Praise for

FINDERS KEEPERS

"Superb. . . . King's restless imagination is a power that cannot be contained."

—Laura Lippmann,
The New York Times Book Review

"Wonderful, scary, moving."

—Elizabeth Hand,
The Washington Post

"[A] taut thriller about the thin line separating fandom from fanaticism . . . [Morris] Bellamy is one of King's creepiest creations—a literate and intelligent character whom any passionate reader will both identify with and be repelled by. . . . nail-biting suspense that's the hallmark of King's best work."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"[*Finders Keepers*] delivers on what it promises: a gripping setup, a group of resourceful good guys, an antagonist capable of terrible violence. It also speaks to the powerful allure of fiction, of how a great story can capture someone's imagination and make him or her see the world in a completely different way."

—*The Portland Press Herald*

"A thrilling, taut read."

—*Miami Herald*

"Expertly plotted, a series of pieces falling into place with almost audible satisfaction as [King] burns towards his suitably horrific climax. . . . once you're hooked, you're hooked. [And] *Finders Keepers* is just as fascinating for its fresh take on a topic that perennially fascinates King: the relationship between a writer and their fans."

—*The Guardian* (UK)

"A nail-biting suspense-horror-mystery tale. . . . a breathtakingly fast-paced read."

—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

"Stephen King never seems to run short of intriguing plots, compelling characters, and just enough gore and guts to bring in a vast audience of readers."

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"A cool thriller packed with literary allusions and the theme that reading literature can change a reader's heart—for good or bad."

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"King is, above all, a master storyteller, building the story's tension—a slow burn throughout—to a near unbearable level by the end."

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"The narrative hums and roars along like a high-performance vehicle . . . a rip-snorting entertainment; one that also works as a sneaky-smart satire of literary criticism and how even the most attentive readers can often miss the whole point."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

STEPHEN KING

FINDERS KEEPERS

A NOVEL

SCRIBNER
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Scribner
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This Scribner export edition June 2020

SCRIBNER and design are registered trademarks of
The Gale Group, Inc., used under license by
Simon & Schuster, Inc., the publisher of this work.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-9821-5049-5
ISBN 978-1-5011-0013-0 (ebook)

Thinking of John D. MacDonald

"It is by going down into the abyss that
we recover the treasures of life."
Joseph Campbell

"Shit don't mean shit."
Jimmy Gold

FINDERS KEEPERS

PART 1: BURIED TREASURE

1978

"Wake up, genius."

Rothstein didn't want to wake up. The dream was too good. It featured his first wife months before she became his first wife, seventeen and perfect from head to toe. Naked and shimmering. Both of them naked. He was nineteen, with grease under his fingernails, but she hadn't minded that, at least not then, because his head was full of dreams and that was what she cared about. She believed in the dreams even more than he did, and she was right to believe. In this dream she was laughing and reaching for the part of him that was easiest to grab. He tried to go deeper, but then a hand began shaking his shoulder, and the dream popped like a soap bubble.

He was no longer nineteen and living in a two-room New Jersey apartment, he was six months shy of his eightieth birthday and living on a farm in New Hampshire, where his will specified he should

be buried. There were men in his bedroom. They were wearing ski masks, one red, one blue, and one canary-yellow. He saw this and tried to believe it was just another dream—the sweet one had slid into a nightmare, as they sometimes did—but then the hand let go of his arm, grabbed his shoulder, and tumbled him onto the floor. He struck his head and cried out.

"Quit that," said the one in the yellow mask. "You want to knock him unconscious?"

"Check it out." The one in the red mask pointed. "Old fella's got a woody. Must have been having one hell of a dream."

Blue Mask, the one who had done the shaking, said, "Just a piss hard-on. When they're that age, nothing else gets em up. My grandfather—"

"Be quiet," Yellow Mask said. "Nobody cares about your grandfather."

Although dazed and still wrapped in a fraying curtain of sleep, Rothstein knew he was in trouble here. Two words surfaced in his mind: *home invasion*. He looked up at the trio that had materialized in his bedroom, his old head aching (there was going to be a huge bruise on the right side, thanks to the blood thinners he took), his heart with its perilously thin walls banging against the left side of his ribcage. They loomed over him, three men with gloves on their hands, wearing plaid fall jackets below those terrifying balaclavas. Home invaders, and here he was, five miles from town.

Rothstein gathered his thoughts as best he could, banishing sleep and telling himself there was one good thing about this situation: if they didn't want him to see their faces, they intended to leave him alive.

Maybe.

"Gentlemen," he said.

Mr. Yellow laughed and gave him a thumbs-up. "Good start, genius."

Rothstein nodded, as if at a compliment. He glanced at the bedside clock, saw it was quarter past two in the morning, then looked back at Mr. Yellow, who might be the leader. "I have only a little money, but you're welcome to it. If you'll only leave without hurting me."

The wind gusted, rattling autumn leaves against the west side of the house. Rothstein was aware that the furnace was running for the first time this year. Hadn't it just been summer?

"According to our info, you got a lot more than a little." This was Mr. Red.

"Hush." Mr. Yellow extended a hand to Rothstein. "Get off the floor, genius."

Rothstein took the offered hand, got shakily to his feet, then sat on the bed. He was breathing hard, but all too aware (self-awareness had been both a curse and a blessing all his life) of the picture he must make: an old man in flappy blue pajamas, nothing left of his hair but white popcorn puffs above the ears. This was what had become of the writer who, in the

year JFK became president, had been on the cover of *Time* magazine: JOHN ROTHSTEIN, AMERICA'S RECLUSIVE GENIUS.

Wake up, genius.

"Get your breath," Mr. Yellow said. He sounded solicitous, but Rothstein did not trust this. "Then we'll go into the living room, where normal people have their discussions. Take your time. Get serene."

Rothstein breathed slowly and deeply, and his heart quieted a little. He tried to think of Peggy, with her teacup-sized breasts (small but perfect) and her long, smooth legs, but the dream was as gone as Peggy herself, now an old crone living in Paris. On his money. At least Yolande, his second effort at marital bliss, was dead, thus putting an end to the alimony.

Red Mask left the room, and now Rothstein heard rummaging in his study. Something fell over. Drawers were opened and closed.

"Doing better?" Mr. Yellow asked, and when Rothstein nodded: "Come on, then."

Rothstein allowed himself to be led into the small living room, escorted by Mr. Blue on his left and Mr. Yellow on his right. In his study the rummaging went on. Soon Mr. Red would open the closet and push back his two jackets and three sweaters, exposing the safe. It was inevitable.

All right. As long as they leave the notebooks, and why would they take them? Thugs like these are only interested in money. They probably can't even read anything more challenging than the letters in Penthouse.

Only he wasn't sure about the man in the yellow mask. That one sounded educated.

All the lamps were on in the living room, and the shades weren't drawn. Wakeful neighbors might have wondered what was going on in the old writer's house . . . if he had neighbors. The closest ones were two miles away, on the main highway. He had no friends, no visitors. The occasional salesman was sent packing. Rothstein was just that peculiar old fella. The retired writer. The hermit. He paid his taxes and was left alone.

Blue and Yellow led him to the easy chair facing the seldom-watched TV, and when he didn't immediately sit, Mr. Blue pushed him into it.

"Easy!" Yellow said sharply, and Blue stepped back a bit, muttering. Mr. Yellow was the one in charge, all right. Mr. Yellow was the wheeldog.

He bent over Rothstein, hands on the knees of his corduroys. "Do you want a little splash of something to settle you?"

"If you mean alcohol, I quit twenty years ago. Doctor's orders."

"Good for you. Go to meetings?"

"I wasn't an *alcoholic*," Rothstein said, nettled. Crazy to be nettled in such a situation . . . or was it? Who knew how one was supposed to react after being yanked out of bed in the middle of the night by men in colorful ski masks? He wondered how he might write such a scene and had no idea; he did not write about situations like this. "People assume

any twentieth-century white male writer must be an *alcoholic*."

"All right, all right," Mr. Yellow said. It was as if he were placating a grumpy child. "Water?"

"No, thank you. What I want is for you three to leave, so I'm going to be honest with you." He wondered if Mr. Yellow understood the most basic rule of human discourse: when someone says they're going to be honest with you, they are in most cases preparing to lie faster than a horse can trot. "My wallet is on the dresser in the bedroom. There's a little over eighty dollars in it. There's a ceramic teapot on the mantel . . ."

He pointed. Mr. Blue turned to look, but Mr. Yellow did not. Mr. Yellow continued to study Rothstein, the eyes behind the mask almost amused. *It's not working,* Rothstein thought, but he persevered. Now that he was awake, he was pissed off as well as scared, although he knew he'd do well not to show that.

"It's where I keep the housekeeping money. Fifty or sixty dollars. That's all there is in the house. Take it and go."

"Fucking liar," Mr. Blue said. "You got a lot more than that, guy. We know. Believe me."

As if this were a stage play and that line his cue, Mr. Red yelled from the study. "Bingo! Found a safe! Big one!"

Rothstein had known the man in the red mask would find it, but his heart sank anyway. Stupid

to keep cash, there was no reason for it other than his dislike of credit cards and checks and stocks and instruments of transfer, all the tempting chains that tied people to America's overwhelming and ultimately destructive debt-and-spend machine. But the cash might be his salvation. Cash could be replaced. The notebooks, over a hundred and fifty of them, could not.

"Now the combo," said Mr. Blue. He snapped his gloved fingers. "Give it up."

Rothstein was almost angry enough to refuse, according to Yolande anger had been his lifelong default position ("Probably even in your goddam cradle," she had said), but he was also tired and frightened. If he balked, they'd beat it out of him. He might even have another heart attack, and one more would almost certainly finish him.

"If I give you the combination to the safe, will you take the money inside and go?"

"Mr. Rothstein," Mr. Yellow said with a kindliness that seemed genuine (and thus grotesque), "you're in no position to bargain. Freddy, go get the bags."

Rothstein felt a huff of chilly air as Mr. Blue, also known as Freddy, went out through the kitchen door. Mr. Yellow, meanwhile, was smiling again. Rothstein already detested that smile. Those red lips.

"Come on, genius—give. Soonest begun, soonest done."

Rothstein sighed and recited the combination of the Gardall in his study closet. "Three left two turns,

thirty-one right two turns, eighteen left one turn, ninety-nine right one turn, then back to zero."

Behind the mask, the red lips spread wider, now showing teeth. "I could have guessed that. It's your birth date."

As Yellow called the combination to the man in his closet, Rothstein made certain unpleasant deductions. Mr. Blue and Mr. Red had come for money, and Mr. Yellow might take his share, but he didn't believe money was the primary objective of the man who kept calling him *genius*. As if to underline this, Mr. Blue reappeared, accompanied by another puff of cool outside air. He had four empty duffel bags, two slung over each shoulder.

"Look," Rothstein said to Mr. Yellow, catching the man's eyes and holding them. "Don't. There's nothing in that safe worth taking except for the money. The rest is just a bunch of random scribbling, but it's important to me."

From the study Mr. Red cried: "Holy hopping Jesus, Morrie! We hit the jackpot! Eee-doggies, there's a *ton* of cash! Still in the bank envelopes! Dozens of them!"

At least sixty, Rothstein could have said, maybe as many as eighty. With four hundred dollars in each one. From Arnold Abel, my accountant in New York. Jeannie cashes the expense checks and brings back the cash envelopes and I put them in the safe. Only I have few expenses, because Arnold also pays the major bills from New York. I tip Jeannie once in awhile, and the

postman at Christmas, but otherwise, I rarely spend the cash. For years this has gone on, and why? Arnold never asks what I use the money for. Maybe he thinks I have an arrangement with a call girl or two. Maybe he thinks I play the ponies at Rockingham.

But here is the funny thing, he could have said to Mr. Yellow (also known as Morrie). I have never asked *myself*. Any more than I've asked myself why I keep filling notebook after notebook. Some things just *are*.

He *could* have said these things, but kept silent. Not because Mr. Yellow wouldn't understand, but because that knowing red-lipped smile said he just might.

And wouldn't care.

"What else is in there?" Mr. Yellow called. His eyes were still locked on Rothstein's. "Boxes? Manuscript boxes? The size I told you?"

"Not boxes, notebooks," Mr. Red reported back. "Fuckin safe's filled with em."

Mr. Yellow smiled, still looking into Rothstein's eyes. "Handwritten? That how you do it, genius?"

"Please," Rothstein said. "Just leave them. That material isn't meant to be seen. None of it's ready."

"And never will be, that's what I think. Why, you're just a great big hoarder." The twinkle in those eyes—what Rothstein thought of as an Irish twinkle—was gone now. "And hey, it isn't as if you *need* to publish anything else, right? Not like there's any *financial imperative*. You've got royalties from *The Runner*. And *The Runner Sees Action*. And *The*

Runner Slows Down. The famous Jimmy Gold trilogy. Never out of print. Taught in college classes all over this great nation of ours. Thanks to a cabal of lit teachers who think you and Saul Bellow hung the moon, you've got a captive audience of book-buying undergrads. You're all set, right? Why take a chance on publishing something that might put a dent in your solid gold reputation? You can hide out here and pretend the rest of the world doesn't exist." Mr. Yellow shook his head. "My friend, you give a whole new meaning to anal retentive."

Mr. Blue was still lingering in the doorway. "What do you want me to do, Morrie?"

"Get in there with Curtis. Pack everything up. If there isn't room for all the notebooks in the duffels, look around. Even a cabin rat like him must have at least one suitcase. Don't waste time counting the money, either. I want to get out of here ASAP."

"Okay." Mr. Blue—Freddy—left.

"Don't do this," Rothstein said, and was appalled at the tremble in his voice. Sometimes he forgot how old he was, but not tonight.

The one whose name was Morrie leaned toward him, greenish-gray eyes peering through the holes in the yellow mask. "I want to know something. If you're honest, maybe we'll leave the notebooks. Will you be honest with me, genius?"

"I'll try," Rothstein said. "And I never called myself that, you know. It was *Time* magazine that called me a genius."

"But I bet you never wrote a letter of protest."

Rothstein said nothing. Sonofabitch, he was thinking. Smartass sonofabitch. You won't leave anything, will you? It doesn't matter what I say.

"Here's what I want to know—why in God's name couldn't you leave Jimmy Gold alone? Why did you have to push his face down in the dirt like you did?"

The question was so unexpected that at first Rothstein had no idea what Morrie was talking about, even though Jimmy Gold was his most famous character, the one he would be remembered for (assuming he was remembered for anything). The same *Time* cover story that had referred to Rothstein as a genius had called Jimmy Gold "an American icon of despair in a land of plenty." Pretty much horseshit, but it had sold books.

"If you mean I should have stopped with *The Runner*, you're not alone." But almost, he could have added. *The Runner Sees Action* had solidified his reputation as an important American writer, and *The Runner Slows Down* had been the capstone of his career: critical bouquets up the wazoo, on the *New York Times* bestseller list for sixty-two weeks. National Book Award, too—not that he had appeared in person to accept it. "The *Iliad* of postwar America," the citation had called it, meaning not just the last one but the trilogy as a whole.

"I'm not saying you should have stopped with *The Runner*," Morrie said. "*The Runner Sees Action* was just as good, maybe even better. They were *true*. It was

the last one. Man, what a crap carnival. Advertising? I mean, *advertising?*"

Mr. Yellow then did something that tightened Rothstein's throat and turned his belly to lead. Slowly, almost reflectively, he stripped off his yellow balaclava, revealing a young man of classic Boston Irish countenance: red hair, greenish eyes, pasty-white skin that would always burn and never tan. Plus those weird red lips.

"House in the *suburbs?* Ford sedan in the *driveway?* Wife and two little *kiddies?* Everybody sells out, is that what you were trying to say? Everybody eats the poison?"

"In the notebooks . . ."

There were two more Jimmy Gold novels in the notebooks, that was what he wanted to say, ones that completed the circle. In the first of them, Jimmy comes to see the hollowness of his suburban life and leaves his family, his job, and his comfy Connecticut home. He leaves on foot, with nothing but a knapsack and the clothes on his back. He becomes an older version of the kid who dropped out of school, rejected his materialistic family, and decided to join the army after a booze-filled weekend spent wandering in New York City.

"In the notebooks what?" Morrie asked. "Come on, genius, speak. Tell me why you had to knock him down and step on the back of his head."

In The Runner Goes West *he becomes himself again,* Rothstein wanted to say. *His essential self.* Only now

Mr. Yellow had shown his face, and he was removing a pistol from the right front pocket of his plaid jacket. He looked sorrowful.

"You created one of the greatest characters in American literature, then shit on him," Morrie said. "A man who could do that doesn't deserve to live."

The anger roared back like a sweet surprise. "If you think that," John Rothstein said, "you never understood a word I wrote."

Morrie pointed the pistol. The muzzle was a black eye.

Rothstein pointed an arthritis-gnarled finger back, as if it were his own gun, and felt satisfaction when he saw Morrie blink and flinch a little. "Don't give me your dumbass literary criticism. I got a bellyful of that long before you were born. What are you, anyway, twenty-two? Twenty-three? What do you know about life, let alone literature?"

"Enough to know not everyone sells out." Rothstein was astounded to see tears swimming in those Irish eyes. "Don't lecture me about life, not after spending the last twenty years hiding away from the world like a rat in a hole."

This old criticism—how *dare* you leave the Fame Table?—sparked Rothstein's anger into full-blown rage—the sort of glass-throwing, furniture-smashing rage both Peggy and Yolande would have recognized—and he was glad. Better to die raging than to do so cringing and begging.

"How will you turn my work into cash? Have

you thought of that? I assume you have. I assume you know that you might as well try to sell a stolen Hemingway notebook, or a Picasso painting. But your friends aren't as educated as you are, are they? I can tell by the way they speak. Do they know what you know? I'm sure they don't. But you sold them a bill of goods. You showed them a large pie in the sky and told them they could each have a slice. I think you're capable of that. I think you have a lake of words at your disposal. But I believe it's a shallow lake."

"Shut up. You sound like my mother."

"You're a common thief, my friend. And how stupid to steal what you can never sell."

"Shut up, genius, I'm warning you."

Rothstein thought, And if he pulls the trigger? No more pills. No more regrets about the past, and the litter of broken relationships along the way like so many cracked-up cars. No more obsessive writing, either, accumulating notebook after notebook like little piles of rabbit turds scattered along a woodland trail. A bullet in the head would not be so bad, maybe. Better than cancer or Alzheimer's, that prime horror of anyone who has spent his life making a living by his wits. Of course there would be headlines, and I'd gotten plenty of those even before that damned *Time* story . . . but if he pulls the trigger, I won't have to read them.

"You're *stupid*," Rothstein said. All at once he was in a kind of ecstasy. "You think you're smarter

than those other two, but you're not. At least they understand that cash can be spent." He leaned forward, staring at that pale, freckle-spattered face. "You know what, kid? It's guys like you who give reading a bad name."

"Last warning," Morrie said.

"Fuck your warning. And fuck your mother. Either shoot me or get out of my house."

Morris Bellamy shot him.

2009

The first argument about money in the Saubers household—the first one the kids overheard, at least—happened on an evening in April. It wasn't a big argument, but even the greatest storms begin as gentle breezes. Peter and Tina Saubers were in the living room, Pete doing homework and Tina watching a *SpongeBob* DVD. It was one she'd seen before, many times, but she never seemed to tire of it. This was fortunate, because these days there was no access to the Cartoon Network in the Saubers household. Tom Saubers had canceled the cable service two months ago.

Tom and Linda Saubers were in the kitchen, where Tom was cinching his old pack shut after loading it up with PowerBars, a Tupperware filled with cut veggies, two bottles of water, and a can of Coke.

"You're nuts," Linda said. "I mean, I've always known you were a Type A personality, but this takes

it to a whole new level. If you want to set the alarm for five, fine. You can pick up Todd, be at City Center by six, and you'll still be first in line."

"I wish," Tom said. "Todd says there was one of these job fairs in Brook Park last month, and people started lining up the day before. *The day before,* Lin!"

"Todd says a lot of things. And you listen. Remember when Todd said Pete and Tina would just *love* that Monster Truck Jam thingie—"

"This isn't a Monster Truck Jam, or a concert in the park, or a fireworks show. This is our *lives*."

Pete looked up from his homework and briefly met his little sister's eyes. Tina's shrug was eloquent: *Just the parents*. He went back to his algebra. Four more problems and he could go down to Howie's house. See if Howie had any new comic books. Pete certainly had none to trade; his allowance had gone the way of the cable TV.

In the kitchen, Tom had begun to pace. Linda caught up with him and took his arm gently. "I know it's our lives," she said.

Speaking low, partly so the kids wouldn't hear and be nervous (she knew Pete already was), mostly to lower the temperature. She knew how Tom felt, and her heart went out to him. Being afraid was bad; being humiliated because he could no longer fulfill what he saw as his primary responsibility to support his family was worse. And humiliation really wasn't the right word. What he felt was shame. For the ten years he'd been at Lakefront Realty, he'd consistently been one of

their top salesmen, often with his smiling photo at the front of the shop. The money she brought in teaching third grade was just icing on the cake. Then, in the fall of 2008, the bottom fell out of the economy, and the Sauberses became a single-income family.

It wasn't as if Tom had been let go and might be called back when things improved; Lakefront Realty was now an empty building with graffiti on the walls and a FOR SALE OR LEASE sign out front. The Reardon brothers, who had inherited the business from their father (and their father from his), had been deeply invested in stocks, and lost nearly everything when the market tanked. It was little comfort to Linda that Tom's best friend, Todd Paine, was in the same boat. She thought Todd was a dingbat.

"Have you seen the weather forecast? I have. It's going to be cold. Fog off the lake by morning, maybe even freezing drizzle. *Freezing drizzle,* Tom."

"Good. I hope it happens. It'll keep the numbers down and improve the odds." He took her by the forearms, but gently. There was no shaking, no shouting. That came later. "I've *got* to get something, Lin, and the job fair is my best shot this spring. I've been pounding the pavement—"

"I know—"

"And there's *nothing*. I mean *zilch*. Oh, a few jobs down at the docks, and a little construction at the shopping center out by the airport, but can you see me doing that kind of work? I'm thirty pounds overweight and twenty years out of shape. I might

find something downtown this summer—clerking, maybe—*if* things ease up a little . . . but that kind of job would be low-paying and probably temporary. So Todd and me're going at midnight, and we're going to stand in line until the doors open tomorrow morning, and I promise you I'm going to come back with a job that pays actual money."

"And probably with some bug we can all catch. Then we can scrimp on groceries to pay the doctor's bills."

That was when he grew really angry with her. "I would like a little support here."

"Tom, for God's sake, I'm *try*—"

"Maybe even an attaboy. 'Way to show some initiative, Tom. We're glad you're going the extra mile for the family, Tom.' That sort of thing. If it's not too much to ask."

"All I'm saying—"

But the kitchen door opened and closed before she could finish. He'd gone out back to smoke a cigarette. When Pete looked up this time, he saw distress and worry on Tina's face. She was only eight, after all. Pete smiled and dropped her a wink. Tina gave him a doubtful smile in return, then went back to the doings in the deepwater kingdom called Bikini Bottom, where dads did not lose their jobs or raise their voices, and kids did not lose their allowances. Unless they were bad, that was.

Before leaving that night, Tom carried his daughter up to bed and kissed her goodnight. He added one

for Mrs. Beasley, Tina's favorite doll—for good luck, he said.

"Daddy? Is everything going to be okay?"

"You bet, sugar," he said. She remembered that. The confidence in his voice. "Everything's going to be just fine. Now go to sleep." He left, walking normally. She remembered that, too, because she never saw him walk that way again.

At the top of the steep drive leading from Marlborough Street to the City Center parking lot, Tom said, "Whoa, hold it, stop!"

"Man, there's cars behind me," Todd said.

"This'll just take a second." Tom raised his phone and snapped a picture of the people standing in line. There had to be a hundred already. At least that many. Running above the auditorium doors was a banner reading **1000 JOBS GUARANTEED!** And "*We Stand With the People of Our City!*"—**MAYOR RALPH KINSLER**.

Behind Todd Paine's rusty '04 Subaru, someone laid on his horn.

"Tommy, I hate to be a party pooper while you're memorializing this wonderful occasion, but—"

"Go, go. I got it." And, as Todd drove into the parking lot, where the spaces nearest the building had already been filled: "I can't wait to show that picture to Linda. You know what she said? That if we got here by six, we'd be first in line."

"Told you, my man. The Toddster does not lie."

The Toddster parked. The Subaru died with a fart and a wheeze. "By daybreak, there's gonna be, like, a couple-thousand people here. TV, too. All the stations. *City at Six*, *Morning Report*, *MetroScan*. We might get interviewed."

"I'll settle for a job."

Linda had been right about one thing, it was damp. You could smell the lake in the air: that faintly sewery aroma. And it was almost cold enough for him to see his breath. Posts with yellow DO NOT CROSS tape had been set up, folding the job-seekers back and forth like pleats in a human accordion. Tom and Todd took their places between the final posts. Others fell in behind them at once, mostly men, some in heavy fleece workmen's jackets, some in Mr. Businessman topcoats and Mr. Businessman haircuts that were beginning to lose their finely barbered edge. Tom guessed that the line would stretch all the way to the end of the parking lot by dawn, and that would still be at least four hours before the doors opened.

His eye was caught by a woman with a baby hanging off the front of her. They were a couple of zigzags over. Tom wondered how desperate you had to be to come out in the middle of a cold, damp night like this one with an infant. The kiddo was in one of those papoose carriers. The woman was talking to a burly man with a sleeping bag slung over his shoulder, and the baby was peering from one to the other, like the world's smallest tennis fan. Sort of comical.

"Want a little warm-up, Tommy?" Todd had taken a pint of Bell's from his pack and was holding it out.

Tom almost said no, remembering Linda's parting shot—*Don't you come home with booze on your breath, mister*—and then took the bottle. It was cold out here, and a short one wouldn't hurt. He felt the whiskey go down, heating his throat and belly.

Rinse your mouth before you hit any of the job booths, he reminded himself. Guys who smell of whiskey don't get hired for anything.

When Todd offered him another nip—this was around two o'clock—Tom refused. But when he offered again at three, Tom took the bottle. Checking the level, he guessed the Toddster had been fortifying himself against the cold quite liberally.

Well, what the hell, Tom thought, and bit off quite a bit more than a nip; this one was a solid mouthful.

"Atta-baby," Todd said, sounding the teensiest bit slurry. "Go with your bad self."

Job hunters continued to arrive, their cars nosing up from Marlborough Street through the thickening fog. The line was well past the posts now, and no longer zigzagging. Tom had believed he understood the economic difficulties currently besetting the country—hadn't he lost a job himself, a very good job?—but as the cars kept coming and the line kept growing (he could no longer see where it ended), he began to get a new and frightening perspective.

Maybe *difficulties* wasn't the right word. Maybe the right word was *calamity*.

To his right, in the maze of posts and tape leading to the doors of the darkened auditorium, the baby began to cry. Tom looked around and saw the man with the sleeping bag holding the sides of the papoose carrier so the woman (God, Tom thought, she doesn't look like she's out of her teens yet) could pull the kid out.

"What the fuck's zat?" Todd asked, sounding slurrier than ever.

"A kid," Tom said. "Woman with a kid. *Girl* with a kid."

Todd peered. "Christ on a pony," he said. "I call that pretty irra . . . irry . . . you know, not responsible."

"Are you drunk?" Linda disliked Todd, she didn't see his good side, and right now Tom wasn't sure he saw it, either.

"L'il bit. I'll be fine by the time the doors open. Got some breath mints, too."

Tom thought of asking the Toddster if he'd also brought some Visine—his eyes were looking mighty red—and decided he didn't want to have that discussion just now. He turned his attention back to where the woman with the crying baby had been. At first he thought they were gone. Then he looked lower and saw her sliding into the burly man's sleeping bag with the baby on her chest. The burly man was holding the mouth of the bag

open for her. The infant was still bawling his or her head off.

"Can't you shut that kid up?" a man called.

"Someone ought to call Social Services," a woman added.

Tom thought of Tina at that age, imagined her out on this cold and foggy predawn morning, and restrained an urge to tell the man and woman to shut up . . . or better yet, lend a hand somehow. After all, they were in this together, weren't they? The whole screwed-up, bad-luck bunch of them.

The crying softened, stopped.

"She's probably feeding im," Todd said. He squeezed his chest to demonstrate.

"Yeah."

"Tommy?"

"What?"

"You know Ellen lost her job, right?"

"Jesus, no. I *didn't* know that." Pretending he didn't see the fear in Todd's face. Or the glimmering of moisture in his eyes. Possibly from the booze or the cold. Possibly not.

"They said they'd call her back when things get better, but they said the same thing to me, and I've been out of work going on half a year now. I cashed my insurance. That's gone. And you know what we got left in the bank? Five hundred dollars. You know how long five hundred dollars lasts when a loaf of bread at Kroger's costs a buck?"

"Not long."

"You're fucking A it doesn't. I *have* to get something here. *Have* to."

"You will. We both will."

Todd lifted his chin at the burly man, who now appeared to be standing guard over the sleeping bag, so no one would accidentally step on the woman and baby inside. "Think they're married?"

Tom hadn't considered it. Now he did. "Probably."

"Then they both must be out of work. Otherwise, one of em would have stayed home with the kid."

"Maybe," Tom said, "they think showing up with the baby will improve their chances."

Todd brightened. "The pity card! Not a bad idea!" He held out the pint. "Want a nip?"

He took a small one, thinking, If I don't drink it, Todd will.

Tom was awakened from a whiskey-assisted doze by an exuberant shout: "Life is discovered on other planets!" This sally was followed by laughter and applause.

He looked around and saw daylight. Thin and fog-draped, but daylight, just the same. Beyond the bank of auditorium doors, a fellow in gray fatigues—a man with a job, lucky fellow—was pushing a mop-bucket across the lobby.

"Whuddup?" Todd asked.

"Nothing," Tom said. "Just a janitor."

Todd peered in the direction of Marlborough Street. "Jesus, and still they come."

"Yeah," Tom said. Thinking, And if I'd listened to Linda, we'd be at the end of a line that stretches halfway to Cleveland. That was a good thought, a little vindication was always good, but he wished he'd said no to Todd's pint. His mouth tasted like kitty litter. Not that he'd ever actually *eaten* any, but—

Someone a couple of zigzags over—not far from the sleeping bag—asked, "Is that a Benz? It looks like a Benz."

Tom saw a long shape at the head of the entrance drive leading up from Marlborough, its yellow fog-lamps blazing. It wasn't moving; it just sat there.

"What's he think he's doing?" Todd asked.

The driver of the car immediately behind must have wondered the same thing, because he laid on his horn—a long, pissed-off blat that made people stir and snort and look around. For a moment the car with the yellow fog-lamps stayed where it was. Then it shot forward. Not to the left, toward the now full-to-overflowing parking lot, but directly at the people penned within the maze of tapes and posts.

"Hey!" someone shouted.

The crowd swayed backward in a tidal motion. Tom was shoved against Todd, who went down on his ass. Tom fought for balance, almost found it, and then the man in front of him—yelling, no, *screaming*—drove his butt into Tom's crotch and one flailing elbow into his chest. Tom fell on top of his buddy, heard the bottle of Bell's shatter somewhere between

them, and smelled the sharp reek of the remaining whiskey as it ran across the pavement.

Great, now I'll smell like a barroom on Saturday night.

He struggled to his feet in time to see the car—it was a Mercedes, all right, a big sedan as gray as this foggy morning—plowing into the crowd, spinning bodies out of its way as it came, describing a drunken arc. Blood dripped from the grille. A woman went skidding and rolling across the hood with her hands out and her shoes gone. She slapped at the glass, grabbed at one of the windshield wipers, missed, and tumbled off to one side. Yellow DO NOT CROSS tapes snapped. A post clanged against the side of the big sedan, which did not slow its roll in the slightest. Tom saw the front wheels pass over the sleeping bag and the burly man, who had been crouched protectively over it with one hand raised.

Now it was coming right at him.

"Todd!" he shouted. "Todd, *get up*!"

He grabbed at Todd's hands, got one of them, and pulled. Someone slammed into him and he was driven back to his knees. He could hear the rogue car's motor, revving full-out. Very close now. He tried to crawl, and a foot clobbered him in the temple. He saw stars.

"Tom?" Todd was behind him now. How had that happened? "Tom, what the *fuck*?"

A body landed on top of him, and then something else was on top of him, a huge weight that pressed

down, threatening to turn him to jelly. His hips snapped. They sounded like dry turkey bones. Then the weight was gone. Pain with its own kind of weight rushed in to replace it.

Tom tried to raise his head and managed to get it off the pavement just long enough to see taillights dwindling into the fog. He saw glittering shards of glass from the busted pint. He saw Todd sprawled on his back with blood coming out of his head and pooling on the pavement. Crimson tire-tracks ran away into the foggy half-light.

He thought, Linda was right. I should have stayed home.

He thought, I'm going to die, and maybe that's for the best. Because, unlike Todd Paine, I never got around to cashing in my insurance.

He thought, Although I probably would have, in time.

Then, blackness.

When Tom Saubers woke up in the hospital forty-eight hours later, Linda was sitting beside him. She was holding his hand. He asked her if he was going to live. She smiled, squeezed his hand, and said you bet your patootie.

"Am I paralyzed? Tell me the truth."

"No, honey, but you've got a lot of broken bones."

"What about Todd?"

She looked away, biting her lips. "He's in a coma, but they think he's going to come out of

it eventually. They can tell by his brainwaves, or something."

"There was a car. I couldn't get out of the way."

"I know. You weren't the only one. It was some madman. He got away with it, at least so far."

Tom could have cared less about the man driving the Mercedes-Benz. Not paralyzed was good, but—

"How bad did I get it? No bullshit—be honest."

She met his eyes but couldn't hold them. Once more looking at the get-well cards on his bureau, she said, "You . . . well. It's going to be awhile before you can walk again."

"How long?"

She raised his hand, which was badly scraped, and kissed it. "They don't know."

Tom Saubers closed his eyes and began to cry. Linda listened to that awhile, and when she couldn't stand it anymore, she leaned forward and began to punch the button on the morphine pump. She kept doing it until the machine stopped giving. By then he was asleep.

1978

Morris grabbed a blanket from the top shelf of the bedroom closet and used it to cover Rothstein, who now sprawled askew in the easy chair with the top of his head gone. The brains that had conceived Jimmy Gold, Jimmy's sister Emma, and Jimmy's self-involved, semi-alcoholic parents—so much like Morris's own—were now drying on the wallpaper. Morris wasn't shocked, exactly, but he was certainly amazed. He had expected some blood, and a hole between the eyes, but not this gaudy expectoration of gristle and bone. It was a failure of imagination, he supposed, the reason why he could *read* the giants of modern American literature—read them and appreciate them—but never *be* one.

Freddy Dow came out of the study with a loaded duffel bag over each shoulder. Curtis followed, head down and carrying nothing at all. All at once he sped up, hooked around Freddy, and bolted into the

kitchen. The door to the backyard banged against the side of the house as the wind took it. Then came the sound of retching.

"He's feelin kinda sick," Freddy said. He had a talent for stating the obvious.

"You all right?" Morris asked.

"Yuh." Freddy went out through the front door without looking back, pausing to pick up the crowbar leaning against the porch glider. They had come prepared to break in, but the front door had been unlocked. The kitchen door, as well. Rothstein had put all his confidence in the Gardall safe, it seemed. Talk about failures of the imagination.

Morris went into the study, looked at Rothstein's neat desk and covered typewriter. Looked at the pictures on the wall. Both ex-wives hung there, laughing and young and beautiful in their fifties clothes and hairdos. It was sort of interesting that Rothstein would keep those discarded women where they could look at him while he was writing, but Morris had no time to consider this, or to investigate the contents of the writer's desk, which he would dearly have loved to do. But was such investigation even necessary? He had the notebooks, after all. He had the contents of the writer's *mind*. Everything he'd written since he stopped publishing eighteen years ago.

Freddy had taken the stacks of cash envelopes in the first load (of course; cash was what Freddy and Curtis understood), but there were still plenty of notebooks on the shelves of the safe. They were

Moleskines, the kind Hemingway had used, the kind Morris had dreamed of while in the reformatory, where he had also dreamed of becoming a writer himself. But in Riverview Youth Detention he had been rationed to five sheets of pulpy Blue Horse paper each week, hardly enough to begin writing the Great American Novel. Begging for more did no good. The one time he'd offered Elkins, the commissary trustee, a blowjob for a dozen extra sheets, Elkins had punched him in the face. Sort of funny, when you considered all the non-consensual sex he had been forced to participate in during his nine-month stretch, usually on his knees and on more than one occasion with his own dirty undershorts stuffed in his mouth.

He didn't hold his mother *entirely* responsible for those rapes, but she deserved her share of the blame. Anita Bellamy, the famous history professor whose book on Henry Clay Frick had been nominated for a Pulitzer. So famous that she presumed to know all about modern American literature, as well. It was an argument about the Gold trilogy that had sent him out one night, furious and determined to get drunk. Which he did, although he was underage and looked it.

Drinking did not agree with Morris. He did things when he was drinking that he couldn't remember later, and they were never good things. That night it had been breaking and entering, vandalism, and fighting with a neighborhood rent-a-cop who tried to hold him until the regular cops got there.

That was almost six years ago, but the memory was still fresh. It had all been so stupid. Stealing a car, joyriding across town, then abandoning it (perhaps after pissing all over the dashboard) was one thing. Not smart, but with a little luck, you could walk away from that sort of deal. But breaking into a place in Sugar Heights? Double stupid. He had wanted *nothing* in that house (at least nothing he could remember later). And when he *did* want something? When he offered up his mouth for a few lousy sheets of Blue Horse paper? Punched in the face. So he'd laughed, because that was what Jimmy Gold would have done (at least before Jimmy grew up and sold out for what he called the Golden Buck), and what happened next? Punched in the face again, even harder. It was the muffled crack of his nose breaking that had started him crying.

Jimmy never would have cried.

He was still looking greedily at the Moleskines when Freddy Dow returned with the other two duffel bags. He also had a scuffed leather carryall. "This was in the pantry. Along with like a billion cans of beans and tuna fish. Go figure, huh? Weird guy. Maybe he was waiting for the Acropolipse. Come on, Morrie, put it in gear. Someone might have heard that shot."

"There aren't any neighbors. Nearest farm is two miles away. Relax."

"Jails're full of guys who were relaxed. We need to get out of here."

Morris began gathering up handfuls of notebooks, but couldn't resist looking in one, just to make sure. Rothstein *had* been a weird guy, and it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that he had stacked his safe with blank books, thinking he might write something in them eventually.

But no.

This one, at least, was loaded with Rothstein's small, neat handwriting, every page filled, top to bottom and side to side, the margins as thin as threads.

—wasn't sure why it mattered to him and why he couldn't sleep as the empty boxcar of this late freight bore him on through rural oblivion toward Kansas City and the sleeping country beyond, the full belly of America resting beneath its customary comforter of night, yet Jimmy's thoughts persisted in turning back to—

Freddy thumped him on the shoulder, and not gently. "Get your nose out of that thing and pack up. We already got one puking his guts out and pretty much useless."

Morris dropped the notebook into one of the duffels and grabbed another double handful without a word, his thoughts brilliant with possibility. He forgot about the mess under the blanket in the living room, forgot about Curtis Rogers puking his guts in the roses or zinnias or petunias or whatever was growing out back. Jimmy Gold! Headed west,

in a boxcar! Rothstein hadn't been done with him, after all!

"These're full," he told Freddy. "Take them out. I'll put the rest in the valise."

"That what you call that kind of bag?"

"I think so, yeah." He knew so. "Go on. Almost done here."

Freddy shouldered the duffels by their straps, but lingered a moment longer. "Are you sure about these things? Because Rothstein said—"

"He was a hoarder trying to save his hoard. He would have said anything. Go on."

Freddy went. Morris loaded the last batch of Moleskines into the valise and backed out of the closet. Curtis was standing by Rothstein's desk. He had taken off his balaclava; they all had. His face was paper-pale and there were dark shock circles around his eyes.

"You didn't have to kill him. You weren't *supposed* to. It wasn't in the plan. Why'd you do that?"

Because he made me feel stupid. Because he cursed my mother and that's my job. Because he called me a kid. Because he needed to be punished for turning Jimmy Gold into one of *them*. Mostly because nobody with his kind of talent has a right to hide it from the world. Only Curtis wouldn't understand that.

"Because it'll make the notebooks worth more when we sell them." Which wouldn't be until he'd read every word in them, but Curtis wouldn't understand the need to do that, and didn't need to

know. Nor did Freddy. He tried to sound patient and reasonable. "We now have all the John Rothstein output there's ever going to be. That makes the unpublished stuff even more valuable. You see that, don't you?"

Curtis scratched one pale cheek. "Well . . . I guess . . . yeah."

"Also, he can never claim they're forgeries when they turn up. Which he would have done, just out of spite. I've read a lot about him, Curtis, just about everything, and he was one spiteful motherfucker."

"Well . . ."

Morrie restrained himself from saying That's an extremely deep subject for a mind as shallow as yours. He held out the valise instead. "Take it. And keep your gloves on until we're in the car."

"You should have talked it over with us, Morrie. We're your *partners*."

Curtis started out, then turned back. "I got a question."

"What is it?"

"Do you know if New Hampshire has the death penalty?"

They took secondary roads across the narrow chimney of New Hampshire and into Vermont. Freddy drove the Chevy Biscayne, which was old and unremarkable. Morris rode shotgun with a Rand McNally open on his lap, thumbing on the dome light from time to time to make sure they didn't wander off their

pre-planned route. He didn't need to remind Freddy to keep to the speed limit. This wasn't Freddy Dow's first rodeo.

Curtis lay in the backseat, and soon they heard the sound of his snores. Morris considered him lucky; he seemed to have puked out his horror. Morris thought it might be awhile before he himself got another good night's sleep. He kept seeing the brains dribbling down the wallpaper. It wasn't the killing that stayed on his mind, it was the spilled talent. A lifetime of honing and shaping torn apart in less than a second. All those stories, all those images, and what came out looked like so much oatmeal. What was the point?

"So you really think we'll be able to sell those little books of his?" Freddy asked. He was back to that. "For real money, I mean?"

"Yes."

"And get away with it?"

"Yes, Freddy, I'm sure."

Freddy Dow was quiet for so long that Morris thought the issue was settled. Then he spoke to the subject again. Two words. Dry and toneless. "I'm doubtful."

Later on, once more incarcerated—not in Youth Detention this time, either—Morris would think, That's when I decided to kill them.

But sometimes at night, when he couldn't sleep, his asshole slick and burning from one of a dozen soap-assisted shower-room buggeries, he would admit that wasn't the truth. He'd known all along. They were

dumb, and career criminals. Sooner or later (probably sooner) one of them would be caught for something else, and there would be the temptation to trade what they knew about this night for a lighter sentence or no sentence at all.

I just knew they had to go, he would think on those cellblock nights when the full belly of America rested beneath its customary comforter of night. It was inevitable.

In upstate New York, with dawn not yet come but beginning to show the horizon's dark outline behind them, they turned west on Route 92, a highway that roughly paralleled I-90 as far as Illinois, where it turned south and petered out in the industrial city of Rockford. The road was still mostly deserted at this hour, although they could hear (and sometimes see) heavy truck traffic on the interstate to their left.

They passed a sign reading REST AREA 2 MI., and Morris thought of *Macbeth*. If it were to be done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. Not an exact quote, maybe, but close enough for government work.

"Pull in there," he told Freddy. "I need to drain the dragon."

"They probably got vending machines, too," said the puker in the backseat. Curtis was sitting up now, his hair crazy around his head. "I could get behind some of those peanut butter crackers."

Morris knew he'd have to let it go if there were

other cars in the rest area. I-90 had sucked away most of the through traffic that used to travel on this road, but once daybreak arrived, there would be lots of local traffic, pooting along from one Hicksville to the next.

For now the rest area was deserted, at least in part because of the sign reading OVERNIGHT RVS PROHIBITED. They parked and got out. Birds chirruped in the trees, discussing the night just past and plans for the day. A few leaves—in this part of the world they were just beginning to turn—drifted down and scuttered across the lot.

Curtis went to inspect the vending machines while Morris and Freddy walked side by side to the men's half of the restroom facility. Morris didn't feel particularly nervous. Maybe what they said was true, after the first one it got easier.

He held the door for Freddy with one hand and took the pistol from his jacket pocket with the other. Freddy said thanks without looking around. Morris let the door swing shut before raising the gun. He placed the muzzle less than an inch from the back of Freddy Dow's head and pulled the trigger. The gunshot was a flat loud bang in the tiled room, but anyone who heard it from a distance would think it was a motorcycle backfiring on I-90. What he worried about was Curtis.

He needn't have. Curtis was still standing in the snack alcove, beneath a wooden eave and a rustic sign reading ROADSIDE OASIS. In one hand he had a package of peanut butter crackers.