



STEPHEN
KING

BILLY
SUMMERS

A NOVEL

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Thinking of Raymond and Sarah Jane Spruce

“I once was lost, but now am found.”
Amazing Grace

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CHAPTER 1

1

Billy Summers sits in the hotel lobby, waiting for his ride. It's Friday noon. Although he's reading a digest-sized comic book called *Archie's Pals 'n' Gals*, he's thinking about Émile Zola, and Zola's third novel, his breakthrough, *Thérèse Raquin*. He's thinking it's very much a young man's book. He's thinking that Zola was just beginning to mine what would turn out to be a deep and fabulous vein of ore. He's thinking that Zola was—is—the nightmare version of Charles Dickens. He's thinking that would make a good thesis for an essay. Not that he's ever written one.

At two minutes past twelve the door opens and two men come into the lobby. One is tall with black hair combed in a 50s pompadour. The other is short and bespectacled. Both are wearing suits. All of Nick's men wear suits. Billy knows the tall one from out west. He's been with Nick a long time. His name is Frank Macintosh. Because of the pomp, some of Nick's men call him Frankie Elvis, or—now that he has a tiny bald spot in back—Solar Elvis. But not to his face. Billy doesn't know the other one. He must be local.

Macintosh holds out his hand. Billy rises and shakes it.

"Hey, Billy, been awhile. Good to see you."

"Good to see you too, Frank."

"This is Paulie Logan."

"Hi, Paulie." Billy shakes with the short one.

"Pleased to meet you, Billy."

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Macintosh takes the *Archie* digest from Billy's hand. "Still reading the comics, I see."

"Yeah," Billy says. "Yeah. I like them quite a bit. The funny ones. Sometimes the superheroes but I don't like them as much."

Macintosh breezes through the pages and shows something to Paulie Logan. "Look at these chicks. Man, I could jack off to these."

"Betty and Veronica," Billy says, taking the comic back. "Veronica is Archie's girlfriend and Betty wants to be."

"You read books, too?" Logan asks.

"Some, if I'm going on a long trip. And magazines. But mostly comic books."

"Good, good," Logan says, and drops Macintosh a wink. Not very subtle, and Macintosh frowns, but Billy's okay with it.

"You ready to take a ride?" Macintosh asks.

"Sure." Billy tucks his digest into his back pocket. Archie and his bosomy gal pals. There's an essay waiting to be written there, too. About the comfort of haircuts and attitudes that don't change. About Riverdale, and how time stands still there.

"Then let's go," Macintosh says. "Nick's waiting."

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Macintosh drives. Logan says he'll sit in back because he's short. Billy expects them to go west, because that's where the fancy part of this town is, and Nick Majarian likes to live large whether home or away. And he doesn't do hotels. But they go northeast instead.

Two miles from downtown they enter a neighborhood that looks lower middle-class to Billy. Three or four steps better than the trailer park he grew up in, but far from fancy. No big gated houses, not here. This is a neighborhood of ranch houses with lawn sprinklers twirling on small patches of grass. Most are one-story. Most are well maintained, but a few need paint and there's crabgrass tak-

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ing over some of the lawns. He sees one house with a piece of cardboard blocking a broken window. In front of another, a fat man in Bermuda shorts and a wifebeater sits in a lawn chair from Costco or Sam's Club, drinking a beer and watching them go by. Times have been good in America for awhile now, but maybe that is going to change. Billy knows neighborhoods like this. They are a barometer, and this one has started to go down. The people who live here are working the kind of jobs where you punch a clock.

Macintosh pulls into the driveway of a two-story with a patchy lawn. It's painted a subdued yellow. It's okay, but doesn't look like a place where Nick Majarian would choose to live, even for a few days. It looks like the kind of place a machinist or lower-echelon airport employee would live with his coupon-clipping wife and two kids, making mortgage payments every month and bowling in a beer league on Thursday nights.

Logan opens Billy's door. Billy puts his *Archie* digest on the dashboard and gets out.

Macintosh leads the way up the porch steps. It's hot outside but inside it's air conditioned. Nick Majarian stands in the short hallway leading down to the kitchen. He's wearing a suit that probably cost almost as much as a monthly mortgage payment on this house. His thinning hair is combed flat, no pompadour for him. His face is round and Vegas tanned. He's heavyset, but when he pulls Billy into a hug, that protruding belly feels as hard as stone.

"Billy!" Nick exclaims, and kisses him on both cheeks. Big hearty smacks. He's wearing a million-dollar grin. "Billy, Billy, man, it's good to see you!"

"Good to see you, too, Nick." He looks around. "You usually stay somewhere fancier than this." He pauses. "If you don't mind me saying."

Nick laughs. He has a beautiful infectious laugh to go with the grin. Macintosh joins in and Logan smiles. "I got a place over on the West Side. Short-term. House-sitting, you could call it. There's

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a fountain in the front yard. Got a naked little kid in the middle of it, there's a word for that . . ."

Cherub, Billy thinks but doesn't say. He just keeps smiling.

"Anyway, a little kid peeing water. You'll see it, you'll see it. No, this one isn't mine, Billy. It's yours. If you decide to take the job, that is."

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Nick shows him around. "Fully furnished," he says, like he's selling it. Maybe he sort of is.

This one has a second floor where there are three bedrooms and two bathrooms, the second small, probably for the kids. On the first floor there's a kitchen, a living room, and a dining room that's so small it's actually a dining nook. Most of the cellar has been converted into a long carpeted room with a big TV at one end and a Ping-Pong table at the other. Track lighting. Nick calls it the rumpus room, and this is where they sit.

Macintosh asks them if they'd like something to drink. He says there's soda, beer, lemonade, and iced tea.

"I want an Arnold Palmer," Nick says. "Half and half. Lots of ice."

Billy says that sounds good. They make small talk until the drinks come. The weather, how hot it is down here in the border south. Nick wants to know how Billy's trip in was. Billy says it was fine but doesn't say where he flew in from and Nick doesn't ask. Nick says how about that fuckin Trump and Billy says how about him. That's about all they've got, but it's okay because by then Macintosh is back with two tall glasses on a tray, and once he leaves, Nick gets down to business.

"When I called your man Bucky, he tells me you're hoping to retire."

"I'm thinking about it. Been at it a long time. Too long."

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"Truth. How old are you, anyway?"

"Forty-four."

"Been doing this ever since you took off the uniform?"

"Pretty much." He's pretty sure Nick knows all this.

"How many in all?"

Billy shrugs. "I don't exactly remember." It's seventeen. Eighteen, counting the first one, the man with the cast on his arm.

"Bucky says you might do one more if the price was right."

He waits for Billy to ask. Billy doesn't, so Nick resumes.

"The price on this one is very right. You could do it and spend the rest of your life someplace warm. Drinking piña coladas in a hammock." He busts out the big grin again. "Two million. Five hundred thousand up front, the rest after."

Billy's whistle isn't part of the act, which he doesn't think of as an act but as his *dumb self*, the one he shows to guys like Nick and Frank and Paulie. It's like a seatbelt. You don't use it because you expect to be in a crash, but you never know who you might meet coming over a hill on your side of the road. This is also true on the road of life, where people veer all over the place and drive the wrong way on the turnpike.

"Why so much?" The most he's ever gotten on a contract was seventy K. "It's not a politician, is it? Because I don't do that."

"Not even close."

"Is it a bad person?"

Nick laughs, shakes his head, and looks at Billy with real affection. "Always the same question with you."

Billy nods.

The dumb self might be a shuck, but this is true: he only does bad people. It's how he sleeps at night. It goes without saying that he has made a living *working* for bad people, yes, but Billy doesn't see this as a moral conundrum. He has no problem with bad people paying to have other bad people killed. He basically sees himself as a garbageman with a gun.

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"This is a very bad person."

"Okay . . ."

"And it's not my two mill. I'm just the middleman here, getting what you could call an agenting fee. Not a piece of yours, mine's on the side." Nick leans forward, hands clasped between his thighs. His expression is earnest. His eyes are fixed on Billy's. "The target is a pro shooter, like you. Only this guy, he never asks if it's a bad person or a good person. He doesn't make those distinctions. If the money's right, he does the job. For now we'll call him Joe. Six years ago, or maybe it was seven, it don't matter, this guy Joe took out a fifteen-year-old kid on his way to school. Was the kid a bad person? No. In fact he was an honor student. But someone wanted to send the kid's dad a message. The kid was the message. Joe was the messenger."

Billy wonders if the story is true. It might not be, it has a fairy tale fabulism to it, but it somehow feels true. "You want me to hit a hitter." Like he's getting it straight in his mind.

"Nailed it. Joe's in a Los Angeles lockup now. Men's Central. Charged with assault and attempted rape. The attempted rape thing, tell you what, if you're not a Me Too chick, it's sorta funny. He mistook this lady writer who was in LA for a conference, *feminist* lady writer, for a hooker. He propositioned her—a bit on the hard side, I'd guess—and she pepper-sprayed him. He popped her one in the teeth and dislocated her jaw. She probably sold another hundred thousand books out of that. Should have thanked him instead of charging him, don't you think?"

Billy doesn't reply.

"Come on, Billy, think about it. The man's offed God knows how many guys, some of them very hard guys, and he gets pepper-sprayed by a dyke women's libber? You gotta see the humor in that."

Billy gives a token smile. "LA's on the other side of the country."

"That's right, but he was *here* before he went *there*. I don't know

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why he was here and don't care, but I know he was looking for a poker game and someone told him where he could find one. Because see, our pal Joe fancies himself a high roller. Long story short, he lost a lot of money. When the big winner came out around five in the morning, Joe shot him in the gut and took back not just his money but *all* the money. Someone tried to stop him, probably another moke who was in the game, and Joe shot him, too."

"He kill both of them?"

"Big winner died in the hospital, but not before he ID'd Joe. Guy who tried to intervene pulled through. He also ID'd Joe. You know what else?"

Billy shakes his head.

"Security footage. You see where this is going?"

Billy does, absolutely. "Not really."

"California's got him for assault. Which'll stick. The attempted rape would probably get thrown out, it's not like he dragged her into an alley or anything, in fact he fucking offered to *pay* her, so it's just solicitation, DA won't even bother about that. With time served, he might get ninety days in county. Debt paid. But *here* it's murder, and they take that very serious on this side of the Mississippi."

Billy knows it. In the red states they put stone killers out of their misery. He has no problem with that.

"And after looking at the security footage, the jury would almost certainly decide to give old Joey the needle. You see that, right?"

"Sure."

"He's using his lawyer to fight extradition, no big surprise there. You know what extradition is, right?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Joe's lawyer is fighting it for all he's worth, and the guy ain't no ambulance chaser. He's already got a thirty-day delay on a hearing, and he'll use it to figure out other ways to stall, but in the end he's gonna lose. And Joe's in an isolation cell, because somebody tried to stick a shiv into him. Old Joey took it away and broke

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his wrist for him, but where there's one guy with a shiv, there could be a dozen."

"Gang thing?" Billy asks. "Crips, maybe? They got a beef with him?"

Nick shrugs. "Who knows? For now, Joe's got his own private quarters, doesn't have to get slopped with the rest of the hogs, gets thirty minutes in the yard all by his lonesome. *Also* meantime, the lawyer-man is reaching out to people. The message he's sending is that this guy will talk about something very big unless he can get a pass on the murder charge."

"Could that happen?" Billy doesn't like to think so, even if the man this Joe killed after the poker game was a bad person. "The prosecutors might take the death penalty off the table, or maybe even step it down to second-degree, or something?"

"Not bad, Billy. You're on the right track, at least. But what I'm hearing is that Joe wants all the charges dismissed. He must be holding some high cards."

"He thinks he can trade something to get away with murder."

"Says the guy who got away with it God knows how many times," Nick says, and laughs.

Billy doesn't. "I never shot anyone because I lost money in a poker game. I don't play poker. And I don't *rob*."

Nick nods vigorously. "I know that, Billy. Just bad people. I was only busting your chops a bit. Drink your drink."

Billy drinks his drink. He's thinking, Two million. For one job. And he's thinking, What's the catch?

"Someone must really want to stop this guy from giving up whatever he's got."

Nick points a finger gun at him like Billy has made an amazing leap of deduction. "You know it. Anyway, I get a message from this local guy, you'll meet him if you take the job, and the message is we're looking for a pro shooter who's the best of the best. I think that's Billy Summers, case fuckin closed."

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“You want me to do this guy, but not in LA. Here.”

“Not me. I’m just the middleman, remember. It’s someone else. Someone with very deep pockets.”

“What’s the catch?”

Nick turns on the grin. He points another finger gun at Billy. “Straight to the point, right? Straight to the fuckin point. Except it’s not really a catch. Or maybe it is, depending on how you feel. It’s time, you see. You’re going to be here . . .”

He waves his hand to indicate the little yellow house. Maybe the neighborhood it sits in, as well—the one Billy will discover is called Midwood. Maybe the whole city, which sits east of the Mississippi and just below the Mason-Dixon Line.

“ . . . for quite awhile.”

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They talk some more. Nick tells Billy that the location is set, by which he means the place Billy will shoot from. He says Billy doesn’t have to decide until he sees it and hears more. Billy will get that from Ken Hoff. He’s the local guy. Nick says Ken is out of town today.

“Does he know what I use?” This isn’t the same as saying he’s in, but it’s a big step in that direction. Two million for mostly sitting around on his ass, then taking one shot. Hard to turn down a deal like that.

Nick nods.

“Okay, when do I meet this Hoff guy?”

“Tomorrow. He’ll give you a call at your hotel tonight, time and place.”

“If I do it, I’ll need some kind of a cover story for why I’m here.”

“All worked out, and it’s a beaut. Giorgio’s idea. We’ll tell you tomorrow night, after you meet with Hoff.” Nick rises. He sticks

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out his hand. Billy shakes it. He has shaken with Nick before and never likes it because Nick is a bad guy. Hard not to like him a little, though. Nick is also a pro, and that grin works.

5

Paulie Logan drives him back to the hotel. Paulie doesn't talk much. He asks Billy if he minds the radio, and when Billy says no, Paulie puts on a soft rock station. At one point he says, "Loggins and Messina, they're the best." Except for cursing at a guy who cuts him off on Cedar Street, that's the extent of his conversation.

Billy doesn't mind. He's thinking of all the movies he's seen about robbers who are planning one last job. If noir is a genre, then "one last job" is a sub-genre. In those movies, the last job always goes bad. Billy isn't a robber and he doesn't work with a gang and he's not superstitious, but this last job thing nags at him just the same. Maybe because the price is so high. Maybe because he doesn't know who's paying the tab, or why. Maybe it's even the story Nick told about how the target once took out a fifteen-year-old honor student.

"You stickin around?" Paulie asks when he pulls the car into the hotel's forecourt. "Because this guy Hoff will get you the tool you need. I could have done it myself, but Nick said no."

Is he sticking around? "Don't know. Maybe." He pauses getting out. "Probably."

6

In his room, Billy powers up his laptop. He changes the time stamp and checks his VPN, because hackers love hotels. He could try googling Los Angeles County courts, extradition hearings have got

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to be matters of public record, but there are simpler ways to get what he wants. And he wants. Ronald Reagan had a point when he said trust but verify.

Billy goes to the *LA Times* website and pays for a six-month subscription. He uses a credit card that belongs to a fictitious person named Thomas Hardy, Hardy being Billy's favorite writer. Of the naturalist school, anyway. Once in, he searches for *feminist writer* and adds *attempted rape*. He finds half a dozen stories, each smaller than the last. There's a picture of the feminist writer, who looks hot and has a lot to say. The alleged attack took place in the forecourt of the Beverly Hills Hotel. The alleged perpetrator was discovered to be in possession of multiple IDs and credit cards. According to the *Times*, his real name is Joel Randolph Allen. He beat a rape charge in Massachusetts in 2012.

So Joe was pretty close, Billy thinks.

Next he goes to the website of this city's newspaper, once again uses Thomas Hardy to get through the paywall, and searches for *murder victim poker game*.

The story is there, and the security photo that runs with it is pretty damning. An hour earlier the light wouldn't have been good enough to show the doer's face, but the time stamp on the bottom of the photo is 5:18 AM. The sun isn't up but it's getting there, and the face of the guy standing in the alley is as clear as you'd want, if you were a prosecutor. He's got his hand in his pocket, he's waiting outside a door that says **LOADING ZONE DO NOT BLOCK**, and if Billy was on the jury, he'd probably vote for the needle just on the basis of that. Because Billy Summers is an expert when it comes to premeditation, and that's what he's looking at right here.

The most recent story in the Red Bluff paper says that Joel Allen has been arrested on unrelated charges in Los Angeles.

Billy is sure that Nick believes he takes everything at face value. Like everyone else Billy has worked for over the years he's been doing this, Nick believes that outside of his awesome sniper skills,

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Billy is a little slow, maybe even on the spectrum. Nick believes the *dumb self*, because Billy is at great pains not to overdo it. No gaping mouth, no glazed eyes, no outright stupidity. An *Archie* comic book does wonders. The Zola novel he's been reading is buried deep in his suitcase. And if someone searched his case and discovered it? Billy would say he found it left in the pocket of an airline seat and picked it up because he liked the girl on the cover.

He thinks about looking for the fifteen-year-old honor student, but there isn't enough info. He could google that all afternoon and not find it. Even if he did, he couldn't be sure he was looking at the right fifteen-year-old. It's enough to know the rest of the story Nick told checks out.

He orders a sandwich and a pot of tea. When it comes, he sits by the window, eating and reading *Thérèse Raquin*. He thinks it's like James M. Cain crossed with an EC horror comic from the 1950s. After his late lunch, he lies down with his hands behind his head and beneath the pillow, feeling the cool that hides there. Which, like youth and beauty, doesn't last long. He'll see what this Ken Hoff has to say, and if that also checks out, he thinks he will take the job. The waiting will be difficult, he's never been good at that (tried Zen once, didn't take), but for a two-million-dollar payday he can wait.

Billy closes his eyes and goes to sleep.

At seven that evening, he's eating a room service dinner and watching *The Asphalt Jungle* on his laptop. It's a jinxed one last job picture, for sure. The phone rings. It's Ken Hoff. He tells Billy where they'll meet tomorrow afternoon. Billy doesn't have to write it down. Writing things down can be dangerous, and he's got a good memory.

CHAPTER 2

1

Like most male movie stars—not to mention men Billy passes on the street who are emulating those movie stars—Ken Hoff has a scruff of beard, as if he forgot to shave for three or four days. This is an unfortunate look for Hoff, who is a redhead. He doesn't look rough and tough; he looks like he has a bad sunburn.

They are sitting at an umbrella-shaded table outside an eatery called the Sunspot Café. It's on the corner of Main and Court. Billy guesses the place is plenty busy during the week, but on this Saturday afternoon it's almost deserted inside, and they have the outside scatter of tables to themselves.

Hoff is maybe fifty or a hard-living forty-five. He's drinking a glass of wine. Billy has a diet soda. He doesn't think Hoff works for Nick, because Nick is based in Vegas. But Nick has his fingers in many pies, not all of them out west. Nick Majarian and Ken Hoff may be connected in some way, or maybe Hoff is hooked up with the guy who is paying for the job. Always assuming the job happens, that is.

"That building across the street is mine," Hoff says. "Only twenty-two stories, but good enough to make it the second highest in Red Bluff. It'll be the third highest when the Higgins Center goes up. That's gonna be thirty stories high. With a mall. I've got a piece of that one, too, but this one? Strictly my baby. They laughed at Trump when he said he was gonna fix the economy, but it's working. It's working."

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Billy has no interest in Trump or Trump's economy, but he studies the building with professional interest. He's pretty sure it's where he's supposed to take the shot. It's called the Gerard Tower. Billy thinks that calling a building that has only twenty-two stories a tower is a little overblown, but he supposes in this city of small brick buildings, most of them shabby, it probably seems like a tower. On the well-tended and -watered greensward in front of it is a sign reading OFFICE SPACE AND LUXURY APARTMENTS NOW AVAILABLE. There's a number to call. The sign looks like it's been there awhile.

"Hasn't filled the way I expected," Hoff says. "The economy's booming, yeah, people with money falling out of their asses and 2020 is going to be even better, but you'd be surprised how much of that is Internet-driven, Billy. Okay to call you Billy?"

"Sure."

"Bottom line, I'm a little bit tight this year. Cash flow problems since I bought into WWE, but three affils, how could I say no?"

Billy has no idea what he's talking about. Something about pro wrestling, maybe? Or the Monster Truck Jam they keep advertising on TV? Since Hoff clearly thinks he should know, Billy nods his head as if he does.

"The local old money assholes think I'm overextended, but you have to bet on the economy, am I right? Roll the dice while the dice are hot. Takes money to make money, yeah?"

"Sure."

"So I do what I have to do. And hey, I know a good thing when I see it and this is a good deal for me. A little risky, but I need a bridge. And Nick assures me that if you were to get caught, I know you won't but if you did, you'd keep your mouth shut."

"Yes. I would." Billy has never been caught and doesn't intend to get caught this time.

"Code of the road, am I right?"

"Sure." Billy has an idea that Ken Hoff has seen too many movies.

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Some of them probably in the “one last job” sub-genre. He wishes the man would get to the point. It’s hot out here, even under the umbrella. And muggy. This climate is for the birds, Billy thinks, and probably even they don’t like it.

“I got you a nice corner suite on the fifth floor,” Hoff says. “Three rooms. Office, reception, kitchenette. A kitchenette, how about that, huh? You’ll be okay no matter how long it takes. Snug as a bug in a rug. I’m not gonna point, but I’m sure you can count to five, right?”

Sure, Billy thinks, I can even walk and chew gum at the same time.

The building is square, your basic Saltine box with windows, so there are actually two corner suites on the fifth floor, but Billy knows which one Hoff means: the one on the left. From the window he traces a diagonal down Court Street, which is only two blocks long. The diagonal, the path of the shot he’ll take if he takes the job, ends at the steps of the county courthouse. It’s a gray granite sprawl of a building. The steps, at least twenty, lead up to a plaza with blindfolded Lady Justice in the middle, holding out her scales. Among the many things he will never tell Ken Hoff: Lady Justice is based on Iustice, a Roman goddess more or less invented by the emperor Augustus.

Billy returns his gaze to the fifth-floor corner suite and once more eyes the diagonal. It looks to him like five hundred yards from the window to the steps. That’s a shot he is capable of making even in a strong wind. With the right tool, of course.

“What have you got for me, Mr. Hoff?”

“Huh?” For a moment Hoff’s *dumb self* is on full view. Billy makes a curling gesture with the index finger of his right hand. It could be taken to mean *come on*, but not in this case.

“Oh! Sure! What you asked for, right?” He looks around, sees no one, but lowers his voice anyway. “Remington 700.”

“The M24.” That’s the Army classification.

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"M . . . ?" Hoff reaches into his back pocket, takes out his wallet, and thumbs through it. He removes a scrap of paper and looks at it. "M24, right."

He starts to put the piece of paper back in his wallet, but Billy holds out his hand.

Hoff hands it over. Billy puts it in his own pocket. Later, before he goes to see Nick, he'll flush it down the toilet in his hotel room. You don't write stuff down. He hopes this guy Hoff isn't going to be a problem.

"Optics?"

"Huh?"

"Scope. The sight."

Hoff looks flustered. "It's the one you asked for."

"Did you write that down, too?"

"On the paper I just gave you."

"Okay."

"I've got the, uh, tool in a—"

"I don't need to know where. I haven't even decided if I want this job." He has, though. "Does the building over there have security?" Another *dumb self* question.

"Yeah. Sure."

"If I do take the job, getting the tool up to the fifth floor will be on me. Are we good on that, Mr. Hoff?"

"Yeah, sure." Hoff looks relieved.

"Then I think we're done here." Billy stands and holds out his hand. "It was very nice meeting you." It wasn't. Billy isn't sure he trusts the man, and he hates that stupid scruffy beard. What woman would want to kiss a mouth surrounded by red bristles?

Hoff shakes. "Same here, Billy. This is just a squeeze I'm going through. You ever read a book called *The Hero's Journey*?"

Billy has, but shakes his head.

"You should, you should. I just skimmed the literary stuff to get to the main part. Straight to the meat of a thing, that's me. Cut

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through the bullshit. Can't remember the name of the guy who wrote it, but he says every man has to go through a time of testing before he becomes a hero. This is my time."

By supplying a sniper rifle and an overwatch site to an assassin, Billy thinks. Not sure Joseph Campbell would put that in the hero category.

"Well, I hope you pass."

2

Billy supposes he'll get a car eventually if he stays here, but right now he doesn't know his way around and he's happy to let Paul Logan drive him from the hotel to where Nick is "house-sitting." It's the McMansion Billy was expecting yesterday, a cobbled-together horror-show on what looks like two acres of lawn. The gate to the long curving driveway swings open at a touch of Paulie's thumb to the gadget on his visor. There is indeed a cherub peeing endlessly into a pool of water, and a couple of other statues (Roman soldier, bare-breasted maiden) that are lit by hidden spots now that dusk is here. The house is also lit, the better to show off its wretched excess. To Billy it looks like the bastard child of a supermarket and a mega-church. This isn't a house, it's the architectural equivalent of red golf pants.

Frank Macintosh, aka Frankie Elvis, is waiting on the endless porch to receive him. Dark suit, sober blue tie. Looking at him you'd never guess that he began his career breaking legs for a loan shark. Of course that was long ago, before he moved up to the bigs. He comes halfway down the porch steps, hand outstretched, like the lord of the manor. Or the lord of the manor's butler.

Nick is once more waiting in the hall, one much grander than that of the humble yellow house in Midwood. Nick is built big, but the man with him is enormous, way north of three hundred.

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This is Giorgio Piglielli, of course known to Nick's Las Vegas cadre as Georgie Pigs (and also never to his face). If Nick is a CEO, then Giorgio is his chief operating officer. For them both to be here, so far from their home base, suggests that what Nick called the agenting fee must be very high. Billy has been promised two million. How much have these guys been promised, or already pocketed? Someone is very worried about Joel Allen. Someone who probably owns a house like this, or one even uglier. Hard to believe such a thing is possible, but it probably is.

Nick claps Billy on the shoulder and says, "You probably think this fat-ass is Giorgio Piglielli."

"Sure looks like him," Billy says cautiously, and Giorgio gives a chuckle as fat as he is.

Nick nods. He's got that million-dollar grin on his face. "I know it does, but this is actually George Russo. Your agent."

"Agent? Like in real estate?"

"Nope, not that kind." Nick laughs. "Come on in the living room. We'll have drinks and Giorgio will lay this out for you. Like I said yesterday, it's a beaut."

3

The living room is as long as a Pullman car. There are three chandeliers, two small and one big. The furniture is low and swoopy. Two more cherubs are supporting a full-length mirror. There's a grandfather clock that looks embarrassed to be here.

Frank Macintosh, the leg-breaker turned manservant, brings them drinks on a tray: beer for Billy and Nick and what looks like a chocolate malted for Giorgio, who seems determined to ingest every calorie possible before dying at the age of fifty. He chooses the only chair that will fit him. Billy wonders if he'll be able to get out of it without help.

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Nick raises his glass of beer. "Here's to us. May we do business that makes us happy and leaves us satisfied."

They drink to that, then Giorgio says, "Nick tells me that you're interested, but you haven't actually signed on for this yet. Still in what could be called the exploratory phase."

"That's right," Billy says.

"Well, for the purposes of this discussion, let's pretend that you're on the team." Giorgio sucks on the straw in his malted. "Man, that's good. Just the ticket on a warm evening." He reaches into the pocket of his suitcoat—enough fabric there to clothe an orphanage, Billy thinks—and produces a wallet. He holds it out.

Billy takes it. A Lord Buxton. Nice, but not fancy. And it's been slightly aged, with a couple of scuffs and nicks in the leather.

"Look through it. It's who you'll be in this godforsaken burg."

Billy does. Seventy dollars or so in the billfold. A few pictures, mostly of men who could be friends and women who could be gal pals. Nothing to indicate he has a wife and kids.

"I wanted to Photoshop you into one," Giorgio says, "standing at the Grand Canyon or something, but nobody seems to have a photo of you, Billy."

"Photos can lead to trouble."

Nick says, "Most people don't carry pictures of themselves in their wallets, anyway. I told Giorgio that."

Billy continues to go through the wallet, reading it like a book. Like *Thérèse Raquin*, which he finished while eating supper in his room. If he stays here, his name will be David Lockridge. He has a Visa card and a Mastercard, both issued by Seacoast Bank of Portsmouth.

"What are the limits on the plastic?" he asks Giorgio.

"Five hundred on the Master, a thousand on the Visa. You're on a budget. Of course, if your book works out like we hope it will, that could change."

Billy stares at Giorgio, then at Nick, wondering if this is some kind of set-up. Wondering if they've seen through the *dumb self*.

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"He's your *literary* agent!" Nick nearly shouts. "Is that a hoot, or what?"

"A writer is my cover? Come on, I never even finished high school. Got my GED in the sand, for God's sake, and that was a gift from Uncle Sam for dodging IEDs and mujies in Fallujah and Ramadi. It won't work. It's crazy."

"It's not, it's genius," Nick says. "Listen to the man, Billy. Or should I start calling you Dave now?"

"You're never calling me Dave if this is my cover."

Too close to home, far too close. He's a reader, that's for sure. And he sometimes dreams of writing, although he's never actually tried his hand except for scraps of prose here and there, which he always destroyed.

"It'll never fly, Nick. I know you guys have already started this going . . ." He raises the wallet. ". . . and I'm sorry, but it just won't work. What would I say if someone asked what my book was about?"

"Give me five minutes," Giorgio says. "Ten, tops. And if you still don't like it, we all part friends."

Billy doubts if that's true but tells him to go ahead.

Giorgio puts his empty malted glass on the table (probably a Chippendale) beside his chair and belches. But when he turns his full attention on Billy, he can see what Georgie Pigs really is: a lean and athletic mind buried inside the ocean of blubber that will kill him before many more years. "I know how it sounds at first blush, you being the kind of guy you are, but it *will* fly."

Billy relaxes a little. They still believe what they see. He's safe on that score, at least.

"You're going to be here for at least six weeks and maybe as long as six months," Giorgio says. "Depends on how long it takes for the moke's lawyer to run out the string fighting extradition. Or until he thinks he has a deal on the murder charge. You're getting paid for the job, but you're also getting paid for your time. You get that, right?"

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Billy nods.

"Which means you need a reason to be here in Red Bluff, and it's not exactly a vacation spot."

"Truth," Nick says, and makes a face like a little kid looking at a plate of broccoli.

"You also need a reason to be in that building down the street from the courthouse. You're writing a book, that's the reason."

"But—"

Giorgio holds up a fat hand. "You don't think it'll work, but I'm telling you it will. I'm going to show you how."

Billy looks doubtful, but now that he's over his fear that they've seen through the camouflage of the *dumb self*, he thinks he can see where Giorgio is going. This might have possibilities.

"I did my research. Read a bunch of writers' magazines, plus a ton of stuff online. Here's your cover story. David Lockridge grew up in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Always wanted to be a writer but barely finished high school. Worked construction. You kept writing, but you were a hard partier. Lots of drinking. I thought about giving you a divorce but decided it would be a lot to keep straight."

For a guy who's smart about guns but not about much else, Billy thinks.

"Finally you get going on something good, okay? There's a lot of talk in the blogs I read about writers suddenly catching fire, and that's what happens to you. You write a bunch, maybe seventy pages, maybe a hundred—"

"About what?" Billy's actually starting to enjoy himself now, but he's careful not to show it.

Giorgio exchanges a glance with Nick, who shrugs. "Haven't decided that yet, but I'll come up with someth—"

"Maybe my own story? Dave's story, I mean. There's a word for that—"

"Autobiography," Nick snaps, like he's on *Jeopardy!*

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"That might work," Giorgio says. His face says *nice try, Nick, but leave this to the experts*. "Or maybe it's a novel. The important thing is you never talk about it on orders from your agent. Top secret. You're writing, you don't keep that a secret, everybody you meet in the building will know the guy on the fifth floor is writing a book, but nobody knows what it's about. That way you never get your stories mixed up."

As if I would, Billy thinks. "How did David Lockridge get from Portsmouth to here? And how did he wind up in the Gerard Tower?"

"This is my favorite part," Nick says. He sounds like a kid listening to a well-loved story at bedtime, and Billy doesn't think he's faking or exaggerating. Nick is totally on board with this.

"You looked for agents online," Giorgio says, but then hesitates. "You go online, don't you?"

"Sure," Billy says. He's pretty sure he knows more about computers than either of these two fat men, but that is also information he doesn't share. "I do email. Sometimes play games on my phone. Also, there's ComiXology. That's an app. You download stuff. I use my laptop for that."

"Okay, good. You look for agents. You send out letters saying you're working on this book. Most of the agents say no, because they stick with the proven earners like James Patterson and the Harry Potter babe. I read a blog that said it's a catch-22: you need an agent to get published, but until you're published you can't get an agent."

"It's the same in the movies," Nick puts in. "You got your famous stars, but it's really all about the agents. They have the real power. They tell the stars what to do, and boy, they do it."

Giorgio waits patiently for him to finish, then goes on. "Finally one agent says yeah, okay, what the fuck, I'll take a look, send me the first couple of chapters."

"You," Billy says.

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“Me. George Russo. I read the pages. I flip for them. I show them to a few publishers I know—”

The fuck you do, Billy thinks, you show them to a few *editors* you know. But that part can be fixed if it ever needs to be.

“—and they also flip, but they won’t pay big money, maybe even seven-figure money, until the book is finished. Because you’re an unknown commodity. Do you know what that means?”

Billy comes perilously close to saying of course he does, because he’s getting jazzed by the possibilities here. It could actually be an excellent cover, especially the part about being sworn to secrecy concerning his project. And it could be fun pretending to be what he’s always sort of wished he could be.

“It means a flash in the pan.”

Nick flashes the money grin. Giorgio nods.

“Close enough. Some time passes. I wait for more pages, but Dave doesn’t come through. I wait some more. Still no pages. I go to see him up there in lobsterland, and what do I find? The guy is partying his ass off like he’s Ernest fuckin Hemingway. When he’s not working, he’s either out with his homeboys or hungover. Substance abuse goes with talent, you know.”

“Really?”

“Proven fact. But George Russo is determined to save this guy, at least long enough to finish his book. He talks a publisher into contracting for it and paying an advance of let’s say thirty or maybe fifty thou. Not big money, but not small money either, plus the publisher can demand it back if the book doesn’t show up by a certain deadline, which they call a delivery date. But see, here’s the thing, Billy: the check is made out to *me* instead of to *you*.”

Now it’s all clear in Billy’s mind, but he’ll let Giorgio spin it out.

“I have certain conditions. For your own good. You have to leave lobsterland and all your hard-drinking, coke-snorting friends. You have to go somewhere far away from them, to some little shitpot of

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a town or city where there's nothing to do and no one to do it with even if there was. I tell you I'm gonna rent you a house."

"The one I saw, right?"

"Right. More important, I'm going to rent you office space and you're going to go there every weekday and sit in a little room and pound away until your top secret book is done. You agree to those terms or your golden ticket goes bye-bye."

Giorgio sits back. The chair is sturdy, but still gives out a little groan.

"Now if you tell me that's a bad idea, or even if you tell me it's a good idea but you can't sell it, we'll call the whole thing off."

Nick holds up a hand. "Before you say anything, Billy, I want to lay out something else that makes this good. Everybody on your floor will get acquainted with you, and a lot of other people in the building, too. I know you, and you've got another talent besides hitting a quarter at a quarter of a mile."

Like I could do that, Billy thinks. Like even Chris Kyle could.

"You get along with people without buddying up to them. They smile when they see you coming." And then, as if Billy had denied it: "I've seen it! Hoff tells me that a couple of food wagons stop at that building every day, and in nice weather people line up and sit outside on the benches to eat their lunches. You could be one of those people. The time waiting doesn't have to be for nothing. You can use it to get accepted. Once the novelty of how you're writing a book wears off, you'll be just another nine-to-fiver who goes home to his little house in Midwood."

Billy sees how that could happen.

"So when it finally goes down, are you a stranger no one knows? The outsider who must have done it? Uh-uh, you've been there for months, you make chit-chat in the elevator, you play dollar poker with some of the collection agency guys from the second floor to see who buys the tacos."

"They are going to know where the shot came from," Billy says.

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"Sure, but not right away. Because at first everyone will be looking for that outsider. And because there's going to be a diversion. Also because you've always been fucking Houdini when it comes to disappearing after the hit. By the time things start to settle, you'll be long gone."

"What's the diversion?"

"We can talk about that later," Nick says, which makes Billy think Nick might not have made up his mind about that yet. Although with Nick, it's hard to tell. "Plenty of time. For now . . ." He turns to Giorgio, aka Georgie Pigs, aka George Russo. *Over to you*, the look says.

Giorgio reaches into the pocket of his gigantic suit jacket again and pulls out his phone. "Say the word, Billy—the word being the passcode of your favorite offshore bank—and I'll send five hundred grand to it. It'll take about forty seconds. Minute and a half if the connection's slow. Also plenty of walking-around money in a local bank to get you started."

Billy understands they're trying to rush him into a decision and has a brief image of a cow being driven down a chute to the slaughterhouse, but maybe that's just paranoia because of the enormous payday. Maybe a person's last job shouldn't just be the most lucrative; maybe it should also be the most interesting. But he would like to know one more thing.

"Why is Hoff involved?"

"His building," Nick says promptly.

"Yeah, but . . ." Billy frowns, putting an expression of great concentration on his face. "He said there's lots of vacancies in that building."

"The corner spot on the fifth floor is prime, though," Nick says. "Your agent, Georgie here, had him lease it, which keeps us out of it."

"He also gets the gun," Giorgio says. "May have it already. In any case, it won't be traced back to us."

Billy knows that already, from the way Nick has been careful

not to be seen with him—no, not even on the porch of this gated estate—but he’s not entirely satisfied. Because Hoff struck him as a chatterbox, and a chatterbox isn’t a good person to have around when you’re planning an assassination.

4

Later that night. Closing in on midnight. Billy lies on his hotel room bed, hands beneath the pillow, relishing the cool that’s so ephemeral. He said yes, of course, and when you say yes to Nick Majarian, there’s no going back. He is now starring in his own last job story.

He had Giorgio send the \$500,000 to a bank in the Caribbean. There’s a good amount of money in that account right now, and after Joel Allen dies on those courthouse steps, there will be a good deal more. Enough to live on for a long, long time if he’s prudent. And he will be. He doesn’t have expensive tastes. Champagne and escort services have never been his thing. In two other banks—local ones—David Lockridge will have an additional \$18,000 to draw on. It’s plenty of walking-around money, but not enough to twang any federal tripwires.

He did have a couple of other questions. The most important was how much lead time he could expect when the deal was about to go down.

“Not a lot,” Nick said, “but it won’t be ‘He’s gonna be there in fifteen minutes,’ either. We’ll know right after the extradition is ordered, and you’ll get a call or a text. It’ll be twenty-four hours at the very least, maybe three days or even a week. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Billy said. “Just as long as you understand I can’t guarantee anything if it is fifteen minutes. Or even an hour.”

“It won’t be.”

“What if they don’t bring him up the courthouse steps? What if they use another door?”

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"There is another door," Giorgio said. "It's the one some of the courthouse employees use. But you'll still have a sightline from the fifth floor and the distance is only sixty yards or so longer. You can do that, can't you?"

He could, and said so. Nick lifted a hand as if to wave away a troublesome fly. "It'll be the steps, count on it. Anything else?"

Billy said there wasn't and now he lies here, thinking it over, waiting for sleep. On Monday he'll be moving into the little yellow house, leased for him by his agent. His *literary* agent. On Tuesday, he'll see the office suite Georgie Pigs has also leased for him. When Giorgio asked him what he'd do there, Billy told him he'd start by downloading ComiXology to his laptop. And maybe a few games.

"Be sure to write something between funnybooks," Giorgio said, half-joking and half not. "You know, get into character. Live the part."

Maybe he will. Maybe he will do that. Even if what he writes isn't very good, it will pass the time. Autobiography was his suggestion. Giorgio suggested a novel, not because he thinks Billy's bright enough to write one but because Billy could say that when someone asked, as someone will. Probably lots of someones, once he gets to know people in the Gerard Tower.

He's slipping toward sleep when a cool idea wakes him up: why not a combination of the two? Why not a novel that's actually an autobiography, one written not by the Billy Summers who reads Zola and Hardy and even plowed his way through *Infinite Jest*, but one written by the other Billy Summers? The alter ego he calls his *dumb self*? Could that work? He thinks yes, because he knows that Billy as well as he knows himself.

I might give it a try, he thinks. With nothing but time on my hands, why not? He's thinking about how he might begin when he finally drifts off.

CHAPTER 3

1

Billy Summers once more sits in the hotel lobby, waiting for his ride.

It's Monday noon. His suitcase and laptop case are beside his chair and he's reading another comic book, this one called *Archie Comics Spectacular: Friends Forever*. He's not thinking about *Thérèse Raquin* today but what he might write in the fifth-floor office he's never seen. It isn't clear in his mind, but he has a first sentence and holds onto it. That sentence might connect to others. Or not. He's prepared for success but he's also prepared for disappointment. It's the way he rolls and it's worked out pretty well so far. In the sense, at least, that he's not in jail.

At four minutes past twelve, Frank Macintosh and Paulie Logan enter the lobby dressed in their suits. There are handshakes all around. Frank's pompadour appears to have had an oil change.

"Need to check out?"

"Taken care of."

"Then let's go."

Billy tucks his *Archie* book into the side pocket of his bag and picks it up.

"Nah, nah," Frankie says. "Let Paulie. He needs the exercise."

Paulie holds his middle finger against his tie like a clip, but he takes the bag. They go out to the car. Frank drives, Paulie sits in back. They drive to Midwood and the little yellow house. Billy

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looks at the balding lawn and thinks he'll water it. If there's no hose, he'll buy one. There's a car in the driveway, a subcompact Toyota that looks a few years old, but with Toyotas, who can really tell?

"Mine?"

"Yours," Frank says. "Not much, but your agent keeps you on a tight budget, I guess."

Paulie puts Billy's suitcase down on the porch, takes an envelope from his jacket pocket, removes a keyring, unlocks the door. He puts the keys back in the envelope and hands it to Billy. Written on the front is *24 Evergreen Street*. Billy, who didn't check the street sign yesterday or today, thinks, Now I know where I live.

"Car keys are on the kitchen table," Frank says. He holds out his hand again, so this is goodbye. That's okay with Billy.

"Shake her easy," Paulie says.

Less than sixty seconds later they're gone, presumably back to the McMansion with the endlessly peeing cherub in the gigantic front yard.

2

Billy goes upstairs to the master bedroom and opens his suitcase on a double bed that looks freshly made. When he opens the closet to put things away, he sees it's already loaded with shirts, a couple of sweaters, a hoodie, and two pairs of dress pants. There's a new pair of running shoes on the floor. All the sizes look right. In the dresser he finds socks, underwear, T-shirts, Wrangler jeans. He fills up the one empty drawer with his own stuff. There's not much. He thought he'd be buying more clothes at the Walmart he saw down the way, but it seems like that won't be necessary.

He goes down to the kitchen. The Toyota keys are on the table beside an engraved card that says KENNETH HOFF and ENTREPRENEUR. Entrepreneur, Billy thinks. There's a word for you. He

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turns the card over and sees a brief note in the same hand as on the envelope containing the housekeys: *If you need anything, just call.* There are two numbers, one for business and one for cell.

He opens the refrigerator and sees it's stocked with staples: juice, milk, eggs, bacon, a few bags of deli meats and cheeses, a plastic carton of potato salad. There's a rack of Poland Spring water, a rack of Coke, and a sixpack of Bud Light. He pulls out the freezer drawer and has to smile because what's in there says so much about Ken Hoff. He's single and until his divorce (Billy's sure there was at least one), he has been fed and watered by women, starting with a mother who probably called him Kenny and made sure he got his hair cut every two weeks. The freezer is stuffed with Stouffer's entrees and frozen pizza and two boxes of ice cream novelties, the kind that come on a stick. There are no vegetables, fresh or frozen.

"Don't like him," Billy says aloud. He's not smiling anymore.

No. And he doesn't like what Hoff is doing in this. Aside from Hoff being too out front after the deal goes down, there's something Nick's not telling him. Maybe that doesn't matter. Maybe it does. As Trump says at least once a day, Who knows?

3

There's a hose in the basement, coiled up and dusty. That evening, as the heat of the day is starting to fade a little, Billy lugs it outside and hooks it up to the faucet bib on the side of the house. He's standing on the front lawn, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, spraying the grass, when a man comes over from next door. He's tall, his own tee blinding white against very black skin. He's carrying two cans of beer.

"Hi, neighbor," he says. "Brought you a cold one to welcome you to the neighborhood. Jamal Ackerman." He's got both beers in one big hand and holds out the other.

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Billy shakes. "David Lockridge. Dave. And thanks." He twists the hose shut. "Come on inside. Or we can sit out on the steps. I haven't really got the place sorted out yet." No need of the *dumb self* here; in Midwood he can be a more regular self.

"Porch steps'll do fine," Jamal says.

They sit. They open the cans: *first*. Billy tips his to Jamal's and says, "Thanks."

They drink. They survey the lawn.

"It'll take more than water to bring that mess back," Jamal says. "I've got some Miracle-Gro, if you want to use some. They had a BOGO deal at the Wally World Garden Center last month and I have plenty."

"I might take you up on that. I'm planning a trip to Wally World myself. I might get a couple of chairs for the porch. But probably not until next week. You know how it is, new place and all."

Jamal laughs. "Do I ever. This is the third house we've lived in since I got married in '09. First one was her mom's." He pretends to shiver. Billy smiles. "Got two kids, ten and eight. Boy and a girl. When they bug you, cause they will, holler them back home."

"If they don't break the windows or light the place on fire, they won't bug me."

"You buying or renting?"

"Leasing. I'll be here awhile, don't know just how long. I'm . . . it's a little embarrassing to come right out and say it, but I'm writing a book. Trying, anyway. Looks like there's a chance I can get it published, might even be some real money in it, but I'll have to buckle down. I've got an office in town. The Gerard Tower? At least I think I do. I'm going to look at it tomorrow."

Jamal's eyes have gotten very wide. "An author! Living right here on Evergreen Street! I'll be goddamned!"

Billy laughs and shakes his head. "Easy, big fella. I'm just a wannabe for now."

"Still, man! Wow. Wait 'til I tell Corinne. We gotta have you

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over to dinner some night. We'll be able to tell people we knew you when."

He holds up a hand. Billy slaps him five. *You get along with people without buddying up to them*, Nick said. It's true and it's not a shuck. Billy likes people, and he likes to keep them at arms' length. It sounds like a contradiction, but it's not.

"What's it about, your book?"

"Can't tell you." This is where the editing begins. Giorgio may think he knows it all from reading a few writers' magazines and online posts, but he doesn't. "Not because it's a big secret or something, but because I've got to keep it bottled up. If I start talking about it . . ." He shrugs.

"Yeah, man, got it." Jamal smiles.

And so, yeah. Just like that.

4

That night Billy browses Netflix on the big TV in the rumpus room. He knew it was a thing these days but has never bothered to investigate it when there are so many books to read. There's so much to watch as well, it seems. The sheer volume of choices is intimidating and he decides to go to bed early instead of watching anything. Before undressing, he checks his phone and finds a text from his new agent.

GRusso: 9 AM at Gerard Tower. Don't drive. Uber.

Billy doesn't have a David Lockridge phone—neither Giorgio nor Frank Macintosh gave him one—and he doesn't have a burner. He decides to use his personal since Giorgio already did. With the encrypted messaging app it should be all right. And Billy has something he really needs to say.

Billy S: OK. Don't bring Hoff.

Dots roll as Giorgio composes his reply. It doesn't take long.

GRusso: Have to. Sorry.

The dots disappear. Discussion over.

Billy empties his pockets and puts his pants in the washing machine along with everything else. He does this slowly, brow furrowed. He doesn't like Ken Hoff. Did not like him, in fact, even before he opened his mouth. Gut reaction. What Giorgio's parents and grandparents would have called *reazione istintiva*. But Hoff is in it. Giorgio's text made that clear: *Have to*. It's not like Nick and Giorgio to bring a local into their business, especially not life-and-death business like this. Is Hoff in it because of the building? Location, location, location, as the real estate guys like to say? Or because Nick isn't local himself?

Neither of those things quite excuse Ken Hoff in Billy's mind. *I'm a little bit tight this year* he'd said, but Billy guesses you had to be more than a little bit short in the shekels department to get involved in an assassination plot. And from the very first—the macho beard scruff, the Izod shirt, the Dockers with the slightly frayed pockets, the Gucci loafers worn at the heel—Hoff smelled to Billy like the guy who would be first to flip in an interrogation room if offered a deal. Deals, after all, were what the Ken Hoffes of the world made.

He turns in and lies in the dark, hands under the pillow, looking up at nothing. Some traffic on the street, but not much. He's wondering when two million dollars starts to look like not enough, when it starts to look like dumb money. The answer seems obvious: after it's too late to back out.

Billy Ubers to the Gerard Tower, as instructed. Hoff and Giorgio are waiting in front. The face-bristles still make Hoff look (to Billy, at least) like a hobo instead of a cool dude, but otherwise

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he's squared away in a summerweight suit and subdued gray tie. "George Russo," on the other hand, looks larger than ever in an unfortunate green shirt, untucked, and blue jeans with enough ass in them to make a pup tent. Billy supposes it's that fat man's idea of how a big-time literary agent dresses for a visit to sticksville. Propped between his feet is a laptop case.

Hoff seems to have pulled back on the salesman *bonbomie*, at least a little. Possibly at Giorgio's request, but he still can't resist a jaunty little salute: *mon capitaine*. "Good to see you. The security guy on duty this morning—and most weekdays—is Irv Dean. He'll want your driver's license and a quick snap. That okay?"

Because it has to be if they're going to proceed, Billy nods.

A few workbound people are still crossing the lobby to the elevators. Some wear suits, some of the women are in those high heels Billy thinks of as click-clack shoes, but a surprising number are dressed informally, some even in branded tees. He doesn't know where they work, but it's probably not meeting the public.

The guy sitting at the concierge-type stand at the lobby's center is portly and elderly. The lines around his mouth are so deep they make him look like a life-sized ventriloquist's dummy. Billy guesses retired cop, now only two or three years from total retirement. His uniform consists of a blue vest with POLK SECURITY on it in gold thread. A cheap hire. More evidence that Hoff is in trouble. Big trouble, if he's solely on the hook for this building.

Hoff turns on his charm turbocharger, approaching the old guy with a smile and outstretched hand. "How's it going, Irv? All okay?"

"Fine, Mr. Hoff."

"Wife tip-top?"

"The arthritis bothers her some, but otherwise she's fine."

"This is George Russo, you met him last week, and this is David Lockridge. He's going to be our resident author."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lockridge," Dean says. A smile lights

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up his face and makes him look younger. Not much, but a little.
“Hope you’ll find some good words here.”

Billy thinks that’s a nice thing to say, maybe even the best thing.
“I hope so, too.”

“Mind me asking what your book is about?”

Billy puts a finger to his lips. “Top secret.”

“Okay, I hear you. That’s a nice little suite on five. I think you’ll like it. I have to take your picture for your building ID, if that’s okay?”

“Sure.”

“Got a DL?”

Billy hands over the David Lockridge driver’s license. Dean uses a cell phone with GERARD TOWER Dymo’d on the back to photograph first his license and then Billy himself. Now there’s a picture of him on this building’s computer servers, retrievable by anyone with authorization or hacking skills. He tells himself it doesn’t matter, this is his last job, but he still doesn’t like it. It feels all wrong.

“I’ll have the card for you when you leave. You need to use it if there’s nobody here at the stand. Just put it on this reader gadget. We like to know who’s in the building. I’ll be here most of the time, or Logan when I’m off, and when we are, we’ll sign you in.”

“Got it.”

“You can also use your card for the parking garage on Main. It’s good for four months. Your, uh, agent paid for that. It’ll open the barrier as soon as I put you in the computer. Parking on the street when court’s in session, forget it.” Which explains the Uber. “There’s no assigned space in the garage, but most days you’ll find a spot on the first or second level. We’re not overcrowded just now.” He gives Ken Hoff an apologetic look, then returns his attention to the new tenant. “Anything I can do for you, just tap one-one on your office phone. Landline’s installed. Your agent there took care of that, too.”

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"Mr. Dean has been very helpful," Giorgio says.

"It's his job!" Hoff exclaims cheerfully. "Isn't it, Irv?"

"Absolutely right."

"You say hi to your wife, tell her I hope she feels better. Those copper bracelets are supposed to help. The ones they advertise on TV?"

"Might give them a try," Dean says, but he looks dubious, and good for him.

When they pass the security stand, Billy sees that Mr. Polk Security has a copy of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue in his lap. There's a bodacious babe on the cover, and Billy makes a mental note to pick one up. The *dumb self* likes sports, and he likes babes.

They take the elevator up to five and step out in a deserted corridor. "There's an accounting office down there," Hoff says, pointing. "Two connecting suites. Also some lawyers. There's a dentist on this side. I think. Unless he moved out. I guess he did, because the plaque on the door is gone. I'll have to ask the rental agent. Rest of the floor is unoccupied."

Oh, this guy is in real trouble, Billy thinks again. He risks a glance at Giorgio, but Giorgio—*George*—is gazing at the door behind which there is now no dentist. As if there was something there to see.

Near the end of the hall, Hoff reaches into his suitcoat pocket and produces a little cloth keycard wallet with GT stamped on the front in gold. "This is yours. Also two spares."

Billy touches one of the keycards to the reader and steps into what would be a small reception area if this were a going business. It's stuffy. Stale.

"Jesus, someone forgot to turn on the air conditioning! Just a second, wait one." Hoff punches a couple of buttons on the wall controller and has an anxious moment when nothing happens. Then cool air begins to whoosh from an overhead vent. Billy reads Hoff's relief in the slump of his shoulders.

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The next room is a big office that could double as a small conference room. There's no desk, just a table long enough for maybe six people, if they crammed in shoulder to shoulder. On it is a stack of Staples notebooks, a box of pens, a landline telephone. This room—his writing studio, Billy supposes—is even hotter than the antechamber because of the morning sun flooding in. No one has bothered to lower the blinds, either. Giorgio flaps the collar of his shirt against his neck. “Whew!”

“It'll cool quick, real quick,” Hoff says. He sounds a bit frantic. “This is a great HVAC system, state of the art. It's starting already, feel it?”

Billy doesn't care about room temperature, at least for the time being. He steps to the right side of the big window facing the street and looks down that diagonal to the courthouse steps. Then he traces another diagonal to the small door further on. The one courthouse employees use. He imagines the scene: a police car pulling up, or maybe a van with SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT or CITY POLICE on the side. Law enforcement gets out. Two at least, maybe three. Four? Probably not. They will open the door on the curb side if it's a car. The back doors if it's a van. He'll watch Joel Allen clear the vehicle. There will be no problem picking him out, he'll be the one bracketed by cops and wearing handcuffs.

When the time comes—if it comes—there will be nothing to this shot.

“Billy!” Hoff's voice makes him jerk, as if waking him from a dream.

The developer is standing in the doorway of a much smaller room. It's the kitchenette. When Hoff sees he has Billy's attention, he gestures around palm up, pointing out the mod cons like a model on *The Price Is Right*.

“Dave,” Billy says. “I'm Dave.”

“Right. Sorry. My bad. You got your little two-burner stove, no oven but you got your microwave for popcorn, Hot Pockets, TV din-

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ners, whatever. Plates and cookware in the cupboards. You got your little sink to wash up your dishes. Mini-fridge. No private bathroom, unfortunately, the men's and women's are at the end of the hall, but at least they're at your end. Short walk. And then there's this."

He takes a key from his pocket and reaches up to the rectangular wooden panel above the door between the office/conference room and the kitchenette. He turns the key, pushes the panel, and it swings up. The space inside looks to be eighteen inches high, four feet long, two feet deep. It's empty.

"Storage," Hoff says, and actually mimes shooting an invisible rifle. "The key's so you can lock it on Fridays, when the cleaning staff—"

Billy almost says it, but Giorgio beats him to it, and that's good because he's supposed to be the thinker, not Billy Summers. "No cleaning in here. Not on Fridays, not on any other day. Top secret writing project, remember? Dave can keep the place neatened up himself. He's a neat guy, right, Dave?"

Billy nods. He's a neat guy.

"Tell Dean, tell the other security guy—Logan, yeah?—and tell Broder." To Billy he says, "Steven Broder. The building super."

Billy nods and files the name away.

Giorgio hoists the laptop bag onto the table, pushing aside the tools for writing by hand (a gesture Billy finds both sad and somehow symbolic), and unzips it. "MacBook Pro. Best money can buy, state of the art. My present to you. You can use your own if you want to, but this baby . . . all the bells and whistles. Can you get it going okay? There's probably an instruction book, or something . . ."

"I'll figure it out."

No problem there, but something else might be. If Nick Majarian hasn't rigged this beautiful black torpedo so he can use it as a kind of magic mirror into what Billy writes in this room, he has missed a trick. And Nick doesn't miss many.

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“Oh sugarpie, that reminds me,” Hoff says, and hands Billy another of his engraved cards along with the key to the cubby over the door to the kitchenette. “WiFi password. Totally safe. Secure as a bank vault.”

Bullshit, Billy thinks as he puts the card in his pocket.

“Well,” Giorgio says, “I guess that’s about it. We’ll leave you to your creative endeavors. Come on, Ken.”

Hoff seems reluctant to leave, as if he feels there should be more to show. “You call me if you need anything, Bi . . . Dave. Anything at all. Entertainment, maybe? A TV? Maybe a radio?”

Billy shakes his head. He has a considerable musical library on his phone, mostly country and western. He has many things to do in the days ahead, but at some point he’ll find time to rip his tunes to this fine new laptop. If Nick decides to listen in, he can catch up on Reba and Willie and all Hank Junior’s rowdy friends. And maybe he’ll write that book after all. On his own laptop, which he trusts. He will also take security measures on both lappies—the new one and his personal, which is an old pal.

Giorgio finally gets Hoff out and Billy is on his own. He goes back to the window and stands there tracing both diagonals: the one leading to the wide stone steps and the one leading to the employees’ door. Again he imagines what will happen, seeing it vividly. Real-world events are never quite the same as the ones you see in your head, but this work always begins with the seeing. It’s like poetry that way. The things that change, the unexpected variables, the revisions: that stuff has to be dealt with when it comes up, but it starts with the seeing.

His phone dings with a text.

GRusso: Sorry about H. I know he’s a bit of an asshole.

Billy S: Do I need to see him again?

GRusso: Don’t know.

Billy would prefer something more definitive, but this will do for now. It will have to.

When he gets back to what he supposes is now home, his new David Lockridge building ID is in his pocket. Tomorrow he'll be driving his new used car to work. On the porch, leaning against the door, is a bag of Miracle-Gro lawn food with a note taped to it: *Thought you could use this! Jamal A.*

Billy gives the house next door a wave, although he's not sure there's anyone there to see; it's still half an hour shy of noon. Probably both Ackermans work. He takes the lawn food inside, props it in the hall, then drives to Walmart, where he buys two burner phones (an heir and a spare) and a couple of flash drives, although he'll probably need just the one; he could put the complete works of Émile Zola on a single thumbie and barely fill a corner of the space available.

He also impulse buys a cheap AllTech laptop, which he puts in his bedroom closet, still in the carton. He pays cash for the phones and the flash drives. He uses his David Lockridge Visa for the laptop. He has no immediate plans for the burners, may never even use them. It all depends on his exit strategy, which at this point is only a shadow.

He stops at Burger King on the way back, and when he gets to the yellow house, a couple of kids on bikes are in front of it. A boy and a girl, one white and one black. He guesses the girl must belong to Jamal and Corinne Ackerman.

"Are you our new neighbor?" the boy asks.

"I am," Billy says, and thinks he'll have to get used to being one. It might even be fun. "I'm Dave Lockridge. Who are you?"

"Danny Fazio. This is my bud Shanice. I'm nine. She's eight."

Billy shakes hands with Danny, then with the girl, who looks at him shyly as her brown hand disappears into his white one. "Nice to meet you both. Enjoying your summer vacation?"

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"Summer reading program's okay," Danny says. "They give out stickers for each book you read. I've got four. Shanice got five, but I'll catch up. We're going over my house. After lunch, a bunch of us gonna play Monopoly down the park." He points. "Shan brings the board. I'm always the racecar."

Kids on their own in the twenty-first century, Billy marvels, how about that. Only then he notices the fat guy two houses down—wifebeater, Bermudas, grass-stained sneakers—keeping an eye on him. And on how he behaves with these kids.

"Well, seeya later, alligator," Danny says, mounting his bike.

"After awhile, crocodile," Billy responds, and both kids laugh.

That afternoon, after taking a nap—he supposes that he's allowed an afternoon nap, now that he's a writer—he takes the sixpack of Bud from the fridge. He leaves it on the Ackermans' porch with a note that says *Thanks for the lawn fertilizer—Dave*.

Off to a good start here. And downtown? He thinks so. He hopes so.

Except maybe for Hoff. Hoff bugs him.

7

That evening, while Billy's putting down lawn food, Jamal Ackerman comes over with two of the beers that were in Billy's fridge. Jamal is wearing a green coverall with his name in gold thread on one breast and EXCELLENT TIRE on the other. With him, holding a can of Pepsi, is a young boy.

"Hey there, Mr. Lockridge," Jamal says. "This little man is my son, Derek. Shanice says you met her already."

"Yes, with a little man named Danny."

"Thanks for the beers. Hey, what is that you're using? Looks like my wife's flour sifter."

"Exactly what it is. I thought about buying a lawn spreader at