartment, have a few more and lose my shirt. What did I care? They'd ask how come I wasn't getting laid, or maybe I had and was just quick about it. I'd say something about a fight we had, something they could relate to, where I'd get sympathy instead of jeers. But first, I would pick up that six-pack of cold tall ones.

I drained the first three cans of beer in route to Richard's. He lived in the East village not far from the restaurant, in a hip young neighborhood that ill suited Rich's conservative views. But rent was cheap and so was Rich. When I got there, I rang the buzzer. No answer.

I cracked my fourth beer and sat on his front stoop wondering where the hell everyone was. Richard's poker game was as regular as Barbara Mandrel during prune season. Then again, did prunes ever go out of season? Maybe, I thought, someone had tipped the police off to the game, and they were raided. But I seriously doubted that. New York City police had better things to do with their time, like writing out tickets to coffee drinkers on the subway and fining taxi cab drivers for cursing.

As I lifted myself off the stoop in search of the closest bar, my cell phone rang. I had the phone mostly for business, but a few people had the number and one of those people was Claudine. I prayed to God it was her.

"Mr. Coppage? This is Carlos. Sorry to be bothering you," he said. Carlos was the night time security guard at the shaft entrance where I worked. It was only the second time he'd ever called me, and the other time was to tell me his wife was having a baby and that he'd be unable to work that night. I had to stand watch myself for three hours until I could find someone else to take his place.

"That's okay, Carlos. What's up?" I asked, sitting back down and taking another sip from the now warm beer.

"Karl DeSalvo is here. He asked if he could give his cousin a tour of the tunnel. I told him no way, and he got mad. Then, in one of the security monitors, I saw him hop the fence."

"So, call the police," I said. I knew Carlos wouldn't call the police, but I wasn't in the mood to get involved. Sandhogs were a close knit fraternity and if anyone found out that Carlos had called the cops on one of our own, he'd get harassed and jazzed for months, maybe even get a broken nose out of it. His job was to protect the site from vandals, not from

sandhogs.

"Can you come by?" Carlos pleaded.

"Listen, Carlos. You're a security guard. Act like one. Go find Karl, and tell him I said he has to leave. I'll hang on while you go tell him."

It was beginning to rain so I stood beneath the awning in front of a restaurant next to Rich's apartment. The Astor Theater across the street was just letting out. Most of the movie-goers looked like N.Y.U. students, young, dressed in black and smoking cigarettes. After ten minutes of holding on, I shut the phone off and finished the beer. I waited another ten minutes, to see if Carlos would call back. He didn't. I dialed the trailer's number, but there was no answer.

I finally admitted to myself that I'd have to go to the site. I hadn't much choice. If anything happened to Carlos, Karl or Lykes, it would be my ass. As Shaft Gang Foreman, I had to make sure the men on my crew stayed in line. And Karl was a member of that crew.

I waited until I saw a cab with its roof-top lights on, then stepped out onto the street with my arm up. With the other, I tossed the remaining two cans of beer into the trash. The site was on Amsterdam and 64th Street. It didn't take long to get there. The rain had stopped and the streets were already drying off. Though I'd been working at this particular site for over three years, tonight I felt like a stranger. The main gate was locked, as it should've been. I walked up to the chain link fence and looked into the lighted guard house not ten yards away. No sign of Carlos. With my keys, I unlocked the chain from around the gate, stepped through, then locked it back up behind me. Inside the guard house, everything seemed fine except it housed no guard.

I walked over to the Hoghouse, the trailer we used for changing in and out of our

diggers. It too was locked. The shaft opening was my next stop.

Only a scattering of high-powered spot lights was on, throwing dark, contorting shadows across a row of Porto-Pottys and a pile of re-bar. The head-frame, rising twenty-five feet above the shaft, looked like an oil-well derrick, except for the two sheave wheels, the pulleys, spinning in opposite directions at the top. The skip was the elevator we used to get in and out of the shaft, and it could only be controlled by the guy at the top, the hoistman. As I approached the head-frame, I could see that the skip was already down in the shaft.

A sign read: BLASTING WARNING SIGNALS

ONE LONG WHISTLE
3 MINUTES TO BLAST

TWO LONG WHISTLES
READY TO BLAST

THREE SHORT WHISTLES
ALL CLEAR

At the console, someone had switched the operation of the skip over to manual. A key was needed for that, and except for me, there were only two others who had one: the head engineer and Richard Pritchett. Karl must have somehow gotten a copy of the key, but already I was thinking that was a lot of trouble to go through just to give your cousin a tour.

I went back to the Hoghouse. I wasn't going to drop into the shaft without a hard hat or miner's lamp. Some habits never die. It would have been like a cop forgetting to bring his gun along on a 911 call. There are rules you never break.

Inside the trailer, Miss September and her bikini-clad friends, draped across Ferraris and Porsches, greeted me. There were no women sandhogs to object to our choice of decor. I also noticed someone had left the coffee maker on. The coffee in the bottom of the pot was

burnt to a thick sludge. I removed the pot and turned off the burner.

At my locker, I undid the combination lock. When I swung the door open, I knew something was wrong. My hard hat was gone. Every day, I left it on the top shelf of my locker, except for the time I was so tired I wore it home by mistake.

Perhaps at this point, I should've gotten on the phone and called the police. There were enough warning signs. Carlos was missing. Someone was down in the tunnels. My hard hat was gone. But at the time, while those things seemed out of the ordinary, they didn't seem overtly menacing either. Carlos could've quit, deciding he'd had enough of us crazy sandhogs. And Karl could be showing Lykes the new Tunnel Boring Machine we'd gotten last month, a three-story monstrosity made in England that cost 12 million dollars. And my hard hat. . . well, that I couldn't explain.

But this was all part of my job. I figured I could handle it, whatever it was. Karl might've been a pain in my ass, but he could be managed once we got face to face, I was sure of it.

I closed my locker and picked another hat out of a box of used diggers. It didn't fit right, was partially cracked, but it'd have to do. I found a pair of torn up cover-alls and slipped them over my new slacks. Unfortunately, I didn't have another pair of shoes. I was wearing my new penny loafers, the nicest shoes I owned, and I knew there was a good chance they'd get ruined if I had to stay below for long, but what could I do? I picked up a fresh battery pack for my miner's lamp and went back to the headframe.

At the console, I checked the gauge that told me the depth of the skip within the shaft: 700 feet down, the bottom. I took my keys out and switched the controls back over to the main console. Then I pulled a lever and pushed two buttons, and soon the skip began to rise

toward the surface. I hoped Karl was close enough within the tunnel to hear it, and that he would be waiting for me when I arrived. I didn't want to go looking for him.

It took several minutes for the skip to surface. Normally, I never noticed the sound of the hoist while it worked, but tonight, with nothing else around except an occasional siren or horn sounding on Amsterdam Avenue, the pulleys and cables rattled like the cranks on Coney Island's oldest roller coaster.

Finally, the skip emerged from the shaft. I swung open the head frame gate, then the skip door. I switched controls back over to the little box within the skip. I closed both doors, and then pressed the down button. The skip began its descent.

This was the first time I'd ever ridden in the cage alone. Normally it was so packed with sandhogs, you hardly had room to fart. By the end of the day we'd be unrecognizable, covered in mud, boots filled with water. We'd rise from the earth like the Morlocks, hungry for something, anything, which didn't taste like rock.

I looked down through the metal floor grating and into the darkness that was Shaft #24B, a darkness I thought I knew like the inside of my dreams, but didn't, really. I had a bad feeling about this.

I passed the riser valves, part of the shaft's valve chamber that brings water up from the tunnels to distribution chambers where it's then pumped into a system of mains that run just below the street surface. And then I was in the long stretch that would eventually bring me to the tunnel itself. The temperature dropped ten degrees. My breath condensed in the air like cigar smoke.

Sometimes, I imagined the cable snapping, the skip plummeting through the shaft, past the tunnel, and into the center of the earth. Ever since I was a child, I had been trying to

understand this pull at my bones, the force of attraction between objects by virtue of their masses. I was fifteen when my father fell from a suspended threshold platform twenty feet up from the bottom of the shaft. An eight-ton winch broke loose from the top and crashed down on top of him. It was a miracle my father was the only casualty at the time.

But he was one of twenty-five sandhogs who've died while building City Water Tunnel #3. That's more than the number of astronauts who've died in the entire 42-year history of the space program. Half of us were deaf from the drilling and the others had silicosis of the lungs, from the rock dust, but it's what we did, and it paid well.

I stopped the cage at the bottom of the shaft. Before I opened the door, I looked around for Karl. I saw the 16-ton front-end loader exactly where we had left it after lowering it safely down the shaft yesterday. The electric train sat at the tunnel entrance. I swung the door open and walked into the center of the shaft.

The tunnel went out from either side of the shaft for several miles. One end ran south toward Staten Island and was still being drilled. The other, Shaft 24B, was the one we had just connected hours earlier. The tunnel was 24 feet in diameter and would eventually have a concrete lining, though now it was exposed granite with occasional bolts sticking out that helped hold together the layers of rock, as toothpicks hold together a club sandwich.

Down the center of the tunnel ran a narrow set of rail tracks on which the locomotive ran. The train carried the muck generated by drilling and blasting, or by the Tunnel Boring Machine, out to the shaft entrance where the broken rock was lifted out in buckets. The train also had man cars connected, to take us quickly to and from the head of the tunnel.

I turned on my miner's lamp. Most of the ventilation system had been shut off for the night, so the air was heavy with rock dust. Only one string of incandescent bulbs burned

along the tunnel walls. I hoped I wouldn't have to stay below for long. I could hear water trickle down the center of the tracks. I had a feeling I was the only one here, that Karl was gone, or had never even come down at all.

I called out for him. My voice echoed up the shaft and down the tunnels and came back to me seconds later. No response. Bolted into the rock and attached to a sheet of plywood was a row of large circuit breakers. I found the one I was looking for and pushed the handle up. The arc lamps within the shaft sputtered and came to life. A thick, white light filled the space, illuminating the tractor and a row of green Porto-Pottys.

I couldn't decide if I should follow the tunnel north or south. I walked past the train to the south and swept my light back and forth, looking for anything suspicious, any sign of Karl, but I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. I walked back through the shaft and around a deep pool of muck. I peered down the other tunnel, but I didn't see anything there either. I picked up a large broken drill bit and smacked it against the train rail, hoping the sound would carry through the tunnels and alert Karl to my presence.

Back under the shaft, I considered my options. Karl and Lykes could be anywhere within the tunnels. I couldn't just sit and wait for their return. The next morning's shift was only five hours away. I still planned on getting a couple of hours sleep tonight. Then I remembered the Mayor might be showing up tomorrow.

As I stood there thinking, the arc lamps suddenly went out. Only my miner's lamp and the incandescent bulbs were left burning. Then I heard a noise coming from one of the tunnels. It could've been a rat--they grew large down here--but it sounded more like footsteps.

I went into the mouth of the north tunnel, where we'd just finished drilling, and peered

down it, listening. After a moment, I saw a light reflect off the walls. Because of a bend in the tunnel, I couldn't see who or what it was, but soon the light cleared the bend and behind it came a murky silhouette. All I had to go on was the bounce of a miner's lamp affixed to the hard hat. I thought I recognized the way the light jogged to the left with each step. We all had signature ways of walking and this seemed like Karl's.

As I called out to him, the diesel engine on the front-end loader burst to life behind me. I jumped and spun around in time to see the huge rubber tires begin to spin. A plume of exhaust shot into the air as the throttle opened.

I looked into the cab. The driver's face was in shadow, but I could see the American Flag sticker on his hard hat. Whoever it was, the fucker was wearing my hard hat.

Then the two spotlights on the loader turned on. The light blinded me. I couldn't see, but I could hear the loader's approach. I dove to the right as the bucket swung by me. The hard hat I wore went flying.

I got up off the floor and glanced down the tunnel again. With the tractor's light behind me, I could see further, but no one was there now.

I turned back to the tractor and jumped onto a lift arm as the bucket swung back toward me. I scrambled across the arms, past the spot lights, and attached myself to the front windshield of the cab.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I screamed, pounding the windshield with my fist. I swung myself around to the door of the cab. I yanked open the door. No one was inside. I jumped to the ground and ran around the front of the tractor. As I passed the bucket, the tractor lurched forward again. My slacks caught on a tooth of the bucket and I fell into the muck. I rolled to my left and flattened myself into the mud as the tractor passed directly over

me. There go my shoes, I thought. After the back tires rolled by, I pulled myself up and began climbing up the rear of the machine. But someone was behind me and pulled me off. Before I could do anything, I felt something come down on the back of my head. The world seemed to splash into a million whirling specks of light. Then, that was all.

Chapter Two

Water had carved huge curves within the stone, making it look more like a slalom course than something designed by city engineers. My miner's lamp revealed drifts of white sediment. The cement lining was completely worn away. Some kind of white vegetation streaked along the sides, like veins of ore. Pieces of junk were wedged within the cracks of the ancient granite: a rusted bicycle rim, a car's brake drum, an arm off a doll.

Construction of the new water tunnel was finally complete and connected to the Kensico Reservoir. Operation of the old water tunnels was shut down for the first time since their valve chambers first opened 150 years ago. Where I was standing was at a place no man had ever seen, and now my father's voice echoed through the tunnel toward me. He was trying to warn me about something, some danger I sensed lurked around the next bend.

When I finally woke, I recognized nothing. I was in a strange room. My head ached, and when I touched at the tender spot, fresh pain coursed through my body. When I tried sitting up in the bed, the floral wallpaper began to quiver and spin. I leaned over the edge of the bed and puked on the floor. The wound on my head seemed to explode. I forced myself to stop the convulsions.

My dress shirt was caked with mud and blood. My slacks were ripped along the knee. My shoes were ruined and my socks were still damp. I checked for my watch but it was gone. So was my cell phone and wallet. The only thing I had in my pocket was the velvet box of the engagement ring. No clock in the room, no phone, only a small dresser with a white vase and plastic flower on top. And a window with the blinds pulled.

Exactly what had happened last night? I'd nearly been run over by a front-end loader-- I remembered that much--but why?

I got to my feet and made it over to the window. Just a view of a brick wall some twelve inches away, but enough to see it was daylight. I walked over to the door, fully expecting it to be locked. It wasn't.

I stepped into a hallway. I couldn't tell if this was some kind of hotel, or boarding house, or what. The walls were covered with striped gold and lime-green wallpaper. A staircase with a wooden banister sat at the far end. I made my way to it, leaning against the lip of the wainscoting for support.

A door opened next to me and a man in a crumpled suit came out. When he saw me, he gave me a quick once over, then hurried toward the stairs. The door to the room he'd come from was still open, and as I passed, I looked in.

A woman in a bath robe was sitting in a red leather recliner counting money. When she saw me, she seemed about to say something, but apparently changed her mind. She went back to counting.

"Excuse me," I said. She looked up and stared at me. "Could you tell me where I am?"

"You're standing in my door way." She crossed her legs and bounced her pink bunny bedroom slipper up and down.

"No, I mean where is this place?"

"'A' is for Alphabet City," she said.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"'N' is for noon," she said, flipping a strand of blond hair from her shoulder. "'T' is for

Tuesday. 'J' is for June. 'M' is for Mary. That's my name. What's yours?"

"Reese."

"'R' is for Reese. What happened to your head, Reese?"

"Long story. You got a phone I could use?"

"Sorry, Reese. The pay phone at the end of the hallway's b-r-o-k-e-n." She spelled it out.

"Thanks for the spelling lesson, Mary," I said. I continued down the hall. So, I'd been unconscious only for the night, but by now, everyone at work would be wondering where the hell I was.

When I made it to the stairs, I almost pitched forward. I caught hold of the railing and began easing myself down.

"Reese, you need help?" Mary asked, leaning over the banister, looking down at me.

Her bath robe was open. I was looking at a whole lot of flesh.

"Sure," I said. She came down and put her arm around me. We went down the stairs together like that, with me still holding onto the railing, her smelling like rose water.

When we got to the bottom, I thanked her. She reached inside her robe pocket and pulled out a business card.

"Give me a ring when you feel better," she said. Then she smiled and her whole face came alive and I realized she wasn't that bad looking, or at least had once been pretty before life had taken her in this direction.

She went back up the stairs and I looked at the business card. No address on it. Just her name in the middle of the card and a beeper number at the bottom. I pushed the card into my back pocket, where Claudine's ring should've been. It wasn't.

"Mary," I said. "B-U . . . busted," I said, giving up trying to spell out the word.

She stopped at the top of the stairs.

"Just toss me the ring, please," I said.

She looked puzzled at first, but then she shrugged and laughed.

"It was worth a try," she said, pulling the box from between her bosoms. "It's not like I'll ever see one of these." She opened it up and looked at the ring. "Nice. What's the lucky girl's name?"

"Claudine," I said.

"Well, good luck," she said, tossing the ring back down to me. It was a terrible throw and I amazed myself by catching it behind me on the other side of the banister.

I returned it to my pocket and continued on. Ahead of me was a set of double doors, apparently the only way out of this den of whores and thieves. I pushed through and found myself engulfed in hot steam. I thought it was a sauna until I realized the steam was coming from one of those restaurant-size dishwashers. No one in sight, though. I kept going forward and passed an open doorway which led to an empty kitchen. A rat scurried from a torn bag of flour. Pools of congealed grease sat beneath the gas stoves and metal counters.

I kept on and pushed through another door. I found myself standing in the back of a diner. The place was empty except for a woman working behind the counter and an old man playing with a stack of quarters and drinking a cup of coffee, neither of whom bothered to look at me. Two flies buzzed above an uncovered plate of glazed doughnuts.

"You got a phone I could use?" I asked.

The lady tugged at her hair net, and without looking up from the paper she was reading, said, "Out the door, left down the block, on the corner."

As I passed the old man, he said, "She must have been a good one," and laughed until he started coughing.

"Shut up, Ernie," the woman said. "That's a buck fifty."

"For a lousy cup of coffee?" he objected.

I walked out onto the street and turned left. I had no idea where I was. The street looked like any other rundown Manhattan street, except maybe worse, the old sagging brownstones in bad need of pressure cleaning. Graffiti covered the aluminum shutters of several abandoned shops. A group of young boys were playing stick ball. Their game stopped as they stared at me. I ignored them and kept walking toward the corner.

There, I found a street sign and discovered I was on Avenue C and Eighth. The pay phone was in front of a T.V. repair shop. Having no wallet and no change, I had to dial the Foreman's trailer collect. One of the T.V.'s in the window of the repair shop was on. I looked at the picture, then slowly hung up the phone.

What I saw I couldn't make sense of. I was looking at an aerial view of Shaft 24B, taken from a news helicopter, with the word "Live" printed across the bottom of the screen. Several emergency vehicles--an ambulance, a police lab--were parked inside the gates. A group of what looked like sandhogs stood around outside the Hoghouse. A slew of reporters gathered beyond a police barricade and police officers were everywhere.

I needed to hear what was being said. I walked inside the store. The bells hanging from the door chimed and a man came out from where he was working on a T.V. set.

"Can I help you?" he said, looking over the top of his reading glasses. He wore a soiled cap on his head and gray hairs poked out from beneath it.

"Can I listen to that station?" I asked, pointing to the T.V. in the window.

"What happened to your head?" he asked.

"Someone knocked me good," I said. "Listen, I need to watch that station."

I just stood there while he thought about whether I planned on robbing the place. Then he reached beneath the counter. For his gun, I guessed. But he came up with a small T.V. which he placed on the counter and turned to face me.

"There you go," he said. It didn't matter what station I put it on. They were all covering the same news story. I turned up the volume.

A reporter stood in front of the emergency room of a hospital. "The Mayor is conscious and alert," the reporter said, "despite what's being reported as two broken ribs and a ruptured spleen. Doctors say he should make a full recovery. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the two sandhogs who were also injured. We have just learned that one has died, Bob. The other remains in critical condition."

I grabbed the T.V. "What?" I shouted. "What!"

"Careful," the repair man said, coming around the counter. He stood next to me. "You get hurt in this accident?" he asked.

I ignored him.

"Thank you for that report from Mt. Sinai Hospital, George," the anchor at the studio interrupted. "No one is saying the exact cause of the accident, but speculation exists that some kind of sabotage might have been involved. If you're just tuning in, we are reporting live on the accident involving the Mayor. The train he was on, carrying him through City Water Tunnel #3, accelerated out of control. As it approached a curve within the tunnel, it derailed and crashed into the tunnel wall. The sandhog killed, whose name has not been released yet, was operating the train at the time."

"Freddy! That's got to be Freddy!" I yelled.

"If you got hurt in the accident," the repair shop owner said, "what are you doing here?"

"Shhh," I said.

"The other injured were riding at the back of the train," the anchor continued, "and thus were somewhat shielded from the direct impact."

The repair man reached to turn off the T.V. "I have to get back to work," he said.

I grabbed his arm. "Not yet," I said, and he froze, staring at me.

"George," the anchor said, "is there any indication as to why some are thinking sabotage?"

"Not yet, Bob," the reporter said. "The people I've spoken with won't speculate, but I have with me here a retired sandhog who will be able to describe better for us what might really have happened down there today."

Then I saw James Avery standing next to the reporter. He had been a friend of my father's. He looked ancient, completely worn down, though he was probably only sixty. You could tell by the pained expression on his face he wasn't enjoying any of this.

"Mr. Avery, thank you for joining us. In your opinion, do you think this accident could be an act of sabotage?" the reporter asked.

"Don't rightly know," Avery said, his hands jammed into his pockets.

"But as you've explained to me, there is a safety feature on this particular train that disengages the accelerator once the train reaches a certain speed, is that not correct?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And reports of the train's suspected speed go beyond this automatic cut off point?"

"That's what I heard."

"What else can you tell us, Mr. Avery?"

James shuffled his feet, then looked into the camera. "Being a sandhog's a dangerous enough job without anyone messing around or tampering with anything. I don't know that anyone did mess with the rail or not, but if any person, or group of people, are in anyway involved, they are cowards of the worst kind, and being on T.V. right now, I can't rightly say the way I feel about this."

"Thank you, Mr. Avery," the reporter said. "That's all from here now, Bob. Back up to you."

I couldn't speak. I realized I was still holding on to the arm of the shop owner and I let go. He scooted back around the counter and put the T.V. away. I walked out of the store and back onto the street. I stood there blinking. My blood began to pound. The ground swung violently beneath my feet. I grabbed onto the phone booth and clamped down on my teeth. A trickle of what must have been fresh blood ran down my forehead.

I picked up the phone and dialed the foreman's trailer again.

Someone I didn't recognize answered the phone.

"Yes, we accept the charges," the voice said. "Is this Reese Coppage?"

"Yes. Who is this?" I said.

"One second, please." Then I heard another voice.

"Reese, this is Rich. Where are you?"

"I'm at the corner of Avenue C and Eighth. Rich, what the hell happened? I just saw it on the news."

"We don't know yet, Reese. We were hoping you could help explain some things."

"It's been a bizarre night and morning. I got knocked out last night at the tunnel."

"Knocked out?" There was a pause. "Go on," he said.

"Karl was there, too. I was looking for him. You find the security guard?"

"We found him, Reese. Look, how soon can you get here?"

"I'll come right away."

"Hold on a second," Richard said. I heard muffled words, then Rich came back.

"Reese, just stay where you are. We'll send a car to pick you up."

"Okay. I'll be here," I said. "But, Richard?"

"Yes?"

"What happened to Freddy?"

"He's dead."

I tried to speak, to say something, but I couldn't. Then Rich spoke.

"Stay where you are," he said.

"I will," I answered, and hung up.

While I waited, I dialed Claudine's office number, again collect. It was a habit to check in with her, and at the time, it seemed the right thing to do. I wanted to hear her voice. She answered and accepted the charges.

"Reese, are you all right? Where are you?" she said, almost in a whisper.

"I'm in Alphabet City."

"What are you doing there?"

"Long story."

"You know what's happened, right?" she asked.

"Not really. I know Freddy's been killed."

"Have you been to the site yet this morning?"

"No."

"Listen. We can't talk long. The police have been asking me questions about last night. I've spoken to Sammy. He called me here at the office. He said that if you should get in touch with me, to tell you not to go to the site. He said he thinks someone's trying to frame you for the accident."

My head split open and out came pouring laughter. It just came out. At that time, it really was the funniest thing I'd ever heard.

Claudine was calling my name.

"I'm sorry," I said, breathing hard. "You were saying?"

"This isn't a joke, Reese. This is serious. Have you spoken to anyone yet?" she asked.

"Yeah, they're sending someone. They're going to put me in shackles. No, no--a straight jacket." My sides were beginning to hurt, but then a fresh pain from behind my left ear kicked in and I lost my sense of humor.

"Sammy said you should go to his apartment, that his wife's expecting you and that he'll get there as soon as he can," Claudine said. "Did you hear me?"

"I hear you. But you know," I said, finally taking possession of the few senses I had left, "if I go to the site and simply explain what happened last night, there's no reason why they won't believe me."

"Shouldn't you at least talk to Sammy first? Get your story straight?"

"I don't need a story. The truth ought to be good enough." I looked up and down the street for the car that would soon be picking me up.

"I know, but it might not be," she said.

"Did Sammy give you any specifics?" I asked. A white pick-up truck I figured for the DEP's turned the corner at Twelfth Street and headed toward me.

"He said something about a missing rail piece. He called from the site."

I tried to imagine ways I could be framed for the accident. My hard hat was probably down there, but so what? Why would I do such a thing? Why would anybody?

I watched the white pick-up stop at a red light on Tenth Street. It was two blocks away. I wondered if they'd seen me yet.

"Reese, I have to go. Someone's coming. I'll meet you at Sammy's," Claudine said and hung up.

The traffic light turned green. I turned my back to the approaching truck and faced the store window. News coverage of the accident continued. A picture of our most recent annual sandhog Memorial Day picnic appeared on the screen. There were six of us in the picture, all holding onto Budwieser cans and smiling. A highlighted circle surrounded one face. I figured it had to be Freddy's until the circle was enlarged and brought into clearer focus.

It was me. It was my face that filled the screen. I didn't know what was being said in conjunction with the photo, but whatever it was, it probably wasn't about the home run I had hit that day in the softball game.

"Fuck," I said. I glanced one more time at the truck. It was a block away, held up behind a large delivery van.

I quickly turned the corner onto Eight Street and ran toward Avenue A. My head felt like it was about to fall off. I tried to smooth my gait, but it didn't help relieve the Ichabod Crane feeling.

It was crazy, me running like this. But if Sammy thought I should speak with him, then that's what I was going to do. Richard Pritchett could wait a few hours before hearing my side of the story. By then, I'd have all the facts straight.

I entered Tompkins Square Park and took a right through the children's play ground. I passed two old men playing chess on a fixed cement table. One of them looked up at me, frightened, as if I might run off with his rook, or something.

I came out on Ninth Street and considered running to 1st Avenue and entering the subway, but I saw an empty cab going West and stuck my hand up. The taxi pulled over. I jumped in and asked the driver to take me to Grand Central Station. I scooted down in the seat as he rejoined the traffic.

"What happened to your head, there, mister," the driver asked.

"Tripped and fell," I said.

Sammy lived only four blocks from Grand Central Station. I didn't want to get dropped off at his door step. I didn't know yet what they had against me, but if I wanted to stay out of their grasp long enough to find out, I had to cover my tracks. If they traced me to Grand Central, I figured they'd assume I caught the L.I.R.R. or the subway or a bus.

Then I remembered I had no money. I considered just bolting on the driver once we stopped, but I was still groggy. I wasn't moving fast, and besides, the way I was dressed, my appearance wasn't going to allow me to blend in with the crowd.

"Look," I said to the driver. "I'm in a jam. I don't have any money on me right now, but I'll send you my fare plus an extra twenty dollars once . . ."

The driver slammed on his brakes. I slid forward off the seat and met the metal frame of the plexiglass divider with my nose. "Get out, cocksucker," the driver said.

My nose burned and my eyes began to run.

"I call the police, you son-of-a-bitch," he said, picking up the mouthpiece on his two-way radio.

As I got out of the car, he continued to shout names at me through his open window. A few people on the streets looked at me, but I kept my head down and walked away from the cab as quickly as possible.

I walked past a sporting goods store that had an outdoor display of discounted T-shirts and baseball hats. The young kid who was supposed to be watching the tables was staring at a group of young school girls, who in turn were staring at me. I took that opportunity to take one of the hats. The girls saw me take it, but I guess my bloody head scared them sufficiently and they didn't utter a peep. Besides, what could the kid do to stop me? I put the hat on loosely and jogged to the subway entrance.

I had to jump the turnstile. I hadn't done that since I was a kid playing hooky from school. For some reason, it didn't give me the same kind of thrill. I caught the West bound L train to Grand Central Station.

While sitting on the half empty train, I imagined the repair shop owner being questioned by the police. Maybe the old men in the park said they saw me getting into a cab. Maybe they found the taxi driver and he told them I wanted to go to Grand Central Station. I didn't know if any of that was happening, and I didn't like my sudden paranoia.

But when the train stopped at Penn Station, I got out. I found a bathroom and cleaned up as best I could. I rinsed my shirt off in the sink and tried drying it in the air blower. Blood was caked into my brown hair. It was in my mustache too, the one I grew to cover a scar I'd gotten years ago after an air blast tore loose a piece of rock which ricocheted

into my mouth.

As I washed, a homeless person came into the bathroom carrying a large garbage bag over his shoulder. When he saw me, he opened the bag and pulled out a pair of worn khakis.

"These look your size," he said, holding them up. He seemed around my age, though it was hard to tell. His brown hair was molded into dreadlocks and his face was dirty. He walked with a noticeable limp.

When I told him I didn't have any money, he waved his hand in front of his face.

"Go ahead, take them," he said. "Guys like us got to help each other out. Besides, they're too big for me."

I thanked him and took the pants. They were a little tight around the waist, but the length was perfect. I made sure there wasn't a hole in the front pocket, then transferred Claudine's ring there. The homeless man eyed the black box, but he didn't say anything. I also remembered to take Mary's business card.

I left as he began to undress, I guessed for his weekly bath. Back outside, I walked fifteen blocks to Sammy's apartment. I didn't want to take the chance anyone was waiting for me at Grand Central.

Chapter Three

On the wall behind where Sammy sat hung a framed photo of my father and Sammy fly fishing together along the Esopus River. Like patients in a sanitarium on their daily walk, they looked almost sickly among the maples and evergreens, a result of spending most of their adult lives underground. And I knew I looked much worse. I still had on the same shirt I'd worn last night and my hair was still plastered to my head. Claudine had brought over a pair of jeans and a clean T-shirt, some clothes I'd left at her place, but I hadn't the chance yet to shower or put them on.

Sammy had told me what he wanted to tell me, that Carlos had been found tied up in one of the supply trailers, and that he had claimed it was me who had done it.

"Tell us everything, Reese. Tell us what happened," Sammy said. A row of eight stitches ran across his forehead, hidden by a white bandage. He'd hurt himself while helping the Mayor from the wreck.

I took several deep breaths. "First, I had dinner with Claudine," I said, looking at her as she sat next to me on the couch. She looked beautiful in her cherry colored blouse and tan pants, but I could tell the day had been a strain on her. Her usually smooth forehead was creased from worrying, and from this I took a small measure of satisfaction.

"Then I went over to Rich's for the card game. No one was there. Then Carlos called on the cellular. He said Karl was there wanting to give Lykes a tour of the tunnel."

"Who is Lykes?" Claudine asked.

"I first met him a couple of weeks ago," I said. "He's Karl's cousin visiting from

upstate. So, anyway, I held the phone while Carlos goes to find them, but he never came back on. So, I went to the site. When I got there, Carlos was missing. My locker was broken into. The skip was down in the shaft. I figured Karl must have gotten a key somehow."

"How would he do that?" Sammy asked.

"I don't know. Make a copy from somebody's, I guess. So, I bring the skip back up, then go down myself. Once I'm there, I can't find them. I turn some lights on, but next thing I know, they turn back off. What I figure was Lykes was hiding near the breakers the whole time. Then Karl comes walking down the North tunnel toward the shaft. I can't see him, but I can see his miner's lamp bouncing up and down. Then all hell breaks loose. The tractor starts up and whoever's driving the thing is wearing my hard hat. I figure that would be Lykes. So anyway, the thing drives right over me and I get up on the other side, and then someone pulls me off from behind and wham! I'm out. Next thing I know, I'm waking up in Alphabet City in some strange hotel bed. I see the news on a T.V. I call the site. Talk to Rich. He wants to pick me up. Then I spoke to Claudine, and she tells me what you said. I see my picture on the T.V. screen. Panic a little, I guess. Make up my mind to talk to you first."

"They were just saying how you didn't show this morning at work, and how you were still missing," Lizzie said. She came in carrying a tray with a sandwich and a soda on it for me. She was a plump, attractive woman who had always treated me kindly, even before my father had died. "I was watching the T.V. all day," she said, setting the tray down in front of me. "And please, call your mother. She's worried sick after seeing the news."

"Did you at least find out what was happening down there?" Sammy asked.

"They knocked me out before I had a chance."

"Did you know Karl was at the site this morning?" Sammy said.

"I figured that out, but I bet he wasn't on the train when it wrecked," I said.

"He was, and got a little banged up, too. He admitted to Rich he was at the site last night, but he swears he left after Carlos told him to."

"I saw him in the tunnel," I said.

"You saw his face?" Claudine asked.

"No, but I know it was him."

"How can you be so sure?" Claudine said.

"Sammy, if you saw me coming down the tunnel and all you saw was the light from my hard hat bouncing up and down, would you know it was me?" I asked.

Sammy shrugged. "Maybe," he said.

"We've been working together for years. We know these things about each other," I said. "Imagine being in an office hallway and a co-worker of yours is coming up behind you," I said to Claudine. "You hear their footsteps. Chances are, you're gonna know who it is before you turn around, right? Based on the sound of their footsteps."

"I guess so," Claudine said.

"I know exactly what you mean, Reese," Lizzie said, finally settling down next to her husband. "Our cat is like that. He only comes to the door when he hears one of us. If it's a salesman or the mailman, Thomas can tell and he won't bother."

I reached for the sandwich and took a bite. It hardly tasted like anything.

"The police are going to want more than light bouncing off the walls," Sammy said.

"What about Lykes? Did you see him?" Claudine asked.

"No. I just saw my hard hat, but I bet you anything he knows how to operate a

tractor."

We all sat there, thinking. I drank the soda. It was hard for me to believe any of this was really happening. More than anything, I just wanted to shower and go to sleep. I got up and went into Sammy's kitchen. I called my mother, reassured her that I was okay. She had been crying. I promised I'd come over to her place in the next couple of days.

After I got off the phone, I went back into the living room

"How many times have you met Carlos?" Sammy asked.

I had to think about it. "I don't know. Five or six times. I leave before his shift starts and I get to work after he gets off. A few times I've had to stay late sorting equipment, doing inventory. I saw him then."

"And out of those five or so times, how many of them were you wearing your hard hat?" Sammy asked, scratching around the bandage on his head with his good hand.

"Probably all of them," I said.

"They found your hard hat down there this morning, after the accident. Yeah, Carlos could be lying, maybe someone's paying him money to lie, but what if he's just mistaken. What if, while on his rounds last night, someone jumps him, someone wearing your hard hat, and it's dark out. Bingo, he automatically thinks it's you."

"I guess that could happen," I said. "Mine's the only one with both an American Flag sticker and the skull and cross bones. But I'd just spoken to Carlos on the phone. He asked me to help him. Why would he believe I'd do that to him when Karl's stomping around the place like he's crazy?" I said.

"What if you had never spoken to Carlos?" Claudine said.

"What?" My head was beginning to reel again. I gripped the arm of the couch and

squeezed.

"How familiar are you with Carlos' voice?" Claudine asked.

"He has a Spanish accent," I said.

"Could you tell his voice apart from some other Spanish speaking person?" Claudine asked.

"I don't know."

"What if he was already tied up when you got that phone call, and Karl, or someone else, was impersonating him. Then Carlos wouldn't have been thinking about you until he saw the hard hat, and he'd have no reason to assume it was anybody else. That's assuming he hadn't seen Karl or Lykes yet either."

"That's good, Claudine," Lizzie said. "I feel like I'm in a Matlock episode."

"Lizzie, this is serious," Sammy said.

"I know," she said, a bit contrite.

"I hate to say this, but I'm not convinced that Karl and Lykes are behind this," Sammy said. "I can't believe one of our own would do something like this. Don't forget Karl admitted to Rich he was there last night. Why would he bother placing himself at the scene of a crime?"

"I know it was him I saw in the tunnel," I said.

"Ever hear of a self-fulfilling prophecy? You expect something bad to happen and it does, but only because by expecting it, you actually cause it yourself?" Claudine asked. "I'm not saying you caused the accident, Reese. My point is about that light you saw coming down the tunnel. Maybe you think it's Karl's because you're expecting it to be Karl's. Your mind prejudges circumstances to fit a preconceived notion."

"Or maybe this person you see happens to walk just like Karl," Sammy said.

"What are the chances of that?" I asked.

"Why didn't you call the police before you went down there?" Claudine said.

"I thought I could handle the situation myself."

"You're just like your old man," Sammy said. "Thinking you can solve all the problems on your own. Don't need anyone's help." He got a far away look in his ageing green eyes, the same look he got whenever he began to talk about my father. "He never should have been up on that threshold platform. Couple of air hoses broke loose just before they were started moving the rig and everyone was afraid the hoses would knock into the explosives and blow everything up, so he goes back up alone, and that's when the winch broke loose."

I'd heard the story a hundred times. My father died a hero, or died trying to be one. Sometimes I felt in awe of him, and other times, I felt compelled to live up to his reputation and angry at the same time for having to try.

"Sammy," I said. "I screwed up. I realize that. Freddy's dead. I haven't had time to deal with it yet, but I know I'm going to have to."

"Reese, you can't blame yourself for that," Claudine said. "Something is going on here that we don't understand, and you've nothing to do with it."

"But the police think differently," Lizzie reminded us.

I took another bite of the sandwich. "How's it taste?" Lizzie asked.

I was about to tell her how wonderful the quality of the baloney was when we heard a knock at the door. Sammy motioned for me to get up. Claudine and I walked past the front door and went up the narrow stairs to Sammy's second floor where the bedroom was.

From there we listened as Sammy opened the door and greeted Richard Pritchett. Then we heard Rich introduce a Lieutenant from the New York Police Department, Greg Something-Or-Other.

Were they coming to arrest me? How did they know I was here? Claudine took hold of my hand.

Sammy introduced Lizzie, whom Rich remembered meeting before. "Come in," Sammy said. I heard them all go into the living room.

"What brings you here?" Sammy asked.

"Am I interrupting someone's lunch?" Richard said.

"I'll finish it later," Sammy said.

It was hard for me to hear them, so I crept halfway down the stairs. Claudine was motioning to me, but I ignored her.

"Sammy, the reason we're here is that Reese still hasn't shown up at the site. The longer he waits, the worse it will be for him. Right now, we just want to ask him some questions. But eventually we'll be forced to put a warrant out for his arrest. You don't happen to know where we might be able to find him, do you?" There was a pause, then Richard continued. "I know you two are friends. You and his father were close. I know there's nothing you wouldn't do for him, but I'm telling you, Sam, you'll only hurt the boy worse if you encourage him to keep clear."

"I haven't heard from him," Sammy said.

As I listened, I looked at a photo hanging on the wall of Sammy's only son, Lloyd, as a baby, sitting on top of a bale of hay, taken at some Sears studio. Now he was in jail, serving time for armed robbery. He'd committed the crime while driving his own taxi cab. Now the

cab sat in a garage somewhere under a tarp.

"Let me ask you something, Rich. You really think Reese is involved?" Sammy asked.

"Honest? No, I don't. Far as I'm concerned, Reese is a stand up guy. But there's some evidence that says otherwise. I'm just following that up. Doing my job. I'm sure once I talk to Reese, he'll be able to straighten everything out. Explain what happened down there. Point me in the right direction. But he needs to come in."

"Do you mind if we have a look around?" the Lieutenant said.

"My word should be good enough, Richard," Sammy said.

"Don't put me in this position, Sam," Richard said.

"I've been a sandhog a long time. I campaigned for you that year after you got hurt, when you ran for President of our union. Now, you're going to let this goon loose in my house?"

"What did you call me?" the Lieutenant said.

"Take it easy, Greg," Richard said. "Sam, we don't have a search warrant. You don't want us to look around, then we leave. But we might leave here with the wrong ideas."

"I don't give a damn what kind of ideas you get. Except for one: Reese hasn't done anything wrong and you know it."

There was a long pause. Then I heard Rich's voice again. "Greg, you mind if I talk privately for a moment with Sammy?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

After that I couldn't hear anything, except Lizzie occasionally clearing her throat and the Lieutenant coughing once. I looked back up the stairs to Claudine, who shrugged and took a step down toward me. The stair beneath her foot creaked.

"What was that?" I heard the Lieutenant ask. Claudine froze and we stared at one another.

"What was what?" Lizzie said.

"That noise I just heard. Is anyone else here?" the Lieutenant asked.

"It was probably just my cat. Here, Thomas, Thomas," Lizzie called.

I heard a meow and looked behind us at the fattest cat I had ever seen. Thomas in all his chubby glory was stretching himself at the top of the stairs. Or trying to anyway.

"Here, Thomas," Lizzie said again.

I heard someone walking toward the stairs. It was Lizzie and when Thomas saw her at the base of the stairs, he bounced down toward her where she picked him up and carried him back into the living room.

"Lieutenant, this is Thomas. Thomas, meet the Lieutenant."

A few minutes later, I heard Rich's voice again.

"As long as we understand each other," he said. "Okay, Greg. We can go now."

Claudine and I crept back up the stairs, avoiding the creaky step, and entered the bedroom. A few minutes later, after I heard Sammy bolt and lock the door, he called for us to come down. Back in the living room, I asked Sammy what Rich had said to him.

"Reese, he knows you had nothing to do with the accident. He said that much in front of the Lieutenant. He thinks somebody's setting you up. Before you turn yourself in, Rich suggests coming up with a good alibi or find whoever's involved."

"Isn't that supposed to be the police's job?"

"They seem satisfied to focus in on you," Sammy said.

"He didn't say anything else?"

"Well, he wanted to make sure I was going to make the next poker game. I asked him about last night's game, 'cause I remember you mentioned you went there and no one answered the buzzer. He said everyone was there, playing. Maybe you pressed the wrong buzzer."

"The wrong buzzer? I've been there before. I know which one to press. He's lying."

"I'm just telling you what he said."

"If it smells like shit, it's shit," I said, disgusted.

"What's your next move?" Sammy asked.

"Well, I'd like to talk to Karl face to face. See what he's got to say about all this."

"I have his address," Sammy said.

"Maybe you should clean yourself up, Reese. Before you do anything else," Claudine said.

Sammy went to find Karl's address, and I went into the bathroom. I got out of my clothes and stepped into the shower. When I got out, Claudine was waiting for me. She wanted to see the wound on my head. I sat on the closed toilet while she poured hydrogen peroxide into it. It was still very tender and Claudine thought I needed stitches and a tetanus shot, but I assured her I didn't need either one.

"I hope this isn't your idea of a bank robbery," she said, pressing down on the cut with a bandage.

"Hey, you wanted an exciting life."

"Where'd you get those pants?" Claudine asked as she worked on my wound. "I've never seen them before." I noticed then the box with the ring sitting on top of the toilet tank and my dirty clothes in the waste basket next to it.

"A homeless guy gave them to me," I said. "Ouch!"

"Hold still. I'm almost done."

After she finished, I stood and picked up the ring.

"You know, it would make my life simpler if you'd just take the damn ring. I'm tired of carrying it. You don't have to say 'yes.' Just hold it for me."

"Sorry. I can't do that," she said. Then she surprised me with a kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, that makes everything all better," I said.

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you," she said.

"Neither do you, apparently."

"Now, now. Let's not get distracted from the task at hand."

"Which is?"

"Getting you out of this mess. You're going to visit Karl?" I nodded. "I'll go try to find that hotel you woke up in last night. Maybe someone saw you being dragged in there last night. That might give you the alibi you need. You know the address or the name of the place?"

"It was on Avenue C between Eighth and Ninth Street. On the East side. It was behind some diner." I pulled the pants from the trash and found Mary's business card.

"Here," I said, handing Claudine the card. "She might be able to help you."

"Who is this?"

"Some woman helped me down the stairs. She lives there. Maybe she saw something."

"It doesn't say what she does," Claudine said.

"And I didn't ask," I said, shrugging.

"Maybe you didn't have to."

"I'm glad to see that at least our trust's still intact."

"I'm glad your body is still intact. I was worried." She put her arms around me.

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I can take more than this." Then we kissed, her tongue like a soothing tonic for the recent bruises I'd received, both inside and out.

Of course, I didn't know how far all this would go. I don't think anyone could've guessed to what limits I would be pushed. In a way, I'm glad I didn't know then what I know now. If I had, I might have locked myself in that bathroom with Claudine and never come out. The road would've seemed too perilous, uncertain, and ultimately unnavigable. But that's how it is for most everything. We take on things bigger than ourselves, almost unknowingly, and it's only then do we find out what we are really made of. It's only then do we discover the quality of our traits, good or bad, strong or weak. I was to find out I was all of these.

Chapter Four

As I entered the subway station, I felt only slightly more confident than the last time. Now that I was wearing clean clothes and one of Lloyd's old baseball caps, I wasn't as convinced that every cop I saw was going to arrest me. Getting out of Sam's apartment by way of the fire escape wasn't too difficult and seemed unnecessary since none of us saw anyone on the street looking for me, but it was better to play it safe we decided.

At Broadway and 116th, Karl's neighborhood, I got off the subway and walked East. Columbia University area: V & T's Pizza, the Hungarian Pastry shop. Outside Karl's building, I rang all the buzzers except his. After a few seconds, the door buzzed. I climbed the five flights of stairs and knocked on his door.

At first, I thought no one was home. I considered figuring out a way to break into the place, though of course I didn't know what I'd be looking for. But then I thought I heard a noise inside the apartment. I knocked again.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice said, surprising me.

"My name's Mr. Coppage. I work with Karl DeSalvo. I'm his supervisor," I said.

The door opened a crack. The security chain was still attached.

"Yes?" the woman asked. She didn't show her face.

"Is Karl home?"

"No."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"No."

"Would you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"About what?" She still hid behind the door. I saw only her hand. She wore a wedding band, and chewed her nails.

"It concerns last night and this morning. There was an accident at the tunnel," I said. She said nothing.

"People were hurt. One was killed," I said.

"You think Karl was involved?" she said.

"Don't know. But we do know he was at the site last night. May I come in?" I asked.

"I'm not really dressed for company," she said. "I've no make-up on."

"That's alright. I won't stay long."

She closed the door, undid the chain, then opened it back up.

The first thing I noticed were the bruises on her face. A purple shiner spread to yellow across her cheek bone. I didn't ask. Didn't have to. Karl beat his wife. It was as plain to me as the light coming down the tunnel.

"I was mugged," she said, as I entered.

"Did they catch him?" I asked, careful to play along.

"I'm afraid not," she said. "Would you like some coffee? It's already made." She closed and locked the door behind me.

"Sure. Thank you," I said.

"Sit down," she said. Her hair was cut short and she wore a long sleeveless nightgown. She looked malnourished. Her arms were like sticks.

I sat down on the couch and looked around. A black Formica wall unit dominated the room. It housed an enormous T.V., which must have been hell getting up the stairs. Next

to the wall unit was a stack of cardboard boxes. Against another wall was a bookcase filled with paperback novels, alphabetized by author. By the front door, a fishing rod leaned against the wall. A well-stuffed duffle bag lay next to it. A paperback romance novel lay on the coffee table. I figured she'd been reading when I knocked.

She came back from the kitchen carrying two large mugs of coffee.

"Thank you," I said, taking one from her. She stood behind a chair and watched me take a sip.

"It's good," I said, looking up at her. She turned from my gaze, came around the chair, and sat down.

"Is your first name Reese?" she asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Karl's mentioned you to me before."

"In what context?"

"Karl never liked you," she said. "He used to talk about you, how when you went away to college and came back, you changed. Thought you were better than everyone else. Then you got the job he wanted. Shaft Gang Foreman, Blaster. He's never gotten over that."

"I'm sure reporting him for drinking on the job didn't exactly put us on best terms either," I said.

"I didn't know about that. But for awhile, all I heard about was Reese this, Reese that."

"Sorry," I said, not knowing what I was apologizing for.

"That's okay. But, hey, I always wondered about your name."

"What about it?"

"Where did it come from?"

I stared into my cup of coffee. "My mother named me after her favorite candy," I said. "Of course, I'd rather've been named after a president."

"Are you for real?" she asked. A smile flickered across her face. I noticed then she was missing a tooth. The bottom of my stomach fell out. All I could think of was the force of the blow that could drive loose a tooth.

"So what's your sister's name? Kit? Or Kat?" she asked.

"Neither. It's Norma."

And then we both started laughing.

"Well, Reese. What did you want to ask me?"

"Mrs. DeSalvo . . ." I said, not knowing for sure if she and Karl were married. After all, I'd never seen her at any of the picnics. I guess that shouldn't have been too surprising though.

"Joanne," she said.

"Joanne. What time did Karl come home last night?"

"He didn't. But that's nothing new. He often disappears for a couple of days without telling me where he goes."

"Was he with his cousin?" I asked.

"His cousin?"

"Lykes. Has he been staying with you?" I asked.

"Lykes isn't his cousin."

"No? Who is he?"

"A business partner."

"I don't get it. What kind of business?" I asked.

"It's not very romantic but Lykes and Karl went into a Porto-Potty business. They have contracts with a lot of municipalities to supply Porto-Pottys at construction sites or special events, like outdoor concerts, things like that."

"What's the name of their business?"

"They lease the Porto-Pottys from different companies, so they don't really have their own logo."

"How did Karl and Lykes meet?" I asked.

"They met in an on-line chat room," she said.

"What kind of chat room?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Karl is involved in so many different things and I'm usually left out of most of them. Not that I'd want to get too involved anyway. . . The truth is we don't have that much in common."

The room filled with silence. I couldn't help it. I had to say something. "How long has this been going on?" I asked, touching my own cheek bone where her bruise was.

She stood. "Listen, Mr. Copping, I think it would be a good idea if you left now. If Karl found out I'd been talking to you . . . let you into our apartment . . ." She didn't finish the sentence.

"You wouldn't have let me in here if you didn't want help," I said.

She walked behind her chair and looked at me. Her fingers gripped tightly the back of the upholstered chair. "Reese's Peanut Butter Cup," she said. "That's funny. Maybe your mother should have named you after a Three Musketeers bar."

"Why?"

"You think you can save me."

"Maybe I can."

"You don't know Karl very well."

"I know he's scared enough and weak enough to hurt a woman."

"You don't know anything," she said.

It was quiet in her apartment for a long time.

"So," I repeated. "How long has it been going on?"

She released her grip on the chair and came back around. She sat back down and slowly picked up her coffee mug. "Off and on since we've been married, but it's gotten worse in the last year. That was, until two weeks ago."

"What do you mean?"

"Two weeks ago, he told me things were going to change for us. Get better. That he was going to stop drinking. I actually believed him, too...Look," she said, standing again.

"Really, I wish you'd leave." She picked up the coffee mugs and took them into the kitchen.

I got up with her. I walked over to the stacked boxes along the wall, curious about them. Were Joanne and Karl planning on moving? I pried the edge of one open and looked inside. It was filled with containers of Prell, a blasting agent made of fish guts and diesel oil. Another was filled with copper wires. Another with blasting caps. All materials obviously taken from the site.

Joanne came back into the room and saw me. We stood there and stared at one another.

"I want to help you, Joanne. We can help each other."

"I never should have let you in here," she said.

"You want to tell me about this?" I asked, gesturing toward the boxes.

"I don't know anything about it."

"I can have Karl arrested today for larceny, if I wanted to."

"Why don't you then?" she said.

"Because I'm more interested in the accident, that's why. We're talking about first-degree murder. The kind of stuff where they throw away the key. By helping me, Joanne, you could be helping yourself. You don't have to live this way."

"You don't know anything about my life, where I've come from, what I've been through."

"At least consider it. Think about it."

"I have," she said.

"I'm going to leave you a phone number," I said. "If you should change your mind at any time. May I have a pencil?"

She went into the kitchen and handed me one with a point as chewed up as her finger nails. I picked up the paperback novel from the coffee table and wrote the number on the last page, which was blank.

"This number's to a friend of mine. Her name's Claudine. She knows what's going on. If she's not there, just leave a message."

"This hardly sounds official," she said.

"The investigation's under cover," I said.

"Not anymore," she said.

I walked myself to the door.

I turned around and put my hand out to her. "I'd like to help you," I said. It wasn't a lie. I wanted to help her, but I also wanted to help myself. My ass was on the line and I needed any information Joanne might have about Karl.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Three Musketeers Bar," she said. I thought I saw the corner of her mouth come up, but she didn't receive my extended hand.

"Thank you for your time," I said. I turned around and left.

* * * *

As I neared my apartment, I noticed a dark sedan parked directly across the street. I didn't know if the car was waiting for me, but I took no chances. Before I reached my building, I turned into a narrow alley. It led to a small courtyard that belonged to the building adjacent to mine.

I'd done this once before when I had lost my keys at work. We were drilling at the time and I was wearing my earplugs, so there was no way I was going to hear the keys fall to the scaffolding and then drop to the belly of the tunnel. At least that's what I figured had happened after discovering the hole in my pocket, plus the fact I never recovered the keys.

I stopped in the middle of the alley. Until now, I'd forgotten all about losing my keys. It was probably almost a year ago, but now it occurred to me that maybe Karl had found them. Maybe that's where he got the key to operate the skip. It was possible.

At the end of the alley, I hopped a tall wooden fence and landed in a well kempt garden. I straightened a potted tomato plant I'd knocked over. Next to a table on which banzai plants sat was a gas grill. I picked up the long handled wire brush, used to clean the grill, and stuck it into my back pocket. Then I climbed onto the hood of the grill. My building's fire escape was in the front, like most of the buildings on my block, but since the

building next to mine had a courtyard and the alley, the fire escape was in back.

A dog inside one of the apartments began barking. I reached and pulled down the fire escape's ladder. I climbed to the first landing. My apartment was on the third floor. After climbing another set of steps, I was level with my bedroom window. The buildings abutted one another and if I leaned over, I could almost touch the casing to my window.

Leaning as far over the rail as I could, I used the handle of the wire brush to pry the top of my window down. The lock had been broken since before I'd moved in. I used the brush as a fulcrum, but after four inches, it no longer worked. Relying on strength alone, I was able to lower the top of the window another two inches. That was all.

I tossed the brush back down into the garden and pulled my legs over the rail so that I was now sitting on top of it. From there, I rose to a squatting position. Then I stood and leaned forward. When I reached the open window with my hands, my feet were still firmly planted on the railing. Too much so. I couldn't figure out how to transfer my weight to my arms without ripping the window out of the wall. This was a hell of way to have to get into your own home.

I tried remembering how I did it last time, but last time, I wasn't stuck between here and there. Last time, I did it all in one smooth motion.

I pushed back with my wrists to transfer as much weight onto my feet as possible. Then I jumped and pulled myself around to the window's ledge. The upper pane slammed down the rest of the way. My feet landed on the narrow ledge. Then they slid off and I was hanging from the window frame.

I looked down. I figured if I fell, I'd sprain an ankle, maybe break a leg. That wasn't something I wanted to try. Using my arms, I began to pull myself up. I got a knee on the

window's ledge, then hooked an arm over the window sash. Then I was able to get my legs under me and from there, I climbed the rest of the way into my apartment. I fell on the floor next to the radiator.

It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. No lights, I told myself, just in case. My bedroom was just as I'd left it. The bed was unmade and a few articles of dirty clothes were scattered across the hard wood floors. I only cleaned up when Claudine was coming over, though I was pretty sure she was cognizant of my slovenly ways. I didn't like them any better than she did. In fact, she was something of a neat freak and I liked that about her. I figured some of her compulsiveness might rub off on me. It hadn't happened yet.

I went into the kitchen. The blinking red light on the answering machine said I had seven messages in all. I pressed 'play.'

Four were from Claudine, each one becoming slightly more frantic than the last. There was a message from Rich to please call him as soon as I could, and another from Sammy, asking the same of me. The last message was a wrong number. At least, that's what I thought.

A man named Abdul, claiming to be from Extreme Cars Import in Paramus, New Jersey, said that my car was in and I could pick it up anytime tomorrow, after two o'clock, that if I had any questions, to please call him. He left his number. The weird thing was he used my full name. Was there another Reese Coppage in the city? I pulled down the directory and looked up my name in the Manhattan section. I was the only one, but there was an R. Coppage listed. I dialed the number. After several rings, an answering machine picked up. It was a woman's voice, but all she did was repeat her number. She didn't say her name. I hung up. I looked up my name in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn sections. I even looked

in the Staten Island directory, where my mother lived, but besides her, there weren't any other Coppages. There was a George M. Copping and a Thomas Copping, both in Long Island, but no Reese. I replayed the message again and copied Abdul's number down on a Post-it note and stuck it in my pocket. I pulled open the fridge and got a Snapple out. In the bedroom, I began to pack a small gym bag with a few articles of clothes. I went into the bathroom and threw in a toothbrush and my deodorant. In the top drawer of my dresser, I found a spare credit card I hadn't used yet. I called in the number to activate the card. There was a hundred bucks hidden away in an empty beer cozy with the words "Sloppy Joes" printed across the front above a picture of Hemingway. I'd gotten it the time Claudine and I went to Key West after visiting her parents in Miami. I stuffed the money into my wallet.

As I set the engagement ring back into my underwear drawer where it had lived the past two months, I heard voices coming from down the hall. There were only two apartments on each floor and I knew my neighbor was usually at work this time of day. I walked to the door with my gym bag in hand and listened. The voices got closer and I heard the sound of keys jangling.

I heard the key slip into the Medico lock. I looked down at the doorknob. It was still locked. The Medico opened. As quietly as I could, I slipped the security chain onto the door. Then, as the doorknob lock clicked open, I threw the Medico lock back up.

I spun around and ran for my bedroom as I heard them try to open the door. Then I heard voices shouting. I heard the Medico unlock again, and then the voices filled the apartment. I figured the chain would buy me another minute at most. I climbed out the top of the window and balanced on the ledge for a second while I tossed the gym bag into the garden below. Then I jumped for the fire escape.

As I landed onto the rail, I heard shouts coming out from my window. I pulled myself over the rail and began to climb down the stairs two rungs at a time. I dropped down into the garden. I didn't look up. I grabbed my bag, then hopped over the fence. Someone shouted, "He's going down the alley," and I heard a dog bark. I heard someone land onto the fire escape. I kept going at a sprint down the alley and didn't stop when I got to the street. I hung a left and headed toward First Avenue. On the corner of First and 90th Street, I entered the Korean market through the back door and dodged a few customers toward the front entrance. From there I took another left and ran toward 91st Street. I saw the bus coming down toward me.

It stopped at the corner on 91st Street. I entered the bus from its back doors as two people were getting off. I took a seat in the back and slouched down. As the bus accelerated past 90th, I looked down my street. I saw two men in suits come out of the market and one of them looked at the bus and pointed. I figured them to be plain clothes police officers. One began to run back toward my apartment, to get his car I guessed. The other went back into the market.

At Eighty-sixth Street, I got a transfer from the driver and caught a cross town bus. You have to love the efficiency of New York City's Public Transportation System.

Chapter Five

An hour later, I was drinking a Bud at a restaurant called Carmine's, just off Columbus, waiting for Sammy. We'd never been there before but figured it a good place to meet. All the waiters and bartenders were wearing ties and long sleeves. It wasn't a place you'd expect to find a couple of guys in construction.

The place was almost empty except for a young couple at one end of the bar and a group of college-aged kids in another corner who looked like they had just gotten off from working at a restaurant. They all wore the same blue denim shirts.

I saw Sammy through the window before he saw me. I was shocked at how old he looked. I wondered if my father was still alive, would he look the same way--slightly stooped over, the few gray hairs atop his head swept to the side.

When he sat down on the stool next to me, he pounded me on the back, his arm as heavy as an anvil. He dropped a bag at my feet with an old bowling league shirt of his inside, along with another of Lloyd's baseball caps. He asked how I was. I told him I had a headache, but fine besides that.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Never felt better," he said. "I think you can take off those sunglasses."

I'd bought them for twenty dollars at a drug store.

The bartender came over and gave Sammy a good look. He didn't seem to like what he saw.

"And what are we drinking today?" he asked. He was a slim guy, with black, greased

back hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Sammy ordered a glass of water. "Evian or San Pellegrino?" the bartender asked.

"Where am I? Madison Avenue? Just plain old water," Sammy said, aware of the bartender's snobbish attitude, but unshaken by it.

"If that's what you want. Personally, I never drink the stuff unless I'm familiar with the source."

"Well, I happen to be familiar with the source and there's nothing wrong with it," Sammy said.

"Sure. And the fish in the Hudson don't have tumors growing from their sides the size of golf balls."

"Our drinking water doesn't come from the Hudson, you knuckle head."

"Calm down, Sam," I said. The last thing I wanted was to draw attention. I knew Sammy. If he felt insulted, he wouldn't let it drop. In a lot of cases, Sammy wouldn't quit until someone called the cops.

"It comes from the fucking Catskills," Sammy said. "Where's Evian come from?"

"The Swiss Alps," the bartender said, as of yet unfazed by Sammy's rising temper.

"Ever been there?" Sammy asked, pointing his nub of a finger at him.

"No," the bartender said, looking down at the finger. If he registered the shortened state of Sam's finger at all, he did so by slowly blinking.

"Then how do you know the water that comes from there is any cleaner than ours? And even if it is, how do you know for sure that's what you're getting? How do you know some outfit in Jersey isn't bottling the same water that flows from your tap there and claiming it comes from some pure, untouched region like your Swiss Alps?"

"I'd know. I'd taste the difference," he said, his attitude unchanged.

"Yeah, right," Sammy said, waving his hand.

The bartender served Sammy his water without further comment. Sammy drank it down fast, and made a loud "aahhhhhh" sound afterwards to show his appreciation. The bartender ignored him. I gave Sammy a few minutes to calm down.

"Did you know he was married?" I finally said.

"Who? The bartender?" Sammy said, turning to me.

"No. Karl. Her name's Joanne."

"I didn't know he was married."

"And he beats her."

"You're kidding," Sammy said.

"No, I'm not. And I found out Karl's been stealing from the site."

Sammy's expression didn't change.

"You don't seem surprised," I said.

"Reese, I've been around a long time. Nothing surprises me anymore. Most everyone I know with maybe the exception of you has taken something from the site at one time or another. Whether it's a pen from the office, or a can of lube for the lawn mower, things have a tendency to disappear."

"I'm not talking about stealing for personal use. I'm talking about things like Tovex and Prell. Stuff that could cause serious problems."

"Karl's been stealing Tovex? That's different," Sammy said.

"He's either planning to sell the stuff or use it," I said. "Joanne said that Karl and Lykes aren't cousins. They're in business together. Maybe they're selling explosives. If so,

though, it screws things up for me. It could almost give him an alibi. It could explain why he was there last night and then left. And if someone was regularly stealing from their place of work, why would they want to close office, so to speak, and inhibit the flow of goods? We both know construction will most likely be shut down for weeks, at least until everything's sorted out. New security measures will have to be put in place." Sammy was rubbing his right temple with the remaining three fingers on that hand.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"About two months ago, I was contacted by someone from a company called Arch Development who was offering me a lot of money if I was willing to leave the union and work for them."

"Does the union know about this?" I asked.

"I never told them. Anyway, I'd heard of Arch before. They built the biggest desalinization plant in the world out in Mexico, but they do other stuff too, and they needed experienced sandhogs for off-shore tunneling for some sewage lines up in Canada. Far as I know, they've done most of their business outside the U.S. Anyway, when I told the guy I wasn't interested, he kept offering me more money. But you know me, Reese. My loyalties are with the union. Besides, I'm looking to retire soon. My pension comes due in a couple of years. I don't want to fuck that up for some pretty cash now, besides not liking the idea of drilling under freezing Arctic water." Sammy took an ice cube out of his glass with his fingers and crunched it between his teeth.

"I remember around the same time," he continued, "Karl asking me if I'd been contacted by Arch and what I'd thought about it. I told him I didn't like working outside the union. He never mentioned it again, but one day I noticed he was wearing those new Kevlar,

steel toed boots that cost about a half G. I asked him about it, and he smiled and said something about who said you had to leave the Union to make a few extra bucks. It was around that time too, come to think about it, when that case of dynamite went missing. Remember that?"

"How can I forget? It was hell the pressure Richard put on me then until the case showed up soon afterwards."

"But remember how when the box reappeared the serial numbers didn't match up?"

"Yeah," I said. "We just figured somebody made an error in the log book. Switched a couple of numbers around."

"Maybe Karl was stealing and selling to Arch Development."

"A big company like that wouldn't deal in such small quantities," I said.

"Unless it was to be channeled toward an illegal project that Arch didn't want to be associated with."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Just thinking out loud, here."

"Why didn't you ever mention any of this to me, about Arch contacting you?" I asked.

"You'd gone away with Claudine to Miami, I think, to meet her parents. When you got back, I guess I'd already forgotten about it."

"I wonder how many other sandhogs were contacted by Arch and offered work elsewhere."

"Don't know."

"Sammy. Can you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Find out what you can about Arch Development. Where their headquarters is, who's in charge, what their current project is, or if they've applied for any new work permits in the city or close by," I said.

"You think they had anything to do with the accident?"

"I've no idea, but it's worth looking into."

"I'll check it out for you, see what I can find out. Got plenty of time on my hands now that our project is shut down."

"Shut down?"

"After the accident, they compiled all the statistics on accidents, what not, and the Sate Board of Health decided that until security and safety can be beefed up, construction's halted. This thing is blemish on the DEP's record that might not go away."

* * * *

Claudine lived in Mid-town. Because she was a reporter, she needed a car to get around, and because she had a car, she lived in a high-rent building for the free parking garage they offered, which in the long run ended up saving her money because she seldom got parking tickets and didn't have to shell out a couple hundred extra a month for parking in some lot blocks away.

We had agreed to meet in front of The New York Public Library. When she pulled up to the curb, I rose from among the small crowd seated along the steps and climbed in the back seat. As she merged back into traffic, I lay down and covered myself with an old army blanket that Claudine had left for me.

She entered her garage through the security gate and pulled into her space. She cut the engine. It became very quiet. I didn't move.

"There's a man sitting in a car," Claudine said in a low tone. "Five spaces to the left. Stay put."

It was dark and hot under the blanket. "Okay," I said.

She opened her door and got out. I listened to the sound of her heels clicking against the concrete. I heard the elevator door open, then close again.

I fully expected to hear a car door open next and the sound of a man's footsteps approach the car, but the garage was mostly silent. If he was really waiting for me, wouldn't he come check out Claudine's car now that she was gone? How long was he to stake out her place?

Of course, it was more likely that he was just some guy, sitting in his car, wondering whether it was worth the trouble of fighting through traffic to get to some job he probably hated, just so he could earn enough to pay for five dollar Big Macs or twelve dollar movies.

I grew tired of guessing and waiting. I decided to lift my head and take a peek. I didn't see the man, at first. Then I did. He had brownish hair and held a cell phone to his ear. He sat in a Lincoln Town Car. I quickly lowered my head, hoping he hadn't seen me. I lay back down in the seat wondering what to do next.

Then I heard the elevator doors open again, and then more footsteps. It wasn't Claudine, I could tell that. The sound of the steps passed me, then stopped.

"Excuse me," a man's voice said. I recognized it immediately. It belonged to Hector, Claudine's next door neighbor. He was gay and had, to put it mildly, a different way of talking from most people I knew. Usually, the guy was hilarious, but he'd also get on my nerves whenever he'd badger me about "changing teams," but I tolerated him even then because Claudine loved him. He was a good neighbor to her. And now, as far as I was

concerned, he was going above and beyond the call to duty.

"Excuse me," Hector said again.

"What do you want?" I heard the man say.

"I was wondering if you could help me. I have a flat tire on my car just over there on the other side of the garage and I was wondering if you could help me change it?"

"I'm busy," the man said.

"You're just sitting there. I'm willing to pay you."

"Change it yourself," the man said.

"I don't have a jack. Can I at least borrow your jack?"

"Christ," the man said. I heard him open his car door. I waited a second until I heard the trunk pop open. Then I opened the far door on Claudine's VW. I did it quietly and crawled out. Then I gently pushed the door back shut. I looked through the car windows and saw the man digging through his trunk. I kept low and scuttled toward the elevator. But there was a stretch where I'd have no cover if he should look over, and besides, the elevator door would make noise. I saw the door to the stairs off to the left. I'd have more cover if I used them. I scooted between two cars and stopped at the door. I looked over one more time. Hector had the jack in his hand and the man was getting back into his car. I opened the door and stepped into the stair well.

I climbed the seven flights to Claudine's floor. The hallway was empty. I knocked on her door and she opened it at once. Inside, we turned to one another and embraced.

"God, you look exhausted," she said.

"I didn't sleep well last night," I said, trying to make a joke of it, but the truth was, I could've laid down right there on Claudine's carpet and fallen asleep.

"I know what you need," she said, taking hold of my hand. "A hot bath."

As she led me into the bathroom, she asked me how Hector did.

"Great," I said.

"The funny thing is, he really has a flat tire," she said.

"You're kidding."

"No. I mean, his car isn't running. He hasn't driven it for over a month, but it really has a flat tire."

"Well, the guy wouldn't help him, but Hector got hold of his jack."

"Oh, he'd like the sound of that one."

"Let's not repeat it, then."

As we waited for the bath to fill, we heard a knock on the door.

"Probably just Hector," she said, "but wait here."

She left and went to the door. I could hear that it was Hector. A few seconds later, I heard him say, "You people don't waste any time, do you?"

Soon after that, Claudine came back into the bathroom. She helped me get undressed and commented on the bowling shirt. She sat on the edge of the tub as I lowered myself into the steaming hot water. She rubbed a bar of soap into a sponge and started to scrub my back. She was careful to keep the bandage on my head dry.

"Do you know how long it's been since I've had a bath?" I asked as Claudine raised my arm above my head so she could wash beneath it. "I can't remember."

She scrubbed behind my ears and even washed my feet. The front of Claudine's shirt got wet and I noticed the fabric of her bra, and through that, her nipple. Despite my exhaustion, I felt my blood pool and surge. Claudine leaned over me. I pressed my lips

against her slender neck.

"Come on in," I said.

Claudine watched as my erection surfaced like a bobbing channel marker. "I remember that guy," she said. "But you should conserve your energy." Then she opened the drain and began to add more hot water to the bath.

"I have plenty of energy left," I said, rising to my knees and pulling her toward me. She smiled and pushed me away. She removed her shirt and bra. Her breasts were marked by the conclusion of abundant freckles, like a field of wild flowers drawn to the shore of two milky ponds. She pulled off her pants and underwear. I watched her red pubic hair part as she stepped into the tub.

She kissed me, our tongues searching. I pressed my hands all along her body. She put her arms across my shoulders and we sank lower into the tub. Then she reached down and guided me in.

It was like pulling the blinds on a howling storm. I forgot about my father's death, Sammy's old age, the accident, my injury. I was quiet inside. I thought only of Claudine. I watched her face, the shape of her eyebrows and lips as the steam from the bath rose around her. I asked her to kiss me again and again. I wanted to stay with her until the chaos awaiting me vanished.

After half the bath water had splashed onto the tiled floor, Claudine insisted. "Come," she ordered. "Now." And I did. It was like shedding tears. It was like a cable snapping inside me and letting go. I was falling.

Chapter Six

"I met with Mary," she said. Claudine was heating up a can of soup. I sat on a stool behind a little counter that served as her dining room table and tried to keep my eyes open. I did manage to notice that Claudine seemed to be in a remarkably good mood despite my present circumstances. Or maybe, I thought, there was a direct correlation between my sudden need for help and her renewed interest in our relationship. Then again, maybe I was reading too much into her mood. It could've just been an after sex thing.

"I beeped her four times before she called me back," Claudine said, placing a napkin in front of me. "I asked her if she heard anything last night or had seen anybody bring you in, or if she knew anybody who had. At first, she said 'no.' It was like pulling teeth."

I thought of Joanne and cringed.

"After I explained that I was willing to pay for information, she agreed to meet me at that diner you told me about. Men were coming and going, but they weren't there for the food. One tried to take me upstairs. Finally, Mary came down. I explained that you were in a lot of trouble and that you needed help. I showed her a picture of you that I carry in my wallet. Don't look so surprised. She said she vaguely remembered helping you down the stairs. Fifty bucks later, she finally admitted that she had a 'client' that night who had mentioned something about seeing two men carrying somebody up the stairs, but that this 'client' of hers would never come forward because he was a family man. I offered her more money for the man's name, but she refused it. 'Client confidentiality,' she said, and wouldn't budge. So unless we can somehow find that man and get him to swear he saw you, you still

don't have an alibi."

Claudine poured the soup into two bowls and brought them over to the counter.

"Are you listening?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Your eyes were closed."

"They were?" I said, completely unaware of what my face was doing. I also noticed my leg had fallen asleep. Pins and needles. My body was beginning to rebel against me.

Claudine sat down on the other side of the counter. We faced each other and began to sip from our spoons.

"I suppose a lawyer could subpoena the two of them and force them to testify," she said between spoonfuls, "but I'm not sure what kind of witnesses they'd make. A hooker and her john."

"Did you question anyone else?" I asked. The soup felt good going down.

"I showed your picture around to a few others. I asked the lady behind the counter if she'd seen you, but she said no. I left right after that. What about you? What'd you find out?"

I told her the same stuff I'd told Sammy. About the true nature of Karl and Lykes's relationship. About the Porto-Potty business. When I got to the part about how Karl treated his wife, Joanne, Claudine grew angry.

"Can't we do something about it?" she asked.

"Well, if Karl's as involved as I think he is, he'll be put in jail for a long time," I said.

I told her how Sammy was going to look into a company called Arch Development. "Maybe you can help," I said.

"Sure. I'll check on-line to see if there's any mention of them anywhere in the papers. Is there anything else I can do?" Claudine asked.

"Actually, there is. I had a strange message on my machine from a guy named Abdul. He works at some car dealership in Jersey. He said my car was ready."

"Your car is ready? What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have the phone number? I'll check it out." Claudine picked up our bowls and placed them in the sink.

We moved over to the couch and lay down there, her at one end, me at the other, our legs intertwined. The Chinese food we'd ordered was on the way. The soup hadn't been enough.

"How's Theodora Rosie doing?" I said, referring to the teddy bear she held in her hand. It was a gift I'd given her to replace an old teddy bear of hers that fell apart one day when I kiddingly drop kicked it across the room.

"She's doing fine, thank you for asking."

We lay there quietly for a few minutes. I closed my eyes.

"I spoke with your mother," Claudine said. "You should call her."

"I will," I said, looking at the patterns of light as they played across the inside of my eye lids, like serpents moving through rows of corn. "Joanne said Karl started acting differently in the last couple of weeks. He stopped beating her. He told her he was up for a promotion, which was a lie. Apparently, he hates me. I mean, we never did get along very well, but I wasn't aware of the extent of his jealousy."

"Do you think this whole plot was designed by Karl just so he could ruin you?"

"Course not." I opened my eyes and noticed a legal pad on the coffee table. I dropped a tired arm toward it and picked it up. The top sheet was covered in circles with names written inside and lines connecting circles. "What's this?" I asked.

"Notes," she said. "It's for an article I'm writing about this gem heist that happened a couple of months ago. They recovered some of the stones and caught a perp, but there are still tons of holes in the story. I was just trying to piece things together."

I stared at the pad. "Suppose one day," I said, "down in the tunnels Karl notices something along one of the tunnel walls and he chips a piece of it free and takes it to a lab and it's some kind of ore. I don't know. Gold. Maybe it's diamonds."

"Another precious gem caper?" Claudine asked skeptically. I looked at Claudine. Her hair was pushed behind her ears. She looked beautiful.

"As sound as any other idea I've had so far. Just play along. So Karl keeps his discovery a secret except for a few key friends. Richard Pritchett. Lykes. They start mining the ore at night, or somehow during our regular shifts. And the way they smuggle the ore out of the tunnels is they hide it in the Port-Pottys."

"I guess it's possible. But what does that have to do with the mayor?"

"I don't know. Maybe they just need a diversion to haul up a bigger than normal load. Or someone on that train found out about their operation, another sandhog, and they wanted to kill them."

"I think the fact the mayor was riding the train wasn't a coincidence. It brought a lot more press to an incident that would have hardly been noted otherwise," she said.

"Ain't that the fucking truth. Remember when last year when Max Carson died from the compressed air accident and how the article you wrote was cut down to nothing and put

on the last page of the Metro section? You're right. People don't normally care about sandhogs or any other blue collar workers for that matter, but since the mayor was involved, we're getting prime-time coverage. It makes me sick."

"Speaking of coverage," Claudine said, picking a remote control from a stack of them on the coffee table. "Let's see if you made the seven o'clock news."

The broadcast of the local news was just starting. The lead story was, of course, about the mayor. He was doing well, recovering. They showed a picture of him sitting up in the hospital bed, talking on the phone and giving a thumbs up to the camera. An unofficial poll done that day by Channel Seven had the mayor's approval rating higher than ever. If the election were held today, they said, the mayor would win the upcoming election easily.

"Nothing like having your spleen removed to help win you support," Claudine said.

"Maybe this was all one big publicity stunt to help the mayor's chances to re-election," I said.

"I wouldn't put it past him. Did you see how happy he looked?"

The coverage switched to the accident itself and they showed footage of a police spokesman holding an impromptu news conference in front of police headquarters. "We have a suspect who we are currently looking for. We are confident we will have him in custody within the day. No," he said in response to a question, "this wasn't an act of terrorism. This looks like the act of a single man. No, we don't know why he did it yet."

There was a knock at the door then and we both jumped. Claudine got up and peered through the peep hole.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Chinese food," came the answer through the door.

"How come he didn't have to buzz to get in?" I asked in a whisper.

"I don't know," she whispered back.

"It could be the police," I said. "Don't let him in. Pay him in the hallway, or something."

"Chinese food," the man said again.

"One moment please," Claudine called out. "I have to get my money."

She ran to the phone and dialed a number. "Hector," she said into the phone a moment later. "It's me. Open your door and look outside. Tell me if the delivery guy is alone or if he looks like a cop or something. I'll hold."

We heard another knock on the door. "I'm leaving if you don't pay me," the man said.

"One second, please," Claudine called out, then screwed her ear back to the phone. "So, it looks okay to you?" Claudine said into the phone. "Alright. Thanks." She hung up and took some money out of her purse. "Hide in the bedroom," she said to me.

I did as she told. A few minutes later, she called out to me that it was all clear. I went into the kitchen.

"I shouldn't stay tonight," I said.

"Where would you go?"

"I don't know. Sammy's?"

"They're just as likely to look there as here. Why don't you stay next door at Hector's?" Claudine said.

"I probably shouldn't even be in your building," I said.

"For tonight it'll be okay. We'll sneak you out in the morning. Besides, you're too tired to go anywhere else."

Claudine made the arrangements with Hector. Then she checked the hallway to make sure it was clear. I followed her, carrying my duffle bag and a carton of lo mein. Hector had a pull-out couch and was putting on a sheet.

"I don't even want to know," he said. "It's none of my business."

"Thank you, Hector," Claudine said. "You're a doll." She kissed him on the cheek.

Soon after, Claudine left. I placed the Chinese food on a table and sat on the edge of the pull-out bed. Hector wanted to talk about how great Claudine was for putting up with me, but luckily, I leaned back and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. Two hours later, he was trying to wake me. It wasn't an easy task. I was dreaming about a giant tractor chasing me, trying to run me over.

"Wake up," he whispered. "The police are outside Claudine's door." When I looked up at Hector, I thought was still in a dream. His face was green. Then I realized he was wearing some kind of cosmetic facial mask.

"I think they have a search warrant," he said.

At that, I sprang out of bed and went to Hector's door. I looked through the peep hole and saw the pant leg of a police officer standing in the hallway, his black shoe gleaming. Then I heard Claudine.

"Can you give me a minute to put on some clothes?" I heard her ask.

"Just one," was the reply.

Then, another officer appeared in the view finder. I saw his face as he looked toward Hector's door. Instinctively, I backed away.

I turned, passed Hector, and entered his living room. "Can you hear into her apartment?" I asked.

"If her window is open," Hector said, going over to the peep hole.

"It isn't," I said.

"They're inside," he said, whispering. "But one is still standing in the hallway." Then Hector came away from the door. "It's the same guy as from the garage," he said.

"Shit. Does Claudine have a photo of you anywhere?"

"I don't think so. Did you leave anything over there?"

"I'm sure something of mine is there, but that won't prove I'd been there tonight."

"Depends what it is. A used condom in the trash can and . . ."

"She's on the pill," I said, "though it's none of your business."

"Excuse me."

Ten minutes went by. I couldn't stop pacing up and down Hector's living room. I grew more and more agitated. "What are they doing in there?" I asked. "They're trying to get her to talk. But she won't. I know Claudine. She won't tell them anything."

"Of course she won't," Hector said.

"But what the fuck are they doing in there?"

"You tell me. What did you do? Kill somebody? Because you know something? I'm not going to harbor a murderer, if that's what you are. Not even for Claudine."

"Of course I didn't kill anyone," I said.

"Then what did you do?"

"Nothing. I didn't do anything."

"Come on now, you have to do better than that for old Hector. At least tell me what you're accused of."

I figured it wouldn't hurt to tell him the truth. "You know how the mayor's in the

hospital because of an accident that happened in the new water tunnels? I'm being framed for that accident. They found evidence that suggested I was at the site the night before, which I was, but. . ."

"You were at the site the night before? Doing what?"

"There were two unauthorized personnel down there and I was trying to get them out."

"You think those two are the ones that caused the accident?"

"That's what I think."

"You know who they are?"

"I think I do."

"Why don't you just explain all that to the police?"

"Because I have no proof. No evidence. No alibi. They'll just arrest me if I come forward. That's why I need to keep clear. I need to find the guys I think were down there."

"You really got yourself into a mess, didn't you?"

"And now I've gotten Claudine involved too."

"Well, Claudine can take care of herself. That's one thing I'm sure of."

Twenty minutes later, we heard a tapping at the window. Hector opened the window. I stuck my head through first and met Claudine's forehead with mine. As I jerked back, my head collided with Hector's nose. I felt like a member of The Three Stooges. We all rubbed our head.

"Reese, you have to get out of here," Claudine said finally. "They subpoenaed my phone records. The last couple of calls were to Hector. They'll probably be over there soon."

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I'm fine. They just asked me a lot of questions and looked through my things. I told them I hadn't talked to you since the night before the accident."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," I said, stretching my hand out toward her. She leaned further out the window and held my hand.

"It's okay," she said. "My divorce was worse. Just do me the favor and get out of here before they come back again, okay?"

"Okay," I said. "I love you." It wasn't the first time I'd told her that and it wasn't the first time she didn't respond. She just smiled, the most genuine, beautiful smile so that I knew she liked hearing those words. Then she disappeared back inside her apartment.

Hector left his apartment on the pretense of throwing out his garbage and came back with a scouting report. One police officer stood guard at the elevator on our floor, and another waited in front of the building. There was no way out for me.

"I'm stuck here with you?" I asked.

"Not for long." Hector disappeared into his bedroom. He was gone for several minutes, until he came back holding up a red sequined dress and a blond wig.

"Ready to play dress up?" he asked.

"Me? Are you out of your freaking mind?" I asked.

"You want to get out of here, don't you? After I'm done with you, no one will recognize you."

"Hector, I'll figure out another way," I said, eyeing the dress.

"And what way is that?"

"I don't know yet. Besides, I have a mustache. . ."

"I have a razor."

"I have a scar beneath the mustache."

"I have make-up."

"I'm too tall."

"No one will be looking at your height; they'll be looking at your bust."

"Are you a transvestite, or something?" I asked.

"Don't be stupid. This is a Halloween costume of mine."

"Well, no way," I said, but ten minutes later I was trimming down my mustache with a pair of scissors. I had knocked on Claudine's widow with Hector's long shoe horn and asked her advice. She told me to do it, that Hector was excellent with make-up. I begged her to come over to help, but she said it was too risky, that I'd have to do it without her.

"And anyway," she had said, "maybe it's better I don't see you that way, you know, just in case you look good as a woman." And then she actually laughed.

"Like there's any chance of that," I said.

When I finished shaving and rinsed off the remains of the shaving cream, I didn't recognize myself. The space between my nose and lip seemed enormous, expansive. And the scar. I hadn't seen it for years, the white line shining like a thread of ivory.

Hector entered the bathroom carrying a huge bra. "You look different already," he said.

"Maybe this is enough," I said hopefully.

"I don't think so," he said, hanging the bra over the shower curtain rod. "Now, come back into the living room and sit down. The light is better there."

I walked into the living room and surveyed the dress.

"I have another idea," I said. "You dress up, go out there and distract the cop. I'll

sneak out by the stairs."

"What about the cop waiting outside?"

"I'll figure that out when I get there."

To my great relief, Hector didn't need much coaxing. Twenty minutes later, he was hardly recognizable. I wouldn't go so far as to say he'd turned himself into a good looking woman, but he'd certainly turn the heads of most men. He'd given himself a nice figure, and though his nose looked a little big, his large, wide apart eyes were oddly compelling.

I gave Hector a partial version of my plan. He seemed almost eager.

"I always thought I should have been an actor," he said. "I mean, I did small parts in high school, and was in a play in college, but I never really pursued it."

Hector took a deep breath and sashayed out into the hallway, leaving the door ajar. I went to pick up the heavy decorative glass bottle I'd noticed earlier and waited behind the door until I heard the bell. Then I went out and saw the cop. He was facing the elevator, talking to Hector, who held the doors open. I snuck up behind the cop and hit him with the bottle. He went down instantly. The way I figured it, if they were going to arrest me for something, at least now I'd done something wrong.

Hector came out of the elevator with his hand covering his mouth.

"You've assaulted a police officer," Hector said, looking down at the cop.

"No shit," I said, stepping into the elevator and pulling out the stop button. "You better get back to your apartment and get that make-up off before he comes to." Hector rushed off, his dress swishing.

I read the cop's name off his badge, then turned him onto his back and cuffed his wrists together. I grabbed the two-way from his belt, along with his gun. When I turned

around and started back toward Hector's apartment to get my stuff, I saw Claudine standing in the hallway watching me.

"Is this the best plan you could come up with?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

"What can I say?" I shrugged and went into Hector's apartment. He was standing in the middle of the room rubbing cold cream all over his face. Claudine followed me in.

"What's next?" Claudine asked.

"Not sure," I said, shoving the gun and radio into my bag.

"Well, you should know that Joanne called a couple of minutes ago."

"How did she sound?"

"Fine. She said that you should have a talk with Richard, that she's learned he's got something to do with the accident."

"That's not a bad idea," I said. "Can you meet me at DoJo's in. . ." I looked at my watch. "Meet me for breakfast at 9:00. That should give me enough time. Just make sure no one follows you there, okay? You should get back into your apartment."

Claudine had been staring the whole time at my upper lip. She reached up and touched the scar. "You look different," she said.

I ran back into the hallway and went over to the cop. I pulled out the gun from the bag and flipped him over. He began to stir. I leaned him against the wall. I slapped his face. He opened his eyes wide and looked at me. I waved the gun.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "I just need you to talk to your man out there, okay? Okay?" The cop nodded.

"Tell him you've got me secured, but that the elevator has been disabled. That he should come up the stairs, that you've already called it in to headquarters."

The cop nodded again.

"And no heroics. 'Cause I will put a bullet in your leg. And just so you know, so your conscious doesn't bother you too much, I'm innocent. I being framed and haven't done anything wrong. Okay?"

I pulled the radio out of the bag and showed it to the cop. "Is it ready to go?"

He nodded. I pressed the button on the side and he spoke into it.

"Peterman. This is Libinsky, over," he said. I made sure he could see his gun pointing at him.

I released the button. "Go ahead, Libinsky. Over."

"I have our man secured," the cop said. "But you better get up here. Advise to take the stairs. Elevator is out of order." I nodded encouragement. Libinsky looked at me questioningly. I released the button again.

"Good enough," I said. I stood and stepped inside the elevator.

Chapter Seven

I killed time at the Veselka diner across the street from where Richard lived. I ordered a cup of coffee and scanned the newspaper. I was wearing another baseball cap I'd found in a dumpster behind a warehouse off Union Square (where I'd disposed of the cop's two-way), and another cheap pair of sunglasses I'd bought. The best part of my disguise, however, remained the fact that I no longer had a mustache. Of course, I reminded myself, the police knew that.

Another problem, besides keeping the gun hidden in a comfortable place, was that I was running out of money. My cash card had been rejected from all the 24-hour machines I'd tried. The new credit card I'd activated was still working, but I figured it was only a matter of time until that too would be canceled. And I couldn't get a cash advance on the card because I didn't have a personal identification number to go along with it.

The young lady behind the counter came by to refill my coffee again. I was on my fourth cup but it wasn't doing any good. Sleep was going to be the only cure and I didn't know when next I'd get to try that. Sleep. It sounded so good. The waitress had tried to make small talk when I'd first arrived, but my responses had been rude enough to dissuade her. Still, she smiled when she came over.

I turned from the counter. If I leaned to one side, I could see Richard's front door through the window. I figured he'd be going out soon to get a fresh bagel. It was a ritual I'd learned about after one particularly rough night of poker at his apartment that went so late, I fell asleep on his couch. When I woke, everyone was eating hot, freshly baked bagels, and

Richard explained he went out to get them every morning before work.

When I looked up from my cup of coffee, I realized I had almost missed Richard. He was already half way down his block. I threw a dollar bill down on the counter, and ran to catch up with him. He was wearing a dark blue jogging suit and his black hair was shining in the early morning light, slicked back the way it always was.

I was still about thirty feet behind him when I saw Sammy step away from a tree he'd been leaning on and stop Richard. Richard didn't seem surprised to see Sammy. They began to talk. I walked closer, then up the steps of a brownstone and sat down on the stoop, hidden by the cement banister. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying, though I thought I heard them mention my name.

Had Sammy come to the same conclusion I had, that Richard was involved? Why would they meet so early in the morning? Maybe they were going out to breakfast together. If so, why wouldn't they just meet at the restaurant?

As I sat there pondering their meeting, a police cruiser appeared. It drove by slowly and the officer inside the car looked my way. I turned my head. The cruiser continued on without stopping. I craned my head above the banister and watched as the car slowly turned the corner. Richard and Sammy had begun to walk west. I wanted to follow them, but if the policeman recognized me, he'd be coming back any minute and maybe with reinforcements. Either way, I had to move. I got up and jogged to catch up to Sammy and Richard. At the corner, I looked down the street and saw the cop getting out of his car. He was walking into a Korean market.

I continued to follow Richard and Sammy. Their pace was agonizingly slow, as if they hadn't a care in the world. I kept my distance though. There was something strange about

this meeting. I wanted desperately to hear what they were saying, but I wanted to remain undetected. They went several blocks before finally stopping. Sammy opened a door off Astor Place and held it for Richard. They both disappeared through it. I jogged to catch up.

There were two doors side by side that went to two different stores and I didn't know which one they went in. One led to a small cigar shop called Dave's Cigars and the other went to a jewelry store. I looked through the window of the cigar shops but didn't see either one of them inside. I couldn't see into the jewelry store because the windows were just displays for the earrings, necklaces, and of course, engagement rings.

Then I noticed that although both doors opened outward, they opened from opposite directions. I remembered that Richard had swung the door open to the right.

As I entered the shop, the sweet smell of aged tobacco filled my head. An old man wearing dark glasses sat at a table, rolling cigars on a large wooden block. His fingers looked like leather and a wet nub of a cigar sat in his mouth, its end still smoldering. When I entered the shop, his head jerked up, but his hands never stopped moving.

"Excuse me. Did you see two men just enter the shop?" I asked.

"I didn't see anyone," the old man said. He rolled a cigar between his palms.

"One was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. The other blue athletic clothes."

"Sorry," the old man said. He kept his head cocked to the side as if he were listening to something.

At the back of the shop, there was a door. I figured they could've gone through there.

"Where does that door lead?" I asked, pointing.

"The alley," the old man said.

"And where does the alley lead?" I asked.

"It's private property back there," he said.

I could see I was going to have to take matters into my own hands. I tried opening the door, but it was locked.

"It's locked," the old man said.

I walked back to the table where he worked. "Open it," I said.

"You're not ready for what lies on the other side of that door," he said.

"What is that supposed to mean? I don't have time for games," I said. "I need you to open that door."

"I don't know much, but I know more than you," he said, and pulled off his sunglasses. One eye was half shut, while in the other, the pupil and iris were indistinguishable, all a milky blue and pointing outward toward space. "I don't see very well, but they are watching you. You should leave," he said, motioning toward the upper corner of the room. I looked that way and noticed for the first time a small video camera.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said. I pulled out the gun from my waistband and waved it into the air so that the camera would pick it up. Then I pointed at the old man. I brought the gun close to the man's head until the barrel touched his nose. His head jerked back in surprise.

"I just roll the cigars," he said, bringing his arms up slowly.

Just then, I heard a buzzing sound coming from the door.

"They've seen you," the old man said.

I could've just turned around and left, gone back onto the street and met up later with Claudine as planned, but running away from potential answers was not in my current game plan. I was tired of hiding from the police. And I felt close to solving my problems. I don't

know why. Claudine would've talked about fate, how fate had brought me here to this shop and now a portal opened for me. I wasn't such a believer in that stuff, but at this point I was without direction and willing to take a chance.

I walked up to the buzzing threshold and, with my gun still drawn, pushed it open. It didn't lead to a back alley as the old man had said, but to a short hallway with another door at the end of it. I looked back into the cigar shop one last time, then turned back and stepped through. The door at the other end was locked. As I considered my next option, a voice came through a white speaker attached to the wall.

"Mr. Coppage, if you look to the right of the door, you will see a box in the wall. Please open the sliding door and place your weapon inside. Thank you."

I saw the box with the metal door but had no intentions of giving up the gun.

"No fucking way," I said aloud, spinning, looking for another video camera.

"You will not be allowed entry until you relinquish your weapon," the voice said.

I went back to the door I'd come through, but it too was locked. I was trapped. I guess I could've tried shooting my way out. Blow a hole in one of the doors. But which one? Which direction did I want to go? Or I could just do what they said, and face whoever it was on the other side, unarmed.

I paced up and down the hallway, thinking. Then I spun around and slid the door to the box open. I placed the gun inside and slid the door back shut. Noise came from inside the box and when I slid the door back open, the gun was gone. Magic.

Now I'm fucked, I thought.

"Thank you," the speaker said, and the door buzzed open. I pulled the handle and stepped into a large room. Men were sitting at tables, playing various kinds of poker games.

A young man wearing a shoulder harness with a gun in it stood at my side.

"This way, Mr. Coppage," he said, gesturing toward another door on the other side of the room.

No one else in the room seemed to notice me. They all kept their heads down, studied their cards, and threw chips into the center of the tables. Red carpet ran wall to wall. A small bar sat on the right with liquor bottles lined up on shelves behind it.

I walked with the young man to the door. He pulled some keys from a retractable chain hanging on his belt and unlocked it. He held it open for me. I stepped forward.

A fat man in a blue suit sat behind a little desk.

"Please, Mr. Coppage. Sit down," he said. His was the same voice I heard coming from the white speaker. There was a folding chair in front of his desk. As I sat, the door closed behind me. I looked around and saw Richard Pritchett and another man come forward. They stood on either side of me. Sammy was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, Richard," I said. "Where'd Sammy go?"

"Sammy?" Richard said. "I didn't see Sammy."

That's when the other guy let me have it. Right in the temple with something hard, maybe his fist. I blacked out for a second, then came to.

My odds were not good. Three against one and they had my gun. Still, I didn't like being hit, especially without provocation.

"Max," the man behind the desk said. "That's not necessary. I'm sure Mr. Coppage is willing to cooperate with us."

"Yeah, Max," I said. "That's really not necessary." I twisted in my seat and swung my arm around, burying my fist into his soft middle. He let out a puff of air and doubled

over. As he righted himself, he pulled a gun from beneath his coat.

"Max, put that away," the man behind the desk said.

Max did as he was told. "You try that again and I'll kill you," he said.

"Try not to be so dramatic," I said, looking around the office. A bank of monitors sat on a shelf, each one blinking from one scene to another. In one, I saw the old man rolling cigars. In another, I saw the hallway where I'd given up the gun.

"Mr. Coppage," the fat man said. "I've let you come in here because someone I owe a few favors to decided he could use your help. He'd like to meet with you. That's very rare. I've only met my benefactor once myself. He's sent a car over. It should be here any minute."

"What makes you think I'll go along?" I asked.

"Mr. Coppage. Free will is an illusion. We are a slave to natural law. We all do and act as we must in order to survive. Few are dumb enough to go against the very instincts that have kept our species so successful."

"I guess that depends on how you describe success. Richard, how do you describe success?" I asked.

"Reese, I never wanted to get you involved."

"A little late for that."

"You followed me here. You've asked for it."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked. Max put a hand on my shoulder to keep me from standing. "I didn't ask for anything. You've set me up."

"If you would have just stayed with Claudine that night after dinner. . ."

"What are you getting out of all this? And take your fucking hand off me," I said to

Max, sweeping his arm away.

"You will understand everything in due time," the fat man said. "But for now we need your cooperation." He produced a gun of his own. "If you'll stand up, Mr. Copping, and allow Max to encumber you." I didn't move. "Remember, there is no free will. You will stand up or be shot. Unlike Max, I do not like to play games."

"How do I know you won't turn me in to the police?"

"As I've said, my benefactor has determined he can use you. That's good enough for me, and it will have to be good enough for you. Now, if you'll please stand up."

I stood. The fat man tossed Max a roll of duct tape. Max yanked my arms behind my back and began taping my wrists together.

"Richard," I said. "Whatever you've done to get yourself involved with these people, it's not too late to get out of it."

"Reese, you don't know what you're talking about. I'm not involved like you think. I owe some gambling debt, that's all," Richard said.

"What about Sammy? Why was he meeting you? What were you guys talking about?"

Max placed a blindfold that smelled like dirty socks over my eyes. Then he punched me in the stomach. I fell to the ground. I must have hit my head on the way down because I passed out and didn't remember where I'd gotten the bruises to my face or the ones that ran along my spine.

* * * *

I figured it had to be an expensive car. The seats felt like leather and the car smelled like leather. Someone sat next to me but he didn't talk much. I tried a few times to strike up

a conversation, but it was like talking to a sponge until the sponge hit me and then it was like talking to a brick until the brick hit me again and then I gave up and didn't talk anymore.

I had no idea where I was being taken. I'd lost all sense of direction the moment I was shoved out the back door of the casino. My head throbbed and when I breathed in deep, a pain from my ribs shook me. I sat back and tried to relax. Nothing else I could do.

I guess I'd fallen asleep, because we were stopped and the door on my side was opening. Someone started pulling me out. I hit my head on the door frame of the car. Despite the pain, I still couldn't fully wake myself. Then someone hit me in the stomach. As I slowly righted myself, I sensed someone standing close in front of me. I kept my head lowered and drove it forward, heard the satisfying sound of bone crushing, my head butt on target. The poor asshole started hollering, his voice echoing. We were in some kind of garage. I heard someone laugh. I guess they held the guy back because he didn't hit me again. Not right away, anyway. I was led into an elevator. I felt the jolt as we began to climb.

My hands were numb. My shoulders ached. I don't know how long I'd been asleep so I didn't even know if we were still in the city or not. The elevator ride took forever. It dinged every time we passed a floor. At my count, we were well past twenty.

Finally, we stopped. Someone took hold of my arm and pulled me. I felt air conditioning. The place smelled like new carpet. My blindfold had shifted slightly, and I could see my feet. I was steered across green carpet, brown tiles, then green carpet again. Several doors opened and closed around me. Eventually, I was left standing on what looked like a Persian rug. The blindfold was removed.

An older man, probably in his late sixties, came around a large wooden desk and stood

in front of me. The blinds were pulled shut on the window behind him. A white telescope sat on a large tripod next to the window.

"Mr. Coppage," the man said. "Thank you for joining me today. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vincent Cresswell." He had gray hair and blue, watery eyes. He wore a pair of silver rimmed glasses and a gray tailored suit. A blue tie matched the handkerchief sticking out his coat pocket.

"And this is Guy," Cresswell said. To my right stood a big man, bigger than me, and if I had known that, I might not have tried to hurt him. His nose was swollen and red, with a trace of blood smeared across his cheek. His head was shaved and gleaming in the florescent light. He wore black jeans, cowboy boots and a tucked-in white Oxford dress shirt.

"Have you heard of me before?" Cresswell asked.

"No," I said.

"That's a shame. I know so much about you. I know, for example, that you've been in touch with Joanne. Such a nice woman. She told you about Richard, didn't she? After all, it's what eventually brought you here, isn't it?" he said, smiling. "Funny how those things work. I also know that you've recently bought a very expensive car from Extreme Car Imports in Paramas, New Jersey. I even know the color. Yellow. And I know that right now, Claudine is on the way to meet you at DoJo's. She'll be so worried when you don't show."

A mixture of fear and hatred began to shake my body. I had never felt anything like it.

"It wasn't my intention, at first, to frame you," he went on. "But it did make things so much easier for me. You've done so little to help yourself."

"Why?" I managed to ask. "What do you want?"

"Let me see if I can explain myself. Do me the favor and look along the walls of my office," he said. Framed photographs hung in vertical rows. On one wall, the pictures were of ancient temples and cities. On the other, they were of modern bridges and dams.

"Take a look at this one," he said, pointing. "I took that myself while visiting Rome. It is of the Pantheon. First built by Agrippa, though hard to say how much of the remaining structure is really his. It was damaged by fire twice, and, in 120 AD, drastically rebuilt by Hadrian. He erected a rotunda capped by a dome of concrete, 144 feet in diameter, with a circular opening in its center. It is Hadrian's dome you see there in the picture. It has survived earthquakes and wars. The Pantheon used all-metal girders to hold up the ceiling of the portico, the only ones ever known to have been used in ancient times. Of course, during the last big depredation in 1625, the bronze girders were removed, melted down, and turned into eighty cannons which were mounted around Hadrian's tomb. The girders were replaced with wood. But still, the front of the portico remains original to Agrippa, as you can see by the inscription: 'M•AGRIPPA•L•F•COS• TERTIVM•FECIT.' Do you know what that means?" he asked me, his blue eyes watery behind the glasses.

"I really don't give a shit," I said. Guy made his presence known by a karate chop to my neck. At least the stunning blow felt like karate. I thought for a second I was paralyzed, but then the feeling wore off.

Cresswell continued as if nothing had happened. "It means, 'Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, made this in this third consulship.' Of course, I admire Agrippa most for his work on the aqueducts. He built two of his own, and constructed 130 water-distribution stations, 300 large cisterns, and 500 fountains. He even took a boat ride through the Cloaca Maxima--the

great sewer--to direct its renovation. He made a difference in the quality of life people led during and after his lifetime.

"Now come over here. Take a look at this," he said, walking over to the opposite wall. "Recognize this bridge?" he asked. I did, but didn't respond.

"The Verrazano-Narrows bridge, built by Othmar Hermann Ammann. At the time, it was the longest suspension bridge ever built, with a span of 4,260 feet. Right in our own backyard. I remember watching that bridge go up. Did you know that the road bed is 20 feet lower in summer than in winter?"

He waited for me to say something. I didn't want to risk another karate chop.

"Because the heat expands the steel," he said, finally. No shit, I thought. "And do you know why the tops of the vertical towers are 1.6 inches farther apart than the tower bases?"

I was silent.

"Owing to the curvature of the Earth's surface," he said. "Of course now the longest suspension bridge is the Akashi Kaikyo Bridge in Japan, with a span of 6,529 feet. 200,000 tons of steel was used to make that bridge. Leave it to the Japanese to always try to one-up us." He turned from the photos along the wall.

"Come here," he said, walking over to his huge oak desk. It was completely clear of papers and had on it only a lamp, a phone, and a laptop computer. He reached inside one of the drawers in the desk and pulled out a photo album. "These are the projects I've worked on, in one way or another," he said. "On some I've been just a consultant, or helped finance. Others are completely my own." He flipped through some of the pages. I saw what looked like water treatment plants, desalinization plants, water tunnels, dams. He slammed the book

shut. "No one will remember my name when I am dead. Neither will anyone remember you," he said.

He stood there for some time, thinking. "But enough of this. I need you to go upstate and help out on a project I'm working on. You'll find out all the details when you get up there. Good day," he said. Guy took hold of my arm.

"Wait a fucking minute," I said. "What makes you think I'm going to help you? Because I'm not. You can go fuck yourself."

The hand around my arm tightened, but Cresswell shook his head. "I almost forgot. Do me one last favor. Come over to my telescope," he said. "Go ahead, it won't bite. Take a look."

The telescope was positioned between two of the blinds. It took a few seconds for my eye to adjust to the light as it came through the lenses of the telescope. Then I saw a car parked along a curb near a street corner. The clarity made me feel as if I was right there, standing next to the car. I grew dizzy and lifted my head. I tried looking through the blinds but couldn't see anything except blue sky.

"Keep looking," Cresswell said. He held a cell phone in his hand.

I bent once again and peered into the telescope. This time I noticed a man in a leather jacket standing next to the car. He also was holding a cell phone.

"Open the door," I heard Cresswell say into the phone.

The man in the leather jacket waited until a few people passed. Then he did as he was told and opened the door of the car.

At first, I didn't recognize Sammy. All I saw was the blood along his face, his arm in a sling. The man in the jacket took hold of Sammy's face and turned it toward me. I could

see how little Sammy resisted the man. He looked as if all the life had been beaten out of him. Then the man shoved Sammy back into the car and slammed the door back shut. To have seen Sammy just hours ago looking fine, and now to see him like this, it was too much of a shock. It was too confusing. But before I brought my eye away from the scope, I noticed a street sign. It read Fifth Avenue. I couldn't make out what street they were on though.

I tried to pull my hands apart. It was no use.

"You have no idea what I'm willing to do to get what I want," Cresswell said. "Sammy can still make it out of this alive, but it is entirely up to you. So, you will be leaving shortly and you will be of some assistance to me."

I walked away from the window and stood in the middle of the room. If they were willing to do this to Sammy, I knew Claudine was not safe either. No one I cared about was safe.

"You motherfucker," I said, then tasted the rust of my blood after something metal banged against my lips. Brass knuckles. Then the blindfold went back on and once again I couldn't see.

Chapter Eight

The thing about being treated like human freight is that it gives you a chance to catch up on your sleep. The main disadvantage is that the quality and nature of dreams during this period tend to be poor. My dreams hovered around two main schemes: Sammy's beaten up body as I had seen it through the telescope from the window of Cresswell's office, and Claudine and me inside Cosina de Pesca where she refused my proposal of marriage.

In the dream about Claudine, everyone in the restaurant knows that she has rejected me. In fact, in one version, she ends up accepting the cook's hand in marriage instead of mine. Apparently, he was an ex-boyfriend from when she used to be a waitress at a restaurant called The Boulevard. Next, Claudine is having sex with a waiter on one of the tables while I talk to my mother, who is sitting across from me. She is trying to tell me about her shopping list--eggs, bologna, fruit--but really she's just trying to distract me from Claudine's approaching orgasm.

Luckily, I awoke before Claudine reached it because the vehicle I was being transported in drove over a pothole or something, and I hit my head. When I opened my eyes, I couldn't see much of anything. When I tried to stretch my legs, they stopped before I could straighten them. My arms were pinned to my sides, not by any rope, but because there was nowhere else for them to go.

I could smell steel and grease and some exhaust. The sound of the road was clear beneath me. I thought maybe I was in the trunk of a car except the space wasn't shaped like a trunk. It was more like a coffin. I kicked out with my feet and pushed upward with my

hands. It was no use. I could see light through a crack above my head. When I tried to remember how I wound up there, my mind was like a barren rock cliff. No footing. No purchase of any kind. Maybe, I thought, I was suffering from a kind of delayed concussion that caused temporary amnesia. Or maybe I was still dreaming.

At least I wasn't claustrophobic. That was the good news, I guess. You can't be claustrophobic if you plan on becoming a sandhog. Of course, few people plan to be a sandhog. Most of the time it just happens. I'm one of the few exceptions. But certainly the fear of enclosed spaces doesn't mix with hard rock mining. Every day of your life is like entering the catacombs of a mausoleum. I've seen men who look all right at first. Rugged men, big around the shoulders, hands hardened by years of physical labor. Then they enter the skip and descend for the first time. They step out into the tunnel and they lock up. They can't breathe. They turn around and beg and plead to be taken back up where they can see sky, feel moving air.

So, if you're a sandhog, you're not afraid of being able to see only six inches in front of you. Still, this wasn't much fun. I was quickly learning there's a big different between standing inside something like a crypt and laying inside something like a casket.

Despite my discomfort, or maybe because of it, I fell back to sleep. But, my dreams remained disturbed. This time, I watch Sammy through the telescope as they bludgeoned him in the back of the car. Sammy looks at me while this is happening, expressionless. I believe, and rightfully so, that it is all my fault.

I awoke again as we moved off asphalt and onto gravel. I could hear the crunch beneath the tires and feel the vibrations coming up through the metal. But that soon changed as we moved onto something that felt like dirt, with bumps and dips, and I was thrown from

side to side. My body already felt bruised. Now it felt broken, especially my neck, since I'd been unable to fully straighten my head for what seemed like hours. I was thirsty and my lips felt like they could peel off my face at any given moment.

We'd been going up hill steadily for a long time and now the grade increased. I became increasingly nauseated until my ears popped. Finally we leveled out. A few more ruts, then the engine noise grew louder until it shut off. We'd stopped. I could no longer see light coming through the crack so I figured we'd moved inside a garage or something. I heard and felt the jolt as the vehicle's door opened, then closed.

"Hey," I yelled and hit the metal with my fist.

"Hey, what?" a voice said, and then my ears rang as whoever it was on the other side banged against the compartment with something metallic.

"You know what that is?" the voice said.

"It's not the sound of one hand clapping," I mumbled.

"It's the sound of what will be pointing directly at your face when I let you out."

I heard keys jangling and then I felt cool air as the top above me opened. I saw the gun and the man behind it. It was Guy. He'd cleaned the blood from his face, but his nose was still swollen. Underneath one of his eyes, a dark bruise shaped like a half moon had begun to form. I slowly pulled myself to a seated position.

I'd been inside one of those big tool boxes, the kind the dealership likes to install in new trucks, along with the bed liner, Mag wheels and undercoating.

"Let's go," he said.

I climbed out of the tool box, into the bed of the truck, and then landed on my feet. We were inside a barn, or something that had once been used as a barn. I could see broken

bales of hay precariously suspended from several lofts. Equipment I didn't recognize--huge rusting tubs, hoses hanging from wooden posts, broken and rotting barrels--all of it lay neglected. When I noticed rubber suction cups at the ends of the hoses, I figured the place must have been a dairy farm at one time.

Now the barn was used to store old Porto-Pottyies. There were at least a dozen of them scattered about. Was this where they took the old toilets to die?

"You can take in all the sights later," Guy said, pushing the gun into my back. "Walk." We began to move through the old barn. Apparently, it had also served as a mill. An old industrial-sized table saw sat askew while planks of decaying wood as wide as my shoulders were stacked inside a stall that most likely had once kept horses. The glass in all the windows was broken and through them I saw only trees and overgrown weeds.

One of the walls of the barn had partially collapsed. A wooden step ladder leading to the second floor of an adjacent building had been placed in the opening. The exterior wall along that second floor had also disappeared. The wooden support beams were bowed and rotten.

"Stand over there," Guy said, pointing to open ground just in front of the ladder. "Now don't move until I tell you to. You try and run, I'll shoot you in the back." He faced the ladder but kept his head and the arm holding the gun toward me. He began to climb the ladder this way, twisted, looking at me the whole time and using just one arm to pull himself up.

Once at the top of the ladder, he quickly jumped up onto the landing of the adjacent building and turned to face me again. "Now it's your turn," he said, looking down at me.

I began to climb the ladder. Guy stepped back, away from the ledge, but apparently

not far back enough because as I got to the top of the ladder and my head rose above the floor, he stepped forward and kicked me in the face. I saw it coming and ducked, but the pointed toe of his cowboy boot met the base of my skull behind my ear. I fell backwards off the ladder. At first, all I could see were stars, planets, constellations. As my vision cleared, a ringing in my left ear started.

"That's for head-butting me," Guy said. "You broke my fucking nose."

"Believe me," I managed to say back, still lying on my side. "It's a fucking improvement."

"I should do you like I did Joanne's, but unfortunately, I don't have time."

"What are you talking about?"

"You think she called you because she wanted to? I made her."

I got to my feet. I was looking for something to throw at this asshole, something that could distract him and allow me to run. "Karl know what you did?" I asked.

"Sure he did. I think he was jealous. Men who beat their wives are funny about that. It's all right if they do it, but they don't like it when someone else gets a whack."

"You know a lot about people. You must be a therapist. Are you a therapist?" I said. I noticed a top to a barrel and figured it'd fly like a Frisbee. I stumbled toward it.

"Quit fucking around down there. Climb back up before I put a bullet up your ass. I'm not kidding." I glanced up and saw Guy had a clear shot at me and that by the time I picked up the lid and slung it up toward him, he'd be able to shoot me twice if he felt like it.

I took hold of the ladder and started up. My plan was to grab his leg this time if he tried to kick me again. I'd pull him down with me.

"Come on," he said, backing up as I got closer. I pulled myself up to the landing.

"Now stand over there," he said, pointing. I turned to see where he meant. In the middle of the landing was a huge cylindrical tube that led down through the floor. It looked like a silo cut open. I couldn't tell how far down it went because after a few feet, it turned dark. I heard what sounded like the squeal of a rat coming from the hole.

"A little bit further," he said. I took one more step over. As I glanced from the opening back to Guy, I noticed the position of his arms.

The explosion shook the barn. As I recoiled, I lost my balance. Twisting, I fell head first into the silo. I flipped over and landed on my back. A thin layer of old grain helped cushion my landing. Still, the impact knocked the wind out of me. I couldn't breathe, but I could hear Guy laughing. Then I saw him lean over the lip of the old silo and look down at me, his bald head a silhouette. He was close to twenty feet above me.

"You should have seen your fucking face. Hilarious."

After ascertaining that I was not, in fact, shot, I staggered to my feet. "Couldn't you have just tied me to a post or something?" I asked, my voice coming in echoing gasps.

"Ropes break. Other things happen. You ain't getting out of this one," he said, as if I had set some kind of record for Amazing Escapes.

"How long you plan to leave me down here?" I asked.

"Don't know. Here, catch," he said, dropping something I couldn't see. It landed with a thud into the grain. "A bottle of water," he said.

"There's rats down here," I said, hearing one of them moving through the grain.

"I hope they eat your stinking ass," he said. Then he turned from the opening. I listened as he climbed back down the ladder and then folded it up. He set it down on the floor. A few minutes later, I heard Guy start up his truck and drive off.

I stood in the middle of the cylinder and did a slow one-eighty. My eyes started getting used to the darkness and I could see no seams in the corrugated metal. I ran my hand along the sides. There was nothing to grip. No toe-holds. It was all smooth. The rats obviously had a way of getting in and out, but I didn't think their route would be of much help to me.

Keeping the rats in mind, I cautiously rooted through the grain looking for the bottle of water. I found it, then piled some grain up with the side of my shoe and sat down. I tried to think about what was happening to me. What Cresswell wanted. Why it involved me. I began to wonder if Karl was at all involved in any of this. If so, maybe it was like Richard's involvement. Only a small part in a much larger puzzle.

Or maybe I was right about the ore. Maybe they had set up a smelting plant up here. Maybe this was where they processed the ore, extracted the metals. Then again, how would they hide an operation of that size? Were they working underground somewhere?

Or maybe they'd uncovered a set of prehistoric bones to some animal thought never to have roamed these parts and they were smuggling out the bones a few at a time. A set of bones would be worth something on the black market, I guessed, if they led to the discovery of another species. Maybe they thought they'd found the missing link. And why not? I'd seen fossils down in the tunnels before. No bones, but fossils of old trees. There were ancient forests buried beneath New York City, along with ancient river beds.

I went through the details of what I knew. Karl and Lykes are in business together, renting out Porto-Potty's. Boxes of stolen materials from the job were in Karl's apartment. A company called Arch Development contacts Sammy and begs him to leave the union and work for them. Then an accident occurs in the tunnel that almost kills the mayor. I believe

that Karl and Lykes were responsible. Then I'm framed for the accident. I follow Richard and get taken to meet Cresswell, who seems to have some nefarious plan. He has me taken up here, wherever *here* is.

Obviously, I was missing several key details, and this meant two things. One, if I ever did get out of this jam alive, the police would still be very interested in taking me into custody. And second. . . well, I guess I didn't have a second point. But it seemed like there should have been.

I leaned my head back against the metal and drained the bottle of water. I thought of Claudine. I hoped she was okay, that she didn't wait long for me at DoJo's and that Cresswell had left her alone. She didn't know anything, or less than me, so why would he need to hurt her? Besides, he already had me where he wanted me.

It seemed that all the people I cared about were in some kind of danger now. I'd dragged everyone into my own mess. But what was done was done. I now had to figure out a way to get out of it. To undo the harm. Which was kind of funny to think about since I was standing in a rat-infested silo and couldn't do a god damn thing. I wanted to scream out loud, to punch and kick at the silo walls like an angry child, and then I realized that's exactly how I felt. Like a child. Unable to control my world. Things happened to me and no matter what I said or did, nothing changed. What I wanted didn't matter. It was what everyone else wanted that made a difference.

I remembered hating my childhood for this very reason. I felt that nobody listened to me. We lived on the ground floor of an old apartment building. I remembered once, in the middle of the day, I'd seen a man lurking near my parent's bedroom, and I ran into the kitchen to tell my mother and she didn't believe me. I begged her to come look, or to call the police,

but she got angry with me instead. She grabbed my arm and shook me, forced me to sit down at the kitchen table. She made me eat a lemon while this man I'd seen was still breaking into our apartment.

Later, when my father came home covered in rock dust and smelling of steel, I told him about the man I'd seen. He was opening his first can of beer. "Well, let's take a look," he said, taking hold of my hand. We went into his bedroom. Together we discovered that my mother's jewelry box was gone. The window in their room had been pried open. First my father sat on his bed, staring at the empty place on the dresser where the box had been. Then he became furious. He pulled his gun from the nightstand drawer and ran into the street. He shot the gun off into the air. Finally, the police showed, more to calm him down than anything else.

Not until nearly fifteen years after my father's death did I learn that my mother knew the man I'd seen lurking that day. He was her lover at the time, terribly in debt and down on his luck, and my mother had arranged for him to break in and steal the jewelry. When I found this out, I refused to speak to my mother for two months, but eventually I relented and she told me some bullshit story that was supposed to make what she did at the time seem all right, something about love and youth and second chances. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I never met my mother's lover. I would have enjoyed kicking the living shit out of him. If I met him today, I still might.

I watched as the light at the top of the silo changed, darkening slowly. The changes came whenever I blinked. Eventually, night set in and I could hear crickets and an occasional hoot from a barn owl. Plenty for it to eat down here, I thought. The rats around me never stopped moving. If I heard one close by, I'd kick out my foot, or swat with the back of my

hand. Only once did I actually feel the hairy heft of a creature when I launched it across the silo.

I thought about my present circumstances, how just when I figured I'd obtained a certain amount of self determination, a certain amount of respect among my peers, the rug gets pulled out from underneath me. The person I'd planned to spend the rest of my life with digs in her heels, though she'll still sleep with me. Then, I think I see somebody doing bad things and everyone is suddenly after me.

I leaned my head back and tried to sleep. It was no use. I stared out the top of the silo and waited for something to happen. About two hours later, it did.

Chapter Nine

"Reese, you down there?" a voice said in a hushed tone. I looked up into the darkness and saw a man's silhouette. I recognized the voice, but I still didn't know who it was. The man began to lower an aluminum ladder down toward me.

"Climb out," the voice said. I hesitated, trying to place the voice. It was a voice unaccustomed to whispering. The syllables were hoarsely catching in his throat. I grabbed onto the ladder and started up slowly. When I stood at the top, I made out Lykes in the darkness. He wore a baseball cap and was holding onto a rifle, which he casually pointed my way.

"Hey, Lykes," I said. "Nice to finally see you again."

"Shh," he said. "Don't make any noise. Just put this on." He handed me a baseball cap and a khaki army surplus jacket.

"What's this for?" I asked, fitting the cap on.

"Hurry up," he replied.

I slid the jacket on. "A little tight," I said.

"Now climb down the ladder over there and don't try anything funny." In the darkness, his face seemed softer than before. The angry mouth and eyes that I remembered seemed less focused on hating everything around him. His mood bordered on friendliness.

"It's almost like we're twins now, you and me," I said. Our hats were the same color. We both wore similar jackets.

With remarkable speed, he swung the end of the rifle around and hit me in the mouth.

"I told you to keep quiet," he hissed.

I stood there spitting out blood, then a piece of my tooth.

"Just get down that ladder."

So much for reading into a person's character, I thought. I made a mental note to avoid using humor as a way of easing tension and nervousness. I climbed down, aware that Lykes' rifle was pointed at the top of my head.

Lykes started down then, like Guy, twisting himself around so that he still had the rifle trained on me, one finger on the trigger, one hand on the ladder. I stood at the bottom, feeling the chip in my tooth with my tongue. I spat out more blood. I ran through a list of just some of the things I'd been subjected to in the last couple of days: I'd been hit in the stomach twice; kicked while down; hit once in the face with brass knuckles; karate chopped in the neck, and now this latest maneuver, chipping a tooth. And what had I given back? Not much. A head butt there, a fist there. I'd knocked out a cop. That was something, I guess.

"Through the door," Lykes said, referring to an opening at the back of the barn. "And remember, I've been hunting all my life. I'm a good shot."

We stepped over what had once been the barn door and walked outside. We started pressing through blackberry canes, the thorns tearing at my arms. We cleared those and were now in a field of waist high grass or hay. He told me to keep walking toward a row of trees at the field's far end. The moon was up and the sky had few clouds. I noticed the stars immediately, hundreds of them. There was no such sky in the city, no place where so much of our galaxy was visible. The sky was big, but it didn't make any of my problems seem any smaller.

"I got a question to ask you," I said, quietly this time.

"Just one?" he said.

"No, I got more than one, but there's one I want to ask you first." I looked back at Lykes and saw the dark path we were making through the grass. Behind us stood the barn.

"Well," Lykes said, "one question is all you're getting, so make it a good one."

"Was it you driving the front-end loader that day in the shaft?" I asked. Out of all the questions I could think of, it was the one I most wanted an answer to. I just needed to be reassured that I was right about something.

"If I say 'yes' to that, then I implicate myself in a crime, don't I?"

"What about Karl, then? Was he the one in the tunnel?"

"I said just one question."

"But you didn't answer the first."

Lykes was silent for a second.

"That's some serious shit you guys did down there," I said. More silence.

Then to my surprise he said, "Richard was down there, too. I was just tagging along for the fun of it. I didn't actually do anything except watch. I almost started laughing when you freaked out."

"You guys almost killed the mayor."

"Yeah, but we didn't, did we?"

"You killed two others though."

"Hey, none of it was my idea. I thought it was a dumb plan to begin with."

"Which was?"

"This is a lot more than one question," Lykes said, ending the conversation. "Now, be quiet so I can think."

We'd come to the end of the field. We climbed over a scattering of boulders and a barbed wire fence. We walked through a thin woods until we came to a dirt road where an old white pick-up truck sat parked. Lykes told me to get in through the driver's side. I did. He got in beside me and told me to put my hands out and hold them together. He produced a pair of handcuffs from his glove compartment and snapped them on me. Then he lowered his rifle to between his legs and shifted the transmission of his truck to neutral. He pulled the emergency brake free. The truck began to roll forward. He kept the headlights off.

"That place you were in," he said. "It used to be a dairy farm."

"I figured that," I said.

"Maybe you ain't as dumb as you look, then," he said. "You know what happened to that dairy farm?" he asked.

"Cows ran out of milk?" I asked, forgetting my new rule. It was a harder habit to break than I thought.

"I guess you are as dumb as you look. You want me to ram this rifle back into your mouth?" He stared out ahead of him, tapping the brakes whenever the truck began to pick up too much speed.

"That farm belonged to the Hewitts," he began. "Was in their family for generations. Same thing happened to that farm that happened to all the dairy farms in the region." He paused and looked over at me to make sure I was paying attention. "The reservoirs," he said. "They tried everything. Turning the place into a mill. There were some beautiful maples up along the ridge over yonder. Used to make syrup every year from those trees. But then they were forced to cut them down as lumber to try to make some extra money."

We came upon another road, this one covered in gravel. We had just enough speed

behind us to make it over a little ridge and then we turned onto the gravel road and continued coasting.

"Times change," I said. "Today, everything is computers. Most of the time, if you aren't ten years old, you don't understand how half the programs out there work."

Lykes flew into a rage. "I know things change!" he said, banging the steering wheel. "You don't have to tell *me*! But I'm not talking about fucking kids. I'm talking about what happened up here that changed our way of life. I'm talking about how folks from a city hundreds of miles away can change everything." He paused, too angry to continue.

We coasted down the road for another hundred yards or so before he applied the brakes and stopped. He put the truck in park and started up the motor. With the truck in drive, we continued on. Still, he kept the headlights off. I wondered whose attention he was trying to avoid.

I looked out the window, trying to find a landmark of some sort that I might remember. The problem was, in the dark everything looked the same. An occasional house. A broken down barn. A stone wall. We drove some way in silence until we came to another road, this one paved. I saw a rusting street sign at the corner, but was unable to read it. Lykes turned onto this road and flicked on his lights. I saw two horses lean their heads over a fence railing, attracted either by the light or the sound of the truck or both. Behind them was a silo. Perhaps that could be my landmark, I thought.

"You better put this on," he said, tossing a bandanna toward me. The two ends were already tied in a knot. "I should've made you put it on earlier, but I forgot. Just slide it over your head and let the front hang down over your eyes." I took off the hat and I did as he told me.

"No, pull it up so it covers your *eyes*," he said. "Now, put your hat back on."

"Where are we going?" I asked finally.

"You'll see," he said. "I'm not supposed to be doing this, but I want you to understand where I'm coming from. I'm not just some local redneck who's taking a few risks because somebody's willing to pay me some money. Though don't get me wrong, money's good. And hard to come by up here. But I got morals and values I'm acting on and I want you to understand it isn't just the money."

We sped along for about fifteen minutes, most of the way in silence. I tried to get him to talk more about what Richard and Karl were doing in the tunnel, but he told me to shut up. Eventually, I did.

We made a few sweeping turns and then a series of sharper turns, and then we finally stopped. He told me to remove the blindfold and climb out of the truck on his side.

On a plaque attached to a fence in front of the parking area, I read "The Pepacton Reservoir." The reservoir stretched out to the left for miles. Directly behind the fence and in front of us was the dam that held it all back. To the right of the dam were thick woods and the continuation of the East Branch of the Delaware River.

The dam was of immense proportions, I could see that from where I was. It looked like something built by the Egyptians. All stone work stacked up like giant steps, the pinnacle of which was only several feet above the water level. Along the top edge of the dam, logs and sticks had collected. Bleached and dried by the sun, they looked like white bones in the moonlight. The plaque said the reservoir was completed in 1943.

Before I knew what was happening, Lykes had hopped the fence. He stuck the rifle back through and aimed at me. "Bang," he said, as if he'd shot me. I froze. I was suddenly

afraid. Here I was in the middle of the night, handcuffed, none of the right people knew where I was and a deranged local was pointing a gun at me and pretending to shoot. It occurred to me that maybe Lykes planned on drowning me in the reservoir and somehow making the authorities think the body was his. Was that why he wanted me dressed like him? Maybe that was why he busted up my front tooth. Didn't his have a chip in it?

"I want you to see something," he said. "Come over here and I'll un-cuff you."

I walked toward Lykes. He kept the gun on me the whole time. I stuck my hands through the bars of the fence. He set the rifle down against his leg and pulled out a key. He undid the cuffs. I thought of reaching out and grabbing his shirt and yanking him into the fence. But as I got closer to the metal bars, something jammed itself into my stomach. I looked down and saw it was the barrel of his rifle.

"Now, climb on over."

I hopped the fence. He kept me in front of him as we climbed up onto the dam. We walked along the edge, stepping over the dried sticks, some as thick as my leg. As the brittle wood cracked beneath our weight, I couldn't shake the feeling that they were bones. The whole thing was like some sort of mass grave.

At first, we were only ten feet or so from the dam's large drainage basin, but as we progressed, the bottom slid away, and soon we were hundreds of feet up. On one side the water lapped lazily against the dam, but on the other it felt like we were standing at the top of a one-sided pyramid, the giant tiers falling away, each one its own cliff, the edges of which looked worn and unstable.

He stopped us. "Look out over the water," he said. I looked, but I kept Lykes in my field of vision as well.

"Arena," he said, pointing at a spot over the water. At first, I thought he meant that this was his arena, his stage. What would he say next? That the games were about to begin?

"Shaver Town," he said, pointing to another far away spot. "Union Grove." I realized he was naming places buried by the Papacton.

"There's a church in there that never got moved. A church! Belonged in Shaver Town. During the drought some years back, the spire on top of the cupola showed.

"Do you know," he said, turning to me, "where most of the milk you drink comes from?"

I wanted to say "cows" but this time I was able to censor myself.

Lykes took a deep breath and grabbed the bill of his cap, moved it side to side across his head, to scratch his hair I guessed. "Huge dairy factories in Canada that feed hormones and antibiotics and steroids into their cows. Do you know who owns those factories? Huge global corporations. The people working them get minimum wage while a few CEO's own half the world's wealth. Nothing is distributed the way it's supposed to be. It's one thing to have technology force you to change the way you live. It's a whole other thing when somebody tells you you got no choice but to pick up and leave simply because they're telling you to," he said, sweeping his arm back across the water.

"One or two or three farms can't survive on their own," he continued. "You need a whole farming community in order to make it. All the farmers help each other out. They lend each other equipment. Jack Bauw buys a tractor," Lykes said, pointing again to a specific spot out over the water. "Don Bramley a thresher." He pointed to another spot. "George Hoag a bailer. And they borrow from each other. But alone, there's no way one or two farmers can afford all that. So when a handful of farms were taken away to build the

reservoirs, it killed all the other farms along with it. And not just here in Delaware County either. It's happened in every county where a reservoir was built. And that's exactly what the city wanted to happen. They wanted all the land around the reservoirs too, to create a buffer zone to prevent fertilizers and animal waste from entering the water system. And they did it all through trickery and deceit. Through their smart, rich lawyers. And that's not all. They started fires in hay lofts. They poisoned local wells. They caused car accidents. Did you know that half the lawyers defending the victims of The Takings died before any settlements were reached? Half of them died from car wrecks along these mountain roads. The others died in the city from natural causes, the coroners said, but they were city coroners so of course they're going to say that. I've got all the newspaper articles saved. I got it all in print."

"Lykes," I said. "What do you want from me? I can't make any of this better. I wasn't even born when this dam was built. I've got nothing to do with any of this."

"I want you to fucking understand what I'm trying to tell you. Are you even listening? Besides, *I* have a plan. *I* have a way to make everything better. And that's what you're doing out here. You're going to help me with the plan."

"What plan? What are you going to do?"

"I can't tell you," he said.

"If I'm going to help, then I've got to know what the plan is, don't I?"

"When you need to know, you'll know."

"Is this the same plan as Cresswell's, or is that something different?" I asked.

"It's funny," he said, as if he didn't hear me. "I've been wanting to do something like this for a long time, but I needed help. I couldn't do it myself. So I prayed for patience, hoping God would supply me with the tools I needed. Then it happened. And now, I'm

going to get *paid* to do it! You college types call that irony, I think, but I call it Divine intervention."

The whole time Lykes spoke I was listening, but I was also waiting for a chance to wrestle that rifle free from his hands. The thing was, he kept his distance and he never dropped the barrel of the gun. He kept it trained on me with a finger on the trigger. Despite how wrapped up he was in settling the score between New York City and the people of Delaware County, he never forgot that I represented an immediate threat.

"Now, I want you to do something for me," he said.

"What's that?"

"Piss in the water," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"Yeah. I want you to know what it feels like to piss in the mayor's cup. To piss in the tea kettle of all those corporate jerks that work in offices twenty stories up. This water right here at our feet runs unfiltered all the way into the pipes and faucets of every apartment in the city. And you're going to defile it."

"Lykes, this is ridiculous," I said, looking out over the reservoir. The moon had risen further and now its reflection ran a direct path to our feet. "My piss isn't going to make a difference. This is a lot of water."

"It's a god damn symbol, you college-boy idiot. It's going to stand for something. Now whip it out or I'm gonna shoot it clean off." Lykes raised the gun and looked down the barrel toward my middle.

If Lykes hadn't made such a big deal about it, I might have just done it without thinking. Really, I had to go anyway. But it was the principle of the thing. I felt like

someone was trying to cram religion down my throat. And there was only so much propaganda a person could take in one day. I'd had my fill.

I simply reached out and grabbed the end of the barrel. I twisted my wrist and, just like that, the gun was pointed away from me. I think the shock of my sudden movement made him pull the trigger. From the roar and quake of the gun, the heat from the barrel, I came close to losing my grip. He almost pulled it free, but I stepped closer and grabbed the middle of the gun with my other hand. Now we were standing face to face, both of us holding onto the gun, and I saw fear in Lykes' craggy visage. Probably not so much that he was afraid of me, but of what might happen to him should I get away. I'll tell you, it was nice to see someone else sweat for a change.

So we took turns pulling and pushing the gun. The branches crackled beneath our feet. We spun around several times. It reminded me of a game we used to play as kids. You'd plant your feet and hold up your hands and the other person, in the same position, would try to make you lose balance. But you could only touch the other person's hands. It wasn't so much a game of strength as one of balance and, ultimately, trickery. Most of the time, you could win if you pretended to go for a strike but at the last moment pulled up. The other kid, leaning forward in anticipation, would then shuffle his feet and you'd win.

It happened like that. Lykes' back was to the water and I leaned forward as if to try to push him that way and he prepared to resist my weight, but instead I let my arms go limp and I put no force on the gun and Lykes began to fall toward me. I buckled my knee, side-stepped him and pulled on the gun all at the same time. Floundering, unable to stop his own momentum, he took one big step, teetered at the edge, and then went over.

He didn't go far. Only about ten feet or so to the next tier, but his gun flew. It

traveled a hundred yards, hit the dam, bounced off, hit the dam again and eventually clattered into the gray expanse of the dry basin.

Directly below me, I heard Lykes groan. If I leaned over I could see the crumbling edge of the tier and half of Lykes' body as he lay there on his back. With the moon behind us, the shadows along the dam were heavy, creating a dark edge along his body. Then Lykes sat up. He groaned again. A minute later, he rolled over onto his knees and crawled a little ways, disappearing into the shadows. I craned my head and saw him stand up. He wobbled, feeling his head for his hat, which had fallen off. Instead, he found blood at the back of his head. I could see the dark liquid reflect off his hand in the moonlight. Lykes looked down at his feet, for his hat I guess, then looked behind him into the basin. Then he looked up at me.

When he saw me, his confusion cleared. With mouth open and teeth bared, he charged the wall in front of him. I couldn't see him anymore but could hear him claw at the stone. I heard his boots sliding, him cursing. Then more scrambling until most of the sounds stopped. Just his breathing was audible, which in the stillness around us echoed along the dam. Then I heard more sounds coming at more regular intervals. Did he find a toe hold? Was he climbing up? I backed away from the edge and readied myself in case he should suddenly appear.

But he didn't appear. Not in front of me anyway. I looked and he was running along the tier toward the end of the dam where the truck was parked. I saw his head bob up and down, then disappear, then bob up and down again. His footsteps echoed back and forth. I started off in the same direction. Even if he made it to the end of the dam before I did, he still had to make the same climb he struggled with moments ago. Then I thought maybe he was planning to climb down, not up, to retrieve his gun. At the end of the dam, he'd only

have a couple of tiers to negotiate, rather than the ten or so we'd been standing above before.

I had a hard time gauging his progress. Only when I saw his head did I have any idea where he was and because he was running so close to the wall, I hardly saw it at all. I just kept going, stepping over the bone-like branches, careful not to fall myself.

Then I heard a far away blast and a long echo following it. Lykes screamed. I stopped running and looked along the tier. He was actually behind me. I'd overtaken him somehow. He wasn't running, or climbing, or doing much of anything except holding onto his leg above the knee. He was staring across the basin into the woods. I looked too but didn't see anything. When I glanced back, Lykes had fallen, was falling. I saw him spinning wildly out of control, trying to grab onto a piece of the dam. He bounced off another giant step and landed in the basin not too far from his gun.

I thought that was it for Lykes, that he was dead. But he wasn't. He lifted his head and began to crawl toward his gun like some slithering creature coughed up from the deep. Something in the woods caught my eye, a movement of light, a quickening of shadow, and then reflection off polished steel as a man emerged with a rifle. There was nothing to do. I watched as the man took aim and fired. Lykes rolled over onto his back, still.

At the time, I only assumed he was dead, having not heard his last breath or listened to his last words. I figured maybe his last coherent words were to me--"whip it out."

I looked back into the woods and found the man again. Why it hadn't occurred to me that I might be next, I don't know. The retort of his rifle bounced between us as his bullet grazed my arm. Either I was lucky, or he missed purposely. I didn't think he'd miss a second time. I dove onto the dam and twisted to get between those wood bones until I could feel the cool stone on my face, determined not to be another burial. Another shot and a branch

nearby my head imploded into dry bits. I tried to crawl forward but couldn't make any real progress without providing him with an even better target.

I counted to three and took a deep breath. Then I rolled off into the freezing waters of the Pepacton Reservoir.

Chapter Ten

I slept in a barn that night. Earlier, I'd stripped my damp clothes and laid them over an empty wheel barrel. I'd pulled some fresh hay from a bale and spread it on the ground. I'd found a flannel shirt hanging from a nail, tore strips from it and wrapped, tied them around my arm. The wound wasn't deep but the water had prevented it from closing.

That night I dreamt I was still swimming in the reservoir. I swam deep, finding the houses that never got moved. I swam through windows and saw beds still made, pictures hanging on walls, everything distorted yet preserved. Every house had a front porch with rocking chairs and dead dogs whose fur moved in slow currents. There were grave yards with head stones. Lykes was there, he wanted to give me a tour, a view of Shavertown past. I saw school houses desks whose wood was etched with initials of promised love. Churches and gas stations, general stores and feed stores, and, of course, farms.

I woke at dawn, startled by a rooster's crow. I was shivering. My clothes had dried some, but were still freezing cold. I looked around the barn and saw a pair of overalls hanging from a nail along with a white T-shirt hanging beneath it. In the dark last night, I hadn't noticed the clothes. They weren't exactly clean but they were a hell of a lot better than putting on damp clothes. Plus, I figured they'd help me better blend into my surroundings. As I put them on, I thought about Lykes' death, and I hoped that when I died I'd have the opportunity to see it coming. Not too far in advance, but far enough so that I could compose some kind of meaningful eulogy for myself. I didn't want to leave this world uttering obscenities. On the other hand, Lykes died defending his ideals, which, to some, might be a

noble death. Perhaps he'd be considered a local hero of sorts years from now, though it was hard to imagine.

I stuck my head out of the barn and felt the early sun on my face. I walked across a short field toward the road I came in on, allowing the sun to warm my skin and my clothes.

I was in another world. No Papaya Kings. No Original Ray's Pizza. No cash machines. No multi-plex movie theaters. I'd never been to Europe, but this was the way I'd imagined it: winding roads, stone fences, bales of golden hay. Working in the tunnels, a person could forget how pretty the surface of the earth was.

Everywhere, rocks jutted from the green haphazardly. It would mean hard work just to clear a small plot of land like this field. Half of the stone walls seemed built simply to have a place to put all the rocks.

That's how my life had suddenly become: like this land, burdened by obstacles. I figured if anybody knew how to clear the way, it was me. A sandhog. Sure, my methods weren't subtle. I wasn't an anthropologist or an archeologist. But just the same, I got the job done. I'd see this through, I told myself. I'd see this through.

As I walked by a lone evergreen, I heard something stir above me. I craned my head and saw an eagle in the tree, perched on a low branch. Its beak was gray and hooked, its feathers brown. Gripped in one of its talons was a dead field mouse. I stood stock still as the bird and I stared at one another. Then it pushed off from the branch. After several noisy, powerful flaps, it caught an early morning thermal and soared upwards. Within thirty seconds the bird became a speck above the Catskill Mountains.

I could have taken it as a bad omen. Predator versus prey, and all that. But I didn't. I was simply awed by the beauty of the land. I guess you could say I was feeling happy just

to be alive. At that moment, I didn't care what had brought me to the Catskills. When all this was over, I wanted to come back here with Claudine and stay in another B & B. Maybe up here, Claudine would have a harder time resisting me and my ring. I needed a spell and it seemed to me the perfect place to cast one.

We'd only been on two real vacations before. The first was to Niagara Falls to celebrate our one year anniversary of being together. We saw more of the inside of our little motel room than we did of the Falls. For our second vacation we went to Miami, where I met her parents for the first, and only, time. From there we took a three-day cruise to the Bahamas. We both got food poisoning, but somehow, despite our intestinal distress, we managed to have a decent time, especially since Claudine won three-hundred dollars at the roulette table. Later, the captain, taken by Claudine's good looks, invited us to dine at his table. I was jealous and back in the cabin we got into a fight. We didn't make up until we got back to New York.

Most people who meet us think of us as an unlikely couple, and I guess we are. If she hadn't been writing that article about City Water Tunnel #3, we never would have met. She interviewed me on my lunch break and I convinced her to meet me later for a beer at O'Rourkes, promising her more material for her article. That night at the bar, I had to fight off the other guys and thought for sure we'd scared her off, but she gave me her home phone number before she left. I called her a few times and we spoke on the phone for several hours, and after that, we went on a couple of dates. She came to believe I wasn't such an asshole after all. Of course, I treated her better than all the guys she'd been with combined. Not that it was a challenge. Her ex-husband especially had been a real bastard. She'd been in the process of getting the divorce when we first started going out, and it was still the reason she

didn't want to get married now. At least that's what I told myself.

I wanted to hear her voice, make sure she was all right. First order of business for me today was to find a phone. I'd take it from there.

I walked along the road for ten minutes before I heard a car coming up from behind. It was an old Volvo station wagon with a couple inside. I stuck out my thumb as the car passed by. The couple glanced behind them, turned toward each other, then pulled off to the side. I jogged over to the car. The man rolled down his window.

He was in his thirties, wore wire-rimmed glasses and had dark hair, which he parted on the side. "Where you headed?" he asked.

"To the nearest pay phone," I said.

"You okay?" the woman asked, leaning over to see out the window. She had curly brown hair and dimples when she smiled. She was wary of me. I guess I would be too if I saw myself walking along a road in the middle of nowhere, a bandage tied around my arm and a busted lip.

"Yeah," I said. "I was out here looking for some property to buy when my car broke down. I tried fixing it myself but I'm not very handy. This was last night. I ended up sleeping in the back seat. Now I need to call my girlfriend and have her come get me."

The guy turned to the woman and she shrugged.

"Get in," he said.

"Thanks a bunch," I said.

"We're heading into Margaretville," he said, pulling back onto the road. "There's a phone there," the man continued. "I'm Garth. And this is Lilly." She turned around and waved. It was the first friendly gesture I'd seen in nearly a week and I almost broke into tears.

Suddenly, I wanted to tell these friendly people everything. But of course, I couldn't.

"I'm Barry," I said. "You folks live around here?"

"Yup. We live in Halcottsville," Garth said. "Just moved here from the city about a year ago."

"We own and run Bud's," Lilly said, as if I should know who Bud was. She turned around and glanced at my wrinkled clothes. "It's a breakfast place in Margaretville," she explained.

"We don't know that much about the restaurant business, but it's something we both wanted to try," Garth said.

"That sounds great. I'd love to try something like that," I said. I really did. It seemed like the perfect idea.

"We couldn't take the hustle and bustle of the city anymore. Wore us both down," he said.

"I can relate," I said.

"So, Barry. Where were you looking to buy?" Lilly asked.

"Well, I can't afford much. I'm just fantasizing about it, really. Me and my girlfriend."

"That's how we were for the longest time. But you'd be amazed. Land around this area comes pretty cheap," Garth said.

"That's what I hear," I said.

There was a long pause in the conversation.

"Where did you say you broke down?" Lilly asked, looking straight ahead at the road.

"On a dirt road up on a hill," I said. "I got lost. Hope I can even find the car again."

"There's a garage in Margaretville. You can probably get a tow from there," Garth

said.

"Thanks," I said. "You know, most people wouldn't have stopped."

"This isn't the city, Barry. You'd be surprised," Garth said. Yeah, I thought. And you'd be surprised if you knew you were driving a man who allegedly staged an accident which almost killed the city's mayor.

After driving past a long, well-managed golf course and a few inactive farms, we came to the town of Margaretville. On Main Street, the front porches of big, old houses seemed to pay homage as we drove by. Then, after we passed about a dozen or so, the houses ended and the stores began: two antique shops, a bar, a Sears catalogue store, and a gas station. Then Bud's. "There she is," Garth said. "Look at that. We don't open for another fifteen minutes and already Raison's waiting outside."

"We have the best coffee in town," Lilly said proudly. "Zabar's. But don't tell anyone it comes from the city. They wouldn't drink it."

At the corner, there was an ice cream shop. Then, around the corner, just over a narrow steel bridge, was an A & P. It seemed to sit on its own island.

They pulled the Volvo up around the back of the restaurant.

"There's the pay phone in front," Garth said. I thanked them both and tried to walk slowly toward the phone.

I dialed Claudine's home phone number collect. When I heard Claudine's answering machine, I hung up. I tried calling her at work. Just her voice mail answered and I was disconnected. Garth and Lilly walked by me as they entered the store. I smiled and nodded to them and they smiled back. Next, I tried Sammy's house. Lizzie answered and accepted the charges.

"I thought it was him," she said. "This time when the phone rang, I thought for sure it would be him."

"I'm sorry Lizzie, it's just me."

"All the times our son would disappear. I'd sit by the phone and wait for the coroner to call. Then one or two days later he'd show up and never say a word about where he'd been. Or we'd get a call from jail and he expected us to bail him out. Reese, I thought I was through with this kind of worrying. I'm an old woman now. Tell me you know where Sammy has been. Tell me he's on the way home to me right now."

I tried not to think of the last image I had of Sammy, but I couldn't help it. It was not a good thing to have in mind when I was trying to console Lizzie. "I'm sure he's okay, Lizzie. Sammy can take care of himself," I said meekly.

"I've been getting these strange phone calls," she said. "When I pick up, there's no one at the other end. I just hear this empty, whistling sound. It's been happening every two hours. I feel like someone's playing a mean trick on me. I've called the police but they haven't done anything about the phone calls."

As people went into Bud's, they looked at me. I turned away from the doors and faced the wall. "Maybe it's Sammy. Maybe he's found a phone but can't speak into it. Have you tried to star69 the number."

"Yes, but there isn't even a ring. Just a click, then the line goes dead."

"What about caller I.D.?" I asked.

"I don't think we have that," she said.

"Listen. Call the phone company and tell them you want Caller I.D. They'll know what it is. Then go to The Wiz or RadioShack or something and buy a Caller I.D. box. They

don't cost much. Plug it into the phone and the next time you get that weird call, it should tell you the number that dialed in and who the number belongs to. After that, we should be able to track it down further. Can you do that, Lizzie?"

"But I don't want to leave the apartment. What if he calls while I'm gone?"

"Well, do you have anyone you could call that could help you?"

"I'm sure Claudine would help me, but I don't know where she is either."

Again, I thought, I had to find Claudine. "What about my mother. Have you tried calling her?"

"She doesn't drive anymore, remember?"

I had completely forgotten. A couple of months ago, after she got into a series of minor fender benders while trying to negotiate around the construction on Columbus Avenue, she cut her license in two and sold the car. I felt like a complete asshole for forgetting. It was like it happened to someone else's mother, not my own. I will call her next, I thought.

Lizzie began to cry softly into the phone. "Thomas is here with me," she said, between sobs. "Just me and poor old Thomas."

"I'll find some way of locating Sammy," I said. "I promise. In the mean time, stay by the phone. If you hear from Claudine, tell her I'm at Bud's in Margaretville? Write it down for me, Lizzie. Bud's in Margaretville. Are you writing it down?"

"Yes, okay. I have it. Bud's."

"In Margaretville."

"Yes."

"Thanks, Lizzie. I'll check in with you again as soon as I can," I said. I hung up the phone and decided to try Claudine one more time at her office. Even if she wasn't there,

maybe someone else would answer.

On the fourth ring, someone did. Whoever it was accepted the charges from me.

"Is Claudine there?" I asked.

"No she isn't. This is Reese, right?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Shelly," the woman said. She was a friend and colleague of Claudine's at the paper.

"Shelly, do you know where she is?" I asked. There was a pause on the other end.

Then Shelly began whispering. "I'm going to transfer you to my desk. Hold on a minute."

I heard music and a woman's recorded voice telling me to hold on, that my call was very important and would be answered in the order it was received. Then Shelly came back on.

"Reese? If you give me the number you're at, I can have her call you back in ten minutes."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to say. Just give me your number."

I read the number off the pay phone. A couple minutes later, the phone rang.

"Reese?" Claudine said. Her voice was like a set of colored crayons filling in the blanks.

"Hi, Sugar," I said.

"Oh, baby. I've been so worried."

"Me too. I thought they might have arrested you. Or worse."

"I've been staying at Shelly's mother's place in the Hamptons. Where are you?"

"I'm upstate in a town called Margaretville. I'm going to turn myself in." It surprised

me to say it, but I realized that I'd been working on that conclusion ever since I'd gone for a swim in the reservoir. "I was shot at last night, Claudine. I could've been killed. And I saw Lykes die. I think I'm realizing I'm better off in police custody trying to explain everything then floundering around out here. And besides, I've found out who's behind the accident. Someone named Cresswell. He kidnapped me and brought me up here."

"Reese, I know of Cresswell," Claudine said.

"You heard of him? How?"

"I came across his name while doing some research on Arch Development. You ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Arch is owned by Wagner Industries, a holding company controlled by a group of investors. Wagner Industries is headquartered out on the West coast. I couldn't find out much about them, but Wagner also owns a company called Reno Contractors, which is located right here in Manhattan and I did manage to unearth some interesting facts. Cresswell is the CEO of Reno. And here's where it gets interesting. He's also Alex Milton's ex-stepfather."

"Wait," I said, remembering the debate I'd seen on TV at O'Rourke's the other night. It seemed like ages ago. "The same Alex Milton running for mayor?"

"The very same. His mother has now been divorced from Cresswell for several years. But he helped raise Alex and he paid for his education. All of it. Undergrad, grad, law school. Not cheap schools either: Princeton, Columbia. Alex's mother stayed married to Cresswell just long enough to use his money to promote her son's education. After she'd gotten all the degrees she wanted for her son, she dumped Cresswell."

"How'd you find all this out?" I asked.

"I'm an investigative reporter, remember? Besides, I've had nothing else to do except sit in front of Shelly's mother's computer and hack away. The internet is an amazing thing. So are old friends that work at the registrars office at my alma mater. But I can't find out where Cresswell lives now or where his offices are. He's disappeared from all the directories. I only get recordings when I call Reno and Reno's offices have moved."

"Okay. Hold on," I said, my mind reeling with this new information. "Let me try to get some of this straight. Cresswell pays some sandhogs to cause this accident that almost kills the mayor who, it just so happens, his step-son is running against. Is Cresswell trying to get Milton elected? Why would he do that? You'd think he'd hate Milton after what his mother did to him. Why would he want to help him?"

"Maybe it's pay-back time. Milton owes Cresswell. You have to believe that if and when he becomes mayor, he'll throw a bone Cresswell's way. I wouldn't be surprised to find out Cresswell was helping to finance Milton's campaign."

"How does this tie in with the idea that they stumbled onto something valuable down there? How does Milton becoming mayor help them get the stuff out any easier? And what the hell am I doing up here?"

"Maybe they aren't mining anything. Maybe it's something else entirely," she said.

I stood there trying to think of a connection between Alex Milton becoming mayor and the watershed region of the Catskills.

"So, tell me what happened to you," Claudine said.

"Well, I went to see Richard and I saw him meet with Sammy," I said. "I followed the two of them, but they disappeared into a cigar store. Through that I walked past a casino,

but when I got to this back room, Sammy was gone. Then, they took me to Cresswell's office. He talked about a bunch of shit, then made me look out his window through a telescope. I saw Sammy again. He didn't look too good. He was beat up bad. Claudine, Sammy is still missing. I talked to Lizzie."

"She hasn't heard from him?"

"No, but she's been getting strange phone calls every two hours. No one is at the other end. She doesn't have caller I.D. but I told her to order it. She'd going to need a caller I.D. box. Is there any way you can help her?"

"I'll see what I can do. But I don't have a car anymore. The police impounded it."

"Shit. Is there any way you can borrow someone's?"

"Maybe Shelly's mom can lend me hers."

"I'm feeling so guilty about Sammy." I looked out over the parking lot and up into the green mountains behind the A & P sign. A sadness as heavy as anything I'd ever felt swam over me. I thought I was going to start to cry. "Oh, my God," I said. "It's all my fault. Lizzie didn't say so, but I heard it in her voice. She blames me " I noticed a local police car pull up into the parking lot of the A & P.

"Reese, come on. You are not responsible for what other people do."

A single cop in a brown uniform and a wide-brimmed hat got out of his car and made his way through the parking lot. Toward me.

"Claudine, a cop's coming my way."

"What kind?"

"Looks like a State Trooper or maybe just a local sheriff or something. He's looking right at me."

The cop stopped when he got to the entrance of Bud's. He looked me up and down. I gave him a nod. He nodded back.

"Claudine," I said into the phone. "Try to help Lizzie find Sammy. I'll check in at Lizzie's place in a couple of hours. I'll leave a message for you if you aren't there. I'm at Bud's, a breakfast joint. I'll see if I can find anything else out from here." I hung up the phone. "How's it going, officer?" I asked.

"From the looks of it," he said, while resting the palm of his hand on the butt of his holstered gun, "I'm doing a whole lot better than you."

"Yeah," I answered. "I'm willing to bet you are."

"So what brings you to Margaretville?" the cop said. He wore dark, aviator-type sunglasses.

"My car broke down," I said. "I was driving around looking for a piece of property to buy."

"That's a funny way to dress when you plan on meeting a bunch of realtors," he said.

"I came up here on a whim. Didn't make any appointments or anything. And didn't expect to break down. Had one set of clothes on me."

"What about that lip you've got?"

"Look, officer. I realize I don't look as if I work on Wall Street, but if walking around with a busted lip and some old clothes is a crime in your town, well, then. . ."

"A crime? Who said anything about a crime?" he said with a smile, then pushed the rim of his hat up an inch. "I was having a cup of coffee at Bud's and I heard about this guy whose car broke down. So I came over here to see if you needed any help."

"Well, thanks for the concern, but I'm all right. My girlfriend is coming to pick me

up and she's bringing jumper cables and that ought to do it. The battery on the car was going and I should have replaced it but you know how those things go. . ." A couple of people coming into the store said hello to the cop. His name appeared to be Daniel.

"She coming all the way from the city?" he asked.

"Yup."

"We could have your car running before she even gets here," he said. "Save you both some time."

"I appreciate that," I said. "But I want her to see the area 'cause I broke down right next to a little farm that's for sale."

"What farm is that?"

"I don't know the name of it. I found it on one of those back roads." I shrugged my shoulders.

"And what back road is that?"

"I don't really know how to describe it. I'll know it when I see it." We stood there looking at one another. "We done here? Because I could use a cup of coffee, if you don't mind."

"I guess we're done. For now," he said, smiling at me as if he knew something about me that I was trying to keep a secret.

I opened the door to Bud's and took a seat at the counter. The place was small and narrow. A counter with stools ran along one side and tables lined the other wall. Garth was behind the counter flipping pancakes at the grill. Lilly was at the register cashing someone out. A minute later, she came over and said hello. Garth turned from the grill and greeted me as well.

"She coming to get you?" Lilly asked.

"Yup."

"You want some breakfast while you wait?" she asked. I didn't know what to say. I didn't have any money on me or plastic. I had nothing.

"I left my wallet in the car, I guess. But my girlfriend will have some when she gets here."

"Garth will fix you up something."

"A cheese omelette sound good?" Garth said, wiping his hands on his apron.

There were several couples at the tables eating breakfast. A few older men were sitting at the counter, talking. One was reading a newspaper.

The old man reading the paper looked me over and kept looking, even when Garth slid a plate in front of him with a tall stack of good-looking pancakes on it. Finally, the old man looked away and covered his pancakes in syrup. I watched him take a bite, relieved to no longer hold any interest for him.

Lilly served me a cup of coffee and I loaded it with sugar and cream. I drank it down in three long swallows. The two old men sitting closest to me resumed their conversation after they'd eaten some of their food.

"You know what I heard?" Jesse asked. "That they never moved all the bodies. They started to, but ran out of time. In a lot of cases, just the head stones got moved. I bet most New Yorkers don't know their drinking water sits on top of a bunch of graves."

One of the old timers was named Dick. The other was Raison.

"I got a serious problem on my hands," Dick went on. "Wagner told some foundation that my cows were at Shadow Brook again, violating clean water laws. Now, I'm getting

sued by an environmental group." He took a sip of coffee.

"That damn creek is dried up anyway," Raison said. "Besides everyone knows you do more to protect the land than any other farmer around. Hell, half your property you've let turn back into woodlands."

"Well, they don't care about that. They want to make an example out of me," Dick said.

"Your farm got laid out that way 200 years ago. It ain't your fault," Raison said.

"Fiscal terrorism," Dick said.

"What are you going to do?" Raison asked.

"I got 35 cows out there in an 80-acre pasture. I'm not going to do anything. My lawyer's working on it. He says this is bad press for the environmentalists, and they might back down if the public found out about it."

"You and Ned are the only dairy farmers left 'round here. We used to have thirty," Raison said. "I hate New Yorkers. They won't quit fucking with us. First they flood us out of house and home and now they're suing us over a little cow poop. It's just gonna get worse. Those New Yorkers won't be satisfied until there ain't a single farmer left. I wouldn't be surprised if we wake up one morning and find Margaretville missing too, swallowed up by the Pepacton like the others." Red spread across Lykes' cheeks. He looked younger now, closer to twenty than thirty.

"They'll do anything to avoid building a filtration plant," Dick said, "but that's exactly what they're gonna have to do. Can't get around it, no matter how much land they buy up."

"I know some people still never got their money from the first time the City come in here," Raison said. Everyone waited patiently for him to finish his thought. "They went

broke taking the City to court and now have nothing to show for it. You know Lykes Dimmit. His family never got their money from the land they owned. As is, they're stealing from us every second of the day. They should be paying us for letting them use our water."

"You fellows read the story in the paper about the fellow they suspect rigged that accident in the tunnel under New York City? What do you think his story is?" another old man said. He was reading Sunday's New York *Times*. I hadn't even realized it was Sunday. I looked around to see if there were any more Times laying around. There was a stack of them on a rack next to the front door but I didn't want to be obvious about it. I saw a paper sitting on a stool at the far end of the counter. From the thickness of it, it looked liked the *Times*.

"There a bathroom I could use?" I asked. "I'd like to clean up a little."

"Sure," Lilly said. "In the back."

I got up and snatched the paper off the stool as I walked by. Once into the bathroom with it, I locked the door and scanned the headlines. A found a picture of myself in the Metro section. It was a photo taken from when I was a senior in college. I looked at myself in the mirror above the sink. I was sporting a couple days' growth. My hair was thinning some on top. I had a scar on my upper lip. I looked changed, but not changed enough. Someone observant could easily see I was the same person in the photo.

The article next to the picture said my whereabouts remained unknown but that they were confident I hadn't left the country, that I was either in the city or traveling on a bus or something, hitchhiking maybe. There were reports of me being spotted as far away as Oklahoma, Los Angeles, places I'd never been to. Apparently, I was being spotted all over the country. One person said I was selling tomatoes on the side of the road in Tennessee.

I folded the Metro section and stuck it into the back of my pants and pulled my shirt over it. Then I unlocked the door and quietly walked to the corner and peered around it toward the counter. The old man was eating his pancakes, still looking at his newspaper. Just then, Daniel came in through the front door. Quickly, I ducked into a small storage room which led to the grill where Garth worked. I went toward the open doorway at the other end and listened.

"Where's our real estate investor?" the cop said.

"In the bathroom," Lilly said.

"How long has he been in there?"

"I don't know. About five minutes. You want another cup of coffee?" Lilly asked.

"Sure. He's taking his time in there, huh?"

"Now hold on," the old man with the paper said. "Daniel, come take a look at this photo of the guy they say tried to kill the mayor. He look familiar to you?"

It didn't take me long to run back to the bathroom and lock the door. I opened the window above the toilet and climbed out. I landed on a short strip of grass behind Bud's that ran along the upper bank of the stream. I climbed down the steep, rocky bank and ran along the edge of the water away from the bridge heading out of town. I figured the cop would call some back up before he went after me. With hope, that would give me enough time to find a good place to hide until Claudine made it. Of course, that would be the problem. Finding a place to hide. This town was going to be crawling with cops in less than half an hour probably. They'd bring in helicopters, tracking dogs, set up road blocks, you name it.

Which got me to thinking about Claudine. How was she going to even get close to here when she arrived in a couple of hours? And if she did, they'd probably arrest her.

Weren't they looking for her too? It was too late to try to call her at Shelly's mother's, even if I could get to a phone. She had probably already left. My only hope for her was that she'd notice all the commotion before getting too close to Margaretville and that she'd turn around and just keep on driving.

I slipped off a rock and my foot splashed into the cool stream. I shook off the water and looked behind me. No one had climbed down the bank after me. I reminded myself I was going to turn myself in anyway. Just stop running and go back to Bud's, I told myself. Stop your goddamn legs from moving and go back. Wasn't it better to let Daniel arrest me than have a pack of dogs corner me somewhere and tear me to shreds?

I remembered back to the day I first started running, when I was on the phone with Claudine, looking at the T.V. in the window of that shop, seeing a picture of myself. I ran through the park and hopped in that cab. Wasn't I tired of all that running? I didn't have any proof yet that Karl or Lykes or Richard were down in the tunnel that night, nor did I have any proof that they were working for Cresswell. Maybe Sammy was the only one to get that proof and look what happened to him.

And that was the thing. If I turned myself in and couldn't prove anything, Sammy suffered for nothing. And Cresswell gets away with everything. Whatever everything was.

Once you start running, it's hard to stop. I say that because I kept going. My feet kept climbing over rocks and I never slowed. I wasn't ready to end this thing, not yet anyway.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. That's the way it goes sometimes. I ran for several minutes before climbing up and sticking my head above the top of the bank. I was at eye level with the grassy path that ran along side the stream. Bud's was far behind me now, but I could see a piece of the building sticking out and I still didn't see anyone outside.

Maybe they were setting a trap for me up ahead. I dropped back down to the water's edge and kept going, but I knew it was important to alter my course. I couldn't run along the stream for much longer. I was never going to find a place to hide down there.

Up ahead a tree had fallen, spanning the narrow stream. I considered walking across it and going back toward the A & P. But then I thought I should just get away from people and crowds.

Along the bank, discarded motor oil cans and old air filters were abundant. There was even an old car battery. I climbed up a bit. The gas station sign, a winged horse flying over a globe, appeared as a sharp contrast to the steady green background of the Catskills Mountain range. A winged horse. That was just what I needed. I climbed up a bit more and peered out from above the dirt. Maybe, I thought, I could jump into the back of someone's truck or car without them noticing.

The first thing I saw was a big flat bed truck pulled up to a gas pump. On the bed, in two rows, fastened with rope, stood six Porto-Pottys--the same kind that were used in our tunnels --the same kind I saw in the old barn I'd been brought to. In front of me was perhaps all the proof I would need. Was there some kind of ore in those toilets?

Was this divine intervention or terrible luck? Whatever the case, this might have been the only gas station for miles in these remote parts. I had a decision to make.

No one was inside the truck. Whoever was driving must have been inside paying for gas. I scampered over the top of the bank, ran behind two parked cars, then hurried across the pavement until I got behind the rear wheel of the truck. I checked the side mirror to make sure no one was in the cab, then looked inside the Mini Mart. Guy's bald head stuck out above a magazine rack. He was handing the attendant some money. I didn't see anyone

else with him.

I climbed into the back of the flat bed. I noticed some boxes wedged between the Porto-Pottys. I lifted the flap of one and saw the same stuff I'd seen in Karl's apartment. Stolen blasting caps, spitter cords and detonators. I opened one of the Porto-Pottys. A couple of flies flew out, then back in. It smelled terrible inside. If they were transporting something like ore they were doing an excellent job of disguising the goods.

I stepped inside the Porto-Potty, allowing the door to close behind me. Green light and the hum of flies. I looked down into the toilet. I could see used toilet paper. It was too dark to see anything else. Maybe from the outside there was access to another compartment that was kept separate.

I was about to exit the toilet when I heard two voices talking.

"Relax, I have everything under control." I recognized the voice. It belonged to Karl. "Here, have one of these." I heard the sound of a beer opening. They must have been standing right outside the Porto-Potty.

"You've been drinking too many of those," the other voice said. It belonged to Guy.

"I told you. I work better this way."

"Just so long as it's all finished by tomorrow."

"Of course it will. Just a couple more blasts and we'll be through. Everything else is in place."

"I'll bring Reese over tonight." Suddenly, there was a wail of police sirens. "What the heck is that all about?" Guy asked.

"Don't know," Karl answered. "But let's get the fuck out of here." I heard the doors slam on the truck and felt the vibrations as it started up. I braced myself against the sides of

the toilet. The sirens grew continually louder until it was all I could hear. It sounded like someone had tripped the alarm at Fort Knox when they still kept the nation's gold reserves there.

Well, I'd found my hiding place. At least for the moment. It wasn't romantic or comfortable and it didn't smell too good, but how many hiding places were comfortable, romantic, or sweet smelling? I figured I could jump ship anytime I wanted provided they drove far enough away and I survived the fall and they didn't see me doing it.

However, it didn't take long before I felt as if I was going to pass out from the fumes. That, and the heat. There were vents on the door and I pressed my nose to the screen, inhaling deeply. I tried to see out, but all I could see was a small patch of ground traveling swiftly by us.

I wished there was a way to leave a trail of bread crumbs behind so Claudine would have a way of finding me. I needed rescuing, not just from Karl and Guy, but from myself. I wondered if I had some kind of death wish. Or maybe I was just being that fifth grader who climbs trees really high to try to impress the girls. Only this time I'd climbed so high, I didn't know how to get back down. I was out there swaying on the end of a branch and no was even bothering to look my way.

Chapter Eleven

About forty minutes later, the truck rolled to a stop. I'd already climbed out of the Porto-Potty about ten minutes earlier once we'd gotten off the main road. I was squatting out of sight between two of the toilets. We'd been going for some time uphill on a dirt road, the woods getting thicker and thicker as we went. I kept thinking about jumping off but I wanted to see where Guy and Lykes were headed, so I waited.

Now, while the dust from the tires was still settling and before they had a chance to open their doors, I jumped from the truck and ran straight into the thick brush that grew alongside the road.

If I thought the place they'd taken me the first night was rural, this might as well have been undiscovered country. The road we'd driven up was completely hidden beneath a thick blanket of leaves, on the ground and hanging above it. There were boulders and cliffs all the way up the mountain's side. About twenty feet away from the truck stood an old wooden shack on a crumbling foundation of rocks. All but obscured by tall maple trees, an old wooden water tower stood off to the right of the shack. At least, it looked like a water tower.

A breeze stirred the leaves, and with it came the smell of the Porto-Pottys. Karl and Guy both got out of the truck. I crouched behind a spot of thick ferns.

"Where the hell is Lykes? He was supposed to be here by now," I heard Guy say.

"How the fuck should I know?" Karl said.

I risked a peek and saw Karl carrying a gasoline canister. He went over to a generator

set up between the shack and the water tower and poured the fuel into the tank. Then he pulled the cord and started it up.

"Because if this doesn't work, Mr. Cresswell will be very disappointed," Guy said to Karl as they went to pick up the boxes of explosives from off the back of the truck. "Does that idea impress you at all?"

"None of that will matter if you let that top box fall. You're not carrying a box of frozen produce, man, you're carrying explosives. You need to respect that," Karl said. They carried the boxes toward the shack.

Once they disappeared inside, I crept from the ferns to the cover of a large, thorny bush to get a better look. There were no windows to the shack. The only way I was going to see inside was to get up to the open door. I crawled toward a large tree growing about five feet from the shack, and stood behind its trunk. I listened. I heard nothing but birds, chipmunks and squirrels. I spun away from the tree and leaned up against the side of the shack. From there I made my way over to the door.

Just as I was about to peer inside, I heard Karl's voice. It sounded far away and seemed to echo, which made little sense to me, unless he was inside some kind of metal bunker, which I guessed was possible. I quickly made it back behind the tree as they emerged squinting into the daylight. They both had gray dirt on their pants and shirts and they were out of breath.

Maybe this was where that underground smelter was. Maybe this was where they brought the ore and turned it into bars, or coins, or whatever.

Next, I watched as they backed the truck up to within feet of the water tower's wooden base. As they moved the truck, I ran around to the other side of the shack and

watched them from a safer distance, hidden in the shadows. I noticed a silver rifle in the truck's gun rack. I wondered if it was the same rifle used on Lykes.

Karl pulled a retractable plastic tube out from beneath the water tower. It was attached to a large motorized pump, which I hadn't noticed before. Karl dropped the end of the tube into the bed of the truck.

"Lykes is supposed to take care of this," Guy said as he opened the doors of the Porto-Pottys. He stuck the tube down into one of the toilets. Karl started up the motor on the pump which ran off the juice from the generator. The tube began to jump as it sucked up the contents of the toilets. . . I tried following where the outflow must have been going, but from where I was I couldn't tell. Were they illegally dumping the sewage into the woods?

After they had sucked the contents of the toilets dry, Karl pulled the rest of the beers from the front seat.

"I better get on over to the house and check on Lykes," Guy said

"He's probably out hunting raccoons," Karl said, opening a beer.

Guy got in, turned the flatbed around and drove off, stirring up dirt and leaves along the overgrown driveway.

"Stupid fuck," Karl said. "So fucking worried about Cresswell. What about me?" He was shouting now. "You should be worried about me!"

I waited in the shadows to see what Karl would do next. He sat down on the stone slab in front of the shack and drank his beer. Soon, his features relaxed. His jaw slackened, his nose seemed to droop, his bottom lip eventually unfurled. He got up and went back inside the shack. I waited a few minutes to see if he'd come back out. When he didn't, I came out of the woods and walked up to the side of the shack near the open door.

There wasn't much to see inside. Some old farming tools hung on the walls. There was a broken chair. I put my head further in and still didn't see Karl. Or the boxes. He'd vanished. Now you see Karl. Now you don't.

I went over to the toilets again and looked for hidden compartments but I couldn't find any. I went back to the shack. Moving inside, I noticed a couple shortened floorboards lying off to the side in the corner of the room. Careful not to make any noise, I moved closer. I saw a hole that led straight down into some kind of basement. Cool air crept up a narrow set of stone steps. A light was on.

I crept down the uneven steps. A steep narrow passageway ran for twelve feet, then turned right. At the end of another short passageway, a heavy door stood ajar. I opened it and the walls fell away. I found myself standing at the opening of a cavern. Steps had been carved into the stone which led to the bottom. Along the ceiling, wooden support beams helped hold back the layers of rock. Two naked bulbs burned, powered, I guessed, by the generator outside.

But I could tell this space wasn't man-made. The walls were not the work of dynamite or a chisel. This was natural, made thousands of years ago by an underground river, which had long since run dry. The erosion caused a shift in the rocks which opened up this large space. I remembered seeing something like this in a text book I'd read about certain caves our neanderthal brothers had lived in that were created after the last ice age as glaciers retreated and left gaping scars in the earth, both above and below the surface.

A miniature train track had been installed to run along the damp walls, though it was in disrepair now. One caboose still sat on the tracks, but all the other cars were missing. I pictured Lykes coming here as a child to play. How many other people knew about this

place?

A large white PVC pipe with a valve attached stuck out of the cavern wall, traveled down, then across the floor and disappeared into a tunnel on the far side of the room. Several other tunnels started at the cavern and ran in different directions, but only the one with the PVC pipe running into it was illuminated by another light bulb. Though I couldn't hear anything, I figured this was where Karl and the boxes had to be.

I was experiencing déjà vu. Me, underground, following Karl. Based on what happened the first time, I found no comfort in the feeling. I looked behind me. Then I walked across the cavern and entered the tunnel. I had to duck my head and bend at the waist. It ran straight ahead for what seemed like a quarter mile maybe. It sloped down gradually, then the grade increased. At first I considered the idea that someone had been prospecting beneath these mountains, looking for gold or diamonds, but there was none of that down here. No veins of ore that I could see. Just plates of ancient rock, occasionally held up with timber supports. Besides, this tunnel didn't look man-made either.

The whole time I was down there, I kept wondering where the smelter was. Why hadn't they set the operation up in the cavern? Where was all the ore?

Along the walls were cut-outs where candles had once sat, and graffiti covered much of the smoother outcroppings. At one point early in the tunnel, fresh water dripped down into a bowl-shaped pool carved into the stone. I tasted it with a finger, then drank some. It was good. Cold, pure.

Why hadn't this place been turned into a tourist attraction? Hell, build a hotel over this thing and people would actually pay to come to a small town like Halcottsville during seasons besides fall.

I followed the PVC pipe until I came to a small cave-like room that sprouted from the tunnel's wall. It was darker in there but I could make out a small cot on one side of the room. In the middle was an old coffee pot which sat on a grill placed on top of two rocks. In the farther corner of the room was a pile of blankets, and next to that were the boxes of explosives along with several empty buckets. There was also a smell in the room of something rotten.

I ducked back into the tunnel and continued on. The tunnel split into two, but I stayed with the PVC pipe. The walls drew narrow, then widened again. Finally, I heard something squeaking and footsteps. Then I saw Karl, bent over, walking backwards, coming my way. He was wearing a hard hat with a miner's lamp attached. I tip-toed back down the tunnel, fully expecting Karl to hear me, but he didn't. I made it to the side room and stood along one of the walls. Soon Karl passed. As he went, he laid down parallel electrical wire from a large spool he carried. Charger line. The spool squeaked on the screwdriver he'd stuck in the middle. He went by without even looking in the room. But then, a few minutes later, I heard him coming back. I pressed further into the corner of the room. He came in and went straight for the boxes. With his back toward me, he picked one up, turned, and carried it off. He never saw me.

I waited long enough for him to leave the tunnel, then followed. As I neared the cavern, I lay flat so I could see further ahead. Karl was attaching the lines to an igniter switch. But he didn't have time to set anything off. Guy had returned and was in the cavern, yelling.

"Reese is gone. He's fucking gone," Guy yelled. Karl dropped what he was doing, and stood up.

"He climbed out?"

"I don't know what happened, but I can't find Lykes either."

"Shit," Karl said. He disappeared from my view. Then I heard footsteps and a door closing and then they were gone. I looked further into the cavern just to make sure. Well, whatever their plan was, I hoped this put a kink into it. And I planned to put in a few more. I didn't know how much time I had before they returned so I had to work fast.

I turned and went back into the tunnel, following the twin wires. I banged my head and was surprised it was only the first time. I would have loved to get my hands on a hard hat. As I continued along, the lights in the tunnel went out. Karl and Guy must have turned off the generator. It was now blacker than black. I sat down on top of the PVC pipe and tried to figure out what to do next. It wouldn't be much fun down here until the lights came back on. There were a few times while working on C.W.T. #3 when the lights went out, so I'd seen this kind of darkness before. It was easy to convince yourself you'd gone blind. Don't try waving your fingers in front of your face. You won't see them. We all stood still until someone cracked a joke, then we all started laughing, and kept laughing until the lights came back on. Somehow, I didn't think me laughing alone would offer much comfort. But I couldn't just sit still either. I didn't know when Karl would return. It might be an hour, or it might have been the next day. Which meant that if I planned on doing anything, I had to do it now.

I got up, felt the ground for the wires, picked them up and continued following them further into the tunnel. My lower back started to ache as I kept low, trying to protect my head. It was difficult too, straddling the PVC pipe, whose purpose I began to guess at. Maybe it was for ventilating the far reaches of the tunnels. As I went along, the tunnel's

downward slope increased.

Finally the wires in my hand grew taught as I approached their ends. I felt the tunnel walls tenderly, as if I was caressing a woman. The wires were attached to what I could feel was a relay of spitter cords which in turn was attached to blasting caps, all arranged to blow up the dynamite which had been pushed into the holes Karl must have drilled. Why was Karl bothering to make the tunnel longer? Was there something on the other side he was trying to get to? My sense of direction was turned around. I had no idea if the tunnel's end faced north, south, east, or west.

I released the cords from the caps and pulled the wires free. When Karl went to detonate his handiwork, he was going to get a surprise. I turned around and pulled the free ends of the wires back with me. I had to go slower this time since the wires weren't leading me anymore. I dragged a foot along the PVC pipe. Eventually, after hitting my head twice more, I made it back to the cavern. There wasn't any light there either. After I felt above my head, I stood up straight and stretched out my back. Then I leaned against the cavern wall, trying to get my bearings. Ahead should have been the stairs that led out. The PVC pipe would take a turn to the left halfway across the cavern floor.

I touched the pipe and continued to follow it until I found the other side of the cavern wall. I dropped the ends of the wires. Now, the wires formed a big loop. I followed the pipe back into the tunnel, feeling the four wires as I went, and kept going until I found the end of the loop. There I tucked the returning wires beneath the pipe. I did this all the way back to the cavern, hiding the wires as I went so that Karl would only see the wires leading out from the triggering device but not returning. Then I felt along the cavern walls for another tunnel, hoping I'd find one not too far from the PVC pipe. I came to a fissure just wide enough to

fit my body into. At its entrance, I lay flat and felt across the cavern floor for the pipe. It wasn't there. I crawled forward and reached out again. This time I felt the pipe. From underneath it I pulled the ends of the wires free and ran then into the fissure. I didn't know how obvious the wires would be when the lights came on, but I had to just hope for the best. I reached my hand back out to feel for the pipe and followed it back into the tunnel. I kept a hand on the walls and waited for the room to open up on my right. Finally it did and I went in. Then I felt along the wall for the boxes.

I came to the pile of blankets first. The bad smell I noticed in the room was worse. I passed my hand over the blankets and felt something beneath them. I jumped back and fell. I got up and tried to run out the room, hit a wall, and couldn't fucking find the way out.

It was a body. There was someone lying dead beneath the blankets. It was pitch black and there was a dead person down here with me. Some part of my brain worked through the fear and realized I'd made it out of the room already and was feeling up the tunnel wall for a door that wasn't there, never would be, and somehow, that part of my brain told me about it. Okay. But which way led back to the cavern?

I tried to calm myself. Take a deep breath. Exhale. I had to reorient myself. Find the side room again, I told myself. But the body was in there. Yes, but if I wanted to get back to the cavern, I had to know which way to go.

I felt along both tunnel walls, looking for the side room. After another brief panic attack, one of the walls fell away and I found it. From that starting point, I got my bearings and found my way back. Once at the cavern entrance, I followed the pipe to the other side, felt along the wall for the stairs leading up, found them and climbed up to the door. It was locked. There was no way out.

I sat on the steps and tried to think. I had a plan and should just stick with it, I told myself. Yes, there was a body, but it was already dead. Nothing I could do about it. It might be Lykes. That, for me, was the best case scenario, though it wouldn't have made any sense. It would've meant that Karl knew about the shooting last night and knew I wasn't where I was supposed to be. Unless the body was put down here without him knowing. But he couldn't have missed that smell.

It might be Sammy. Maybe they planned to show me his body at some point to try to break me down further. I hoped to God it wasn't Sammy.

It might be. . . I decided not to think about any other possibilities. What if it wasn't even a person? Maybe it was an animal. Or maybe it was just a sack of potatoes.

I thought about seeing my father's body lying in the casket. I was only ten at the time. It didn't look anything like him. First of all, they'd put him in a suit. Second, because his head had been smashed in, they'd put a hat on him. And third, I saw the stitches they used to sew his mouth closed. It was an image that had haunted me for years. I didn't want another.

Yes, I saw Lykes die, I saw his body, but I couldn't really see him, his face, the bullet holes. So I told myself it was a good thing it was so dark down here. At least there wouldn't be another image to haunt me.

I got back up, followed the wall until I felt the pipe, then moved toward the tunnel. I was getting good at it, finding my way around in the dark. Instead of stopping at the room, I passed it and went all the way to the end of the tunnel. Bumped my head only once. There I carefully removed the materials I wanted. I stuck the caps and fuses and the stick of dynamite into separate pockets. Then I made my way back.

At the fissure in the cavern, I assembled the explosives to the charge and stuck the

whole mess as deep into the wall as I could reach. The detonation wouldn't be enough to do any real damage to the structure of the cavern, but it would be enough to scare the shit out of Karl. And give me the advantage of surprise.

I felt along the walls, passed the tunnel with the pipe going into it and kept going along the edge of the cavern, feeling for another one of the tunnels I'd noticed when I first entered. I found one and carefully felt my way inside. It didn't lead far but it seemed long enough to keep me hidden from anyone who might enter the cavern. I sat down, leaning my back against the wall and waited.

I hadn't eaten anything proper in days, hadn't slept well. What I wouldn't give for a big, juicy burger and a cola. And a big soft bed. Claudine's bed. Me sleeping for fourteen hours.

As I lay there ready to fall asleep, I thought about the information Claudine had given me about Cresswell and Milton. Milton would throw a bone Cresswell's way. But what was big enough to kill over? I didn't think any smelting was going on down here. So if it didn't have anything to do with valuable ore, then what? I thought back to the night before the accident, in O'Rourke's, where Lykes began talking about The Takings. The debate between the mayors had set him off. They'd been talking about the quality of New York City's water. They were talking about whether or not a six-billion dollar filtration plant was needed.

That was it! Six billion dollars was worth killing over. Worth killing a lot if you're someone like Cresswell whose ego was big enough for all of us. It would become the single largest public works project in a decade, not counting the construction of City Water Tunnel #3. Then I considered a reason Cresswell would choose the tunnels to stage his "accident:" to further discredit the Department of Environmental Protection, whose image had already

been tarnished by a few other deadly accidents in the tunnels. If bidding for the filtration plant ever started, how could the DEP win the contract when their lack of security had almost killed the mayor? Of course, Milton becoming mayor was only half of the equation. The need for the filtration plant had to be dire. How was this to be accomplished? By having the water become unsafe to drink without it being filtered. And how was this to be accomplished? Perhaps by paying off scientists to alter their data. Or by poisoning the reservoirs. How were they going to do it? It wasn't like it could be a one shot deal. You couldn't just back up a truck and dump poisons into the reservoirs to make the water a threat to public safety. Not without being caught. It would have to be a long running campaign to give the poisons time to build to such a point that reservoirs within the city itself like the Kensico Reservoir and the Central Park Reservoir became contaminated. So the question remained for me. How would they poison the water? The answer had to do with what Karl was doing down here, and it had to do with the Porto-Pottys. Human waste was one of the most toxic of all substances to humans if ingested. As I considered the possible ways to poison water, I fell asleep.

Chapter Twelve

The explosion woke me. I didn't know where I was at first. Then it all came back. I stuck my head out into the cavern. The lights were on again. Dust was everywhere. Small pieces of rock were falling. Karl was on his back.

I crawled to my feet, ignoring the stiffness in my joints, and went over to him. The dust was thick and I began to cough.

Karl had a growing red spot on his shirt. When I leaned over him, I saw a sliver of rock sticking out of his chest. I felt for a pulse in his neck. Couldn't find one. I knelt, listening. He was still breathing.

He jerked and opened his eyes. They looked directly into mine and I saw the shock register there. The hairs on the back of my neck stood. Karl reached and grabbed my arm. I kept still and let him. He lifted his head off the ground and dust fell from his hair. He tried to get up but didn't get far. He lay back down on the cavern floor. I looked at the piece of rock in his chest, then back to his face. His lips moved as he tried to say something.

"I killed you," he managed to whisper. At first, I thought he was confused about who was killing who. I think he saw the confusion on my face. "At the dam," he whispered again. "You fell into the water. You never came back up."

"Why did you shoot Lykes?" I asked.

His eyes rolled around in his head as he gasped for more air.

"Thought it was you," he said, focusing his eyes back to me. "Cresswell never trusted me to do the job, but I . . . but I . . ." I counted six more breaths. Then he looked at his chest,

at the stone protruding there. He looked at me again, and I could tell he knew what had happened. He knew I had killed him. After another short breath, he was dead.

The image of Karl dying would stay with me forever, just like the image of my father inside his casket had, only this time, I alone was responsible. It wasn't much fun to have no one else to blame for the ghosts that haunt your life. It was a hopeless feeling and even today when I close my eyes, I see the rock jutting out of Karl's chest. I see the recognition in his eyes and it makes me want to jump out of my own skin and run.

But right then, standing over Karl, I thought about Joanne. About her bruises, the shape of her life. Karl wasn't going to hurt her anymore. He wasn't going to show up to work drunk. He wasn't going to mess with my life or anyone else's. I tried to close his eyes, but they wouldn't stay. With him staring out, I went through his pockets. He'd pissed his pants. When I found the set of keys, they were wet.

I left his side and checked out the fissure I'd blown up. It was about twice its former size. But nothing really happened to the cavern itself. I told myself I couldn't have guessed a piece of rock would find its way into Karl's heart. Yes, I should have considered the possibility Karl could've gotten hurt. But at most I would've thought he'd get only cuts and bruises.

I went into the side room and lifted up the blanket. There wasn't any body there. Either Karl decided to move the body to another place or I'd freaked out for nothing. There wasn't even anything I could have mistaken for a body. Just a pile of blankets. And the smell was gone.

I went to the stairs feeling tired and weary. I climbed out of the cavern and went through the passageways. As I neared the stairs that led up into the shack, I heard a steady

noise I hadn't heard before. It wasn't the generator. As I climbed the steps, it became louder until, when I was standing in the shack, it was nearly deafening.

Rain was pounding against the metal roof and coming in through the door. The shack suddenly lit up with a flash of lightening. I went to the door and looked out. I couldn't tell what time of day it was. Thunder echoed across the mountain side. At the next flash, I saw the truck and wondered where Guy was. He'd be in the shack to get out of the rain if he was up here at all, I figured. I waited a few minutes to see if it would let up. When it didn't, I ran out into the rain. By the time I grabbed the door handle on the truck and jumped in, I was soaked. Water dripped off my chin and from the ends of my hair. I shook my head and wiped the water from my face. Rain drummed against windshield and roof. Trees swayed in the wind. Lightening flashed across the sky. The silver rifle was gone from the gun rack.

I fit a key into the ignition and started up the truck. With the windshield wipers going and the lights on, I turned the truck around and headed down the steep driveway. The tires slipped in and out of the muddy ruts. On the left side of the drive, large outcrops of rocks appeared and seemed to block the way as the mountain rose next to me. On the right, the ground swiftly disappeared. I rode the brakes hard, trying to keep from either plowing into the mountain side or slipping off the road.

The driveway curved to the right. As I came out of the turn, I saw a car coming. Its lights were on. I couldn't see who was driving car and I didn't care. There was room for only one vehicle on the road and I decided it was going to be mine. I had the truck and I had all the down hill momentum. The car was going to have to get out of the way. It was as simple as that.

I let up on the brake. The truck broke into a head long gallop. I honked the horn to

let the other driver know that I wasn't going to slow or stop. The car continued to come forward anyway. With the rain so hard, it was possible the other driver didn't hear the horn. And anyway, there was nowhere for the car to go even if it wanted to get out of the way.

By the time I remembered my seat belt, it was too late. The car hit the side of the mountain as the truck's fender smashed into the driver's door. The truck ricocheted off and swerved the other way. The front right tire slipped from the road. I jerked the wheel back, trying to regain control, but the truck didn't respond. The next thing I knew, the truck had slid completely off the road. Then it skidded down the mountain, crashing through trees and brush. There was nothing to do except hold on. Then there was a big smashing sound as steel bent and wood snapped.

The impact was so strong it threw me into the passenger seat, right up against what was left of the cracked passenger window. The truck sat nearly on its side, its engine still racing. I took a quick inventory of my body, making sure I didn't have bones sticking out or bled from anywhere obvious. I seemed all right for the moment.

I looked across the driver's side and up the mountain towards the road above, but couldn't make out much through the rain that was still falling. I reached across the bench, grabbed the steering wheel and pulled myself up. I cranked down the driver's window and began to climb out. I was half way through when I saw him running, sliding toward me, his arm extended, holding up the silver rifle.

"Don't fucking move, Reese," Guy yelled across the short distance.

I wriggled my way free and fell to the ground. I heard the gun go off. A bullet rammed its way into the belly of the truck.

What was I going to do? Even if I was able to out run Guy down the mountain side,

I felt sure I'd end up getting lost in those woods. I imagined trying to live off berries and raw squirrel. I'd last two days at most, and then I'd find a dry cave, if there was one, and lay down in it to die. They'd find my skeleton a year from now, curled up into a ball. I had no strength left.

"Don't shoot," I shouted. I stood up slowly, raising my arms above my head.

Guy neared me, his bald head shedding water, his clothes sticking to his body, a hand gun pointing at me. I saw a cut across the bridge of his nose, the blood mixing in with the rain.

"Guy, listen to me," I shouted above the rain. "Karl killed Lykes. He told me."

"What?" Guy yelled, stepping closer. He was still trying to catch his breath.

"Lykes is dead. Karl killed him," I shouted, squinting to see.

"How'd you get the truck?" Guy shouted, using the gun like a pointer.

"There was an accident. Karl's dead, too."

"I should kill you right now just for the hell of it." Guy yelled. "I think you broke my nose again."

"Go ahead," I yelled. "But who's going to finish the job for you? There's no one left to do it but me."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" he yelled.

"I'll show you Karl's body," I shouted.

We stood there in the rain while Guy considered whether or not to kill me. I began to wonder about my choice not to run. Maybe if I'd gotten away I would've come upon a house where a nice couple lived, maybe Lilly and Garth, and maybe they would've let me in and allowed me to use their phone. Change into dry clothes. Sleep on a couch under a thick

blanket. Maybe Garth owned a gun. I could steal it from him.

"All right," he shouted. "Get going."

I started up the mountain. We both kept losing our footing, but every time I looked back, Guy was watching me, his gun ready. I saw the truck behind us, up against a huge tree.

Finally, we made it to the road. I was so tired I could barely walk. I got in the car by the driver's side door and slid over. Guy got in next. He backed the car away from the mountain. The hood was bent up and only one head light worked. He drove with one hand while holding the gun in the other. The front tires spun in the mud, and at one point, we slid backwards. Eventually, Guy was able to pick up some speed. We flew up the drive then and came to a skidding halt just in front of the shack.

Once inside, Guy stood above the opening in the floor and shouted down Karl's name. Puddles formed at our feet.

"That's stupid," I said. "Even if he was alive, he'd never be able to hear you."

"Get the fuck down there," he said, and I started down the steps. When we got to the cavern, we both stopped and stared at Karl. Guy stood there, rubbing his bald head, his brow furrowed. "Jesus. What happened to him?"

"Rock from an explosion entered his chest," I said.

"I can see that. How'd you rig it?"

"Rig it? I didn't do anything. He must have had one too many beers. This stuff is dangerous. I've seen Karl get reckless before."

"Fuck him," Guy said. "He's been nothing but a pain in my ass since I've known him. Where's Lykes body?"

Guy's callousness towards Karl's death made my skin crawl. Where was the human

in him? How deep did his fear keep him?

"I don't know. I thought it was under those blankets in that other room, but it isn't."

"How do I know you didn't kill them both?"

"I guess you don't, but I didn't just ram a piece of rock into Karl's chest with my bare hands. It was an accident, I admit it. I was just trying to distract him so I could get the fuck out of here."

"Tell me where Lykes' body is," he said, pointing the gun at me with renewed energy.

"I swear I don't know. But just before Karl died, he told me he shot him by mistake, thinking it was me."

"How'd you get out of the silo in the first place?"

"Lykes let me out," I said.

"Why?"

"He took me to the reservoir. Started giving me speeches. Then we got shot at by someone standing in the woods. It was Karl."

"So, Karl shot at you too?" Guy asked.

"I got nicked. Then I jumped into the reservoir. I stayed under a long time. Karl thought I was dead. Look, every part of this plan is going wrong for you," I said. "You know what that means. Cresswell's going to have you killed."

"That's *Mr.* Cresswell. And no he won't. I'll see this thing through and, like you said, you're going to help me. Then, I'm going to take all the credit because you'll be dead. How does that sound?" he said.

"Not too good," I said. "But who knows? Maybe working together will bring us closer. You know, maybe we'll become friends."

Guy leaned forward and popped me in the mouth with the handle of the gun. When was I going to learn?

"That's a love tap between friends. Want another?"

"No thanks."

"Then shut the fuck up and just do what I tell you."

* * * *

It took the remainder of the day to hook things up the way Karl had it. Guy took Polaroid flash pictures of me while I worked. I slid fresh dynamite into the holes Karl had drilled. The camera whirled. "Smile pretty," he said more than once. He watched my every move the whole time. I kept thinking of another way to rig the explosives, but Guy knew a surprising amount about the way things were supposed to look. I ran the wires back through the tunnel.

We dragged Karl's body into the side-room so we wouldn't have to keep looking at it. Then, I detonated the dynamite. Three seconds later I felt air come up through the tunnel, carrying with it the smell of burnt powder and rock dust. We gave it time to settle.

Guy brought me back up to the shack where we had lunch. The rain had let up and was now just a drizzle. Guy sat at one end of the shack while I sat at the other. The gun sat in Guy's lap.

"You want his beer?" Guy asked.

"Sure," I said, willing to take the calories anywhere I could get them. Guy rolled the can across the floor to me.

The beer went down easy and I felt drunk right away. I'd wolfed down Karl's sandwich in seconds and polished off his bag of chips. "See? We are becoming friends.

Sharing a meal together. . ."

"I'm still going to kill you when this is all over. It's how Mr. Cresswell wants it. Everything's going to look like you did it."

"What's Mr. Cresswell have over you anyway?" I asked.

"Nothing. You wouldn't understand." The cut across his nose had scabbed, but the swelling had just begun. I didn't think now was a good time to mention it.

"Try me," I said.

"He's a man with great vision. You met him."

"I'm not as impressed as you are. I don't think he's worth killing over."

"I told you you wouldn't understand. He's interested in the greater good of all mankind and if people stand in the way of that, that's their fault."

"What's the big plan up here, anyway?"

"You don't need to know that."

"You're going to kill me anyway. What's the big deal? Just tell me."

"No fucking way. I've learned to keep my mouth shut the hard way," he said.

"You're no fun," I said.

"We should get back to work," he said, getting up.

"So Cresswell, I mean, Mr. Cresswell, is a great man," I said. "His step-son a great man too?"

Guy froze in his tracks. "What are you talking about?"

"Alex Milton. He's a great man too? I'm not the only one who knows that Mr. Cresswell's illegally financing Milton's campaign," I said, getting up. "That once Milton gets into office he's going to give the contract to build the new filtration plant to your boss."

"Who else thinks the way you do?" Guy pointed the gun at me.

I thought of telling him that if he didn't let me go, someone would release to the press proof that Cresswell was financing the campaign. But then I thought about Claudine. She was in enough danger already, just being associated with me as closely as she was. I was afraid of putting her in even greater risk. Wouldn't Cresswell assume Claudine knew what I knew?

"It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure it out. That's why Cresswell tried to kill the mayor in the accident."

"Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Why you getting so upset, Guy? Is it because you're thinking if I figured it out, someone else probably figured it all out too? Like the cops. You ever wonder why they never caught up to me?" I said. "Because they knew I wasn't involved. But they figured they'd let me fly on my own, that sooner or later I'd lead them to the quarry. You think they don't know where I am? The New York City Police Department? They caught the guys that blew a hole in the World Trade Center. You think they'd let a guy who nearly killed the mayor slip through their fingers? I doubt it. They know where I am and they know what's going on."

"What are they waiting for then? Why didn't they stop Karl from shooting Lykes? Why aren't they stopping us from finishing this project?"

"Because they want Cresswell and Milton. They'll wait until you or I lead them to the proof they're looking for."

"Aw, you're full of shit. I don't believe any of it."

"How do you think I got to the A & P and found you and Karl? You think it was

chance I got picked up on the side of the road and given a ride directly to where you two were headed? I got picked up by a pair undercover cops. Everything that's happened, they've allowed it to happen."

"No. You're just trying to stall to keep me from killing you," Guy said, but I could see him thinking it out, wondering if it was at all true.

"Maybe you ought to talk to Cresswell about it first before we do anything else. He might want to hear about this." Mentioning Cresswell again was a mistake. Guy feared him more than he did anything, including the cops. Everything he did was for Cresswell's sake. Guy lived and breathed to please Cresswell.

"No. Mr. Cresswell gave me a job to do, and that's what I'm going to do. If any of what you said was true, Mr. Cresswell would know about it. He's got the fucking police working for *him*. No way what you said was true."

* * * *

Guy had me carry the buckets I'd seen in the side room to the head of the tunnel. It wasn't any fun to see Karl lying there under the blankets. I couldn't image what it would be like working in a morgue. I would keep expecting to see a ghost. It wouldn't have surprised me.

Back at the head of the tunnel, I filled the buckets with debris from the blast. It was ball-busting work. I wondered who'd done this before me? It was hard to imagine Karl doing it. I carried the muck buckets to where the tunnel forked. In the adjacent tunnel, I dumped the debris on top of the pile of rocks already there. As some of the rocks rolled down the pile, I noticed something very un-rock like protruding. It was a human hand. I called for guy to come look. Together me moved more of the rocks and we saw Lykes face covered in dust.

"You put him in here?"

"No, I told you. Karl killed him. How could I bring his body up here? Why would I?"

"Why would Karl? Why wouldn't he bury him out in the woods somewhere?"

"Maybe he wasn't dead yet. I was far away from him. Maybe he was still alive and he requested to Karl that if he should die to please burying him here in the cavern. It's where he grew up, isn't it?"

"You sure can make up a lot of stories," Guy said.

"I'm just guessing, but I the sure fuck didn't do this to him and I wouldn't have any cause to bring him here, either."

We looked at Lykes' face for a few more moments. Then Guy made me get back to work.

As I filled the buckets at the head of the tunnel for a third time, I noticed a more steady flow of air. I reached my hand through a crevice between the rocks and felt nothing but more space. Apparently, we'd gotten through to either another tunnel or cavern or. . . I put my ear to the rocks and thought I heard the sound of soft rain falling on leaves. Had we made it through to the outside?

I remembered as a kid watching the cartoon *Valley of the Dinosaurs*, about this family on a rafting trip who got caught in a whirlpool and came out on the other side of a water fall, at a place where prehistoric animals still roamed. But they could never find their way back to civilization. I felt like that, unable to find my way back to a normal life. And who knew? Maybe on the other side of this tunnel, brontosauruses and tyrannosauruses lived among ferns and volcanoes. Of course, the big differences between the family in *Valley of the Dinosaurs*

and me was that, one, I was utterly alone in my journey, and two, I was going to be killed before it even began. I wasn't even going to be given the opportunity to be eaten by a tyrannosaurus. I was regretting more and more my impulse to look into the back of the truck. If only some of the stuff I'd tried to sell to Guy was true. That the cops knew what was going on and were waiting in the shadows, ready to stop all this.

Chapter Thirteen

Guy saw me pressing my ear against the rocks. "You get through?" he said.

"I guess. There's just space after these rocks."

"That's it then. Fill up the other buckets and let's go."

As I threw more pieces of rock into the buckets, the hole became larger until I wondered if I could fit through. It could be another way out, though where it led, I didn't know yet.

On the last trip, I could barely make it up the incline while carrying the buckets. I kept having to stop and rest. Guy waited behind me with the gun. Finally, I dumped the last two buckets onto the pile.

Guy had me get rope from the side room. Then, in the cavern not far from where I'd hid the dynamite in the fissure, he had me tie my ankles together. Then he had me lay on my stomach with my arms crossed at the wrists behind my back. He put a knee in my back and began to tie up my hands. He yanked and pulled at the rope until I lost all feeling in my arms. Then he pulled me to a seated position and leaned me against the wall. He checked the knots around my ankles. Then, for good measure, he tied my knees together.

"Don't go no where," he said on his way out. He locked the door behind him. Five minutes later, the lights went out.

I was so weak, I felt sure I wouldn't have the strength to fight my way out from the ropes, and I was right. I did the only thing I was capable of doing at that moment. I fell asleep.

I awoke to Guy kicking me in the ribs. "All right man, this is it."

Have you ever just wanted to be dead? You're so worn out, so tired and in pain, so helpless and frightened that relief is all you want, anyway you can get it, and being dead starts seeming like a pretty good answer to all your problems. I was starting to feel that way. I kept wondering, if Guy wanted to kill me, why hadn't he done it already?

I tried to say something, but my mouth was so dry no words came out. My shoulders and neck were numb and my hips felt like they were about to explode.

"This is a trail run," Guy said. "Just to make sure everything's working. So you sit tight. This won't take long." I noticed then that his back pocket, where he'd stuck all the photos he'd taken of me, was empty. He'd stashed them somewhere.

I worked up the last bit of saliva I had left. "How many more lives you going to ruin for him?"

Guy froze and turned back toward me. "You got it backwards there, Reese. Mr. Cresswell helps better people's lives. It's like the atomic bomb. It killed thousands of innocent people, but it ended up saving more lives in the long run. That's called vision. You and me, we can't see farther than the next day, maybe a week at the most. Mr. Cresswell sees only in years, ten at a time. That's the difference between a great man and someone like you or me."

"No. The difference between me and you and Cresswell is that you both are sadistic psychopaths who deserve nothing but. . ."

Guy hit me in the mouth with the back of his hand. "Not another word," he said between clenched teeth. "Why do you have to bring me down all the time? What's your

fucking problem?" He stamped his foot like a child. It was a charming new side to Guy I'd never seen.

I had to laugh. It was one of the funniest things I'd ever seen or heard.

"What's so fucking funny?" Guy said.

I could only shake my head.

"That's all right. I won't have to deal with your negativity for much longer."

Guy walked over to the PVC pipe where it came out of the cavern wall. He reached for the large valve there and turned the handle 45 degrees clockwise.

What happened next resulted in the most grotesque experience of my life. Even when I think of it today, my eyes water at the memory and I gag.

This is what happened: Some shards of rock that flew out from the blast that killed Karl also penetrated the PVC pipe in a several places, so that when Guy turned the handle on the valve and allowed for the hundreds of gallons of untreated raw sewage stored in the old water tower to begin to travel down into the pipe, the liquified excrement found these holes. Due to the tremendous pressure behind the flow, it sprayed out from the pipe like water from a high powered fire hose. Except it wasn't water, it was human waste. In the middle of the cavern was a flowing fountain of shit.

Of course, the majority of the excrement was flowing as designed, through the remainder of pipe and tunnel, then out through the hole I'd created hours ago. Where it was all ultimately headed, I didn't know yet.

And I didn't much care. My main concern at the time was finding a way to get out from under the spray. My mobility was severely hampered by the ropes, and I could only fall to my side and try rolling in one direction or another. I picked the wrong direction. Instead

of getting free from the liquid, I further involved myself. It went directly into my eyes, my mouth. Temporarily blinded, I gagged and spit while I kept trying to roll. In the background, I could hear Guy cursing. I kept wondering why he wasn't shutting the damn thing off.

The ground grew more and more slippery and eventually, I found myself on my back, spitting, almost vomiting, and, then, slowly sliding toward the tunnel's entrance, atop a running stream of shit. At least the spray was no longer raining down on me.

If I survived this, I thought, I was going to need some serious injections of antibiotics. I hoped there wasn't some untreatable eye disease I could get from e. coli or cryptosporidium that caused blindness. I already knew about some of the other stuff that could happen.

I continued to slide along the cavern floor until I entered the tunnel, feet first. I craned my head back. Despite the tears washing over my eyes from the nearly visible fumes, I saw Guy at the valve trying to cut the flow. Perhaps the valve was stuck. Then, just before I slid completely into the tunnel, I saw Guy slip and fall to the floor.

I turned my attention to what lay ahead. I thought of bracing myself against the tunnel's walls, but still being tied, I didn't have limbs at my disposal and I wasn't going to use my head as a jam. And then I thought, maybe I can get out this way. As I slid along next to the PVC pipe, I decided to go with the flow, so to speak. My stomach muscles burned from the exertion, but I still managed to keep my head up so I could see where I was going, and so that I wouldn't crush my already dead arms. With limited success, I tried to avoid banging against the sides of the tunnel by shifting my weight.

I heard the roaring before I saw it. As I approached the end of the PVC pipe, I saw what looked like an impenetrable wall of gushing liquid issuing forth from its mouth. It nearly filled the entire tunnel. Before I knew what was going on, I got sucked into the massive flow.

I was under for a second, then surfaced, spitting and coughing.

I rode rapidly on top of the river of shit, feeling a lot like I was in an Indiana Jones movie, only this one would be called *In The Temple of Doo*. I, the protagonist and hero of this story, was in deep shit with only one way out.

I began to anticipate the end of the tunnel up ahead. I was about to be expelled. At least I hoped. What if I was too big? It was possible I could get stuck in the opening. If that happened, the level of fluid would rise behind me. I could drown. By any stretch of any imagination anywhere, there seemed few worse ways to go. Or, the pressure would build to such force that I'd shoot out like a champagne cork. Or both could happen. I could drown, then get shot out.

Just ahead of the opening, a swell pressed against the walls and formed a whirl pool. I flew through that and went feet first into the hole. Just as I feared, I got stuck. It wasn't that I couldn't fit through. It was that the force of the liquid kept me jammed against the top of the hole. I had to somehow push myself down, go under briefly, and allow the pressure to carry me the rest of the way.

But I didn't have to do that. The force behind the liquid suddenly gave out. The level dropped rapidly and within seconds I found myself lying half in, half out of the tunnel, with just trickles of shit running around me.

Guy must have been able to stem the flow. I wiggled the rest of the way through and rolled across some rocks until I came to a patch of dirt. The first one, the first heave, was the worst. It seemed to pull me two ways, forcing the stuff back and throwing it up at the same time. I thought I was going to die because I couldn't stop to take in air. The sweat of weakness streamed down my face, mixing with the vomit. My heart pounded harder and

harder.

I forced myself to swallow, gasped in air, then vomited some more but there was nothing left in my stomach. It was just dry heaving, but the shit was still everywhere else. In my ears. In my nose. Stuck in my teeth. I rubbed at my burning eyes and, in doing so, realized my hands were free. They must have slipped from the ropes in route and I hadn't been aware of it. I untied the remaining ropes from my legs.

I quickly glanced around me. It was night out. Past a couple of trees, the shore of the reservoir beckoned not ten feet away. A brown bath led from near my feet to the water's edge. I sat there feeling stupid when I heard my name echo from the tunnel as if from a megaphone.

I crawled on my hands and knees the rest of the way to the reservoir. When I got to the water I kept going and when it got deep enough I began to swim. I opened my mouth wide to let the freezing water in. I imagined having gills and the water running through me. I opened my eyes wide. I rubbed my hair. Then I kicked off my shoes and swam hard under water. I knew the water near the shore was now contaminated, but compared to what I'd just been through, it seemed pristine.

I came up for air. I looked back and saw Guy appear from out of nowhere, emerging from the ground as if through hell's secret portal. He didn't see me. I took another deep breath and went under again.

I knew he'd probably notice the ripples in the water so I took broad strokes and glided between them. I felt my pulse slow, found new pockets of air within my lungs to feed on. Then I slowly rose upward. My head was just below the surface and for a moment I thought I wouldn't have to come up at all, that I suddenly had grown gills. But of course I knew I

needed air, and explained that much to myself, so I pushed my arms down and seconds later felt the cool night air rush down my wind pipe.

I looked back at the shore and heard the gun go off before I saw him. Guy missed by several feet. He waded out into the water and took aim again. I went back under and swam another ten yards. I heard the muted sound of the gun and felt the weird rolling swish as the bullet cut through the water somewhere near by. When I came up again, Guy yelled across the water.

"You'll never make it across," he said.

He was right, of course. I was already exhausted and wasn't even one tenth of the way there. We're talking 372 square miles of water. He had the option of waiting for me to drown, or he could follow along the shore if I tried to swim one way or the other. I tried to figure out where the dam was, but there wasn't a current that I could feel and the horizon revealed nothing.

I took another deep breath and went back under. Just pockets of cold, then colder water. Soon I'd get hypothermia, I figured. I didn't have a lot of extra calories at my disposal to help regulate body temperature. Not after this past week.

I was too tired to hold my breath for long. I surfaced again and rolled onto my back. I looked up at the stars. Guy was yelling something, but it came to me in milky waves. The stars were so beautiful out here. I swam awhile on my back, allowing water to enter my mouth, then spitting it back out. Then a dizzying spell of nausea washed over me and I didn't know which way was sky and which was water. I reeled around and somehow managed to stay afloat while I vomited. When my stomach calmed, the dizziness left, but so did the last of my energy. I was completely exhausted. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't swim back

to the shore. I couldn't make it across either.

Somehow I managed to take off my pants and tie a knot in each leg. Then, from behind my head, I slung them forward and down into the water. The legs filled with air like two buoys while I held the waist below the surface. I'd seen it done this way in an episode of *Bay Watch*. Thanks to David Hasselbrough I had myself a temporary floatation device. I rested my chin in the crotch and turned back to see Guy. He'd stripped off his clothes. Now he dove into the water.

I kicked out with my legs to get further away. My float wasn't working very well. Air kept escaping through the material and I kept having to splash more bubbles under the pants to fill the legs back up with air. It seemed hardly worth the effort. I let go and did the breast stroke a few times. Guy was swimming hard, his bald head cutting through the water like a torpedo despite the fact that he was holding onto the gun and keeping it dry above the water. Or trying to. There was no way, I thought, he could swim this far using only one hand and not get the gun wet. Does a gun work when it gets wet? I supposed it depended whether or not the powder inside the bullets got wet. The way he was swimming, though, Guy must have been on the high school swim team.

I tried to keep moving, but I was growing weaker and weaker. At one point, just to rest, I allowed myself to sink below the water's surface. I bobbed a few times, then lifted my head to take in air. Then I went back to bobbing.

I sank lower than I meant to. A fish brushed against my side. I imagined staying down there, holding my breath forever. Just letting go of everything, the pain I felt burning my lungs, my arms as if they were not a part of me, just floating forever among the algae and fish and lost towns taken by the reservoirs. I thought of Claudine and about how much I

missed her. I was tired of missing her, tired of everything. I looked toward the surface and waited for the panic to kick in. It didn't. I let out some air and sank a little bit further. My ears were ringing. I kicked out a leg once to little affect.

Up until that moment, nothing I'd been through made me feel as if something was watching over me. It had seemed to me the universe didn't care one way or another what happened to me. For whatever reason, this had been a struggle I'd had to make on my own, without help of any kind that wasn't a derivative of someone else's desires.

Then something happened to change all that. I'm not saying I suddenly became born again after that night. And I'm not saying I went around telling everyone about it either. All I'm saying is I felt less alone.

What happened was that my foot kicked something hard under the water, something immovable. I kicked it again, then reached across to feel it. I followed it upward with my hand until I came to the end of the thing, a flattened point. I held on to it and brought my foot over. Then I began to stand, using my arms as counter weights to keep from falling off. When I extended to my full height, my nose just cleared the water's edge. If I bounced up and down a little, my mouth cleared. I blew out what little air I had left and sucked in as much fresh air as I could. I began to bounce up and down on one foot, breathing in at the top, breathing out on the way down and moving my arms about to keep from falling off.

What was I standing on? Only one theory has proffered itself over time and it still holds water today, if you'll pardon the pun. I figured I was standing on the steeple of the church Lykes told me about that never got moved. I imagined during a drought the water level of the reservoir dropping six feet or more and the point becoming exposed to air after years of being under water.

What would have happened had the steeple not been there? I've been afraid to answer that question. I don't really know, of course. Maybe panic would have kicked in and fueled an adrenaline rush which would have had me fighting my way back to the surface. Or maybe not. The bottom line is, I didn't have to find out which way it went. That decision was taken away from me. And it is this feeling I get when I think about touching the church steeple for the first time, that feeling of wonder mixed with fright. . .it has me looking at events that occur around me a little differently than I used to. Not that I expect to see miracles. I used up my share that night. That stuff probably only happens just once in your life. But what about other people? When is it going to happen to them? When, just when they're about to give up all hope, is something going to catch them, something out of the blue they hadn't counted on?

So, I bounced up and down on the steeple and watched Guy swim toward me. He'd slowed down considerably. I saw the gun go under several times. At about the halfway point, he stopped swimming and began to tread water. He pointed the gun toward me and I could hear the click of the hammer as it came down, but nothing else happened. Guy cursed. When I saw his hands next, they came up empty from the water. Maybe he stuck the gun into the waist band of his boxer shorts. I kept my balance and watched his progress. I needed a plan, but I didn't really have one. I figured once he got to me, we'd have to fight. I'd be somewhat rested. He'd be tired from the swim.

When he was about fifteen feet from me, he suddenly shot up out of the water and cried out. He went under for a second then came back up sputtering. It was as if he'd been attacked by a shark. He seemed unable to swim any farther. He was having a hard enough time just staying afloat. "Reese," he said. "I got a fucking leg cramp. Help me."

My first thought was that he was faking. He must have realized I was standing on something and wanted to draw me off. If he still had the gun, he could hit me over the head with it. But even if he wasn't faking, what was I going to do? If I went to help him, surely he'd pull me down with him. And besides, why would I want to help Guy anyway, unless he agreed to go to the police and rat on Creswell, which I was sure he'd never do. He'd rather die first than betray his Master. So why did I care whether Guy lived or died?

Because I'd seen two people die in two days and that was going to be it. There wasn't anything I could have done to help Lykes. And while I couldn't have prevented Karl's death by planting the dynamite somewhere else, there was nothing I could do now to reverse it. Guy was the only one I could help. If there was any debate going on in my head at all, it lasted only a second. I told myself Guy was a victim in this as much as I was. He was a victim of Cresswell's greed and ego. Guy was weak and Cresswell preyed on the weak.

"Guy," I said, as he splashed around, groaning. "Guy!" I shouted. "Try to swim toward me. I'm standing on something. If you can make it to me, then you can stand here too!"

Guy went under for a second and I fell off the steeple watching him. I was going to swim toward him, when he surfaced again.

"I'll try," he said.

I treaded water and kicked my feet out trying to relocate the steeple. I panicked. If I couldn't find the steeple, we both were fucked. I went under and kicked my legs in all directions. Finally, I felt it and stood back up.

"That's good," I said. "Keep coming." He was less than six feet from me now. I reached out my hand and after a few moments, Guy was able to grab it. Just as I predicted,

he pulled me from the steeple and as I moved into the water next to him, he began to climb on top of me. I sank beneath his weight. I knew what I was supposed to do. Instead of fighting to come up, I went further under water. Guy instinctively let go and I swam out from beneath him and came up just out of reach.

"Go forward," I said. "Feel with your feet. Right around there."

"I don't feel anything," Guy screamed.

"Keep feeling," I said, treading water but slowly moving farther away from him, back toward the shore.

"I don't feel. . ." Guy said, then he went under again. There was nothing I could do. If I went to him, he'd just pull me down again. I didn't have the strength to fight him and save him at the same time, and I didn't have the strength to drag him back to shore.

I waited for bubbles to emerge above him. "Fuck!" I yelled out, then swam back toward him and dove under. I reached everywhere, frantically feeling for something, I had to come up for air. When I did, I saw him standing on the steeple, looking down at his feet. "What is it?" he asked.

"A church steeple," I said between breaths.

"A church steeple?"

I began to swim away.

"Where are you going?"

"It's all over now, Guy," I said. "When you get back to shore, I'd think about turning yourself in."

"What if I can't swim back? My whole right leg is fucked," he yelled.

"The cramp will go away," I said. "Then just take it slowly."

I did a slow and steady breast stroke all the way back. Every time I surfaced I heard Guy muttering something to himself. I looked back a few times to make sure he remained where he was.

The shoreline grew closer at an agonizingly slow pace until finally I was lying on a small patch of sand near Guy's clothes. I lay there motionless except for my heaving chest. Once my breath was moderately under control, I pulled on Guy's pants. Inside his pocket were a set of car keys. I stuffed my feet into his shoes and made my way back toward the tunnel. It was like returning to my own private hell. The worst part was the beginning where I had to crawl through the opening. After that, I tried not to touch the walls or slip and fall.

At the side room, which remained somewhat untouched by the waste, I dragged Lykes' body back to the cavern and left him near the steps leading out. Then I did the same with Karl's. Then I went a third time to the side room and pulled out a stick of dynamite. I placed it in a timber support near where the tunnel joined the cavern. I twisted on a blasting cap and pushed in a short spitter cord. Then I set it off with a striker. I ran through the cavern and out the heavy door, closing it behind me. A second later, the dynamite exploded. I opened the door back up and saw how the timber support had broken in half and how the tunnel had collapsed on itself. The falling rock had also disconnected the PVC pipe at one of its joints.

Back inside the shack I looked for the photos Guy had taken of me but couldn't find them. I hoped he'd stashed them in his car. Outside, I pulled the spark plugs from the generator and drained out the oil. I left the water tower alone. I didn't want a ton of shit raining down on me again.

Next, I checked the car for the photos. They weren't there. I put the key into the

ignition and started it up. I wasn't going to get far in it without gaining attention since the hood was bent up in the middle and only one headlight worked, especially if they put up road blocks in hopes of finding me, but that was okay with me. Although I didn't have any proof that Cresswell was behind any of this, the police would have to believe I didn't have anything to do with it either. It was an immense project, really, and I wasn't connected in any way to Karl and Lykes' Porto-Potty business.

I started down the driveway. Eventually the trees began to thin and the jutting rocks along to road side disappeared. The drive turned into an oil and gravel road. I kept on it until I found Route 28, the main street that could take me into town, if I could only figure out in which direction to turn. I tried to remember when I was on the flat bed what it felt like when we turned off the main road. I thought it was a left. Which meant I needed to take a right.

Chapter Fourteen

The bacteria in my body had yet to start producing their toxins, so for the moment, I was feeling pretty good about myself. After all, I had just saved New York's water from contamination. Maybe there would be a parade in my honor. A day commemorating Reese Coppage's valiant efforts to keep New Yorkers safe from worrying about potentially deadly micro-organisms in their water. Reese Coppage's Bacteria-Free Day! To celebrate everyone would repeatedly wash their hands over and over again.

As I drove along Route 28 in Guy's damaged car, I heard the crazy thump-thump, wackety-wackety sound of a helicopter flying up from behind me. It zoomed over my head, the powerful beam from its search light carving a path through the darkness like a cleaver through lamb. The helicopter made a tight circle and came back toward me. I expected a hail of bullets at any minute, the sound of bombs. At the very least, I expected to see a slew of squad cars careening around the corner toward me. The chopper thundered over me and then circled back a second time, the spot light sweeping directly over the car.

But the helicopter kept going. It circled around and then stopped up ahead and to the right, hovering over something, its spotlight shining down and holding steady.

I approached the point along Route 28 where the road ran close enough to the Papacton Reservoir so that through the trees you could see the water. In the middle of the reservoir, lit up from the beam of light that crashed down upon it, a small boat rocked from side to side. I recognized Guy as he stood in the middle of the boat with his arms raised, surrounded on all sides by men in uniforms. Along the far side of the reservoir, lined up along

the shore, I saw the flashing lights of police cars, dozens of them, their headlights shining into the water. I didn't know if they were on the tunnel side or the non-tunnel side.

Then I wondered if they thought it was me in the boat. It wouldn't take them long to figure out they had the wrong man. Well, the right man, but you know what I mean. Even if I shaved my head, Guy and myself didn't look anything alike except maybe our general builds. His nose was busted up pretty well. Would Guy tell them about me, about the tunnel, just to save his own ass? Or would he make up some story about why he was out in the middle of the reservoir? *Gone for a nighttime swim with plans of killing myself, but then changed my mind when I found the church steeple. Took it as a sign from God I should continue to live and do good in the world.*

I slowed down, but soon my view of the boat became obscured, so I picked up speed and kept going. Whatever was happening to Guy, it was clearing the roads for me. I made it into Margaretville without anyone stopping me. I drove to the A & P parking lot and parked near the river. Then I climbed down the bank and used the downed tree I'd seen earlier to cross over the water. I headed for Bud's.

I opened the window to the bathroom and climbed through. It was dark inside Bud's except for a street light on Main that shined through the window. I walked behind the counter and found a loaf of white bread. I ate six slices. Then I drank from a carton of milk I found in a fridge.

Then I was running toward the bathroom and almost didn't make it. I flushed the toilet several times until the whole mess was gone. Then I went back out and ate another two slices and drank more milk. This time, I was able to keep it down.

I went to the register and pried open the drawer with a heavy metal spatula. Only the

change was there. I grabbed all the quarters thinking I'd need the toll money to get back into the city. I dialed Lizzie's number. I hoped to hear Sammy answer, that we was found and that at least one thing had resolved itself, but that wasn't the case. Lizzie answered and I felt bad for waking her up and giving her false hope that on the other end of the line was her husband of 37 years.

"It's Reese," was the first thing out of my mouth.

"As long as it isn't that blasted whistling sound. I've been going crazy here. Absolutely crazy. Bonkers. I'm going to need a straight jacket soon. My poor cat is afraid to come near me. He's hiding under the bed right now."

"Was Claudine there? Was she able to help you?"

"She was here, but it was just a dead end is all. She left yesterday for the A & P. She called here when she couldn't find you. Said she was getting a room at, wait a minute, I wrote it down. Thee Old T-Bar Saloon and Inn."

I found the Yellow Pages and called. I knew she wouldn't be using her real name. I figured that if Claudine used a fictitious name, it was going to be the name of her teddy bear, since she used it once before when playing a joke on me. She'd called me from her office and disguised her voice and said she wanted to meet me for a drink at O'Rourkes if I was willing. I met her later that night. She'd said her name was Theodora Rosie.

I was right. The tired sounding woman at the front desk patched me through and Claudine answered. "Reese! Where are you?" she said.

"I'm at Bud's again."

* * * *

I waited under the bridge for Claudine to come. I found a smooth rock to sit on and

watched the sun come up. Physically, I felt terrible. Every now and then a chill would run through me. My hands felt cold and clammy. My eyes felt blood shot beyond bleary. Yet, despite how badly I felt, despite how unresolved everything still was, I felt strangely at ease with myself. The way I figured it, if this whole ordeal was meant to be the end of me, it would have happened out on that water. And it affected me another way too, something I realized when I saw Claudine pull into the last spot in the A & P parking lot and turned off the car.

Seeing her sitting there behind the wheel was a wonderful sight. Her ears stuck out on either side of the Met's baseball cap she wore. A pony tail stuck out the back. Yet I felt strangely removed from her. I'd been through so much and she hadn't any idea what it felt like. I thought of us getting married again, wanted it still, yet what if we didn't? I hadn't really thought about what it would be like to be single again, didn't really want to be, but if we didn't end up getting married, if our relationship didn't work out, I would be okay. I still loved her. Yet I could survive without her.

I crawled out from under the bridge and looked around. I didn't think anyone saw me. I went up to the car and opened the door. I hoped for the kind of greeting that you see in the movies, romantic music, soft lighting, the kind of greeting that would make a person forget the mess they're in, but the first thing she said was, "Maybe you should get into the trunk."

"I stink that bad?"

She crinkled her nose in pretend, but then got an actual whiff. "Oh boy. You do smell, but that's not why I suggested it. I thought you'd want to hide from any cops we might see along the way."

"I know you're right, but I don't think I can handle that," I said. "If I don't stay in the

fresh air, I think I'll go nuts." I pulled the door shut.

She backed the car up and crossed over the bridge. She turned right onto Main Street. We were headed back to Route 28.

I told Claudine as much as I could. I told her I'd been wrong about the ore and that the whole thing was about the filtration plant Milton would eventually give the Cresswell. Claudine listened, the muscles in her forearms taught, her grip on the steering wheel vise-like. After I finished telling her everything, she looked at me. There was a question forming in her eyes but she didn't say anything.

"What?" I asked.

"That stuff you said about the church steeple. It seems so. . . I don't know."

"Weird? I know. It is. I've never felt anything like that before. You know, I'm less afraid about everything now. I know I can pretty much survive anything."

She stared out the window. Then I got her to tell me about the Sammy situation. When she got the caller ID box, it didn't display any information about the caller when the call came in. But the number showed. Claudine had a friend at the paper track it down. It was registered to an old gas company, National Gas, which was bought by Columbia Gas a couple of years ago.

"So I called Columbia Gas. Just one machine after another and when I finally got hold of an actual person, they were of no help at all. But Nancy is going to help. She's dating a cop. It's still early enough in the relationship that he might be willing to put a trace on the call. He's still trying to win her over. And even if I had any connections at the police department, I wouldn't be able to use them. The good news is that when the phone rings and Lizzie answers, the line stays connected until she hangs up, so there should be plenty of time for the

trace. Also, since it calls regularly, they can have everything ready ahead of time."

"It might not have anything to do with Sammy," I said.

"I know but you're right. It's worth checking out."

Suddenly, a cop car came speeding over the hill, sirens blaring. I ducked down below the dash and immediately felt sick. I listened as the cop car raced past us. I sat back up. It seemed strange my escape should be so easy.

"It makes me wonder how they ever find anyone," Claudine said.

"Through the media. America's Most Wanted," I said. "It was the old man at Bud's that figured out who I was. Not a cop. I told Guy the police were letting me get away so I'd lead them to Cresswell. I'm beginning to wonder if it's true."

There was a pause in our conversation and during it I took the opportunity to puke out of the window. "Sorry," I said.

"It's alright, baby. We're going to take care of that real soon."

Suddenly, a cop car came speeding over the hill, sirens blaring. I ducked down below the dash and immediately felt sick. I listened as the cop car raced past us. I sat back up. After letting the air from the window pour over my face, I said, "I told Guy the police were letting me get away so that I'd lead them to Cresswell. I'm beginning to wonder if it's true."

"Next thing you know, we'll be getting a police escort back to the city."

Half an hour later, Route 28 took us alongside another reservoir, the Ashokan. As we drew close to a bridge, we saw cop cars and trucks on either side of it. A few men were standing near the water's edge behind the fence surrounding the reservoir. There was some traffic in front of us, mostly rubber-neckers slowing to see what all the commotion was about. We slowed, following the bumper of the car in front of us.

There was nowhere for me to hide, so I just looked straight ahead out the window. With our windows rolled down, we could both hear the driver in the car ahead of us calling out to the closest cop.

"What's going on?"

The cop turned to the driver and shrugged. "Something with the water," he said.

Another cop next to him turned to the driver. "If I were you," he said, "I wouldn't be drinking the water around here for awhile." That almost made me laugh since the guy ahead of us had Delaware County plates. No one in the Catskills drank this water. They all had their own wells or their own municipal supply. Neither the cop nor the driver knew that only New York City and the surrounding boroughs used this water.

"Why not?" the driver asked.

"It'll make you sick," the cop said.

"No shit," the driver said, then began to cross the bridge. We followed close behind.

"You think Creswell got to this one too?" Claudine asked after we'd crossed the bridge.

"I don't know," I said.

Claudine turned on the radio. It was a country station. Just as she was about to change the station, the song ended and the DJ came on.

"Howdy folks," the DJ said. "I have a bulletin from the Department Of Environmental Protection and the City of New York here. We've got a 'boil water' warning out for the entire city. This look pretty serious folks. It also says no showers, no baths. Boil water for coffee, formula for babies, family pets. Seems some kind of bacteria's gotten into the supply. The city is working on cleaning it up, but until further notice, boil that water. Or you can put a

few drops of chlorine bleach into a gallon of water and let it sit for twenty minutes. Those purifiers some of you have don't work, it says here, because these microbes are too small. They pass on through. So folks, listen up, boil that water. Now here's a Dwight Yoakum song."

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked.

It ended up I'd seen only one half of Cresswell's plan to ruin New York City's water and, ultimately, to bring the city to its knees. While I had temporarily stalled the operation to poison the Papacton, I had done nothing to protect the Schoharie Reservoir.

And it was so easy for him, thanks in part to the Land Acquisition Program's \$250 million budget to buy up even more land in the Watershed area. Delaware County's population was scarce and getting scarcer. What the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection and the others on the State's Board of Health obviously didn't plan on was that by acquiring more properties and clearing out more families, they were clearing the way for others to move in, those with intentions of ruining the water. It isn't the police who keep order, despite what most people think. It's the public eye, and without it, things can run amok.

"Maybe this is why no one seems to be looking for you. Maybe they're all dealing with this," Claudine said as we drove across the reservoir.

I was stunned, but it all made sense. "It would explain why that boat with Guy was in the reservoir. They were looking for the polluters."

At the next town, Claudine pulled into an EasyQuick gas station. She came out carrying two cases of two liter water bottles, twelve in each.

"That's all they have in there. People already bought up all the gallon jugs. I'm sure

people are scrambling to buy up all the water they can in the city."

Luckily, Shelly's mother's car had one of those New Jersey Turnpike Passes stuck to her windshield so we never had to see an actual person when we went through the tolls. The traffic leading out of the city was thick as people decided it would be easier to stay with relatives and friends who lived in New Jersey and Connecticut rather than stay in the city and be poisoned. We entered the city through the Tri-borough bridge. Everywhere we saw people walking out of stores carrying bottles of water. A fire hydrant had been opened by vandals, and the police had cordoned off the area so that no one came into contact with the water as it poured down the street and entered a city drain.

Claudine drove me straight to the Central Park Zoo. We entered through the service gate and drove up to Michele's small cluttered office near the back. As expected, the light was on. Claudine left me in the car and went up to the door. She knocked, then a few seconds later the door opened and she went inside.

Soon after, the two of them came out to the car. Michele hadn't changed much since her new job. She still wore her dark hair in two thick braids and she still wore jeans and long sleeve shirts tucked in tight beneath a thick leather belt. The only thing she'd done is get contact lenses. Personally, I thought she looked better wearing glasses. Maybe it was just that I'd gotten used to seeing her in them.

Michele and Claudine helped me out and led me up the stairs to her office. It was as messy as ever, stacks of files sitting on the floor, books open on her desk. You wouldn't think running a zoo would require so much paper work. Then again, Michele was involved in several non-profit organizations, and half this stuff could have been for them.

We went through a back door, then down a long, un-airconditioned corridor. I grew

dizzy and they both had to hold me up.

"A lot of cases going around like this one," Michele said. "But it's men who get it the worst."

"Really?" Claudine said, sounding interested.

"Same as in the rest of the animal kingdom. The females have the better immune systems."

"I didn't know that," Claudine said.

"What'd you do, Reese? Go swimming in a reservoir?"

"How'd you guess?" I said, trying to make a joke of it.

Near the hallway's end we made another turn and we came to a large hospital type room with several metal tables fixed to the floor, several rows of sinks, counters, medicine cabinets, x-ray machines. The place was in perfect order, unlike her office. Michele and Claudine led me to one of the tables.

"I really appreciate this," Claudine said.

"Not another word," she said. "You're just lucky the zoo's closed to the public until Monday. Straightening out the mess they made here seems like a life long endeavor. But we'll have Reese fixed up in no time if he gets on that table sometime today," she said. I got on the table. She lifted an eye lid and flashed a pen light across my eye. "Hmm," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"You're dehydrated," she said. "First thing you get is an IV of saline and sucrose. Perk you right up." She slung a long dark heavy braid from her shoulder to her back.

As soon as the liquid entered my arm, I passed out. I hadn't slept that hard since the womb. That moment when I began to lose consciousness felt better than anything I'd ever

felt. It was like falling from a high cliff and landing on a cloud. I was sure Michele had put something else in the mix beside saline and sucrose. Whatever it was, I was grateful.

Chapter Fifteen

When I finally woke up, I was starving. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. Neither Michele nor Claudine were in the room with me. I had a sheet over me but I was freezing. Next to the bag of saline hung another, smaller bag. I sat up and read the label. Sounded like some kind of antibiotic. Whatever it was, I was feeling a whole lot better. No dizziness. No sense I was going to vomit.

I got off the table and wheeled the IV stand along with me toward the door. Suddenly, I had to rush toward the bathroom. Diarrhea. Bad. Oh, boy. I sat on the toilet for ten minutes. Thank goodness I still had the IV in me. If I kept this up, I was going to get dehydrated all over again.

When I flushed the toilet, the pressure was barely enough to empty the bowl, let alone refill it. I wanted to wash my hands, but what was the point? There was a small dispenser of Purell Instant Hand Sanitizer on the sink counter. I squeezed some onto my hands and rubbed them together until the gel evaporated.

Then I walked out into the hallway in search of either Claudine or Michele. I heard the sound of a television and I saw light coming out into the hallway from another open door. I walked over and saw Claudine curled up on a small couch, sleeping. The room served as the staff kitchen. There was a vending machine, a coffee maker and a microwave. Off to the side was a small round table with a couple of chairs around it. I pulled a chair out and sat down.

On the T.V. they were covering the water story. What else? A reporter stood outside

of an old one-story building.

"The last time the Chelsea Pump Station was put into service was in 1989, after a winter of extraordinarily low precipitation. The station ran for two weeks and then shut down when heavy rains finally came. But never has the station come into service for the reasons it has today. With the bacteria teeming in the Catskills and Delaware watersheds, the Hudson River has once again been tapped by the City of New York.

"However, encroaching salt water from the Atlantic is pushing farther up the Hudson and is now within five miles of the intake pipes." The camera turned to show the river. On the opposite shore, twin smoke stacks to some factory belched black air. "Still, salty water isn't deadly water. Even if the salt line draws closer, only people on low-salt diets are in any kind of danger from this water." The camera swung back around to the stern face of the young reporter. "This Pump Station will run around the clock. With the capabilities to pump 100 million gallons of water a day, it should help ease fears. But it isn't enough."

I looked over at Claudine. She was still curled up on the couch, but her eyes were open.

"You watching this?" I asked. I scratched at an itch and almost accidentally pulled out the IV needle.

"Yup," she said, then sat up.

On T.V., they were back inside the studio. They had some water expert on.

"Yes," he was saying, "a point source is any discernible, confined and discrete conveyance from which pollutants may be discharged, like a pipe or ditch, or a tunnel or a container. Even a floating craft. When the source is diffuse and does not have a single point of origin and is not introduced into a receiving stream from a point source, then it is

considered a nonpoint source pollution, as we have here."

"But do you think this is an act of God or do you think it was done deliberately?" the anchor asked.

"Is that a philosophical question?" the expert asked. He was reminding me of a college professor I once had. Maybe it was the same person.

The anchor looked confused. "No," he said.

"Because it could be."

"I mean do you think there was a naturally occurring event that could have caused this outbreak or do you think it was an act of sabotage."

"There is a team of experts down here now from all over the country whose job it is to find the source of the contaminate and eliminate it. I have confidence they'll get to the bottom of it. But let me say, things like this have been happening all over the country. Granted, not to this degree, but it's been happening. It happened in Alpine, Wyoming. 159 people were suspected of being infected from the drinking water there. Nineteen of them were hospitalized. And Alpine has a population of only 470 residents. Our system here supplies water to over 9 million residents. They use over 1.5 billion gallons of water in a single day. For it to be a deliberate act, it would have to have been a massive plan carried out directly under the nose of the city's watchful eyes.

"Algae blooms can spring up without any warning and choke the oxygen right out of the water. They can produce deadly toxins to fish and animals. There are many naturally occurring substances harmful to man if ingested. There's giardia lamblia that causes gastroenteric disease. There's nitrates that can cause methemoglobinemia. So, I don't think speculation at this point does any of us any good. The most important service we can provide

for the public now is to make sure they boil their water and not to bathe in the water. They should take a sponge bath with the water they've boiled for drinking."

After a few more minutes of coverage, the station went to a commercial.

"Oh, boy," I said. "This is crazy."

"Sure is," Claudine said. "How do you feel?"

"Better. What is Michelle giving me, do you know?"

"Some kind of antibiotic. She went home to feed her dog and take her out for a walk, but she's coming right back."

"How long was I out for?"

Claudine looked at her watch. "About twenty-four hours."

"You've been here the whole time?" I asked.

"Nope. While you were passed out, I did a little investigating," she said.

"Investigating?"

"I went to visit Alex Milton's mother. I told her I was writing a story about him for the paper and she agreed to an interview. She has a house on Staten Island. I drove out there and we talked for a couple of hours. After awhile, I got her to open up."

"Anything interesting?"

"Well, for one, Milton and Cresswell didn't get along very well when they all lived together. In fact, it seems that Milton hated Cresswell. And hated the way Cresswell treated her."

"She told you that?"

"I have my ways of getting people to talk. That's why I'm good at what I do. Besides, everyone wants their own story heard. Once they start, they can't stop."

"Go on."

"Cresswell had spent all this money on Milton's education and he expected Milton to come work for him after it was all said and done. Sure, he expected Milton to rebel some, go through a phase. However, once Milton finished getting his degrees, there was no turning back for him. Milton wanted nothing to do with Cresswell's millions. He wanted to help people, become a public servant. Cresswell didn't expect that. "

"You mean all that bullshit Milton spews is true? He wants the filtration plant because he's worried about people's health? I don't buy it."

"Unless his mother was trying to pull one over on me. But I think she was telling the truth. Of course, it's possible that Milton has pulled the wool over *her* eyes, but that would mean Cresswell and Milton just pretended to dislike each other for all those years so they could later plan to rip New York City off. That's a lot of forward thinking."

"So, if Milton and Cresswell aren't working together, then what's happening?"

"All I know is that I saw the latest poll results earlier on T.V. and guess what? Milton is now ahead of Holdings for the first time, by a whopping 25 percent. Cresswell has managed to put his step-son, who hates him more than anything, ahead in the polls."

"It could just be a by-product of Cresswell's plans. He might not care one way or another who wins the election. Or maybe he has something on Milton and plans on using it against him. Something we don't know about."

"Like what? What could Milton have done that was so bad he'd sell out to a man he hates?"

"I don't know. It could be anything. Maybe Milton got into some kind of trouble in his youth and if the press found out about it, he'd lose the election. Maybe Cresswell helped

him cover this thing up but still holds some piece of incriminating evidence. Or maybe Cresswell has something on Milton's mother."

"Maybe. But what if he simply plans on taking advantage of Milton's good nature? Cresswell could have people front for him, present Milton plans for a filtration plant and Milton would never have to know he was giving it over to Cresswell. Then, once Cresswell got the contract, he could begin to milk the city. With a project of that scale, it would be easy."

"You almost have to work harder not to steal from the bureaucrats than you do to stay honest," Michele said. We both turned around, startled.

"How long have you been standing there?" Claudine asked. "I thought you had to go home to feed your dog."

"I did. Now I'm back. How do you feel, Reese?"

"Better, thanks."

"Good. Anyway, like I was saying, now that I have access to this big budget, if I wanted to steal, it would be so freaking easy. It's almost like they want you to. I have to say to the board, 'No, a toilet doesn't cost three thousand dollars. No, seven hundred pounds of lettuce shouldn't cost two thousand dollars.' It's crazy."

Claudine and I looked at each other. We trusted Michele and it was good to have another person listening. It made us both feel less alone.

"So," I said, "Cresswell helps Milton get elected by making one of Milton's primary campaign issues become the only important issue in the race and Milton would never suspect Cresswell of doing anything to help him get elected since he never wanted Milton to go into politics in the first place. Still, that's leaving a lot to risk, don't you think? What if Milton

decided not to award Cresswell's firm the contract? What if there were a lower bidder?"

"How do you know this Cresswell guy wants to build a filtration plant in the first place?" Michele asked. Neither of us had the strength to explain it to her.

"Let's just say I've been through a lot of shit recently, literally, and what I've seen has led me to believe that's what Cresswell wants. I have no proof at the moment. In fact, I'm running very low on proof. How does one acquire proof in cases like this?" I wondered aloud.

"Can you prove that he at least is responsible for poisoning the reservoirs?" Michele asked. She caught on fast.

"I can show the cops the tunnel they built to run the sewage through. Well, what's left of the tunnels. Maybe somehow I could tie Creswell into the Porto-Potty business Lykes and Karl ran."

Claudine's cell phone starting ringing. She answered, scrambled for a pen and wrote an address down on a napkin from the table. When she got off the phone, she said, "They got a trace on the phone calls Lizzie's been getting."

We spread a New York City bus map out on the table but there wasn't enough detail to figure out exactly where the phone call had originated from.

"You up for going for a ride?" Claudine asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

Michele took out the IV and gave me some gigantic pills that looked like they were meant to be placed at the end of a tube and blown down my throat, though I was to take them with a glass of water twice a day. She assured me they were safe on humans, better, in fact, than the stuff they gave humans, because these pills were swine de-worming pills and killed

every type of germ, virus, or living organism that has ever or will ever afflict either man or beast. Then she made some joke about all men being beasts, but I think it was a reference to Cresswell more than one directed at me.

Then she brought me over to the lost and found box and I picked out a few articles of clothes I thought would fit me. As Claudine and I got into Michele's very practical Saturn station wagon, she instructed me to drink lots of Gatorade and eat as much yogurt as I could to replace the friendly bacteria.

We drove out through the zoo's back gate. Claudine had already returned the car she'd borrowed from Mrs. Roberts.

* * * *

First, we got onto 12th avenue at 56th street and headed north. Without turning the wheel, 12th avenue turned into the West Side Highway. Next thing we knew we were on the Henry Hudson Parkway doing 40 miles per hour while taxis rocketed past us doing close to eighty. We exited at 125th street and came back down Riverside Drive. That ended at 72nd street. There we continued south on West End Avenue. Still, we couldn't find 68th street. Basically, the address no longer existed. Everything west, from 70th street to 59th street, was either highway or a construction site. Some kind of "improvement project" was underway to extend the West Side Highway. We found a few parking lots close to the construction but none showed any addresses and the few streets we were able to go down ended abruptly in a tangle of barbed wire fencing.

We decided to give it a try on foot anyway, just in case, and we figured the best way to get to the general area we wanted to go was through Riverside Park, since the south end of it came right up to the whole mess. We drove into the park on a service road near the

Soldiers and Sailors Monument and parked between two electric golf carts in back of a maintenance building.

"You know he may not even be here," Claudine said.

"I know, but we have to check it out," I said.

"It would be a strange coincidence if those phone calls just happened to start around the same time Sammy goes missing."

We walked south through the park and Claudine reached for my hand. Our fingers entwined. It had been awhile since we'd held hands. It felt good.

The park ended unceremoniously. A chain link fence marked its border. On the other side of the fence was a field. I could just make out the remnants of a baseball diamond. At the end of the field sat a new white trailer which was probably used as an office for the construction company. To the right of the field was a long concrete dock and then the Hudson River.

We slipped through a gap in the fence and stepped onto the concrete dock. It wasn't used for anything anymore and was slowly deteriorating. We had to step over cracks and jump over fissures. The thing was slowly falling into the water. Ahead of us was an old harbor, its loading docks for the most part still standing. It looked like the ruins of some ancient culture. There were rusting steel pilings lined up at angles to protect the docks from wakes. Then there was a series of suspended buildings that looked like freight or box cars but with windows. They were held up by support beams and rusting ladders led up to them. Up further ahead and to the left was the construction site for the new highway. More than half the span was already finished.

We came to the end of the cement dock and began walking in trails carved through

the weeds and brush by hikers and mountain bikers who knew of this place. Today there wasn't anybody about. It was amazing to me that in a city as crowded as New York, there could be land of any kind not in use, especially land near the water. It amazed me too that anyone who wanted could walk right up to these old heaps and climb them. It was a law suit waiting to happen. There were no keep out signs posted. Only a fence with a gaping hole in it. Hardly a deterrent.

We reached the first loading dock. The ladder leading up to the box car was rusted out in the middle of each step.

"Well, the phone call could be coming from anywhere in this general vicinity," Claudine said. "I think we can rule out all these old structures. I don't see any phone lines running from them."

"The line could be underground," I said.

"So what do we do?"

"We climb up in some of them," I said, detouring from the trail and climbing over a few boulders. The ladder rattled back and forth when I grabbed hold of it. A few feet away water continued to erode the foundation.

"Careful," Claudine said behind me.

I started up the ladder, stepping on the peg-like remnants of each rung. Halfway up, a rung snapped off and I found myself hanging onto the rail, looking down.

"Maybe you should let me," Claudine called up. "You weigh too much."

I thoroughly agreed with her and carefully let myself back down. Claudine tried next. In a style resembling a cat, she made four separate leaps and was up into the overhead trailer before I could blink. She stuck her head out a busted window and shook her head. Then in

similar fashion, she climbed down.

"Just piles of dirty magazines and a sleeping bag," she said. "Gross. Probably the home of a child molester."

"Nice thought."

We walked along the bank, jumping over missing patches of concrete until we came to the next loading dock. This one was completely missing a staircase.

"Let me see you get up this one," I said.

I looked back behind us and noticed another old building I hadn't seen before because it had been hidden from view behind the newer aluminum trailer. This one had exhaust vents coming from its side along with a few pipes that went into the ground. They could have been for plumbing or they could've had wires running through them.

"Let's go check out that one," I said.

We doubled back and cut through the brush. We circumnavigated piles of sand and gravel and came up to the building. It was longer than I'd realized because half of it angled back, forming an L. Although the structure was old, it was still solid. I tried looking through a window but they were boarded up from the inside with plywood. Fresh plywood.

"What do you think?" I said.

Claudine knocked on the door. "Sammy?" she called.

There was no response. I tried the handle. It turned but wouldn't open. Then I noticed the pad lock. "Let's pry this thing open," I said. I looked around and found a piece of re-bar. I slipped it in the lock and yanked down. The lock snapped open. We pushed the door open.

It was dark inside. All I could really see was a big furnace sitting in the middle of the

room. I scanned the perimeter of the room but didn't see anything.

"Sammy?" Claudine called out. She turned to me. "Did you hear something?"

I shook my head. We walked further inside and looked around the corner.

"Sammy!" Claudine shrieked and we ran over to him. He was tied to a chair. Claudine pulled the tape free from his mouth and I started to undo the ropes around his legs and arms. I thought much couldn't faze me anymore after what I'd been through but I was wrong. I'd done a good job of denying how deeply Sammy's disappearance troubled me. And now that I had him back, I allowed for the first time the real thought of what it would have been like to lose him enter my mind. Tears streamed freely down my cheeks. I was glad it was dark inside and they couldn't see me.

"You alright?" Claudine asked.

"I think so," Sammy said.

"What's wrong with your arm?" Claudine asked.

"My shoulder's out of socket." We couldn't see yet his two black eyes, the bruises along his neck, his blood stained shirt.

"Can you walk?" Claudine asked.

"Sure," Sammy said, then tried getting up. He fell back into the chair. Claudine and I helped get him upright and balanced. "I can't believe you found me," he said.

"Where's the phone?" Claudine said.

"There isn't one," Sammy said. "Didn't need one."

"How'd you make Lizzie's phone ring?" Claudine asked.

"See that old fuel tank there?" Sammy said.

We looked and saw an oil tank sitting beyond the furnace on the far side of the room.

"That tank was designed to call the oil company when the level got low. That way, you never run out of fuel. A truck would re-fill it without anyone manually checking the level."

"How do you know about this?" Claudine asked as we neared the tank.

"Way before your time, Reese, your father and I worked for People's Petroleum for a couple of years before we decided to become Sandhogs."

"I remember hearing something about that," I said. I'd regained some of my composure.

"So I pried off the panel, re-set the dial feature to call Lizzie, then re-activated the beast. I had no idea if it was still hooked up to a phone line or not, but I figured I had nothing to lose trying."

We got outside now and saw Sammy's true condition. Claudine and I looked at one another and we decided not to mention to Sammy how awful he looked. He'd find out soon enough.

"That's amazing," Claudine said. "You sent an S.O.S. message through the oil tank."

"That was my part. The other was you guys putting a trace on it."

"You can thank Claudine for that."

We took a few more steps and Sammy stumbled. I got his good arm over my shoulder and we went a little further.

"You know who's been keeping watch over me?" Sammy said. "Fucking Richard Pritchett."

"Rich!" I said.

"Yup. He's got a fucking tazer and he zapped me from behind when he caught me

messing with the tank. He didn't have any idea what I was doing, though. I think he thought I was trying to rig it to explode. That's when he decided to tie me up."

"Where is he now?" Claudine asked, looking around us.

"I don't know. Sometimes he's gone for hours," Sammy said. "Damn! I can barely walk. We have far to go?"

"Claudine," I said. "Run ahead and try pulling the car up as close to the fence as possible."

She agreed it was worth a try and sprinted ahead, her feet digging into the gravel.

"Quite a girl you have there," Sammy said.

"Yup. I know," I said.

We made it around the building and Sammy saw the newer white trailer next to it. He stopped us. "There's papers in there you might be interested in," he said. "I was snooping around in there earlier when Rich wasn't looking. That's why he put me in the other building."

"What kind of papers?" I asked.

"Blue prints that got nothing to do with this highway."

We walked closer to the trailer. I leaned Sammy against the side, then walked around to the front. I looked through the windows but couldn't see anything. I knocked. No one answered. I tried the handle. Locked. I tried kicking in the door. I held onto the rail and kicked just next to the door knob. I tried it again. Then again. Finally, it gave way. I stepped inside. There were two desks set up on either side of the trailer. A row of filing cabinets lined the wall between them. Before I could begin searching, I heard Sammy call out for me. I stuck my head out the door and saw Rich running toward us across field.

"He's got the fucking tazer again," Sammy said. I jumped down the stairs and came

to Sammy's side. There was no way we'd be able to outrun him together. And besides, I wanted to get my hands on the papers Sammy had seen inside the trailer.

"I figure if I strike first, I got a chance," I said.

"Be careful. It's no fun getting zapped," Sammy said.

"Come on, you mother fucker," I called out to Rich.

Rich raced up to me, the tazer extended in his hand, the arch of electricity between the two rods visible.

We both struck at the same time. My fist landed against the side of his head. I felt a stinging just below my arm and then a paralyzing jolt of pain zig-zagged from my shoulder to my knee. I fell to the ground. So did he.

By the time I was able to recover, he was standing over me with the tazer.

"Get up," he said.

I reached out for his leg and yanked him to the ground. As I climbed up on top of him, he blasted my arm. I recoiled as the jolt ran all the way to my jaw.

Then Sammy jumped him from behind. "No, Sammy," I tried calling, out but it was too late. Sammy fell to the ground in a heap, moaning as the electricity made its way through his joints.

"This thing's got plenty of juice," Rich said, trying to smooth back his hair. "If you two want to keep this up."

"You're a real fuck," I said, once my jaw loosened up. "You know that. You told me you weren't involved. A few gambling debts was all. You're in up to your eye balls."

"Like I don't know that. Just get up and get in front of me before I blast you again."

I got up and helped Sammy to his feet.

"How'd Rich get to be such a scum bag?" I asked Sammy.

"It wasn't such a stretch," Sammy said.

"Fuck you guys. You keep talking, I'll blast you just for the hell of it."

We shut up for a few seconds.

"Now turn around and head back to where you found him," Rich said.

I didn't see what choice we had. We started back toward the older building.

Then a terrible noise exploded behind us. We all three jumped and turned around. Claudine was racing across the field in the Saturn, a trail of dust billowing behind her. I took the opportunity to come around with my right arm and with all my might, slam my fist into Rich's nose. He fell to the ground. The tazer sailed from his hand.

Claudine then slammed on her brakes, and came to a skidding halt just in front of us, the tazer disappearing beneath the car. The mangled fence at the far end of the field became visible through the settling dust. The front end of the Saturn was smashed in, but the windshield was fine. So was Claudine. She flung the passenger side door open.

"Get in," she said.

Rich couldn't move. Blood foamed from his nose and poured into his mouth. I figured we didn't have to worry about him any longer. Sammy got into the passenger seat.

"Sammy," I hollered. "Where did you see those papers?"

"There was a strong box on one of the desks," he said.

I ran up the stairs of the trailer and went inside. I didn't see any strong box. I tried a few of the cabinet drawers, but they were locked. I went over to a desk and tried the drawers there. They were locked, too.

I went back outside and found Rich trying to crawl under the car for the tazer. I

grabbed his ankles and dragged him out. He had the tazer in his hand. I dropped his feet and stepped on his wrist. He cried out. I bent and pulled the tazer from his dirty fingers. I pressed the button on the side to see how it worked. Then I looked down at Rich. A trail of blood ran along the dirt where he'd been on his belly.

"Get up," I said.

Rich rolled over and sat in the dust thinking things over. The blood continued to leak from his nose but it wasn't going to kill him. Maybe make him a little light headed. He eyed the tazer, then slowly got to his feet.

"I didn't expect to ever see you again," he said, sounding as if he were under water. A bubble formed at his lips and popped just a quickly.

"Thanks for believing in me. I'll remember that the next time I visit you in jail."

"Hah," he said. "You're the one who'll be in jail. You never should have gotten involved."

"I didn't have a choice, did I? That's what it means to be framed. Now get inside that trailer and show me this strong box or I'll taze you."

"I don't know about any strong box," he said.

"Wrong answer," I said, and pressed the button on the tazer. I held it out in his direction.

"Alright. Alright. I'll show you," he said.

"Pussy," Sammy called out behind him.

Rich climbed the steps in front of me. I closed the door behind us. He turned around nervously and looked at the door.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"In there," he said, pointing to one of the desks.

"Which drawer?"

"The big one."

"It's locked," I said, pulling at the handle.

"The keys are in the pen holder."

I turned the holder over and the keys fell onto the desk. I jammed one into the drawer and turned the lock. Inside was the strong box. "Good boy," I said. I tried opening the box, but it too was locked. "The key?"

"I don't know," Rich said.

"Rich, now's not a good time to hold anything back."

"I swear I don't know." I pressed the button on the tazer again. "It's not that hard to bust that thing open. Here. I'll do it for you."

"Never mind," I said, putting the box under my arm. I opened the trailer's door and started down the stairs.

"What about me?" Rich asked.

I turned around. "What about you?"

"You can't leave me here. Take me with you."

"You want to jump ship? After what you did to Sammy?"

"I can help you. I know a lot of things. What's in that strong box isn't going to be enough."

"Why do you want to help us now?"

"Why do you think? They'll kill me."

"Who? Creswell?"

"Take me with you and I'll tell you everything."

So we put Rich got into the Saturn and Claudine rocketed us back toward the hole in the fence.

"I hope Michele has good insurance," Claudine said as she got us back into the path that would lead us out of the park.

"Um, I don't think insurance covers this kind of thing," I said.

I handed the tazer over to Sammy's good arm and although I wouldn't have blamed him if he zapped the hell out of Rich, Sammy restrained himself.

"How did they find you?" Rich asked.

Sammy explained about the oil tank.

Chapter Sixteen

Sammy, Lizzie, Claudine and I sat on the floor in Michele's office. Now that the zoo was reopened, it was the only place where we could be assured privacy. We'd cleared a space for ourselves by pushing stacks of papers up against the wall. Rich was with us too, although he was feeling much less enthusiastic than the rest of us. Michele had already tended to his broken nose and now a clean white gauze covered most of his face.

"This reminds me of when you came over to our house, Reese, right after the accident and we all sat around trying to figure out what the heck happened to you. Remember?" Lizzie said. She was so happy to have Sammy back in one piece, she could hardly contain herself. I'm sure she would have felt more at ease if she'd been able to serve us something, sandwiches, drinks, but as it was, there was nothing for her to do. "It's not like a *Matlock* episode anymore, though," she said. "It's more like the movie *China Town*. You ever see that?"

"Yup," I said, as I opened the strong box. "A great movie."

"Lizzie," Sammy said. "We don't have much time here. The press conference is in a couple of hours." Sammy's arm was back in place and sat in a sling. The cuts on his face were cleaned and covered with ointment. He was dressed from the zoo's gift shop. A cartoon drawing of a seal standing on its tail adorned the back of his T-shirt.

"It's in four hours," Claudine said. "And we don't know yet whether we have enough here to really implicate someone."

Lizzie quieted down and we all focused on the contents of the strong box. I pulled out a blue print and unfolded it. It was an early draft of what looked like a huge factory

situated on a specific parcel of land. The Yonkers Raceway and the Hillsvew Reservoir were clearly marked.

"That's the blue print for the filtration plant," Rich said.

"They haven't even decided to build one yet and they already have a blue print?" I asked.

"Come on, Reese. It's a done deal. They've already knocked down the Dairy Queen. They're moving the railway track now and still need to relocate a tenement housing project, but that hasn't stopped them from bringing in the bulldozers."

"But the project hasn't been approved by anyone yet," Claudine said.

"But it will be. Everyone knows that," Rich said.

"Why build it here?" Lizzie asked, "In the middle of all this stuff?"

"It's the logical place," Rich said. "The Hillsvew Reservoir is the last point where water from both the Catskill Aqueduct and the Delaware Aqueduct come together before entering City Tunnels #1 and #2."

"And eventually #3, if we ever get back to work," Sammy said.

"The water won't have to be diverted anywhere and once it goes back into the tunnels, no one'll be able to get to it," Rich finished explaining.

"Who owns this land?" Claudine asked.

"Cresswell, I think," Rich said.

"You know what's strange? Holdings owns the Yonkers Raceway," Claudine said.

"He does?" Lizzie said. "Oh, yes, I'd forgot that."

"He bought the old harness-racing track during his first term as mayor twelve years ago to keep it from being demolished. Supposedly he hasn't made a dime on the purchase

since."

"Why is that strange?" I asked.

"Cresswell owning the land that abuts the Yonkers Raceway? You'd think Holdings would have an idea about who his neighbor is. And the City owns the land around the Hillsvieview Reservoir, doesn't it? That wouldn't leave a very large stretch of land to build on. Not without getting permission from either the City or from Holdings himself, and not without calling a lot of attention to the whole thing."

"What are you getting at?" Sammy asked.

"That someone in the City's current government has to know about this blue print," Claudine said.

"I'd like to know for sure who owns this land," I said.

"That's not too hard to find out," she said. "And I think I have time to do it."

Claudine went alone to the public records division inside City Hall to check out who owned the property just south of the Yonkers Raceway. She called from a pay phone three hours later.

"Cresswell doesn't own the land. Holdings does," she said.

"Holdings owns the land?" It took a few seconds for the information to sink in. I was alone sitting at Michele's desk. "Where does Alex fit into all this?" I asked.

"I'm not sure he does. If Holdings owns the land Cresswell plans to build the filtration plant on, then I'd say those two are working together. Alex may just be a pawn."

"But didn't Cresswell try to kill Holdings?"

"Maybe their deal soured and somehow Cresswell would get the land if Holdings died. Or maybe it was all a publicity stunt to throw suspicion off Holdings."

"Do you think Holdings knew about the contamination before it happened?"

"I don't know. But he certainly stands to profit from it."

I looked at the giraffe clock on Michele's desk. "The debate starts in an hour."

"I've made copies of everything. Including the blue print. I should make it in time. Good luck on your end," Claudine said. "I love you."

It was nice hearing it come from her instead of me. "I love you too," I said.

* * * *

I walked through the park alone. It was lunch time and the park benches were lined with business people eating sushi out of clear plastic trays. Most looked like they hadn't bathed in awhile. Their hair wasn't parting right or it looked frizzy. Most of the woman used assorted barrettes, clips or scrungies. Some wore hats. The men had bed head.

A young entrepreneur walked by with a cooler slung across his shoulders. "Water. Five bucks. Water," he called out clandestinely.

"That's outrageous," I heard a woman say.

Every so often a break along the benches would appear between the business people and a homeless person would be camped out, bags of empty aluminum cans and old clothes fanned out around him. Eventually, if this water problem continued, I figured it would get harder and harder tell the difference between those who had jobs and beds to sleep in and those who didn't.

I exited the park and walked two more blocks to the police station. I climbed the steps and walked through two sets of double doors. I walked up to the woman seated behind the high counter and told her I'd like to speak to a police officer. She asked me my name and I told her. She didn't seem to recognize it. She told me to please be seated. I sat cross-

legged on a bench next to a young woman and her child. The child was probably six years old and he touched my shoe. His mother wasn't paying him any attention. She was staring at a business card she held in her hand, then began dialing the number on her cell phone. I smiled at the boy and he immediately started to cry. His mother reached out without even looking and jerked his arm. The boy stopped crying. Then he touched my shoe again. This time, I didn't smile. I just looked at him.

I was relieved when, a couple minutes later, a door opened and an armed officer looked at me. "Reese?" he asked.

I stood up. He nodded to me. "Come inside, please." I walked past the officer into a room filled with desks and men in suits and uniforms. A few looked my way, but most kept busy with their work. I did notice a box of doughnuts on one of the tables.

"You mind if I search you?" the officer asked.

"Not at all," I said. It was a quick search and when it was over he asked me to sit down at his desk. The first thing he asked for was I.D. I figured they'd ask me for it, but all I had was my ATM card.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Just check my Wanted Poster," I suggested, pointing to a bulletin board covered in photographs of men and women push-pinned into the cork. He got up and pulled mine down. He compared my face with the one on the paper. My mustache had begun to grow back in and given another week would look about the same.

"Okay," he said. "You're under arrest." The officer pulled a thick form from a card board box and cranked it into his typewriter.

Chapter Seventeen

At my arraignment three days later, my lawyer tore to shreds most of what the prosecution had to say about my supposed life of crime. Almost all the evidence was circumstantial. But not all of my version of what happened could be verified. The cavern and tunnels I told them about couldn't be found. My guess was that someone used dynamite to collapse the whole thing and that Karl and Lykes' bodies were buried under it all. But, ultimately, the prosecution case was so flimsy, it didn't matter.

Besides, the court had a pretty good idea that I'd helped uncover the real crooks. Cresswell was being investigated and Holdings dropped out of the race for mayor. Claudine opened a can of worms at the press conference and no one in the city could resist taking a look. One thing was for sure. Cresswell wouldn't be able to get a city contract to build even a side walk, let alone a project of any real importance.

New York City's water was still undrinkable, though the toxicity levels were dropping. It seemed that the bacteria had started to kill each other off in some kind of weird, cannibalistic way. Of course, the remaining strain left alive would be nearly indestructible, but at least it could probably be contained.

Chapter Eighteen

We were all gathered at Sammy's place. Claudine invited Joanne to join us and she accepted. Because her husband's body hadn't yet been recovered, she refused to believe he was dead. I decided not to try very hard to persuade her of the fact. When she was ready, she'd come to that conclusion on her own. Yet time away from Karl had done her some good. She'd put on a few pounds. When she noticed the ring on Claudine's finger, she really came to life. The romantic in her was still alive, as it was in Claudine, too.

Sammy and I talked about his son. His parole hearing was coming up. He had talked about wanting to become a Sandhog. We agreed if he made his parole that we'd put him to work. We talked about whether or not I should join Sammy and retire from being a Sandhog, but as of yet I hadn't made up my mind.