



# 1

They were after me. I didn't know who, and I didn't know why, but I had to get away.

There was no other thought.

I fell through darkness till direction lost all meaning. My seizing lungs burned. When I finally breached the surface, I saw water and no shore. Pain chewed my awareness—pain and a wrenching sense of loss like a freshly severed limb. I groped for meaning, but it fled.

I lost count of how many times my head went under. My sodden leather jacket dragged against my shoulders—a dangerous weight. A sick jolt of anxiety stopped me from struggling out of it. The coat was important. I felt it with the same heart-knocking certainty that drove me to outpace my unseen pursuers.

I kept swimming.

I didn't remember reaching land, but came aware of it in stages. Consciousness flickered like an old filmstrip. I hugged a dirty strip of beach, sand clotting my nose. The water lapped my legs. Everything hurt.

A sharp insectile chitter brought me lurching to my knees. I came up swinging blindly, gagged on a shout, then doubled over to vomit about a gallon of the lake. Shakily, I knelt as my breath hitched in my scalded throat, then scrubbed grit and worse from the stubble on my jaw.

That urgent sense of pursuit spurred me to my feet once again. One boot was missing, and the sock on that foot flopped like a dark tongue.

I thought I heard a woman's voice, keening. Trapped.

Whirling at the sound, I hoped to catch sight of her, but I was alone, and the lake—as big as an inland sea—stretched away empty.

Those murky waters surged before me. My vision faltered and for a moment everything dropped away into darkness. The lake became a vast abyss, and nightmares seethed in its depths. The water wasn't water anymore, but a boiling blackness, filled with crimson eyes and gnashing teeth. I loosed an incoherent shout, stumbling backward to put as much distance as possible between myself and the dizzying vision.

I ended up on my ass with my back pressed up against a crumbling wall of shale. When I looked back at the lake, it was just water again, gray and brooding as the leaden skies above.

*Keep moving.*

Scrambling up the embankment, I kicked away my remaining boot. I'd run barefoot. I didn't care. A scree of stones clattered with the boot to the beach below. The guardrail twisted above me, one section skewed crazily from a collision that left green paint streaked across the

metal. Hauling myself over, I bent in the dirt to catch my breath.

My pulse pounded so hard sparkling lights strobed at the edges of my vision. For a moment it seemed like I was going to be sick again. A tractor-trailer whizzed past, snapping me out of it.

The long, smooth stretch of two-lane country highway curved away through rolling farmland. Cornfields edged with autumn-hued trees lay opposite the lake. I couldn't see a house in either direction.

*Just my luck.*

I needed to catch a ride and get to someplace populated. The urge for a crowd jangled as powerfully as the need to flee.

A few cars sped by, drivers intent on their destinations. I tried flagging them down, but no one stopped. Some lady in a Malibu took one look at me and gunned her motor, swerving as she sped away. I yelled something nasty after her, but really couldn't blame her. I looked like the kind of hitchhiker they wrote about in horror stories—scarecrow-thin, bedraggled, and dressed in black from head to toe.

Doggedly, I kept moving.

It was dark and my feet were getting pretty raw by the time a semi caught me in its headlights and actually slowed. The rig pulled over to the narrow berm, wheels crunching gravel as it came to a halt. I approached the passenger side, trying to look harmless. The driver, a round-bellied man in his middle fifties, leaned over and rolled down the

window nearest me. Heavy metal throbbed from the cab.

“You wreck your motorcycle or something?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I hedged, scrubbing at the stubble on my chin.

The man’s bushy brows drew together and his right hand dropped to the stick shift. Great. He was ready to drive away, too. I must’ve looked worse than I felt.

“Look,” I said quickly. “I don’t know what happened. I woke up half in the lake.”

The trucker considered this for a few moments, keen eyes lingering on my face.

“Ah, fuck it,” he said with a shrug. “Get in. We’re almost to Ashtabula. I’ll drop ya off there.”

Relieved, I climbed up the passenger side and settled in. My jacket squelched around me. I should have been shivering, but I just felt numb. In the darkness beyond the warm light of the cab, the chittering call of some night-thing raised the hairs on my neck. I slammed the door hurriedly, glad to be able to shut whatever it was away, then shifted my bare feet among the piles of crumpled fast food wrappers on the floor. The trucker’s brows shot up when he saw I wasn’t wearing any shoes, but he opted not to comment. Instead, he shoved a stubby-fingered hand at me by way of introduction.

“Folks call me Big Bill,” he declared. “What’s your name, son?”

That was when it hit me.

I didn’t have a fucking clue.

I half-expected Big Bill to kick me out of his cab when I didn’t respond right away. He kept his hand poised stiffly between us, his frown deepening to a scowl.

“Name’s only polite, son,” he rumbled, “but suit yerself.”

To buy some time, I accepted his grubby clasp. The contact felt electric, and my already whirling brain burgeoned with half-formed thoughts and emotions—none of them my own. There was hesitation edging toward suspicion. A rising sense of irritation. The metallic tang of fear. I blinked, fighting to make sense of the onslaught. Instinct told me it was coming from the trucker.

How was that even possible?

“You on something?” Big Bill asked suspiciously, peeling his hand away. He wiped it on his thigh, as if my touch clung unpleasantly to him.

I didn’t have an answer, but the unwelcome flood of perceptions cleared as soon as he broke contact. In



its absence, my own anxieties surged with renewed intensity—the unsettling sense of pursuit and the staggering realization about my name.

How could I forget my fucking name?

Big Bill put the rig in gear, eyeing me skeptically the entire time. He said nothing further as he pulled back onto the road, so I turned and stared out the window, wrestling my anxious thoughts into some kind of order.

*A wallet.*

I had to have a wallet. Maybe that was why I'd refused to ditch the coat. Trying not to be obvious, I patted myself down, digging through the pockets of the leather jacket and turning them inside out. Driving gloves, a pen cap, some soggy gum wrappers. Nothing of any use whatsoever. I cursed none too softly.

Bill blasted Metallica and focused on driving.

I found a tiny front pocket with a metal snap rather than a zipper. It looked just big enough to hold a Zippo, or maybe an ID. Something was wedged inside of it—and wedged in tight. My hands were shaking, so it took a couple of tries to finally drag out the thin canvas wallet. It was blue and sealed with Velcro. I tore it open.

Three waterlogged twenties. A platinum card—*go me?*—and a State of Ohio driver's license.

"Zachary Westland," I read, squinting in the dim lighting of the cab.

Nothing.

Not even a flash of recognition.

The photo on the license didn't help. Pale blue eyes peered out at me from a long, narrow face. Gaunt cheeks, a straight nose, and a smooth brow surmounted

by a shock of brown hair. It wasn't a bad face, but it might as well have belonged to a stranger.

The address was for an apartment in Cleveland Heights.

"That had to be Lake Erie," I murmured. Big Bill cleared his throat, and I realized I'd used my out-loud voice.

"I'm gonna drop you off at the Pub n' Sub by 531 up here," he announced.

I cast a sidelong glance his way.

"How far are we from Cleveland?"

"Bout sixty miles," he said. "You can catch Route 20 or I-90 from 11. They'll both take you into the city."

"You're not headed that way?"

Big Bill fixed me with a steely glare. "Son, you're getting out soon as we're in East Ashtabula, and that's all I'm gonna say on the matter." To punctuate this, he cranked the music even louder. 'Enter Sandman' thundered through the cab. As dark as this stretch of country lane was, it really felt like we were heading off to never-never land.

With Big Bill brooding beside me, I dug through the rest of the wallet, searching for anything that might loosen my stubborn memory. There was a conceal carry permit, which I hid immediately, an insurance card declaring coverage on both a Buick and a motorcycle, and a business card for what looked like a nightclub. On the back of the business card, there was something scribbled in blue ink. I didn't think it was my handwriting.

*SS and Marginal-2*

All of it was meaningless to me.

We passed a gas station that was already closed for the night, and pulled in next door onto a gravel lot. There was a long, squat building that looked more suited to be a machine shop than a bar. A brightly lit sign with garish green and yellow lettering declared it the Pub N' Sub.

"Here's your stop," my reluctant Good Samaritan announced. He put the rig in park and folded his arms across his chest, scowling.

"Thanks, man," I said, and was relieved when he didn't extend his hand again. I wasn't sure what had happened when we shook the first time, but I didn't want to repeat the experience. I swung down from the cab, and he started pulling away almost as soon as my feet were on the gravel.

I stood blinking in the harsh glare of the floodlights mounted on the roof of the single-story bar. The wide lot held two semis, half a dozen mud-spattered pickups, and a few bikes out front. A couple of neon signs in the windows let me know I could get fresh eats and cold beer—except the "E" in "Eats" flickered dully, making the sign read, "Fresh ats." I pondered the nature of a "fresh at" while I tried to figure out my next move.

I had an address. It was safe to assume that's where I lived, but with no car and no shoes, the sixty miles to Cleveland might as well have been six million. Maybe I could use the phone and call a cab.

Throwing my slightly less sodden leather jacket over my shoulder, I picked my way across to the entrance of the pub, the gravel sharp and painful against the raw pads of my feet. The wind kicked up, scattering dried

leaves across my path. If it was cold, I didn't feel it. From about ten paces out I could hear the muffled strains of country music, and I drew up short when I spied a predictable sign on the door:

NO SHIRT. NO SHOES.  
NO SERVICE.

To which was appended in less-regular red letters, *No Shit*.

"Really not my fucking day." I sighed, then shook my head and went in anyway. The worst they could do was throw me out, right?