

Chapter 1: Arrival

Billy was less than a minute from the monstrosity that was his father's house, an ugly building he'd shunned for three years. He had reason: no one wanted his ass handed to him. Though recent events had nixed that possibility, there were still goosebumps.

Because the body doesn't forget, does it?

Goosebumps didn't concern him. A debilitating headache forcing him to drive with his left eye shut, on the other hand, was concerning. Luckily, his right eye worked well enough to navigate. Billy turned the Corolla into his father's subdivision, mumbling mailbox numbers as he passed them: 14, 16, 18, 20. Twenty-two should have been next, but instead, a large mound of newspapers stood in its place.

Newspapers?

He braked, upsetting a pair of robins patrolling the road edge. The birds flew away to continue their worm-hunt beneath a tall hedgerow that grew between the road and what Billy now recognized as his father's property.

He threw the car in reverse, backing up. Billy could now make out his dad's ornate mailbox as well as boxes for *The Herald* and *The New York Times*. All three receptacles shared a support pole emerging from the pyre of moldy papers. He marveled at the near-misses surrounding the boxes; there were easily dozens, perhaps a hundred; not one of the plastic-sleeved papers had made it in. Several did perch on the mailbox itself, however, obscuring the house numerals, but he knew where he was: 22 DUTCH ROAD.

Aka Dad's Playpen.

It was 12:02 PM on Sunday, August 21, 2016. He'd driven six hours that morning and six the previous day from Little Rock, having stayed overnight at his Aunt Julie's in Nashville. Both days, it had been a glorious, windows-down drive, Carolina blue stretching horizon to horizon. Now, however, the roar of the open road was gone, replaced with the rhythm of grasshoppers and the steady ticking of the Corolla's timing belt. As the car idled, he massaged his neck, listening to the insects' peaceful serenade, contemplating the mildewed papers.

Why hadn't Dad's minions cleaned them up? Billy chuckled. Because they no longer work here.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror: a pirate too poor for an eyepatch. Scurvy knaves were supposed to look, well, *scurvy*, and sure, he felt that way, but he also felt envious: a pirate's missing eye no longer hurt the pirate—Billy's eye was killing him. He looked back at the smothered mailbox and a vague recollection surfaced, something about a kid on a dirt bike. A childhood friend? He wasn't sure. Whoever it was had been wearing a shiny metallic-red helmet. That was it: beside the headgear, the memory was unremarkable.

There was fluttering in the hedgerow. He'd sat idle long enough for the robins to once again make their way down the street, now keeping beneath the shrubs. The bushes surrounding his father's property were much taller and thicker than he'd remembered; mere ornamentals three years ago were now keeping the property entrance shaded. He opened his troublesome eye to see the entrance clearly: a metal arch spanning the driveway, supported by brick pillars. There was an inscription he didn't bother reading, because he knew the large baroque letters spelled out his last name: BUCHANAN.

Richard, you're still the only one in Whispering Pines with a vanity entrance.

Whispering Pines existed in the exurbia surrounding Rock Hill, South Carolina. Six years ago, a developer had cleared an eighty-acre tract of pulpwood forest to make way for a sprawling subdivision of roads and

mammoth houses; consequently, the pines no longer whispered. A few owners had opted for landscaping—stick trees trucked in from distant nurseries—but most of the homes floated on seas of unnaturally green fescue. His father’s lawn was no exception, but it was the only one surrounded by a buckthorn hedgerow, which, in turn, screened a six-foot security wall. His father was proud of this barrier: “Bushes make ‘em curious, Son. The wall keeps ‘em out.” There were thirty-five other homes, each with at least two acres of manicured turf and a white stone driveway. At four acres, Richard Buchanan’s lot was the neighborhood’s largest.

Billy looked toward the residence, a place he’d visited only once before. The building was much larger than a typical house—way too big to be cozy. Conversely, “mansion” or “estate” felt a little too large for it. He searched for a Goldilocks phrase—not too big, not too small—and it came to him: Buchanan Manor.

He let off the brake, scattering the birds again as he pulled the car underneath the arch. Billy took in the wall: a twelve-inch-thick concrete barrier faced on the inside with a checkerboard pattern of glossy slate squares reminiscent of the Vietnam Wall, a monument he’d seen on a grade school field trip.

The wall’s presence wasn’t surprising; it had been in place since construction. What *was* surprising were the statues, catching him so off-guard he stood on his brakes again.

The grasshoppers’ chorus and the timing belt’s ticking once again resumed, but Billy felt no peace this time.

Statues? What the hell, Richard?

Billy called his father by his first name whenever he was mad at him—which was often; Richard’s being dead for eight weeks hadn’t changed this. While his father was alive, Billy wouldn’t dream of yelling at him. Why court a cuffing? Death, however, had been a game changer. *Now I can yell all I want.* Still, he hadn’t yelled—old habits die hard.

As a youth, William Buchanan was quiet, falling short of the gregarious nickname his mother bestowed on him: Billy the Kid—BK for short. Inside his head, however, he could howl like the Arctic: mundane injustices—the loss of a favored toy, schoolyard treachery—could set him off, but he reserved the coldest winds for his otherwise unassailable father. In his pre-teen years, Billy created a serious internal defense against him, an elaborate WWI-styled bunker encircled with razor wire and landmines. He patrolled it with Brodie helmet on and rifle at the ready, eyeing his father over the no-man’s-land between the lines, yelling unpleasant epithets to keep “Hun” Richard at bay. Outwardly, however, when Daddy was about, Billy only whispered.

The secret yelling continued through adolescence. But by the time Billy turned sixteen, the year of the Saturday morning brawl, much of his father’s menace had abated; the dangerous mental Hun had transitioned into a second-class villain, more Doctor Evil than Doctor Mengele. This “mental” Richard stayed familiar, but not chummy; a petulant ranch hand you couldn’t bring yourself to sack.

Said ranch hand had for the last few years served as Billy’s cerebral custodian, maintaining his mental equipment. Richard was feet up and lackadaisical about his duties, his sweating Mai Tais producing impressive ring stains. It wasn’t the negligence that got under Billy’s skin, however; it was his father’s snide commentary:

“You call that clean, Billy?”

“The lawn’s not cut yet? It’s been an hour, for Chrissake!”

“I said *two* beers!”

“Son, grow some balls and stand up to that prick!”

Being that Billy's father was somewhat overbearing, the divorce had been a godsend. Now, at twenty-two, Billy's other influences, a loving mom and a tight extended family, had matured him beyond merely reacting; the *tête-à-têtes* with Richard, so volatile in years past, now required a true shock to ignite. Otherwise, though Mental Richard could still cause mayhem, he now had to do so from the Prison of Unwanted Memories, and then only on visitor's day.

Within this correctional institution, Billy's hatred for his father sat on death row, unwilling to take a needle. In the last three years, however, BK had made progress reconciling his feelings. Richard was now a mere yeoman sitting far from the captain's chair, manning less-and-less important stations, so it seemed inevitable: one day in the not-too-distant future, imaginary Mental Richard would die.

Then the headaches began.

In June, migraines began overwhelming Billy, staying Richard's execution. In the last two months, Billy's imaginary father had begun veering from the predictable scripts of the past toward present circumstances, wrestling him for control of his own mental mic. The good news: these conversations were still inside his head—BK wasn't hearing voices. He was sure of this. Pretty sure.

Now, however, a shocked, angry Billy found himself ill-prepared as his mental houselights dimmed for Richard Time. On stage, his father sat with cowboy boots propped comfortably on a campy-looking switchboard entitled COMMON SENSE AND MOTOR CONTROL. He was smiling toothily, ignoring a bank of flashing red lights, hands behind his head. Deliberately, he swept his Justins from the panel, pushing backwards on his wheelie stool.

"Hey, Buckaroo!"

Don't call me 'buckaroo.' You know I hate that. Just explain the statues.

There were several inward-facing sculptures along the wall's perimeter. Each was a muscular Asian laborer, or perhaps a warrior, six foot plus, holding a tool of some sort—picks, shovels, hammers, axes. They looked old, well-made, and most of all, valuable. Very valuable.

"Aren't these cool, Son? My own private army!"

BK bristled at this. His father's lavish, post-divorce lifestyle (and the bragging that went along with it) was nothing new, but these large museum pieces were *way* over the top, even for his One Percent father.

Richard, who sold you these? And, my God, they're not cast, they're actually carved! Must a' cost a fortune. Seriously, Dad, a goddamn fortune! What were you thinkin'?

"I thought you'd like them," Richard said defensively. "Like the soldiers we played with when you were a kid. You remember, don't you?"

When Billy was five, his father presented him with a bag of plastic soldiers, then left. Billy did the best he could alone, staging battles between the US Army and rocks he'd dug out of the backyard because it would have been unpatriotic to have the soldiers fight each other. He remembered convincing his childhood friend, Dwayne, to bring Dwayne's samurai soldiers over so his men wouldn't have to fight rocks.

Billy ignored his father's question, instead asking: *Why are they carryin' tools, Richard? Hi-bo, hi-bo, off to work we go?*

...

Richard?

Still silence. Though his headache was a seven on its way to an eight, Billy spoke aloud. With exaggerated calm: “Richard?”

“Yes, Son?”

“This ugly house, the tramps, your cars—all that cost a lotta money, right?”

...

Less calmly: “So you’re tellin’ me the money you *didn’t* spend on that crap, you spent on these statues? Chrissake, how stupid is that?”

Richard stood up from his wheelie stool. “Hey! Watch the tone, Buckaroo. Show some respect for the man who attended your baseball games.”

“You came to two, and you were drunk both times.”

“Those games were so *long*. And it’s hard to get booze at little league games, I really had to hunt for it.”

“You managed.”

“Yes, I did. Now, let’s see, didn’t we work on your dirt bike together?”

“Wrong. That was Dwayne’s dad, Mr. Grady. Try again.”

“Okay, what about that brand-new PlayStation I got you for your birthday?”

“Auntie J and Uncle Mickey gave it to me—for Christmas. Not you. And it was used.”

“Well, Buckaroo, I can’t help it if they’re cheap. Anyway, coulda sworn it was me.”

“Mom told me everyone *pretended* it was from you! And they’re poor, Richard, not cheap. Uncle Mickey would give you the shirt off his back.”

“Shirt off his back? Who’d want to wear that ratty old wife-beater?”

On it went, Richard purposefully missing his son’s points, Billy illuminating Richard’s shortcomings—alcoholism, absenteeism, and avarice—in Broadway floods. The mechanics of the old ranch hand pattern were shifting, however. Richard’s whininess hadn’t changed, it was the *strength* of his voice, its unsettling volume, which had been growing ever since the funeral. And his father sounded so *lifelike*—not some phony Hun—and so close, as if sitting in the Corolla’s passenger seat. Was he really hearing him, were Billy’s thoughts still his own?

“Richard, you a mind reader?”

...

Out loud, it sounded stupid, but BK took the silence as proof of mental confidentiality. This was too small a comfort, however, to offset hearing what his doctor called auditory hallucinations, however. That was the bad news. The good news was the cure: Quetiapine, medication a doctor had prescribed for him a month ago. Within days of the first dose, Richard’s unsolicited commentaries began fading, ceasing by week’s end. Better living through chemistry—not just good news, but great news! The med came with strings, however. The Quetiapine, or “Q” as he called it, shut his father up, but produced energy-sapping nausea which threatened his job. He’d stopped taking it.

Between no Q and seeing these goddamn statues, he told himself, no wonder Richard’s workin’ the mic.

“Okay, time to break out the sign,” Billy said aloud, then palmed his forehead and looked at the dashboard clock: 12:18 PM. He put the car in PARK, not knowing how long this might take. Drawing a breath, closed his eyes, and went on the defensive, imagining a blue stop sign, just as Dr. Singh had taught him. He struggled at first to maintain this strange image—the sign begged to be red—but soon Richard’s voice started hitching and bucking, so BK kept at it. At 12:25, Dick’s voice climbed to a whine and by 12:26, went inaudible.

The whole deal took only eight minutes, but they were costly minutes. Billy’s sweat-soaked t-shirt felt clammy, and his eye was still painful despite a pressed palm. *Still, holy crap, it worked!* He had silenced Richard with an imaginary prop! This, the blue stop sign’s first successful field-test, had been very satisfying; until now, he’d only practiced it in Dr. Singh’s office, without his opponent, Mental Richard, present.

He slowly opened his eyes, focusing on Richard’s army. There were at least a dozen statues spaced about seventy feet apart, standing in a line along the checkerboard wall. Billy thought it a safe bet that the parade of tool-holding men, like the wall, completely encircled the property. They stood facing away from the barrier as if guarding it, all except a strange, three-party greeting committee, about fifty feet up the driveway. This trio stood close to the drive, like tollbooth operators, but were no collectors of fees. The center one was large and imposing, easily eight feet tall—the only statue not holding a tool. It was flanked by two swordsmen and it looked important, like royalty—some sort of emperor or king. The muscular sculpture stared menacingly at Billy, holding its thick arms across its torso as if expecting something. For a moment, BK considered the eight dollars in his wallet, then felt foolish.

Ain’t payin’ no toll, Hoss, he thought. Good luck with that.

The Corolla’s AC had expired the previous summer, so Billy was sticking uncomfortably to the driver’s seat vinyl. The manor’s no doubt functional air-conditioning beckoned, but he kept the car in PARK because the sculpture’s face, with its strong cheekbones and broad, dignified nose, was simply marvelous to look at. It had been carved with obvious talent, someone’s skilled hands imbuing it with a persona of one who gives orders but doesn’t take them. Its robes were finely-hewn, floating on an imaginary wind—an observation reminding Billy of how hot the day was becoming.

Though the lifelike samurai king was carved to look intimidating—and in Billy’s mind, the sculptor deserved kudos there—pigeons had really done a number on it. No matter how formidable looking, something covered in bird crap could only be taken but so seriously. This glaring indignity broke Billy’s trance, allowing him to register an untended lawn tall enough to hide the ankles of all three statues. No minions, of course, meant no one to cut the yard.

The young man and the royal regarded each other for another moment, long enough for Billy to once again hear the droning grasshoppers and the companionable tick-tick-tick of his aging Corolla. But the insects’ churring couldn’t mask the anger he felt at Mental Richard’s unwanted return, an auditory appearance brought on by the sight of these high-end statues standing like pickets. Though the obscene expense pissed the shit out of him, he knew contemplating Richard’s in-your-face yard bling would prove exhausting. *Yes, king, you’re an impressive son-of-a-bitch, he thought, but my head’s still killin’ me.* He engaged DRIVE, shouting, “Sayonara, coalminers!” then drove the rest of the way.

The pavers crunched as he pulled the car around the manor’s circular drive. Bates had told him the detached garage would be locked, so he parked by the front doors. There were no other vehicles or signs of activity—he was alone. BK emerged to take in the building. It looked as ugly as it had three years ago during his first visit, dad’s infamous fiftieth birthday party, save for one striking difference—a new blue-tiled slate roof. *That must a’ been pricey. Or maybe not. What had Bates said?*

Bates had told him Richard had had the original grey slate, guaranteed for one hundred years, replaced earlier that summer, telling him it hailed hard in Rock Hill, “wink-wink.” (Bates, a literal man, made great pains to indicate that Dick Buchanan had said *wink-wink*, and that he, Deacon Bates, hadn’t.) BK tried to imagine ice pellets damaging slate which elsewhere protected cathedrals for centuries—it just didn’t seem possible—but there had been turbulent weather over the winter and according to the insurance adjustor, a May inspection did reveal dings and missing tiles. However, the suspicious adjustor *also* noted that the other neighborhood houses, with their 30-year asphalt shingles, were undamaged. According to Bates, the guy had asked sarcastically, “Did you have a party on the roof, Mr. Buchanan?” Richard had replied, “Oh yes, a real slammer.” Dick got a new roof, dying before paying his deductible.

But those statues, they’re a crap-load of money, Billy thought, *free roof or not. Lear jet money. Biggie Smalls money*. Where did Richard get *that* kind of money?

Before she married, Billy’s mom, Sarah, joked that Richard, a New Yorker, *had* to be mobbed up to throw cash around the way he did. He never said where it came from and she never asked; she’d fallen deeply in love with a flamboyant, successful man—things would take care of themselves. But being *connected* was a joke which soured after the first few years and by the time Billy was born, simply chaffed. Richard was neither mobbed up nor on a nodding basis with the traditional concept of work. Work was for minions, and Dick Buchanan was no minion. Richard *earned*, by which he meant using his brain to separate money from those who already had it—Mensa for profit.

A half-in-the-bag tax attorney attending his father’s fiftieth party had put it best: “Buchanan worms his way into the financial heart—a real middleman’s middleman.” BK, serving at the time as a 19-year-old backyard bartender, nodded, smiling pleasantly, realizing the man, who tipped well, didn’t know he was talking to Buchanan’s son. The man’s statement didn’t upset him; he assumed everyone knew about his father’s finagling, and in some weird sense, this was okay; scheming was how dad provided for the family, at least in the early years, keeping money coming in the door. What *did* make him and his mother mad was how fast the money also went back out, and for the last few years of the marriage, didn’t come in at all.

Richard spent cash—no question there—he just couldn’t (or wouldn’t) save it. In their household, Sarah’s hard-earned waitressing money, needed at month’s end, found itself instead briefly riding in the first-class section of Richard’s wallet before passing to parts unknown, at least unknown to her. When these parts *did* become known—Richard took his affections beyond his wife—the Buchanan’s seven-year marriage foundered, then sank out of sight, leaving a few photograph albums and a 6-year-old Billy to bob in the waves.

A lopsided divorce agreement made for anemic alimony. Dick punished his ex-wife through late payments, enough to hurt but not enough to be sued over. His son? Richard paid lip service to his future, bragging to his sketchy gambling associates about the account he’d set up for Billy’s education—its accumulation, good for a semester’s worth of books and perhaps a school shirt, instead went to paying bills.

Despite his worsening headache, he tried to stay in the present, because the manor still awaited.

He recalled the floor plan as best he could from his one other visit. The building had two stories and about twenty rooms; it was U-shaped, open on its northeast side. The main building and its east and west wings surrounded an outdoor Italian marble terrazzo complete with two ewer-holding nymphs pouring water into a fountain. The terrazzo overlooked a large backyard running to the rear wall.

The building exterior featured ocher-colored bricks bordered with dark green trim clashing with the blue roof tiles overhead. The color of the manor’s bricks matched fetid carpet he and his mother had once seen while

landfilling an old mattress the super said was too big for their apartment dumpster. The memory of that moldering carpet, coupled with the exterior's competing tricolors, now made him queasy.

The manor walls boasted large, top-quality windows, but these were unevenly sized and asymmetrically arranged, giving the building a rickety look. This was deceiving, however. Prior to construction, Richard directed the architect to "Make it bomb-proof, I don't care what it costs." The architect had delivered. The structure was solid; in fact, so solid it could withstand a tornado strike. "No foolin', a full-on F1, perhaps an F2," the proud architect had crowed, even as Richard disputed his bills, eventually paying just thirty cents on the dollar.

BK walked up to two stout-looking oak doors whose lionhead knockers gleamed in the afternoon sun. He raised his finger to the doorbell but thought better of it. Who would be home? Instead, he retrieved keys Bates had FedEx'ed the week before, locating the one labeled FRONT DOOR.

It's my home now, at least for tonight. He inserted the key.

The lock was stiff, requiring him to twist the key firmly. He pushed hard below one of the knockers and after an initial squawk, the door opened. He stepped in; cool air enveloped him. The foyer smelled like an office: a mixture of drywall, rubberized plastic, and carpet cleaner.

The interior was dark, contrasting sharply with the brightness outside. Before his eyes could adjust, an annoying beeping startled him. *Alarm!* He'd forgotten his father's Gestapo-like penchant for security. BK pulled the key from the lock, examining the fob for a security code, but found none. *Beep-beep! Beep-beep!* went the alarm, and from his previous visit, Billy knew he had less than twenty seconds to punch in the four-digit code before a truly unpleasant (and unstoppable) blaring started. *Dammit, Bates, why didn't you give me the code?* He stepped to the keypad just inside the door, his hand poised over the numbers; if he didn't act fast, Richard's home-security company would be sure to send a rent-a-cop to ask questions.

What's the code? Don't say you changed it! Somethin' to do with that old rock dude, Purple Prince?

"Just 'Prince,'" said Richard, very lifelike.

What?

"Not 'Purple Prince', just 'Prince.'"

And that helps me how?

"Remember the song?"

He tried remembering: *Gettin' down like it's— No. Gonna get down like it's— No.*

"Son, gonna party like it's—"

"1999." He punched the numbers. The beeping ceased. Before closing the doors, he looked across the roundabout pavers toward the line of tool-wielding statues. At seventy yards, they seemed less real, more like the toy soldiers of his youth—specifically, Dwayne's samurais.

They do look like an army, Richard. Billy stared at the large, cross-armed statue. Even at this distance, the determined stare of the stone king, the obvious leader of these ninja coalminers, was uncomfortable—he couldn't stare back.

Hadn't it been facin' more toward the gate when I got here?

"Pay attention, Son," Richard said.

What? Oh yeah, sorry, Dad. Coolin' off the whole neighborhood—my bad. Billy, feeling 12 again, closed the door to save AC, then sat down on the lesser of two ostentatious couches in the foyer, dropping his head between his knees because his father's hallucinations had returned.

"You're not really here, Richard, are you?" he asked.

...

Good. Keep it that way.

His father didn't speak again, however, which was a tremendous relief: between the heat, the alarm, the unwanted banter, and of course, his killer headache, Billy's brain simmered.

The trip from Little Rock to Rock Hill had taken two days, including the overnight at Aunt Julie's. Billy hadn't minded; he liked driving. The journey had been pain-free until two hours past Nashville, when simple neck tension graduated to his current full-fledged pounder. Prior to these unwelcome migraines, BK rarely suffered headaches, never being incapacitated by one. These new ones, however, crippled.

In the coolness of the manor's interior, he realized how warm and unwell he really felt. Billy massaged his temples, staying motionless on the overstuffed couch, easing back from the edge of nausea, letting the vented air cool him off. *I think I need to stay like this forever.* Five minutes later his phone vibrated. Though he was pretty sure he'd cheated the barf fairy, he moved carefully, fishing the phone from his pocket, placing it between his ankles so he could read it while slouched over. He blanched. It was a text from Mandy.

New house killin it?_

Love lots! Your girlfriend_

Even if it was Mandy, he was in no mood to talk. Raising his head above his knees, he thumbed a response, "Yes," then dropped it again.

The phone vibrated a second time—this time voice. Billy grimaced, but tapped the ACCEPT CALL icon.

"Don't want to talk now, girlfriend."

...

Perhaps he'd been too abrupt?

"I'm not your girlfriend, Billy, I'm your momma."

"Momma?"

"Yes, it's me," Sarah answered. "Why are you so snappy? You and Amanda fightin' again?"

"Sorry, Mom. No, we ain't fightin'." He loved his mother, but the pain and the nausea made it a struggle to be pleasant. "When did you start likin' her, anyway?"

Sarah ignored the question. "Are you takin' your medication?"

"Yes, Momma."

"You've taken it today? Once this mornin', and you'll take one tonight?"

"Yes, Momma."

This was a double lie.

“BK, it’s important you take it. You want rid of those headaches, right? That young doctor may be a foreigner but he’s no quack. You need to take it, Sweetie-pie. I’m worried ‘bout you.”

“Ain’t worryin’ what mommas do?”

“Don’t sass me, Billy,” she said, but he could hear the Arkansas grin through the phone—one that, despite the migraine, matched his own.

“Sorry, Mom, but I feel fine. Oh, and please tell me I didn’t inherit Dad’s taste—you should see the house.” Billy recalled the mismatched windows and the hideous trim as he eyed odd artwork hanging in the foyer. “Towards the end, Dad must a’ been losing his marbles.”

“Yes, so you just keep yours, but never mind that. How was stayin’ at Auntie J’s? Did you apologize for the short notice?”

“I did.”

“And the cats?”

“The cats are great, ‘cept the one with three legs. It died.”

“Oh, that’s so sad!”

“She kinda went on and on about it.”

“She *loved* Lucky Puff, Billy. Puffy was her special cat.”

“Lucky Puff got run over by a vet in a wheelchair, Momma. Wouldn’t call that lucky.” Aunt Julie had found the badly injured cat during the previous year’s Veteran’s Day parade, nursing it back to health. The wheelchair being the cause of the cat’s woes? Conjecture on Billy’s part.

“Well, that kitty was fortunate Auntie J found her when she did, ‘cause that woman just loves the world’s cats.”

“Yes, and half of ‘em live in her house. Seriously, Mom, it smells like an ammonia factory.”

Well, you certainly inherited your father’s sense of humor, Sarah thought. She loved her son enough to change the subject before he brought up his pet Aunt Julie theory: Auntie J saved on funeral expenses by burying Uncle Mickey—her handyman husband—in the basement under three tons of cat litter. That way, he’d keep being handy.

“Didja talk about anythin’ besides cats?”

“Just how budget Dad’s service was.”

“I don’t know why she’s complainin’, she didn’t pay for it.”

Neither did we, thought Billy.

Then Sarah spoke what they both knew: “That Wendi woman did.”

Sarah, who knew her son thought more of Wendi, her ex-husband’s last girlfriend, than she did, changed gears again. “So, you’re at the house. What’s it like?”

“Like Van Gogh vomited.”

“Whoever *he* is,” said Sarah. “Some of the furniture in those email pictures Bates sent looked, well, valuable. Whatcha think?”

“Dunno, Momma, guess so. Bates said most of it’s knock-off, but some might be worth somethin’. But hey, there’s these statues in the yard. They’re weird but that doesn’t matter, they’re fancy as hell, worth big bucks, Momma, *huge* bucks. And there’s dozens of ‘em!”

Sarah perked up. “Statues? Like Auntie J’s concrete Jesus and those adorable lambs?”

“No, Mom, not concrete—stone! Carved. Chiseled. You know, sculptures!”

Sarah didn’t sound impressed. “Well, BK, statues or no statues, doesn’t matter. We ain’t seein’ no money outta that house.”

“For sure,” he agreed, examining a tag hanging from the couch. It was an auction label. There was one matching it on the opposite couch and others on all the artwork he could see. “Looks like Bates is gettin’ ready for a yard sale, Momma, to pay off the creditors, I guess.”

“Don’t start me on that tuh-urd, Bates.” Sarah pronounced *turd* using two syllables. “Just look over what Bates has for you, *carefully*, sign it, and you know the rest. Hustle back with that three thousand. The super’s screamin’ about the back rent, so let that tuh-urd Bates worry about everythin’ else.” She changed gears again; Sarah was an efficient gear-changer. “BK, you eat lunch?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Because, you know, that medication, that Q-peen—”

“—Quetiapine—”

“—Whatever it’s called, you need to take it with food. That foreign doctor—”

“—Doctor Singh—”

“Yes, him, he said so, and I finally got to the library to look it up online. Says you need three meals a day with it. Eat, Billy. You’ve lost so much weight, you’re a stick with hands. Speakin’ of, what was lunch?”

“Taco Bell.”

“Now, Billy, you must eat, of course, but don’t *waste* money. Eat what your momma packed in the cooler. Have you put it in the fridge? That chicken won’t keep in this heat—it’s a scorcher here, by the way. Bates said the house would have power. Does it?”

“Yes.”

“How’s the Corolla?”

He looked through the floor-to-ceiling windows framing the front doors. The car gleamed in the sun. “It’s fine, ‘cept the AC’s still dead. Alignment’s pullin’, too.”

“I pray it’ll be alright, and we’re more worried about you, anyway. You don’t sound so good, Sweetie.”

“We? Who’s *we*?”

His mother paused; he could hear her thinking. “*We* are your momma and your girlfriend. And don’t say Amanda’s not your girlfriend; you’ve been sleepin’ at her apartment.”

“What? You guys are *talkin’* now? I thought you hated Mandy.”

“No, I *dislike* Mandy. There’s a difference.”

“Mom, I don’t want you talkin’ to her—”

“Sweetie, that’s not up to you. Look: please just take your medicine and come home in one piece, okay? ‘Cause I got a bad feelin’.” Sarah regularly had bad *feelin’s*.

“Okay, Momma: ‘Take my meds.’ Got it. It’s just weird, you know, you and Mandy talkin’.”

“Just keepin’ track of my son’s whereabouts. Believe me, we’re not tradin’ recipes. Listen, I hafta go. Your momma—that’s me—loves you. And who loves me back?”

“Billy does.”

“Billy who?”

“Jesus, Mom, I’m twenty-two. Don’t make me say it.”

“Don’t blaspheme. Now, tell me who loves me.”

“*Billy the Kid*. Ya happy now, Mom?”

“Delirious! Take your medicine, Sweetie-pie. Love you. Bye!”

“Love you too, Momma,” he said. With a click-beep, the call ended. Billy was used to Sarah having *feelins* and finishing conversations like a drill sergeant, but his mom and his girlfriend talking? That was new. He stewed over an image: Mandy and his mother sitting on some couch comparing notes, but he dropped the thought. He was feeling better—at least a little—and didn’t want to jinx it.

He continued looking through one of the glass panels abutting the front doors. Outside, the two robins he’d scarcely noticed earlier had just alighted on the shoulders of the large tollbooth samurai, the Big Hoss. *Strange*, he thought. The statue now definitely faced away from the road, toward the house—toward Billy. *Coulda sworn it had been lookin’ the other way*. But had he really been paying attention? No.

The fat robins perched comfortably, enjoying the view while digesting their worms. Suddenly, the statue vibrated. The unsuspecting birds felt this tremor through their talons and flew off to the safety of the hawthorn bushes. Billy saw them take flight but thought nothing of it; he was too far away to notice such a quick movement.



Stan Rutmeyer let Mr. Peebles out for his afternoon potty. The dog bolted, hustling down the deck steps to inventory the backyard pee spots. Some dogs are one-spot dogs, but Peebles, an industrious dachshund, liked to spread it around, hitting previous marks before trying anywhere new. Stan stood between open back doors, watching the dog’s tail waggle as he went willy-nilly, peeing intermittently, working his way towards the neighbor’s hawthorn hedge and the wall behind it. Stan looked over this wall which separated his yard from his neighbor’s, noticing a small white sedan parked on the Buchanan driveway, a car that hadn’t been there that morning. *Well, doesn’t look like that lawyer’s car*, he thought, *and it’s certainly not Richard Buchanan’s*.

It was a hot afternoon, not the time of day to be standing in the sun. Stan realized he was half in and half out, cooling off the neighborhood just as Billy had done earlier. He stepped inside, closing the French doors behind him, confident Peebles would scratch the glass when ready to come in.

Stan had been examining ledgers in his den, but didn't return there right away, instead stopping in the kitchen for a ginger ale. Stan, who was battling Type 2 diabetes, allowed himself one soda a day and was looking forward to this afternoon's allotment. He took a Canada Dry from the fridge and stood by the sink, looking through the window at Buchanan's manor. Stan Rutmeyer's house was smaller than Dick Buchanan's—all the other homes in Whispering Pines were—but stood higher in relief, allowing a good view into Dick's yard over what Stan referred to as the Berlin Wall.

He told himself he was looking to see if Bates (or whoever owned the white car) was going to cut Buchanan's lawn. It had been a stellar summer for growing grass in South Carolina, with plenty of heat and near-daily thunderstorms to keep the turf verdant. Stan himself had struggled keeping his own back forty in check, which meant Buchanan's yard was a prairie. To Stanley Rutmeyer, tending one's yard was a civic duty on par with voting, so with no yard man calling, his neighbor's lawn galled. Of course, Stan wasn't just curious about the lawn. Buchanan's statues, whose heads had appeared above the Berlin Wall earlier that spring, also piqued his curiosity, but for the moment, his dead neighbor's Serengeti took top billing.

At first, it had been no big deal. Two weeks after an ambulance arrived at 22 Dutch Road and one week after Ruthie, Stan's wife, learned that Buchanan had died, Stan cut Richard's lawn. He did it out of a neighborly respect for the dead and because Ruthie had asked him to—whoever was in charge over there now had more important things to worry about, she'd said. Besides, cutting the lawn would be the male equivalent of bringing a casserole, so Stan, who lived for riding his John Deere, took the hint.

It turned out his neighbor's lawn, larger than his own by two acres, was a challenging cut. The two dozen statues required careful maneuvering, and large, unexpected ruts (some with kicked-up furrows necessitating lifting the mower's blades) made for slow work. The gouges were odd: the last lawn service must have mown after a particularly bad rain as the ruts ran counter to natural drainage. Stan could knock his own yard out in less than sixty minutes, but that first Buchanan goodwill mowing took two and a half. The beer bottles and assorted trash hadn't helped; Dick had been dead perhaps a week before hooligans began arriving, requiring Stan to hop off the mower a dozen times to pick it all up.

Hooligans in an Aster & Son Paving truck, perhaps?

He remembered he'd finished the last of the weed-whacking, wondering whether Shane Junior, the son of Aster & Son, and his band of delinquents were to blame for the trash, when an old dented Cadillac sedan drove under the Buchanan arch. *That piece of crap has seen better days*, he'd thought then. The fidgety driver, who wore a rumpled suit, parked three feet from Stan's shoes, emerging without acknowledging him. Ruthie later told him the guy was Deacon Bates, Buchanan's lawyer. Stanley put his weed-whacker down, wiping his hands thoroughly with a handkerchief before stepping up to the man, extending a dried hand.

“Hi-ya.”

Bates looked at him as if the last thing on Earth he'd do was touch a sweating human being. He regarded Stan briefly, then turned his back on him, muttering, “Make sure you cut the back,” before making his way toward the front doors. Stan took no umbrage being mistaken for a landscaper; it turned out to be the highlight of his day. Without skipping a beat, and in an exaggerated New York accent, he said, “Cutting da back will make it a hun-tread bucks.”

Bates stopped in his tracks, turning toward him as if seeing Stan for the first time. His gaze was calculating, but it drifted toward the statues, losing its strength. “Okay, fine. Someone will pay you.” Bates then went inside, closing the doors quickly.

Stan made three observations about Bates that day: first, he was cheap; second, he was a liar; and third, the man was preoccupied, as if there was something wrong with him. The last observation was the most

interesting. He finished up that day by blowing grass clippings off the driveway, whistling as he worked, wondering why a guy in a decent (albeit rumpled) suit would drive such an old, piece of crap Caddy.

“I can’t believe you asked for money,” Ruthie exclaimed later that evening as they walked Mr. Peebles. “Richard just died, so Mr. Bates likely has a million things on his mind. He probably thought you were hired help.”

“Do I look like hired help?” Stan replied.

“Do you really want to know what you look like? The *truth*, I mean?”

“A seventy-year-old balding fat guy wearing Bermuda shorts? No, please lie to me.” Ruthie laughed. Stan gave her a winning smile which the mirror told him was still charming. “You know, Ruthie, one day, the thin guy trapped inside me is going to pop out of my chest, *Alien*-style, and whisk you away to some far-off, romantic paradise.”

“I can’t wait, but I’ll swoon if there’s too much blood. And besides, it’s not necessary. I love you the way you are, Stanley, you burnin’ hunk a love.” She gave him a peck on the cheek, then clasped his hand tightly. “All he needs is an Elvis jumpsuit,” she whispered conspiratorially to Peebles. Stan remembered laughing as they passed Buchanan’s arch, saying *thank ya, thank ya very much*. But what had made the walk truly memorable was Peebles’s sudden, raised hackles; the dog was barking fiercely at the largest of Buchanan’s statues, the cross-armed Big Kahuna, forcing Stan to heel him tightly all the way home.

Stan finished his soda just as Peebles began scratching the back doors. He let him in. The dog motored to his bed, circling twice before lying down. He was panting from the heat, looking up at Stan with bright, prideful eyes: another completed mission. “Well done, Wonder-Wiener.”

Man and dog were home alone. Ruthie was visiting her sister in Wisconsin, leaving them to batch it for a week. She’d been gone only two days, but already the house rules had been relaxed: dishes in the sink, unopened mail, pizza boxes stacked like evidence. “Say, Peebles, boys will be boys, won’t they? The cat’s away, et cetera, et cetera.” The dog continued panting, a series of rapid *hub-hubs*.

Stan was in a good mood; he’d been reviewing his new client’s horse-trading ledgers, an activity he enjoyed thoroughly. Before returning to them, he looked through the kitchen window one more time, admiring his manicured lawn and the two trendy garden gnomes Ruthie had given to him for Christmas; one held a cell phone, the other sported VR goggles. He grimaced again at his neighbor’s knee-high grass, but based on principle, there’d be no more pro bono mowing. Bates was a lawyer and lawyers had money; therefore, Bates could pay someone and not rely on the kindness of strangers. *You’re welcome, by the way*.

Bates’s cheapness wasn’t what really bothered him, however, nor was it the rioting lawn—it was something he couldn’t quite put his finger on, something like the feeling of being watched. Stan mulled over the nature of his “dis-ease” as he eyed the eight-foot Big Kahuna. *Something’s not right about you, Big K*.

He returned to his den.

Though retired, Stan Rutmeyer still worked hard. He’d had three jobs before getting the gold watch, the longest and most enjoyable being his last, working as a handwriting analyst for the Secret Service, a position he took in the early seventies. It was a desk job reviewing whatever was brought to him, but there had been travel—a fair amount of it outside the country. It wasn’t glamorous; he didn’t profile ransom-note writers or murderers’ confessions. Instead, he spent his time reviewing the day-to-day correspondence of those best positioned to threaten the US dollar—counterfeiters. He’d been excellent at thwarting forgers, but at the height of his skills, wonky 90s “governmental re-visioning” promoted him beyond his skill set where he languished in middle management until his retirement as a G15 in 2011.

However droll his later career might have been, the straight-eight government hours allowed him time to pursue his passions, which ranged from the ordinary (golf: 16 handicap) to the eclectic (collecting handmade bobbers), but the love of his life, besides his wife, was US history. Chiefly a Civil War buff, he'd turned his passion for nineteenth-century ink and paper into an encore career as a boutique graphologist. He was very good, winning beer bets by determining the authorship—Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Teddy Roosevelt, for instance—of any ten-word writing sample composed before the advent of the ball point pen.

Stan was currently authenticating a five-volume set of horse-trading ledgers he'd received from a woman in Kentucky. He'd been engrossed in it since reading the first ledger entry dated September 30, 1835: "Palomino 2-year mare, 13 hands, good teeth." He was halfway through the second ledger, comparing entries to handwriting samples provided by his client. She wanted to know if a branch of her family tree had at one time owned a stallion named King David, a horse purported to have sired a generation of exceptional racehorses, including the 1903 Kentucky Derby winner, Judge Himes.

Stan had just sat down in front of the second ledger when his phone buzzed. It was a text from his wife. Engrossed as he was, Stan dutifully returned her texts, but as the day wore on, an *I love you but I'm busy* tone crept into his responses:

How's Peebles?_

Good._

What came in today's mail?_

Just bills.

Remember to pick me up from the from the airport this time._

Yes dear_

Meanwhile, Mr. Peebles entered the den, depositing himself underneath Stan's large mahogany desk. Stan unconsciously rubbed the dog's belly with his loafer, causing one of Peebles's rear legs gyrate slowly.

The work was intriguing, but the big stone Kahuna competed for his attention. Twenty minutes in, while examining ledger entries underneath the title "Draft Horses Purchased for the City of New York Department of Sanitation," he remembered something suddenly which ended Peebles's rubdown.

"No, it can't be," he said aloud.

Peebles yawned, waiting for the foot-rubbing to recommence, but it didn't. Stan stood up, returning to the kitchen. The dog reluctantly followed, watching his master, the Man, stare through the window over the neighbor's wall before the Man said, "I guess it is, Peebles, would you believe it?" Instead of looking toward Buchanan's vanity arch as it usually did, the Big Kahuna now faced Buchanan's house—at least it looked that way from here.

He turned to his dog, looking thoughtful. "Well, Peebles, we've got a mystery to solve on our evening walk. Are you up for it?" Peebles wagged his tail at the word *walk*, hoping for the even better word, *treat*. "We'll go when it cools off. Say, how about a treat, Peebles?" Stan reached into the cupboard, retrieving a Milk Bone, tossing it to the dog without looking, assured by experience the canine would catch it in mid-air. Peebles did not disappoint. Stan heard the snap of small but powerful jaws behind him as he returned to the den.

Across the way, cold eyes looked over Dick Buchanan's wall, straight into Stan's kitchen. Like Billy earlier, Stan had no idea that the statue, too far away to be seen clearly, had been pivoting, bit by bit.