

DAVID BALDACCI

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A NOVELLA

THE

MIGHTY

JOHNS

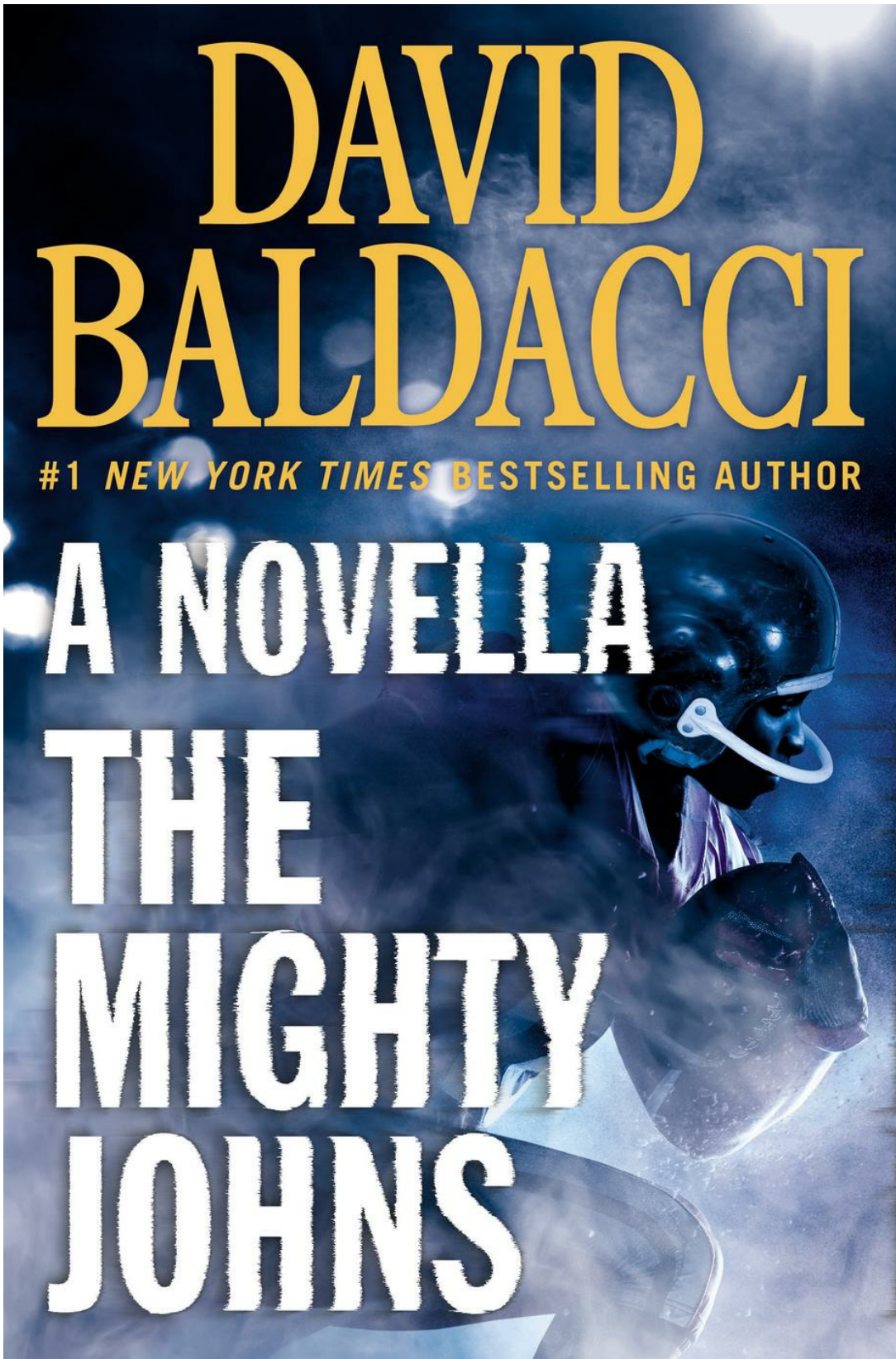


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A Novella



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I wrote *The Mighty Johns* nearly twenty years ago, and the story is set in 2002. At that time, it was published only in hardback, in a collection of sports-related short stories. After the story came out I didn't think much about it until a few months ago. Then I got the idea to revise, update, and add to the tale, and have it published in an ebook format for the first time. I loved reading sci-fi and time-travel books growing up. That love was transferred to the story you will find in *The Mighty Johns*. I had fun writing it. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Chapter 1

YOU KNOW,” SAID MERLIN NORTH, “if one really thinks about it, this football field is logically comparable to the cortex surrounding the brain. The cortex, as I’m sure you know, is one-tenth of an inch thick and has vertical columns running from top to bottom that are roughly two-thousandths of an inch in diameter.”

North bent down, plucked a few blades of grass, and showed them to the uniformed young man next to him, whose name was Jimmy Swift. An east wind careened over the unique topography that surrounded the pair, wrapping the two young men in an unpredictable embrace. And it carried the foul smells of the nearby manufacturing plants and mining operations into the lungs of the folks here.

Swift studied this visible air current. It was easy to see that the young man respected the east wind and understood its potential for deceit.

North continued, “Now, those cortical columns could be the blades of grass on this field, Jimmy. Each column contains one hundred and ten neurons. There are six hundred million such columns and thus there are roughly fifty billion neurons in the cortex.” He eyed his friend closely to gauge his interest and understanding for what lay ahead. For Merlin North something inevitably lay ahead of one of his science-charged homilies.

“So what are you trying to say?” said Swift, who had other things on his mind as his gaze caught and held steady on the flagpoles due west of him. “Left to right,” he muttered to himself. He did a silent calculation and marched two steps to his left and next took one long stride back. Just in case.

“Aren’t you listening?” asked North, who then followed his friend’s gaze to the flagpoles. He added in an impatient tone, “The wind’s fine. I calculate about six to eight knots, roughly east to west, not that significant really, though it is swirling, but then it always swirls. And he’s got a strong leg, and

you're very fast. You're aptly named. So what do you think about my theory?"

Swift glanced at North, and the expression of confusion was more weary than profound. And, at least to Swift, North held forth on the most impossibly useless subjects at the most inappropriate times. Last week, during a particularly rugged practice drill, North had grilled him on Carl Jung's theories on individuation, synchronicity, and the existence of archetypes when weighed against modern string theory and neuron consciousness, with a dollop of quantum psychology thrown in for no apparent reason other than to befuddle Swift even more.

"I'll be sure to look into that," Swift had replied at the time, and just to make North shut up. Now he looked blankly at his friend. Quantum theorizing obviously did not jazz Swift's motor to any appreciable degree. In his defense he had many other things on his mind, the wind for one. It was swirling, and swirling was not good. It also was gusting, and gusting was even worse than swirling, as far as he was concerned. He was about to be called on to perform a very difficult task, and North was distracting him.

North let the blades of grass drop to the ground. "It's obvious, isn't it?" said North. "Come on, think, *Swift!*"

If they hadn't been such close friends, Swift might have decked North. Yet the timing was no good. Right now he really needed his friend and teammate for a very special task.

"Not to me it's not," said Jimmy, and he licked his fingers, just as he did every few seconds, to improve the traction there. "Look, I need to clear my mind, okay? Not fill it up with stuff I'm never going to use once in my life."

North tapped the bottom of his cleats clean and said, "Let me spell it out for you then. We could be standing on an intellect perhaps surpassing our own and we're stomping all over its neurons, Jimmy; the delicate yet critical canopy over its nuclear engine. Do you truly believe that such a profound concept has nothing to do with you?"

"Looks like grass and dirt to me, Merl, but then I'm just a dumb poli-sci major." Swift looked up into the bright lights and stiffened when he saw what was coming. "Forget the cortex, Merl, time to go to work." Swift performed a little jig to get the circulation going in his legs and licked his fingers a final time. He cast one last look at the flagpoles, which were barely visible now, what with the low cloud cover and the rapidly failing natural light. Then he

set himself to wait as the screams plummeted down upon the two men like August hail, and the ground shook like an earthquake barreling their way.

A smile eased across Swift's face. This was his time to shine. And like any young man gifted with extraordinary ability, he meant to let it rip.

North looked up, saw what Swift saw, strapped his helmet tight, inserted his mouthpiece, and squatted to lower his center of balance. His heart rate had nearly doubled with the adrenaline spike, and he knew Swift's had, too. And yet North had a relative calmness about him that came from the most basic of all endeavors: preparation. In fact he was never more ready in his life. And he was about to do something that, if it played out as perfectly as it had in his mind the last week or so, would literally rock the world.

Chapter 2

THE FOOTBALL DESCENDED upon them from out of the murkiness of the stadium lights. Overcast skies pregnant with rain had further aged a gloomy Saturday afternoon into an early, melancholy dusk. It would have been difficult to see a plane coming at them from out of the blinding crest created by the banks of thousand-watt stars that ringed the stadium. Yet, as usual, Swift fielded the blob of leathery pigskin that plummeted from the sky with an athletic grace he possessed in enviable quantity.

For his part, the blocky, slower-footed, and yet extremely capable North eased back on his right foot and established a firm center of gravity on the possible cortex of a potentially large intellect lying beneath them. He silently counted to three as he eyed screaming, barbaric young men charging at him and Swift. This fanatical—some would say infantile—group had been transported into the civilized world for four quarters every Saturday in the fall across the length and breadth of America's college football empire.

The cries from the stands echoed the brutes' battle hymn as blood-lusting spectators, now mere ghostly outlines in the diminished light—silhouettes of Johnny Rebs or Union Blues hunkered at the fogged tree line moments before the deadly clash—leaned forward and awaited with glee a violent collision of young, strong bodies that was bare seconds from occurring. Not even patrons of the Roman bloodbaths snorting their fix of human pain and cruelty had ever witnessed anything quite so spectacular in its potential for glorious mayhem.

With an explosive burst, North took off running. He said not one word, uttered not a single reciprocal scream, for he was saving every ounce of energy he had in order to transfer it on to others. As Newton's Third Law of Motion dictated with a majestic certainty, when an object exerts a force on a second object, the second object exerts an equal and opposite force on the

first. And, at least for now, E did approximate MC squared, though North was working on alternative theories that were holding some promise. Yet, for his purposes right now, all that mattered was angle, speed, and weight displacement, and the use of power against itself to maximize effect beyond all reckoning; for the individual parts were very often not so great as the entire throbbing whole. What was rushing headlong at him and Swift was a living, breathing physics experiment, and North did not intend to screw up such a magnificent display of scientific possibility.

North had studied his opponent's kickoff techniques all week. Teams usually had players remain in their running lanes so all paths of escape were blocked off, but this unit had the tendency to congregate half a dozen men in the middle of the field where they would use their collective speed to pursue tackle angles to the outside if necessary. Well, North was going to take that technique and ram it right down their throats.

With Swift dancing and juking behind him, awaiting any crevice he could slide through, North counted off his steps, simultaneously calculating axis rotation, curvature of the earth, mass, speed, and, possibly most important for his purposes, angle of impact. When he reached the count of five North hit the compact wall of men at what seemed like the speed of light, or, as North would later say in his inimitable way of pedantic embellishment, at the speed of a subatomic particle tunneling under a quantum barrier, or at approximately four point seven times the speed of light. So fast, in fact, that the particle would exit the tunnel before it even entered it. North had tried explaining that to Swift once, only to see his friend's eyes glaze over. Then, if you pointed out that at the speed of light time stands perfectly still, like, fittingly enough, the hands of a stalled clock, and that traveling at a rate *faster* than that of light would actually carry one backward in time, one would see the comprehension of the casual listener approximate that of a cinder block.

Well, not today. Today it was going to knock the socks off the crowd of screaming Mighty Johns fans, because North took out the wall of screaming men with his masterfully placed flying body block that dropped his opponents like dominoes in exact accordance with the formula of mass displacement at a precise angle of collision. He had worked it all out the previous week in between his science labs.

True to form, Jimmy Swift exploited this enormous gash in the kickoff

team's heart, flashing by as North lay in the grass, his face mask bent, his mouthpiece knocked out, and a spot of blood on his cheek. All around North sprawled a sextuplet of young men in orange-and-black uniforms stunned by the impact of a quantum tunneler who had exited before he had entered.

Not one opposing player had a good shot at Swift until he was at the opponent's forty-yard line. A very fast cornerback named Brady—who had given Swift fits for three years—had selected a decent angle of attack as he raced after his streaking opponent. However, this time, Brady had underestimated Swift's speed and determination. Right as the cornerback went in for the kill, his target kicked it into a higher gear, and Brady ended up eating a mouthful of grass, or billions of neurons, if you believed North.

Swift sped untouched into the end zone to complete his 103-yard trek, and then respectfully tossed the ball to the waiting official and jogged to the bench, where he was mobbed by his frantically delighted teammates.

North rose among the bodies of the fallen and trotted off the football field at Draven University. The school sat in a drab, manufactured valley of perpetually darkened hues among the squat, hollowed, and stripped coal hills of western Pennsylvania, and was home to the Mighty Johns football team. As North gazed at the berserk crowd, the metal-and-concrete stands shaking under their collective mass times energy, he knew these emotionally charged plebeians hadn't a clue as to what really had just taken place on the field.

North had *only* displaced the almost century-old blocking stratagems of X's and O's by using the principles of modern quantum theory that most people would never be able to comprehend to any measurable degree. Still, North had to smile at the mad party going on over at his team's bench. What could be better than an extravaganza of science coupled with the exuberance of raw, young men in all their beastly pomp and pageantry that coexisted for at least sixty violent minutes on Saturday afternoons in the fall at the universities housing the best and brightest all across the land? Where else could you watch smart, educated people physically wreck one another for a nominal cost that included food, drink, and even a place to sit?

He jogged to the bench and slapped hands with Swift. His teammate also whacked him on the helmet. "One for the old cortex," Swift said, and the two friends sat down next to each other. Then it was dramatically announced over the PA that Jimmy Swift's run was actually one yard longer than originally thought. The rollicking, delirious crowd grew still and quiet at this

momentous and stunning proclamation, for the truly unthinkable had just occurred.

Jimmy Swift had just broken the forty-year-old record for kickoff returns held by the immortal Draven alumnus Herschel Ruggles.

Swift, at the prompting of his coaches and teammates, was persuaded to run out onto the field to acknowledge the crowd's applause, which cascaded down like towering waves of blue as men, women, and children, many of them weeping uncontrollably—the sight of men with large beer bellies heaving was particularly memorable—and flicking their Mighty Johns aquamarine towels back and forth to show their undying gratification at being a part of this once-in-a-lifetime occasion. At least a half-dozen God-fearing and married women in the stands would gladly have sacrificed themselves by engaging in a monstrous orgy with Jimmy Swift right there on the playing field, with the complete blessing of their tearfully joyous husbands.

Here, college football was not just beloved by these folks; it was their faith.

Swift took North with him to acknowledge the crowd's appreciation, despite his shy friend's protest. "Like you didn't get it for me," replied Swift as he pulled the far larger North out with him. They both took awkward bows at the fifty-yard line while a stretcher crew carried off the six young men who had had the misfortune to wander into Merlin North's laboratory at the Mighty Johns' twelve-yard line.

North and Swift returned to their seats on the bench as play resumed. Swift hunkered down and ostensibly began going over in his mind the wonderful run that had just made him a legend.

North, motivated perhaps by being a part of this record-breaking feat, started contemplating, for the hundredth time or so, the mysterious disappearance of Herschel Ruggles all those years ago. It had happened right on this very field, in front of 24,612 rabid Mighty Johns fans, including North's father, Peter North, who had been a teammate of Ruggles's. While a man vanishing into thin air during a football game was not a physics conundrum per se, it was still a problem, a solvable problem, North thought.

He was a scientist, but, as strange as it seemed, North was something of a superstitious one. This shattering of the record was an omen, a signal of unmistakable importance. It was finally time to tackle the mystery that had bedeviled Draven University, the county of Allegheny, the town of Crucifix,

the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the entire country for four decades.
What in the hell had happened to Herschel Ruggles?

Chapter 3

AFTER A PRACTICE THAT HAD left him drenched in chilly sweat, yet not very tired, North walked out onto the Mighty Johns' football field. There was no crowd, no opposing team seeking to crush him, no Jimmy Swift and his complete indifference to the logical ways of science. Now, North could think even as the wind nudged him here and there, like a fox lazily trolling the underbrush for easy prey. Other than the wind and the university, there wasn't much of interest this secluded western wedge of the Keystone State had to offer.

North had always found the town's name rather odd. There was a Crucible, PA. There was also Leechburg, PA, Jim Thorpe (named after another athletic wonder), PA. Intercourse, Holiday Pocono, and Bird-in-Hand, PA. There was also Egypt, Mars, Mexico, Moscow, Oklahoma, and Paris, PA. There was even a Virginville, PA, which North meant to visit at some point, if only to see if there was some monument in the town square that would explain things.

Yet, to him, Crucifix, PA, seemed a little much.

However, North had come to Draven University because it offered an excellent science program at a location not all that distant from his hometown. Swift had come here because the school had offered him a full football scholarship and overlooked a high school academic transcript containing nothing but mediocrity. Through the odd ways of the world, these two very different men had become good friends and supportive teammates.

Swift had chosen political science as his major and then ascertained, too late, that it involved far more reading, writing, and thinking than he had expected. He had tried to switch to history, but then discovered that discipline had similar if not even more onerous academic requirements. He decided to stick it out with poli sci until better prospects happened along. They never

had, and he had decided to await graduation and then determine what he wanted to be. In private, Swift had shared with North his desire to one day play in the NFL.

North hated history, though he had read far more of it than most. And yet he had once thought seriously of becoming a scholar in that field, until he started to delve more deeply into what was often passed off as history. He had found most of it to be revisionist drivel, intentionally misleading at best, outright fraudulent at worst. He came to despise those elitist folks who sat around with their gold-tipped nibs and their bow ties and their smug attitudes and their bags of clichéd and altered facts, and wrote of the glorious exercise, the indescribable ecstasy of war, for example, blithely ignoring each and every diary or journal of any hard-luck soldier who had actually fought in such terrible times, where not one passage could be found to validate the Bow Ties' outrageously romanticized testimonies of man killing man. Yet from much of the recorded history of warfare, one could draw no other conclusion than that young men regularly fought each other to determine who got to die a more glorious death. In that regard, it was a lot like college football, mused North, minus the dying.

North could never be part of such a franchise of the callous and ignorant. He had, instead, turned to science, where equations and formulas of exacting precision could be relied upon and pursued alongside an opportunity for new discoveries at a level that had absolutely no peer in the universe. For instance, every scientist knew what mass was, yet no scientist had ever seen energy, only the effects of it on mass. The possibilities were so great that North nearly wept every time he thought of them. Therefore, it was upon science and not upon history that North had decided to wield his massive intellect. It was actually the best of both worlds for him: a foundation of iron upon which to plant his feet, and a sky without limit for which he could reach.

North knelt in the grass and studiously surveyed the exact spot where Herschel Ruggles had fielded that kickoff forty years before while playing the Howling Cougars of Appalachian Valley Tech. Long before he and Swift had broken the record, North had read every available account of the incident, and there were many, of varying reliability and specificity. North had spoken with anyone he could find who had actually been in attendance on that unforgettable day, including his own father. From all these sources, North had pieced together the events leading up to Ruggles's vanishing. North also

had Ruggles's entire touchdown run diagrammed in his mind.

Ruggles had fielded the ball three yards deep in the end zone. The Howling Cougars kicker at the time had possessed quite a leg and actually went on to play professional ball, first with the Packers and then with Johnny Unitas and the Colts. He routinely kicked the ball into the end zone, and he had never had one taken back all the way on him.

Carrying the ball as he always did in his right hand, Ruggles had cut to his left, picked up his blocking wedge, and ridden it to the Johns' thirty-one-yard line, where his protection finally had broken down. At that critical point Ruggles did something that had characterized his entire football career at Draven. Tightly scripted offensive schemes went out the window and pure instinct took over.

Ruggles reversed field, running naked, for all the Johns had committed to the left side. The fact was most of them were down on the ground already, having sacrificed their bodies for what had been a respectable return. Given the time on the clock and the Johns only down by four, thanks to a missed two-point conversion by the Howling Cougars, things were looking pretty fair for the Mighty Johns and their high-powered offense, headed up by tailback Herschel Ruggles, their only bona fide All-American gridiron legend. Yet what was respectable to ordinary mortals was far from acceptable to a man of Ruggles's ability and drive.

It was known across the football conference that Ruggles's ambition, if not obsession, was to score on every single play. And while of course he didn't, some Saturday afternoons it seemed like the man accomplished this lofty goal. Yet he *had* scored at least three touchdowns in every collegiate game he had ever played, and once had scored six times in a single half. Against Nebraska! Fully two-thirds of the season ticket holders at Draven were there solely to watch him perform. And Ruggles well knew it. From everything North had been able to discover, Herschel Ruggles was not a man who lacked confidence. It was often that way with demigods, reasoned North, particularly those of the athletic kind.

North stood and then started to pantomime the remainder of Ruggles's legendary run into the records book. He cut from the left sideline and began a race to the middle of the field near the thirty-five. Before he got there, however, an ambitious Howling Cougar had launched what should have been a successful ankle tackle on Ruggles at the left hash mark. Truth was, he

should have had Ruggles dead to rights, according to a fan who had seen it, and whom North had interviewed. What he ended up with, said the now very elderly man, was an armful of nothing but crisp Pennsylvania air as Ruggles leapt right over him. Leapt right over him! By a good two feet, declared the man. Not even Michael Jordan could have done that, the old-timer added, not with all the bells and whistles athletes these days got.

Back then, after a game, all the players would sit around smoking and drinking beer and eating fattening food. There were no strength trainers, no weightlifting rooms, no dieticians, not one shoe contract, just towering men who played the game with all their enormous hearts because they loved it more than they loved their own mothers. Herschel Ruggles was just such a man, pronounced the old fan. Hell, he had leapt over that Howling Cougar by a damn good *three* feet!

North attempted such a jump himself, and though there was no opponent seeking to take out his legs, he almost fell. Agility had never been a strong suit of his. The next player who had had a shot at Ruggles was a starting middle linebacker carrying thirty more pounds than his target and who also had decent wheels. A stiff arm, the likes of which no one had seen outside of a Bronko Nagurski bone-crushing jaunt, had left the determined linebacker flat on his back and the crowd stunned, according to several other fans North had spoken with. North also had succeeded in tracking down the former Howling Cougar who actually had been the recipient of this violent if legal blow. The fellow had remembered every second of it, he had told North with seemingly bountiful pride. Indeed, the man had remarked that it was one of the high points of his life. The former Howling Cougar linebacker was now a successful automobile dealer just across the state line in Ohio, so the man presumably had had his share of triumphs in life. Yet being pounded into the earth by Ruggles apparently ranked right up there with all of them.

North belted his imaginary foe and kept right on going. The next two obstacles were a pair of Howling Cougars who had been slow coming down on the kickoff and thus, ironically, were in a position to make the key stop on Ruggles. The mightiest Mighty John, however, had other plans. Ruggles had thrown a damn near perfect Crazy Legs Hirsch scissors move, split the pair of defenders, and then was gone like a flash of ship's light in a vicious, unforgiving fog.

The two Cougars ended up colliding, and probably each one thought he

had made the tackle on Ruggles. After that Ruggles burst through two more tacklers, knocking both men unconscious with the ferocity of his attack, because even though he was carrying the ball and was the presumptive target, that was not how Ruggles played the game. When it was your task to stop him, *you* became the target for him to destroy, which he often did, with complete and unassailable finality.

Finally, the kicker himself had the last legitimate shot at Ruggles yet missed badly after biting on a feint and falling flat on his face. Some said that during his long professional career afterward this same kicker never again attempted another tackle, due solely to his embarrassment at the hands of Ruggles that day. After that it was a mere foot race, and the Olympian speed with which Ruggles was endowed left absolutely no doubt as to the outcome.

North mimicked that race, albeit far slower than had Ruggles, and as the greatest of the Mighty Johns had done four decades ago, he crossed the goal line, his heart pounding with vicarious triumph.

The next movements were critical, and North took a few minutes to ponder them. The truly extraordinary fact was that Ruggles had not stopped there. He had not merely tossed the ball to the waiting referee and trotted back to the bench as Jimmy Swift had done. Ruggles had continued running, ball in hand, into the passageway that led deep underneath Herschel Ruggles Field and to the Mighty Johns' locker room.

The stadium was renamed from simply Johns Grounds ten years prior when North's father, Peter, a wealthy businessman, had given a large sum of money to the school.

A decent two-way lineman with a heart far larger than his physical talent, and a former teammate and friend of Ruggles, Peter North had said, at the time of the field's christening in Ruggles's memory, that it was the proudest moment of his life, and a way that would forever keep alive Herschel Ruggles, wherever he happened to be, and regardless of whatever had happened to him. "A great man, an athlete of near-mythical proportion, a scholar of outstanding reputation, and a young man as compassionate and giving off the field as he was predominate and prolific on it," said a truly moved Peter North. It was a speech that had driven the crowd to tears, including North, who had been only eleven at the time. Not yet fully aware at the time of his mental prowess, that chilly fall day North had made a silent promise to his father that when he felt his skills were suitably developed, the

son would once and for all discover the truth of what had happened to a man his beloved father had described as “someone who even more than my own father had the greatest influence over me, and without whom I would not have achieved the success I have today. God Bless Herschel Ruggles, and all those like him, though they would most certainly have to be few in number.”

The crowd had cheered even as it had wept.

As North stared at the opening down which Ruggles had run and never returned, a slight chill hit him. Certainly, only a few at the school would know all the nooks and crannies, rooms and passageways, that lay under the stadium. The college had been funded and built by the coal-mining baron John Milton Draven—both the source of the school’s name and the identity of its athletic teams. It had opened in 1930, a year after the Great Depression began.

Draven had been near maniacal in his building plans, and the earth on which the university was situated, had been gouged open to a great depth by the large machinery from the mogul’s mining company. To such an extent, in fact, that what had been carved out beneath the ground could be said to be almost as elaborate as what lay above it.

Most folks attributed that to Draven’s background. He had started out as a humble miner, digging out the black rock with a pick and later dynamite. Shrewd and ambitious, he had parlayed his skill at pinpointing enormous veins of coal into enough money to purchase a few choice tracts of land in the Alleghenies. One of these parcels had turned out to be lying above the largest geological trap of both coal and natural gas ever discovered up to that time, and had propelled its fortunate owner into the rarefied financial universe of the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. Yet Draven had never forgotten his roots, and his money cascaded down not upon America’s metropolises, but on the poor and disadvantaged of the country’s Appalachian coal-mining regions. Draven, forever remembered as tall and regal, white haired since the age of thirty, and bearing a striking physical resemblance to Walt Whitman, had explained his construction of these underground labyrinths by stating that the basis of his fortune had originated from there, and the happiest times of his life had come when he was beneath the dirt. Thus, he had added to great humorous effect, he not only did not fear his death, he was actually looking forward to it, as he would be returning to the very place he cherished most in the world, and that had so enriched him.

His inevitable detractors claimed that Old Draven was a cunning sociopath, interested only in his own well-being and adding to his already deep purse—despite his outward philanthropy, which was not nearly as great as reported, they claimed. These same sources also alleged that the real reason Draven had dug the earth out so much when constructing the school was that he believed precious minerals were buried there, just waiting for a nimble hand to pluck them.

Whatever the truth actually was, his enemies had the last laugh, for a very elderly John Milton Draven had been buried alive during a visit to one of his Pennsylvania mines, the Gloria No. 3, named in honor of his wife of the same number. His body and those of his entire party of twelve—not including the fortunate Gloria, who had stayed home—were recovered several weeks later. The evidence showed they had lived for perhaps a week, until their air and presumably their hope had given out. There was some indication, as culled from the results of Draven’s autopsy, that the rich man had actually been strangled. Those who had spent considerable time with the hot-tempered Draven—though not in nearly such close quarters as a small pocket of life a hundred feet underground—did not rule such a fate out of the question.

North felt the gaze upon him before he heard or saw anyone.

“Something on your mind, young man?”

Chapter 4

THE OLD FELLOW STARING at North was badly stooped, though it was clear he had once possessed an impressive physique. In the bent torso North could sense intense pain. And yet the man's features betrayed not a trace of agony. He looked to be in his seventies, his hair a carpet of straggly gray and white. The face was a jumble of mismatched parts. The eyes were too large for the face, and the forehead was too short and spare in dimension when aligned against the slope of nose and width of skull. By contrast, the jutting chin was a shelf of intimidating proportion, and the jaw was so geometrically perfect it seemed carved by a jeweler's wheel. His long, stained fingers were wrapped around the handle of a broom. He held the tool, it seemed to North, like it was a part of him, an appendage of planed maple to go with the deformed body; perhaps it was necessary support, for the legs looked too spindly to be of much practical use.

"Something on your mind, young man?" he asked again, taking a few hesitant steps forward.

North rose and headed over to the man, who was just outside the entrance of the immortal passageway through which Ruggles had raced to his apparent doom.

"You're one of them football players, ain't you?"

"Merlin North. First string outside linebacker and second string offensive guard."

"Merlin? Don't hear that name much."

North looked a bit embarrassed. "I was named after Merlin Olsen. He was a member of the legendary Fearsome Foursome defensive front with the LA Rams back in the sixties. He was my dad's favorite NFL player. My friends call me Merl."

"Right. Hey, you're the one what threw that block sprung Jimmy Swift,

ain't you?"

"I am."

"Helluva hit, young man. Ain't seen one like it for years."

"Probably since Herschel Ruggles played," commented North with what he hoped was delicate inducement.

"Oh, I ain't been here that long. Heard about him, though. Hell, who ain't heard of that feller? Legend, I guess you'd call him."

"Exactly how long have you lived around here?"

The man leaned forward more on his broom handle, as though for additional support if the two were going to stand there jawing for a bit.

"Oh, 'bout a year now. Surprised you ain't seen me before. I do the cleaning 'round the stadium."

North looked around the large complex. "Just you?"

"No, not just me, young feller. But even though I ain't been here all that long, I know the ins and outs of this place better'n just about anybody."

"Really? Why's that?"

"Because I took the time to learn it, that's why." The man's eyes sparkled under the litter of oddly cut hair.

North glanced down the tunnel. "Find anything interesting while you were doing your *learning*?"

The man looked behind him, following North's gaze. "Depends on what you call *interesting*. But it lights my fire."

"What's your name?"

"Benny, Benny James. Folks call me BJ. You g'on and do that too."

"Okay, BJ, what if I wanted a little tour through the stadium? Would you take me?"

BJ cocked a fuzzy eyebrow at him. "You play football here every Saturday. Ain't you know the place by now?"

"No, I mean *that* part of the stadium." North pointed down the tunnel. "Past the locker room and the tape room and the laundry. Further on, into the bowels of the place, so to speak."

BJ moved his broom forward an inch or so before once more resting his chin on the handle. "Why you want to do that?"

North tried to appear casual. "Like you said, it lights your fire. Maybe it'll light mine."

"Young feller like yourself, should be getting your fire lit with the pretty

young things running 'round here. Cheerleaders and such. They go for the fellers in the uniform on Saturday afternoon.”

“So you played football?”

“Nah, wanted to, but ain't got what it takes. Too light in the bones, can't run worth a spit, and bleed too easy. I just watch, but I'm a good watcher. Over my time seen all the great ones play.”

“So you've traveled quite a bit?”

BJ took a few moments to sweep up some paper shreds next to the tunnel entrance and scooped them into a dustpan, which he then emptied into a trash can sitting next to the last row of seats on the lower level. “I get around. Big country, like to see what I can of it before I kick off.”

“So will you show me the underground part of the stadium?”

BJ steadied himself on the broom handle before answering. “I tell you what, you come see me tomorrow night right here around nine, I see what I can do.”

“Why at night?”

“Got to work during the day. Don't worry, there's light in there.” He added quietly, “At least in most of the places. We get to the others then we use flashlights.” He seemed to appraise North keenly. “You *game*?”

North stifled a chill deep inside of him before answering his new friend and now informal scout, BJ. “I'm game.”

Chapter 5

A SLASH OF HEAT LIGHTNING, unusual for this time of year, greeted North as he made his way to meet BJ. The man was not there when North arrived at the entrance. He took a cautious step forward into the tunnel. Though he had been down that passageway many times, after games and practices, something did not feel quite right. Perhaps it was as simple as the fact that he had never before been down here *alone*.

He took another step inside. This section was well lit, the old fluorescent tubes hanging down from the vaulted ceiling blinking and popping with incandescent glee. From somewhere in the darkness there came the drip of water. North told himself there was nothing odd about that. Tunnels always leaked and made strange sounds as support beams and load-bearing walls held back the weight of the earth. He walked quickly forward and entered the prep and treatment rooms.

Here the players would sit immersed in the whirlpool in near-boiling water or ice cubes, as needed, or lie on long tables for electromassages, cortisone injections, complex taping, and strapping and rigging of knees, ankles, shoulders, and other susceptible spots. As well as additional treatments designed to help erase or at least diminish the physical punishment that inevitably came from men of like weight, speed, strength, and determination colliding with each other week after week.

This was all familiar ground for North, nothing to be unduly nervous about. He had expected to see a few of his teammates in there getting some extra sessions of tape, heat, or needle pricks, but the room was empty, the lights off. He left the familiar area and continued on down the tunnel, wondering where his scout, BJ, might be. Perhaps the old fellow had forgotten. Maybe North should turn back. Yet he kept going, placing his hand against the cold stone wall as he ventured to imagine what might have

happened to Ruggles as he raced down this passageway.

The dilemma was that no one North could find had seen Ruggles after he entered the tunnel. In those days everyone associated with the team was usually on the field during the game. Thus, Ruggles had almost certainly been alone in the tunnel, at least for a few minutes. The very strange thing was that Ruggles apparently *had* gone into the locker room because his street clothes—according to what North could determine from the sketchy facts available—had not been found in his locker.

North well knew how long it took to shed football equipment. And the record showed that several people came into the tunnel about five minutes after Ruggles did, and they saw no one there. They would probably have been in there earlier, but absolute pandemonium had broken out on the field after Ruggles's run, and the fact was most people hadn't realized their hero had left the field at all. Most of them thought he was buried under a pile of his celebrating teammates in the end zone. It was only after the celebration died down that folks realized Ruggles wasn't there. Yet still, five minutes to get off all his equipment, change into street clothes, and then leave undetected? And add to that the puzzling fact that Ruggles's uniform, shoulder pads, helmet, and cleats had never been found. Why would he take those items with him? How could the most famous football player in town leave undetected wearing or carrying his own football uniform? None of it made any sense.

The light was growing dimmer the farther in he went. Apparently, as BJ had indicated, the bulk of the underground guts of the place had never been lit. North stopped and stood there for a couple of minutes, the erratic thuds of his heartbeat growing louder. He half expected to see a black, floppy raven sailing toward him, cawing its message of doom and spreading its utter terror over its poor earthbound targets. The Fall of the House of North. It had an unsettling ring to it.

A flash of light behind him made North turn. He held up one hand to block the blinding strobe confronting him.

"That you?" called out a voice.

"BJ?" said North. He dropped his hand but averted his gaze as the light grew closer.

BJ walked up next to him, a powerful searchlight in hand. North noted curiously that the man was not limping and now needed no broom to steady him. Also, he did not seem so bent and physically wretched tonight. Though

the man was a complete stranger, and could have been a fugitive killer on the run for all North knew, the young man let out a breath of relief to have a companion in here.

BJ said apologetically, “Must’ve missed you. I was standing outside smoking a cig. Might’ve been late, too. Durn watch never keeps good time. Figured you might have come in here so’s I came in to find you. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. But let’s get going. I have an early lab tomorrow.”

“You’re the boss. But stick close, easy to lose your way down here. Done it more’n once.”

“Well, don’t do it tonight,” muttered North.

They made a left at an intersection of two separate corridors, and then, after a short walk, hung a right. This new direction threw them into total darkness but for BJ’s light. Also, at this point the floor of the tunnel angled downward at about ten degrees. North found himself having to slow his pace lest he tumble forward into BJ and wipe out the elderly man and his all-important light with an “illegal” block in the back.

“What’s down here?” asked North.

BJ looked back and grinned. In the arc of the light his features, along with the discomfiting glint of nicotine-stained and uneven teeth, seemed almost fiendish. It was the first time North had really seen the man’s teeth, and the impression was unnerving. The man seemed different somehow; North couldn’t quite make out exactly in what way. Was he growing taller? North was almost six foot three and a very solid 235 pounds. It must be an optical illusion, or his runaway imagination, thought North, for BJ seemed to be growing closer to him in weight and height.

“You’ll see. Good shit.”

They continued on. North crept ever closer to BJ even as his dense muscles tensed for some possible action, he wasn’t quite sure what. He also noticed that it was becoming harder to breathe down here. North was aware that at ever-increasing altitudes the thinning air made breathing very difficult. Obviously going *down* into the earth presented similar dilemmas as dirt, rock, confined spaces, and poor air flow combined to create comparable sorts of challenges. In fact, it could produce the lethal atmosphere of carbon dioxide buildup that had ended the life of John Milton Draven and company so long ago. North recalled that while the coal baron had perished in the Gloria No. 3 from lack of air, he also allegedly had ligature marks around his neck.

The turns became so numerous that soon North was hopelessly lost, and thus totally dependent upon a man who was a complete stranger to him. He was just about to tell BJ that they should turn back, when he saw it. A door! The light was shining upon a door. BJ glanced back at him, grinned, and pointed to this portal of warped oak planks and rusted iron.

“What is it?” North asked.

“Like I told you. The good shit. No, make that *great* shit.”

With astonishment, North watched as BJ pulled an ancient-looking key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock.

North gripped the man’s arm. “Where’d you get that key?”

“You spend a lot of time down here, you find stuff.” The man let out a cackle that fled down the tunnel, the sounds bouncing off all sides like bats in rabid seizure.

BJ turned the key and pushed the door open. He held the light high as he entered. North hesitated for a moment, but then composed himself and followed BJ inside.

North first observed that his companion’s light was not really needed here. There was natural light of some unknown origin, though this far under the earth the possibility of such intrinsic illumination was dubious at best. The room was fairly large, perhaps twenty feet square, with walls of quarried stone that appeared to be dry stacked, for North could not make out any mortar lines. The large rocks were as uniformly placed as concrete block and so tightly mitered that they matched the finest wood moldings North had ever seen. Skillful hands indeed had put together this place. Yet why waste such talent on a room that would never be used or even seen?

“Where’s the light coming from?” asked North.

BJ merely shrugged his shoulders. “Ain’t never been able to tell.”

“Why build a room like this when no one will ever use it?”

BJ shrugged again and grinned. “It’s a mystery all right.”

“So where’s the ‘great shit,’ as you put it?”

“Through there.”

BJ pointed toward the far corner of the room that a compass would have shown to be the northwestern side of the place. The light dimmed a bit there. Yet even North, whose eyesight was not the best without his glasses, which he had forgotten to bring tonight, could make out an opening in the rock, once it had been pointed out to him.

“Where does that go?”

“Show you. Lot better’n telling. Come on.”

BJ started forward, yet North did not move. BJ looked back.

“Come on, young feller.”

“No,” North said. “Now we go back.”

“Ain’t you want to see?”

“Not tonight. Another time. I need to think about all this.”

“You sure? Great shit,” BJ added, though his grin was less prominent now.

“I’m very sure,” said North.

They retraced their steps, North a foot or so behind BJ. From his pocket, North drew out the piece of chalk. As they walked down the passageways, North held the chalk against the walls and marked the trail all the way back.

When they reached the outside once more, North drew in a long breath. A lover of astronomy all his life, to North the stars had never been a more welcome sight. He glanced at BJ, and the man had returned to his stooped, decrepit appearance. North thanked his guide, pressed a crisp twenty-dollar bill into the man’s hand, and walked off.

BJ stared after him for a bit, the expression on his features a mixture of curiosity and disappointment, and then the man headed back into the tunnel.

Chapter 6

NORTH RETURNED TO THE tunnel underneath the stadium a few nights later, and this time he was not alone. Jimmy Swift did not look pleased to be there, yet North had easily countered every one of his teammate's excuses for not coming with far more logical arguments of his own. When he had still refused, North had reminded him that he was the primary reason Swift now dwelled in the university's record books, and didn't that mean something? And didn't Mighty Johns football players have to stick together in this tricky world where things could change faster than a fourth-quarter lead?

And Swift had finally answered that they did indeed. Yet he did not look happy to be standing outside a tunnel that he would be forgiven for thinking went straight to Hell without offering a return ticket.

North had done some more research. His findings had been interesting, although not totally illuminating. The man calling himself BJ was not employed by Draven University as a janitor or for any other purpose. North had looked for BJ all over campus, without success. He had waited by the tunnel opening at the stadium the previous night—concealed, of course—but the man had never appeared. North had talked to legitimate members of the janitorial staff, and none of them had heard of or seen any man resembling BJ.

After learning all this, North wondered how close he had come to calamity that night. It had been an impetuous, foolish act and North was neither impetuous nor foolish.

But that night I was, and I wonder why.

North looked around to see if anyone was watching them. Yet it would have been difficult to make out someone in the darkness unless he had been standing out in the open, jumping up and down and screaming like a Draven varsity cheerleader. North took a deep breath, turned on his flashlight, as did

Swift, and the two men headed inside the tunnel.

At the time that Ruggles disappeared, no one believed that he would have kept jogging along with football in hand until he became hopelessly lost in the tunnels. Further, because his street clothes had been missing, the search efforts had focused—almost exclusively, North had ascertained—on an exit door in the locker room that led to a stairway heading out through the rear of the stadium and into the parking lot. However, as North had found out previously, this door was always kept locked to prevent thieves and vandals from coming in and stealing equipment and the players' personal valuables. Ironically, Ruggles had been the cause of this new policy, because people had continually snuck in to take his jerseys and other equipment both as mementos, and for resale.

Yet unless Ruggles had had a key, he could not have escaped this way. And there was no evidence North could unearth that showed the man ever had such a key. The problem was the few police reports available were inconclusive as to whether this door had been found unlocked or not or forced open. While the case had never officially been solved, the unofficial verdict was that Ruggles, despite his outward appearance as a superior young man, had gotten himself in trouble somehow. Perhaps with a girl, some had speculated, although there was never proof of such. But if that had been true, he conceivably could have taken the opportunity of his magical kickoff return to disappear and leave that sort of problem behind.

"Maybe that's why he was so damn determined to score," observed one man North had spoken with. "'Cause he knew that was his only chance, eh? Damn shame. They had two more games left that season. Would've liked to have parked my butt in the seat and watched him. What a beautiful sight. I know they call baseball a thinking man's game. But Ruggles made football as close to an art as it's ever likely to come, eh?"

North had agreed with the man on Ruggles's artistry, but his very strong impression was that running away from a problem was far too simple an explanation for what had happened. He had never found anyone who could corroborate Ruggles's being in desperate circumstances over money, a woman, or anything else. Indeed, he had a very promising professional football career ahead of him that, many speculated, could have ended in the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

Two days ago, North had even ventured home to his father and asked him

about Ruggles's motivation to disappear. Peter North had been sitting in his leather chair behind his desk in his walnut-paneled study, sipping a cognac from a special stock he kept on hand for occasions both grand and private. His father drank a little too much to make up for the bad back he had "acquired" from his playing days. North wished his father would cut back on his alcoholic intake. He wished his father would cut back on many self-destructive tendencies, but he had voiced his opinion and his view had been rejected, and harshly so.

His father had peered over the rim of the snifter, his eyes red, his skin pale, and his eyes weary.

"It was a long time ago, son, so what do you hope to accomplish?"

"The truth," North had answered a little apprehensively. "I believe the truth is important."

The fact was his father made him nervous. He had never treated his son badly, yet Peter had not built his fortune on the basis of kind and generous qualities. He had accrued his wealth through discipline, patience, measured ruthlessness, and the ability to seize opportunity at the expense of all others without a jot of remorse or guilt. And yet wasn't that, generally, the codex of the magnate?

"It's what scientists are always looking for," North had added. "The truth."

Peter had eased out of his chair and stood in front of the fire smoldering in the hearth. Like North he was a big man, though seriously running to dough, with mutating wattles skimming along his neck and beginning to lay siege to the skin folds around his eyes. And yet Peter's face still held vestiges of the rugged good looks that had won the heart of his second wife, North's mother, and kept it until she had died four years before.

"That's science," Peter had said. "We're not dealing with chemical equations or mass times whatever. We're dealing with human beings—one of my good friends, in fact."

"I thought that would make you want to learn what really happened to him. In fact, I'm doing this for you, Dad."

Peter had put a large hand on his son's shoulder. "I had you when I was over forty, Merl. My first wife never could deliver on the kiddy thing. But your mother sure did, and now you're all I've got left. But let me be clear: This is not something you have to do for me. This is all behind me now. I

made my peace a long time ago with Herschel Ruggles and everything that went along with him.”

As he had turned away, North asked one more question, one he had wanted to ask for many years, and yet the timing had never quite seemed right.

“What did it feel like to play with Herschel Ruggles?”

His father turned back, swished the cognac in his glass for a few moments as he eyed the dying embers in the fireplace. It seemed to North that his father was recalling every detail of his life, the residuary elements of which were now locked inside walnut-paneled rooms and vats of cognac.

“It felt like you could never lose,” said Peter. He had eyed his only child with a baleful look. “Can you imagine what that must feel like?”

“My imagination is not that good,” admitted North. “But I think I understand what you’re saying.”

“Throughout my whole life, whenever I have been confronted by a problem that seemed insolvable, a mountain that could not be moved, where my very financial and even personal survival was at stake—and there have been more of those than I care to admit, Merl—I always thought: ‘What would Ruggles do?’ And when I answered that question I solved the problem.” He put a big arm around his son’s broad shoulders. “And I survived, son. That’s what it’s all about. Survival.”

Chapter 7

THAT MEETING WITH HIS FATHER was why North was so determined to do what had not yet been done even after forty years. Even though his father had told him he needn't do so on his account, North was going to do his best to find out the fate of Herschel Ruggles. And tonight he and Swift were going to search the tunnels for possible clues as to the man's disappearance.

"Do you know what you're doing, Merl?" asked Swift as they trudged along the dark passageway, his light beam flicking here and there over the rough surfaces of the walls and floor.

"I almost always know what I'm doing."

"Gee, that's *almost* comforting."

"Gee, that's *almost* funny, Jimmy."

"It smells awful down here."

"Mold usually does. Damp rock, wood, and dirt never have a particularly pleasant aroma. I can give you the exact chemical interactions, if you'd like."

"Do you even know what you're looking for?"

North didn't answer immediately, for he was tracing the trail of chalk on the wall with his flashlight beam. He looked up ahead and stopped. "That," he said and pointed.

North didn't have a key to the room, as had BJ. He had brought a ring of old keys with him, however. As Swift held the light for him North tried each one, and each of them failed. North sighed, but Swift patted the wood with his hand.

"Hell, the blocking sheds are harder than this. Come on."

"We can't damage school property," exclaimed North.

"We're school property, if you think about it. And we get *damaged* every Saturday, and I don't hear anybody complaining."

"That's actually an interesting argument," said North.

“Thanks, now let’s go.”

They backed up as far as they could across the tunnel and then each took off running. They hit the door at the same time; it went down easily, and both of them landed in the middle of the room on top of the busted door. North quickly got up, suddenly worried that they might just have not only destroyed university property, but perhaps invaded BJ’s sleeping chambers as well. However, there was no sign of the bent man.

Swift slowly rose and dusted off his hands. “An empty room, really cool. Can we go now?”

North pointed to the corner, at the opening. “Not yet. This is where I stopped the other night. The guy wanted me to follow him into that next space. That’s when we turned back.”

“Why didn’t you go on?”

“I don’t know. Something didn’t seem right to me.”

Swift started toward the opening that was revealed in the far corner, but North grabbed him by the shoulder. “Wait a minute, Jimmy, don’t be in such a hurry.”

“Look, Merl, it’s already eleven o’clock. I’ve got an early class tomorrow and I need some sleep. Are we going to check it out or not? Come on, I can bench three-twenty, and you can do four. I think we can handle the situation. You said the old guy looked ready to drop as it was.”

In response, North pulled out the pistol from his coat pocket.

Swift stiffened when he saw it. “What the hell is that for, Merl?”

“Just a precaution. It belongs to my dad. He brought it back from Vietnam. It’s okay, I know how to fire it.”

“Right! You’ll shoot your damn foot off, or maybe mine.”

“Guns and ammo are simple physics: matter and energy colliding to create another type of force.”

“They’ll kick your butt right off the team if they see you with that. And me, too! And I can’t afford this place without my scholarship, Merl. I don’t have a rich dad like you.”

“Look, there may be something in there we can’t handle with just our brawn, Jimmy. The bottom line is that no one has ever searched down here for possible clues to Ruggles’s disappearance. He might have made it this far and then disappeared forever. I don’t plan on that happening to you or me. Now come on.”

North edged toward the opening while he aimed the old pistol with one hand and held the flashlight with his other. Swift followed, crouched into a tight ball, as though ready to explode into whatever might be lurking around the corner, or maybe in preparation for sprinting away from it. Indeed, Jimmy Swift looked like a young man who would indeed live up to his surname if anything remotely frightening came at them from underneath all this dirt, rock, and football stadium birthed from the dirty coffers of a coal tycoon.

As they passed through the opening, North's fingers began to tingle and he had no idea why. It took quite a bit of effort to hold on to the gun and flashlight. As he looked over at Swift to see if his friend was having the same reaction, it surprised him to see that Swift's image was blurry, almost holographic. North reached out to him, afraid that his fingers would pass right through Swift. Yet he touched flesh and his teammate gave him a reassuring grin, and soon the two were through the passageway and into the next space.

It was not as well lit as the room they had just left, though there was an almost ethereal glow present here. The space seemed to be almost identical in size to the one they had just left. The walls were rough stone with clay, and the drip of water and creak of earth were far more apparent, far more unsettling. North flashed his light up and down as he and Swift scanned the area.

"Nothing to see," said Swift. "Nothing to shoot," he added, looking anxiously at the pistol.

"Great shit," North said.

"What?"

"The guy BJ said there was great shit in here."

"Maybe he has a lot lower expectation than we do. But then, to me great shit is a bottle of tequila and a night with Cindy Wilson in her itty-bitty cheerleader's outfit."

North seemed not to hear this because he had continued to shine his light around, and it had caught on something in a far corner. He rushed over to it.

"That's a dress or gown, isn't it?" asked Swift, who had come to stand next to his friend. They both stared at the cloth as it hung from a hook.

"Appears to be," answered North, who wondered why he hadn't seen it immediately. Swift was about to reach up and touch it when North stopped him. "It looks pretty old. It might fall apart."

“So what if it tears a bit. We need to check it out, right?”

“Right,” said North. He reached out and nudged the dress. It did not fall apart under his probing. He carefully lifted it off. Revealed underneath was an even more curious object.

“A...wig?” said Swift.

“A blond woman’s wig,” added North.

Swift picked up the hairpiece and examined it.

“Check to see if there’s a manufacturer’s label on it,” said North. “I’ll do the same with the dress.”

The garment was a long, formal gown, of good quality, and made of heavy wool dyed dark blue. It was in remarkable shape for having been in such a dank place. North looked for a label but found none. Swift was more fortunate.

He shone his light on the tag on the inside of the hairpiece. “Jenkins Wig Shop. They’re over on Perkins Street near the courthouse,” he said. “I’ve seen the place lots of times. Never been in, of course. How old do you think this stuff is?”

North took the wig from Swift. “At least forty years old if it’s connected with Ruggles’s disappearance.” He thought for a moment. “This must be the great shit.”

“An old wig and a dress? It’s not like it’s buried treasure or anything. That’s what I’d call great shit.”

North lifted an eyebrow at his friend as he wrapped the wig in the gown and gripped it in one hand. “Treasure is in the eye of the beholder, Jimmy. Let’s go.”

When they reached the exit from the tunnel and breathed fresh air again, Swift looked at North. “Hey, do you think Ruggles disguised himself as a woman in order to disappear?”

“And then snuck back and left the gown and wig to let people know what he’d done? I don’t think so. And besides”—North held up the gown—“there is no way Herschel Ruggles could have fit in this. He was bigger than you, though not so big as me.”

“Look, maybe it’s not even connected to Ruggles. Maybe that guy you saw likes to play dress-up.” Swift smiled and poked North in the shoulder.

“You’re not taking this very seriously.”

“Come on, Merl, it’s been forty years. No one solved it in all this time,

what makes you think you can?"

"Because I'm smarter than most people," announced North boldly. "And maybe I care more than the people investigating it did. Maybe they were afraid if they discovered the truth, it would somehow hurt Ruggles's reputation."

Swift suddenly looked somber. "And you're not scared of that, too? From all you've told me your old man was tight with the guy. What if you discover Ruggles did something really bad and had to go on the run for it? What do you think that will do to your father?"

North considered this for a few moments. "Sometimes the truth *does* hurt, Jimmy. But I'll take the truth over speculation and just plain wrong information any day. Once you accept anything less than that, the whole world goes to Hell."

Swift shook his head and stretched his arms to the sky, working out some kinks that just came with playing football. "You're a nut. But you're a Mighty Johns nut. So what do we do now?"

North held up the gown and wig. "We find out where these came from, if we can."

"It's been a long time."

"Time is just another part of the equation. Light traveling from the most distant quasar known takes almost fourteen billion years to reach Earth, so four decades is nothing to me."

As they trudged off, the darkness was broken by the flash of a struck match near the tunnel entrance. BJ lit his cigarette, his gaze on the departing men. He glanced at the sky and then into the tunnel. The look on his face was not one of glee, yet it was also not one nuzzling on anger, either. It was difficult to say what was running through the man's thoughts, other than perhaps the harsh and debilitating tug of melancholy. He smoked down his cigarette, stubbed it out with the toe of his scuffed shoe, and disappeared into the tunnel as the constant eastward wind crowded in after his vanishing form.

Chapter 8

THE NEXT DAY NORTH entered the Jenkins Wig Shop, which he learned had been in business for more than fifty years. The place smelled of mothballs and incense, an odd combination, North thought. There were no other customers, so he walked directly up to the counter, took the wig out of a paper sack, and motioned to the woman there.

“I was wondering if you could help me.”

The woman slowly headed over. She was petite, though her build had run to stocky now. She looked to be around sixty or so, and seemed to be wearing a wig herself, one of short, ash-blond locks that curled around her ears and etched a straight line across her wide forehead. Her makeup was carefully applied, smoothing away wrinkles and other blemishes. Her clothes were expensive, and tailored to her figure. A woman who cared about her appearance, North concluded. Then, as she drew nearer, he took a breath and almost gagged as the woman’s perfume engulfed him. The smell was blunt, stupefying. He wanted to let out an enormous sneeze, but felt that might do irreparable damage to both her self-esteem and his inquiry.

“I’ll try, young man.”

North swabbed away drops of moisture from his eyes and said, “This wig, it has your label inside, and I was wondering if you could tell me something about it.”

“Like what?” The woman did not look much interested.

“Like who might have bought it. You see, I found it and I’d like to return it to the owner.”

She picked up the wig. “I don’t think they’d want it back. It’s an old style.”

“Right. Perhaps forty years or so.”

“Forty years!” She looked up at him, stunned. “Where’d you find it?”

“In an old trunk in the attic of the house I’m staying at. The owner of the house didn’t know anything about it. She said I could try to track it down. So that’s what I’m trying to do.”

The woman eyed him skeptically. “Lot of work for an old wig no one would want to wear anymore.”

“Well, it’s kind of a hobby of mine—a challenge, so to speak. Do you think it could be about forty years old? I’m sure you’re probably an expert in such things.”

Obviously flattered, the woman examined the wig with a keener eye. “Been running this shop for over thirty years, my mother for over twenty before that. I know my wigs, that’s for sure.” She looked it over thoroughly, including the inside. “Well, it’s at least forty years old, possibly older. That was the style back then, sort of a combo of Jackie Kennedy, Grace Kelly, and Kim Novak, pretty popular back then.”

“Any way to tell who might have purchased it? I mean, does it have a hidden serial number or anything like that?”

Her small lips curved into a smile. “It’s not a gun, young man, it’s a wig.”

“So there’s no way to tell?”

The woman sighed, and then thought for a few moments. “Well, we’ve got all the old sales records in the back. Mother never threw anything away, and I guess I’m just as bad.” She paused again. “You leave it with me, and I’ll see what I can find. If it was just about forty years ago, it’ll cut down the search quite a bit. I’ll start there anyway and see if we hit something.” She eyed him curiously. “Now, are you going tell me what’s *really* going on?”

North feigned looking sheepish. “Well, the truth is, it’s part of an experiment I’m conducting at the university. I’m getting my degree in science, and I’m trying to determine whether the energy levels released through the brain’s neocortex are substantial enough to have left residue of the firing of the neural network connectors, think of them as latent by-products of the synaptic impulses, on wigs and hats and such, anything that would have come in contact with that area of the brain. The hypothalamus, as I’m sure you know, is an extremely sensitive area lying within the ventral region of the diencephalon. It controls many of the interactions between the mental and physical: metabolic functions, autonomic nervous system, that sort of thing. Since humans are perfect communication transmitters, what with our chemical, electrical, and water makeup, my theory is that an energy

release from each of us—think even along the lines of telepathic communication—can be physically captured, and what better place to begin than on objects covering the head? It's my belief that physics and paranormal activity may actually be capable of extraordinary reconciliation. That's why I'm so interested in this wig."

The woman stared at him, her lips moving slowly as though she were trying to repeat all he had just said and yet being utterly unable to replicate even a smidgen of North's rhetoric. Finally, she said, "You come back tomorrow afternoon, and I'll see what I have for you."

He thanked her and left, grateful for the rush of outside air to clear his sinuses and lungs of her potent scent.

Inside the shop, the owner, her expression inscrutable, watched North through the window as he headed down the street. Then she carried the decrepit bowl of hair to the back room.

Chapter 9

WHILE HE WAITED for an answer on the wig, North decided to make another clandestine visit to the underground room. It was possible that he and Swift had missed something of importance, and North also wanted to test a theory of his. However, Swift had steadfastly refused to come this time, excusing himself on the grounds that he had a date with Cindy Wilson that included a fifth of Wild Turkey, a date that no mystery, however enticing, could hope to compete with.

Going down there alone held very little appeal, yet ever since he was a child, North's indefatigable curiosity always trumped his innate fear. As a small boy he had once stood under an enormous oak tree during a storm to test whether lightning actually *was* attracted to tall objects. His frantic mother had spotted him from the kitchen window, snatched him up, and brought him into the house about a minute before the tree was split in half by a lightning bolt. However, as an adult, neither was he one to undertake undue risk, so he brought, among other equipment, two flashlights, a video camera, and his father's pistol, fully loaded.

The door he and Swift had burst through was still lying on the floor. North entered the main chamber and studied the space for any changes. He saw none, and now he prepared himself to test his theory. He pulled the video camera from his backpack, turned it on, and pointed it at himself.

"Merlin North, Senior, Science Program, Draven University, November Nine, twelve thirty a.m. Herschel Ruggles Investigation, Report One. Underground Room." He strapped the video camera to a specially rigged helmet device that referees in professional football were now using to give a ground level, in-your-face view of the game to appease the more bloodthirsty fans, and pointed his head here and there to test its balance and range field. Satisfied, he stepped toward the opening that led to the other room. As he had

on the last visit, he held the pistol in one hand, his flashlight in the other. He counted off his steps to the opening and then stopped right before he would've broken the invisible plane he had diagrammed in his mind.

“Testing theory one,” he said for benefit of the camera’s recorder and, ultimately, posterity. North took great pains to dutifully record virtually every scientific experiment he performed. It would make his official biographer’s job that much easier, he felt.

He took a deep, cleansing breath, stepped forward, and then abruptly stopped. He swung his head and thus the camera around, taking in a 180-degree sweep. He took another step, and that was when he once again sensed the murkiness of the last trip through here, as though he were submerging himself in shallow, dirty water. North felt no sensation of panic or of being unable to escape his predicament. On the contrary, his mood was one of utter calm, of a serene peacefulness. He took another step forward and once more did his camera sweep. It was then that the image caught his eye.

“Jimmy? Jimmy, is that you?” Had Swift forsaken his planned rendezvous with Cindy and the Wild Turkey?

The man flashed by so fast North thought he had just stumbled into a real-life quantum tunnel of his very own. And then North nearly cried out because the man had carried a football in his right hand and wore the old-style headgear of a gridiron player of four decades ago, along with Johnny Unitas-style high-top black cleats and lumpy, antiquated shoulder pads that looked like the fake muscles used in the low-budget movies of a bygone time.

North had seen photos of Herschel Ruggles and that man—that very man!—had been the one who had just raced by him. The iron chin, the fire of determined brown eyes, dead-set pupils that did not countenance even the possibility of defeat, had been right beside North, almost touching him. And then he was gone. North dropped his light, and even came close to firing off his pistol. He staggered through the opening and into the “great shit” room, sank down against the wall, and rubbed his back against the abrasive surface, as though desperately seeking a firm footing in reality after encountering possible madness in the last few seconds.

Hands quivering, he slipped off the camera, rewound it, and looked at the little playback screen. The camera technology was digital, and the images it captured were crystal clear. The images he was looking at were unusually sharp, yet they were just pictures of the wall. There was no man in uniform,

no football, no spectral Ruggles galloping to his predestined destruction.

North stared at the opening. He would have sworn to God he had seen twenty-one-year-old Herschel Ruggles carrying his football well past the goal line and into the spiraling, cavernous depths of the unknown. Damn it, he had seen the man right next to him. He had! The camera, though, did not share his view. According to this instrument, North had seen nothing even remotely out of the ordinary.

North was well aware of the theory known as the “observer effect.” It said that an observer of some action could influence that action by the mere act of watching with a specific level of intent. For example, if one’s intent was for the pot *not* to boil, then it wouldn’t, seemingly in defiance of the laws of science. In the realm of quantum physics, observers had witnessed beryllium atoms confined in a magnetic field and then exposed to radio waves. Normally, as the atoms absorb the radio waves, they would evolve into excited atomic-energy states in a quarter of a second or less. The scientists conducting this experiment repeatedly shone a short pulse of laser light into the atoms that simulated the “observer” effect in this case. The atoms did not evolve, even far past the time they should have. The observer effect had apparently defeated a natural physical transition that, it was widely thought, could not be influenced.

And yet, had North intended with all his heart to see Ruggles tonight? And had that same desire allowed Ruggles to be freed from whatever alternate dimensional state held him? That was a tricky thing for the science-minded North. In fact, it was bordering on the edge of charlatanry, if not outright madness.

Perhaps he simply had been hallucinating. North began to look at the situation rationally. He had been thinking of almost nothing except Herschel Ruggles for a long time now. He was in a dark, mysterious place, all alone, and his anxiety level, coupled with his very natural desire for something—anything—to happen, could easily have tricked his mind into seeing something that absolutely could not be there. North sighed when he realized the atomic pot *had* boiled, just like it normally did, regardless of whether he wanted it to or not.

The mind was always playing these games. North knew that approximately five milliseconds were required for the sensory faculties, upon registering a sound or visual image, to communicate that fact up the nerve

autobahn to the brain. However, since many human actions were performed within two to three milliseconds of the reception of a sensory impulse, for example, a starter's gun if one were in a race, it could honestly be said that many things humans did were totally unconscious, without input from the mind, because it took too long to receive the mental command to do so. And yet if one were to ask the runner when he precisely heard the starter's gun sound, he would say he heard it simultaneously with his leaving the runner's block, even though that was, neurologically speaking, an impossibility. And yet the brain tricked the mind into believing that it was actually so in order to cover up its own tardiness. A gap of two milliseconds might not seem like much to the uninformed, North knew, but in the arena of the mind-body equation, it was roughly equal to the duration of an Earth year. And North's own brain had just undertaken a major jockeying effort on his weary mind, aided no doubt by his complete obsession with all things Ruggles. North sighed. His mind had just pulled the neuronal wool over him, and he had fallen for it like a freshman general-studies lummo.

"Great shit, like I told you."

North stared up at the man. BJ was grinning from cauliflower ear to cauliflower ear. "Great shit, you seen it too, ain't you. Seen *him*, I mean."

North slowly rose on weakened legs. BJ was dressed in the same clothes as before, smiled the same quasi-insane smile.

"Seen who?" asked North in a quavering voice.

BJ cocked his head a little to the side, and as North flashed his backup light that way, he was amazed at the muscles in the man's neck. They bulged out like a pair of swollen parentheses and had a sinister quality that North could not quite pin down. On the earth's surface, the man's Adam's apple had been encased in a scrawny tube of a vessel. Had the man's shoulder and arms also widened and thickened to rival North's own impressive, weight-room-sculpted physique? Had North gone mad in the last minute or so? Was BJ even standing there, or was he also the holographic product of a wretched synaptic misfire?

"The man. That Ruggles fellow. You think it's him too, ain'tcha? That why you come down here asking all them questions. Am I right, or am I right?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about. I didn't see anything." North held up his camera. "And there's nothing on here, either."

BJ waved off that dilemma. “Why, you can’t catch stuff like that on film. It’s like a vampire. They ain’t got no reflection in no mirror. Hell, everybody should know that, even college boys like yourself.”

“So you saw something?” North ventured weakly.

“Hell, I say I did. And from you looking ready to puke, you saw the same thing. Don’t try and lie, boy, I can see through any liar, and you ain’t nearly as good as most I’ve come across in my life.”

“I saw something,” North finally admitted. “And it did look like Ruggles.”

BJ slapped his thigh. “Hell, I knew it. Runs by and then just disappears into nothing.”

“Yes,” North said. “How many times have you seen him, it? Him, I guess.”

“Half a dozen or so. Wanted to show you the other night, ’cept you lost your nerve. Probably thought I was a wacko.”

Something occurred to North. Why hadn’t he and Swift seen the image when they had come through the passageway previously? Was there some principle North was unaware of that ruled out two people experiencing the dynamic that resulted from dimensional transference or whatever the hell it exactly was? But then, North recalled, he *had* felt something that night, the sensation of walking through water, and the fleeting glimpse of something hurtling past that he had incorrectly thought was his friend, Jimmy Swift.

BJ’s gaze caught and then held on North’s gun. “That’s a pretty piece.”

“My father’s. He fought with it in Vietnam.”

BJ looked puzzled and drew nearer. “’Nam, huh? Mind if I take a look?”

North wasn’t about to let the man have the weapon, but he held it out for examination. “It’s loaded, so I don’t want to let go of it, you understand.”

“Sure, sure, can’t never be too careful with a damn gun.” He eyed the weapon closely. “You said your daddy brought this back from ’Nam?”

North nodded. “He was drafted into the Army.”

“Well, okay, but he didn’t bring this gun back from ’Nam. This here’s a German Mauser Parabellum nine-millimeter. Krauts used this make during World War Two. I oughta know. I fought those bastards for three years. Had these damn pistols fired at my ass mor’n once. Do some hurtin’ on you if it clipped you. Even took one off a dead Kraut right outside of Paris in forty-four and then sold it to a Frenchie for a nice bottle of US of A bourbon he’d gotten his hands on. Yep, definitely a World War Two piece. Ain’t nothing

like this ever used in 'Nam, son. Nosiree.”

North looked down at the gun he held. “You fought in the Second World War.”

“Yep. Volunteered at age seventeen. Got me a bunch’a medals,” BJ added proudly.

North said, “How come you left the gown and wig here?”

BJ looked puzzled. “Gown and wig?”

“Yes, hanging over there on the wall.”

“You sick, son?”

North started to explain, but then stopped. He looked at the place where the gown and wig had hung. How could BJ not have seen something so clearly out of place as a gown and wig in a secret room underneath a football stadium? And yet the man looked truly bewildered. And when North moved closer to the spot, the hook that the gown and wig had been hanging on was no longer there.

“Hey, son, you okay?” said BJ in a worried tone.

North turned to face him and said, “Yes, I’m fine. I’m going to go now. Thanks for your help.”

“Ain’t done much. But I appreciate the twenty you gave me. To a feller like myself, difference between eating and not, so to speak.” He let that statement just hang.

North pressed a couple of twenties into his thick hand. “Well, this’ll make you twice as happy then. Good night, BJ.” He had thought about asking the man who he really was, now that North had determined he did not work for the university. Yet right now North didn’t want to know the answer to that question.

He gingerly walked back through the space the image of Ruggles had torpedoed through, and then he sprinted all the way back to winking stars and fresh air.

Chapter 10

THE NEXT MORNING NORTH made his way to the library to research World War Two-era pistols. Although BJ had seemed very authoritative on the subject of German weapons, North wanted to check it out himself. It didn't take him long to verify that what BJ had said was the exact truth. There was even a photo of a Mauser pistol in one of the books North had consulted. It was a perfect match to his father's.

When a hand touched his shoulder, North turned and found himself staring at Molly McIntyre. A mass com major in her senior year, McIntyre was editor of the Draven School newspaper and also headed up the yearbook committee. McIntyre was smart, polished, and very comely in appearance, with shoulder-length auburn hair that she was forever flicking out of her dancing green eyes, and a long, curvy body that could not fail to garner the attention of all the young men on campus, North included.

She glanced at some of the books spread over his table. "Hey, Merl, could you pull yourself away from your armament research and help me with something?"

"Sure, Molly, what's up?"

"I want to talk to you about an idea I have for this project the yearbook staff is doing for the upcoming seventieth anniversary of the university."

She led him over to a private room off the main library area and closed the door. The table she was working at was covered with books, press clippings, old photographs, and the like.

"You're one of the few football players who actually have a brain, and part of the anniversary edition of the newspaper has to do with Herschel Ruggles, the football player from way back. You know about him, of course."

"A little," replied North warily.

“Well, he’s still the school’s greatest athlete, a Heisman Trophy finalist in his sophomore and junior years, and a favorite to win it as a senior. And his still-unexplained disappearance is hands down the school’s greatest mystery. Did you know that people still talk about it?”

“Really? That’s amazing,” said North, accomplishing what he hoped was an authentic look of surprise. “Some people just can’t help living in the past, I guess.”

“Tell me about it,” said McIntyre. “But it’s not like I can ignore the man in the anniversary edition, particularly when he disappeared forty years ago. Right?”

“Right, absolutely. And you needed me for...?”

She picked up some old photographs lying on the table. “These are photos of an event that took place about a year so or so before Ruggles’s disappearance. It was an awards banquet in his honor.”

North studied the photos. One of them showed a group of people all in formal wear, including Ruggles and a tall, elderly man with longish snow-white hair. A woman who looked to be in her thirties stood beside Ruggles, and there seemed something very familiar about her to North.

“Who are those people with Ruggles?” he asked and pointed at the elderly man and the woman.

McIntyre looked surprised at his question. “Merl North, you of all people should recognize the founder of the school, John Milton Draven.”

“Right, right. Draven. And the woman?”

“Wife number three. Her name was Gloria. You remember the old story, right? That’s the name of the mine where Draven was buried alive.”

“Right again. She’s very beautiful.”

“Most *third* wives are, North,” replied McIntyre dryly. “In fact, it’s practically a requirement.”

He looked admiringly at all her work. “You’ve really researched this.”

“So much so that I’m about to pop a brain wire. I mean I’ve got my own classes to attend to, and half my staff revolted on me, complaining I’m some kind of ball buster. But if you’re going to do something, you need to do it right. Here’s my proposal to you. Could I do a story on you and Jimmy Swift for the part of the anniversary edition that deals with Ruggles? You two *did* collaborate to break the man’s record. And it might give a modern-day connection to the Ruggles story. I’m not doing all this work to put the readers

to sleep.”

“I’ll do it, if it’ll help you out. In fact, I think it’s a great idea.”

“That’s terrific, Merl, I really appreciate it.” She paused and smiled shyly. “You know, we should go out for a beer sometime and talk. I’ve got some questions I want to pose to you. See, I was at the stadium when Jimmy broke the record. I saw the block you threw. Now, I’m no scientist, but it seems to me you used a little physics in your work that afternoon. Am I right?”

North couldn’t help but smile at her wonderfully perceptive insight. “I’d love to have a beer with you. A woman who can appreciate good science is a woman I want to get to know better,” he added enthusiastically. Suddenly self-conscious, he looked down. In doing so North glanced at the photograph once more and it finally clicked why the woman looked so familiar. He picked up the photo, trying his best to keep his hands from shaking.

“Molly, do you mind if I borrow this photo? I can use this to get Jimmy interested in doing the piece for you. He can be shy sometimes.”

McIntyre said skeptically, “Shy? Jimmy Swift?”

“I know he doesn’t come across like that, but he has a different side to him.”

“Just so you know, the word on campus is that Swift and Cindy Wilson did a number last night that ended right here on a table in the library, and ‘shy’ was not a term that anyone would’ve applied to them. A real animal, apparently, that Jimmy Swift.”

“Well, I’m certainly not like that,” said North gallantly.

“That’s good to know,” said McIntyre in a disappointed tone. “Although you could be quite the lady killer if you wanted to, what with your strong jaw, cute broken nose, and your ‘brainy’ glasses fronting those mischievous blue eyes. And being tall and having those broad shoulders of yours certainly doesn’t hurt. Girls really fall for that combination of brains and brawn. It’s very sexy, Merl.”

“Thanks, Molly,” said North, who could think of absolutely nothing else to say.

She looked down at the materials on the table. “You know, from all I’ve found out with this project, Ruggles was quite the ladies’ man.”

North shook his head. “I’ve heard those rumors, but they’re baseless. See, I’ve done a little digging into his life, too.”

“Really? Who did you talk to?”

“Well, people he played with. Or against. Fans, folks like that.”

“Well, of course they aren’t going to tell you the dirty-linen things. God, men are so naïve about things like that. You all hold Ruggles up on this gigantic pedestal because of his athletic accomplishments. I spoke with a very different class of observer. And what I was told was that, in fact, Ruggles had quite an eye for the ladies. And not just the student body, but also faculty, faculty wives, and on up the ladder.”

“‘On up the ladder’—what do you mean by that?”

“Up the ladder, Merl, right to the very top. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back to work.”

North left her there as he stared down at a photo that had turned his entire investigation upside down.

Chapter 11

NORTH CARRIED A PAPER BAG to the wig shop. Inside the bag was the gown from the underground room. North had painstakingly compared it with the gown that Gloria Draven had been wearing in the photograph he had taken from McIntyre. While North was no women's clothing expert, the gown was an identical match, from the color, to the intricate collar, to the buttons, to everything.

The wig was the second part of the equation. In the photograph, Gloria Draven had had blond hair, cut and styled in the manner of Grace Kelly and Kim Novak with a dash of Jackie Kennedy, as the owner of the wig shop had said. The result was that if you put the wig and the gown together, you had Gloria Draven, or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof.

As for the image of Herschel Ruggles galloping through an underground room, North believed now that, instead of a hallucination, he was confronted with a time-space dimensional fissure. Not precisely a step back in time, but a sort of fractured portal that offered glimpses of the past without actually traveling to that time period. North knew that it was theoretically possible, this sort of intermediate shared dimensional experience, but he had never thought he would see it firsthand—in the bowels of a football stadium, no less.

He had tried to explain all this to Swift, but his friend had still been recovering from his date with Cindy and the Wild Turkey. It was lucky there was no practice this week because of exams, and yet Swift had not looked capable of much studying, either.

He entered the wig shop and went directly to the counter. A young woman came out and greeted him.

“I was in yesterday and gave the owner, a wig to look at for me.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, but she's not in today.”

“She said she’d have an answer back for me today. She was going to check the sales records to see if she could determine who had purchased the wig. I found it and was trying to return it to the owner.”

“Oh, well, I’ll check in the back. What did it look like?”

North took out the photograph of Gloria Draven and held it up. “Like this woman’s hair.”

The young woman looked puzzled but studied the photograph, then went into the back to check. North rubbed his nose, for the same noxious scent of perfume was still heavy in the air. It was so thick that he actually looked around the shop for the woman, but didn’t see her.

The young woman came out a few minutes later, empty-handed. “There’s nothing back there like it.”

“Was there a note? Maybe a message to give me? She told me to come back this afternoon.”

“No, there was nothing like that.”

“Is there a way for me to contact her? Do you have her home phone?”

The young woman’s manner changed, and she looked guarded, almost hostile. “We don’t give out information like that. And your name is...?”

North could easily read her thoughts. She had suddenly hit upon the possibility that he might be some creep, and was trying to wheedle information out of her.

“Merl North. I go to school at Draven.”

The woman’s face instantly brightened. “That’s right. I thought I recognized you. You’re on the football team. I saw you when you helped that other player break the record.”

“That’s right, my friend and teammate, Jimmy Swift.” He sniffed the air. “Whew, that perfume is really pungent. I smelled it when I was in yesterday.”

She wrinkled her nose. “God, tell me about it. It’s like cigarette smoke; it never goes away. Nobody has the heart to tell her, though. I guess her sense of smell must be dead.”

“Must be.”

“Look, I’m sorry I can’t help you. She didn’t even let me know she wasn’t coming in. I can call her at home, if you want.”

“Would you?”

She smiled again, picked up the phone, and made the call. She listened for a bit and then replaced the receiver. “Just got the answering machine. I can

try later.”

“I’d appreciate it. Let me give you my cell phone number. If you or she can call me, I’d appreciate it. It’s pretty important.”

The young woman took the number and then shook North’s hand. “Wow, to shake the hand of someone who helped break Herschel Ruggles’s record. My grandfather would be so impressed.”

“Who’s your grandfather?” asked North curiously.

“Herman Bowles. He was the trainer for the team during the Ruggles years.” She paused. “I wonder what really happened to Herschel Ruggles? Grandad never could figure that one out.”

“Yeah, I wonder. Look, is your grandfather still around here? *I’d* like to go and shake *his* hand.”

The young woman’s eyes lighted up. “Would you? He’s right over in the next county. Just a half hour away. He moved back from California about six months ago, after my grandma died. I can give you directions. I could call him and say you’re going to drop by sometime. I won’t say when, so you won’t feel any pressure.”

“What’s your name?”

“Susan. Susan O’Riley.”

“Well, Susan O’Riley, you can tell your grandfather I’ll be by today,” said North. “And I’m going to bring Jimmy Swift with me. Two *legends* for the price of one.”

“Oh my god, are you serious?”

“I never joke about legends.”

As North left with the directions to Herman Bowles’s home, he noted the name of the proprietor over the door: Linda Daughtry. North hoped she was in the phone book, because he intended to pay her a visit as well. Now he just needed to rescue Swift from his hangover hell, and he was in business.

Chapter 12

HERMAN BOWLES LIVED at the end of a narrow road that one got to by driving through a cleft eroded inside of a hill, like an extracted wedge of cheese. The steep walls that rose on either side caused sundown to occur inside the cleft at around three o'clock; thus it was dark when North and Swift arrived at the house.

North had poured cup after cup of the most powerful coffee he could find down his friend's throat even as he had explained all that had happened. He had left out the part about seeing Ruggles, though, figuring that, even stone cold sober, Swift would be unable, or at least unwilling, to grasp such a concept.

Bowles was a short man with bandy legs, and a thickened torso with popped-vein forearms revealed because he had his shirtsleeves rolled up. He coughed hoarsely when he greeted the two young men, and explained that he was about halfway through his winter cold that was not helped by his pack-a-day Winstons habit. "I'm old," he confided to North with a wink and a smile. "And a man's got to pick his poison and then live, and die with it, right?"

"Right," answered North. "But you still shouldn't smoke. Because that's *real* poison."

They settled in the small living room of the little house that was decorated, as far as North could tell, in Americana sports memorabilia.

Bowles coughed up a chunk of phlegm into his handkerchief, cleared his nose, and then slapped his withered thigh. "Can't believe you two are here sitting in my living room. Holy shit, excuse my French."

"Nice place," said Jimmy as he glanced at the collection of vintage professional football cards that hung under glass next to the little bar set up in the far corner. On the bar's counter were arranged, pyramid style, whiskey tumblers from all the major college football conferences. The lamp tables and

some of the chairs had college and professional football helmets melded to wood that was stained medium dark. The pattern of the furniture upholstery on these chairs was a green football field covered with figures of famous football players in frozen action. Under their feet was an official Philadelphia Eagles rug. On the walls were posters of what appeared to be every major AFL and NFL quarterback of the last forty years with arms cocked, jaws set, eyes ablaze. One wall was festooned with a mural of none other than the craggy countenance of Raymond Nitschke, with a miniature shrine to Dick Butkus arranged on a nearby table.

No one remotely interested in the game of football could sit here and be unmoved.

Bowles said, "After my wife died, God rest her soul, and I mean no disrespect by saying this, I finally was able to pull out all my stuff and do the house the way I wanted."

Swift rubbed his temples before closing his eyes and sitting back.

North glanced at him and then poked Swift sharply in the side with his elbow. Swift scowled and then his eyes fluttered closed once more.

Bowles leaned forward. "So I got to know, what'd it feel like breaking the record, Jimmy?"

North elbowed Swift again, jolting him awake. "Go ahead, Jimmy, Tell Mr. Bowles what it felt like breaking the record."

Swift coughed, straightened, and said, "It felt good. It felt great. Couldn't have done it without Merl, you know."

Bowles looked over at North, who said bluntly, "Matter of physics, mostly." He paused. "I guess Jimmy never thought about continuing his run on into the tunnel, did you?"

Swift looked puzzled. "What?"

North managed to surreptitiously plant a sharp kick against his friend's leg and Swift finally woke up to his role in the story that North had drilled into him on the drive over.

"No, no way. Not like Ruggles. *Herschel* Ruggles, that is," added Swift, with all the subtlety of the lamest actor ever to take up space on a celluloid roll.

They had practiced this part on the way over, and he had performed it far better in the car.

Damn Cindy Wilson and the Wild Turkey, thought North. "So you were

the trainer on Ruggles's team?" he asked.

Bowles nodded. "Well, up until he disappeared, o'course."

"Boy, that was something, that was, huh?" volunteered Swift and then looked at North for approval and received none, for North's gaze was on Bowles.

"Yes it was," said Bowles thoughtfully. "Never could figure it out."

North said, "I guess there was always the possibility of Ruggles escaping through the locker room door, the one that led to the parking lot. Although he would have had to have a key."

Bowles shook his head. "Nope. He didn't go through the locker room. Of that I'm certain."

North looked surprised. "But don't you know that Ruggles's street clothes weren't in his locker?"

"I heard that, but hell, folks were always sneaking in there and stealing his stuff. And if he went and disappeared and all, think what that stuff would've been worth. And they never found his uniform, either. Now tell me, how do you pull off all that gear and then put on your street clothes and then walk off carrying all that gear and somebody not notice, tell me that, willya? Hell, I wouldn't have put it past the police to have pinched that stuff and then written it up that those clothes and such weren't ever there at all. People are people and Herschel Ruggles was Herschel Ruggles," he added, as though that explained all.

North sat back. "So, is that why you believe he didn't go through the locker room? That hardly seems conclusive to me."

"No, I know he didn't go through the locker room because *he* would've seen Ruggles."

North almost fell out of his chair. "Who? *Who* would've seen him?"

"The feller who was in there taking care of an injury."

North almost dug his fingers through the face of Joe Namath that was revealed between his legs on the chair's upholstery. "Who, a trainer?"

"No, a player. He got a bad stinger. Sent him in there to try and work it out."

"What was his name?"

Bowles slumped into thought as he tried to recall. "Been a long time," he said apologetically. "Forty years about. Memory ain't that good no more." He added defensively, "And, Jesus, all the players come through there. And I'm

a trainer. Remember bodies a lot better than names. Remembered the bad stinger, didn't I? That's something most wouldn't. And I've been out in California too long. In fact, left right after the season Ruggles disappeared. Worked at USC mostly, lots of fellers with weird names and nicknames come through there. Filled up the dang memory. If I'd stayed 'round these parts, probably know it off the top of my head. But I didn't and so I don't."

"What position did he play?" asked Swift. "That might help you narrow it down."

Bowles's eyes almost closed as he chewed on this. "Oh, he was a lineman. Biggest man we had." Bowles thought about it some more. "I'll think about it," he said. "It'll most likely come to me."

North said, "Do you remember his jersey number? I could look that up."

"No, I'm sorry, I don't."

North was confused. "But didn't the police question you? And the player?"

"Sure, they came around. Asked some stuff. I assumed everybody told the truth. But you fellers have to understand something—back then, folks just thought it was an act of God, so to speak. I mean Ruggles wasn't like other people. That boy could run, jump, change direction, defied gravity like. Some of us, well, some of us just thought he decided to go back to where he really came from. You know, where he *really* came from," added Bowles nervously, and he shot a glance to the ceiling.

"What, like from another planet?" asked Swift, who looked like he might start laughing until North stopped him with a grim stare.

"I know it sounds crazy. But then some other folks, they thought he might have *wanted* to disappear, if you get my meaning. You know, over some trouble or something. Nobody wanted to find the boy if he didn't want to be found, you know. I mean, people come from all over to see him play. Even President Eisenhower came one time. That boy put Draven University and Crucifix, PA, on the map. Nobody wanted to do nothing to hurt Herschel Ruggles."

"So, in other words, the police investigation wasn't all that thorough," said North.

Bowles shrugged. "You heard the expression 'Let sleeping dogs lie'? Well, nobody wanted to mess up all that was good about Herschel Ruggles."

"And by that, you mean mess up all that was good about the town? And

the university?” said North a little testily.

“I guess you could say that.”

North inwardly fumed. The investigation obviously had been botched. A man had disappeared, and the truth had never been allowed to come out simply to appease folks’ vanity. It was yet another example of history written totally wrong. He looked at Bowles. “But if you could remember that name, maybe we can do now what should have been done then.”

Bowles looked deeply embarrassed. “It just ain’t coming to me, son.”

North just sat there, depressed and thinking that perhaps his entire destiny was to be forestalled by an ex-trainer with an excellent memory for physical ailments but a faulty one for names. As he looked down at the chair he was sitting in, he noted with some embarrassment that, in his heightened frustration, he had gouged out both eyes of Broadway Joe Namath. He discreetly covered this defilement with his legs.

They talked some more about the greats of the past and present, then North and Swift took their leave. North left his phone number with Bowles in case he conjured the critical name from his dubious memory bank.

As they drove back through the shadows of the early dusk, Swift said, “Well, that wasn’t much help, but it will be if he remembers that name. Maybe that person, if he’s still alive, could tell us what he saw.”

“If anything,” exclaimed North, who was obviously upset. No wig, no name—how could it get worse? And was Bowles’s memory really that bad, or did he have a reason to withhold the name from them? The possibilities were beginning to rival a thermodynamics problem. And for the first time he could ever recall, North’s brain was beginning to tire.

He glanced at Swift and decided to change the subject to more pressing—if less important—modern matters. “Exams are coming up. I hope you’re studying. The team can’t afford for you to be put on academic probation like last year.”

“I was in the library most of the night,” Swift replied indignantly.

“So I heard,” said North right back. “But this time leave Cindy Wilson in her dorm room. I’m sure she needs the rest.”

All Swift could do with that rejoinder was slyly smile.

Chapter 13

THEY DROVE TO LINDA DAUGHTRY'S HOME. North had gotten the address out of the phone book. The woman's residence was located at the end of a cul-de-sac and was ringed by mature trees. It was a nice house, big, and set on a large lot, North noted. And there was a late-model Lexus coupe in the driveway. The wig business must pay better than he had thought. A dog barked from somewhere, perhaps from the woods next to the house. North and Swift walked up to the front door, and North knocked.

They waited and he knocked again.

Swift eyed the car. "Looks like somebody's home."

"Ms. Daughtry?" called out North. Most likely, he thought, she didn't want to face him. Perhaps she was hiding in the closet after making off with his forty-year-old wig for some inexplicable reason. With the way his luck was running she was probably a fake-hair kleptomaniac.

"Ms. Daughtry?"

"Try the handle," advised Swift.

"That's breaking and entering."

"Not if it's not locked."

"That's a distinction the police do not make, Jimmy."

Before North could stop him, Swift reached out and tried the knob, and it turned. The door swung open.

North looked at Swift in dismay. "Now you've done it. Step through there and it's a felony."

Swift promptly stepped through. "I'm a felon. Feels good. Come on, Merl, we can always say the wind blew it open."

North shook his head. "This is not right."

"Damn, Merl, sometimes I just don't get you. You're so uptight. You'll go down in a tunnel in the dead of night with maybe a psychopath, but you get

squeamish walking through an open door in broad daylight. Now come on. I thought you were all about the truth.”

North, fuming a bit, followed his friend inside.

“Ms. Daughtry?” called out North. “I was the person who dropped off the old wig. I was just wondering if you’d found out anything?”

There was no response. The only sounds were a clock ticking, the hum of probably an appliance, and their breathing.

North said, “Okay, let’s look around.”

They had not gone far when both men stopped and stared upward. Where the chandelier in the living room should have been was, instead, the unfortunate owner of the house. Linda Daughtry was hanging from the ceiling. The chandelier had been taken down and a strong rope had been run through the hook that had supported the light to form the improvised gallows.

Daughtry’s eyes were open and seemed searching; her neck was cocked at an angle and ligatured to such a degree that life was pretty much ruled out. And North noted that, ironically, her wig had fallen off, revealing that her real hair was composed of wilted fragments of gray surrounded by broad, peeling patches of scalp. A pathetic, forlorn figure in death was Linda Daughtry.

The stench from her putrid body was fierce and hit them both hard when the wind coming through the open front door pushed the foul odor in their faces. The dead, North knew from his science labs, did not keep particularly well without ice or embalming.

This malodorous grenade propelled Jimmy Swift into giving up the last portions of the Wild Turkey still lingering in his gut, mixed with a half-dozen cups of coffee and a cheese Danish. That concoction did nothing to enhance the appearance of Daughtry’s living room rug.

North, shaken to his core, managed to dial 911.

The police arrived shortly thereafter. Before they got there, North lectured Swift on what and what not to say, even as the fastest of the present-day Mighty Johns sat on the floor cradling his head between his legs.

“Say nothing about the wig, Jimmy, or the investigation we’re undertaking. Do you understand?”

“V-vestigating?” moaned Swift.

“Yes. Look, just don’t say anything. I’ll handle it. Just pretend you’re comatose.”

“W-won’t be pr-pretending,” whimpered Swift as he slumped flat to the floor.

The police were professional and appropriately suspicious of North’s admittedly unusual story. He had settled on his and Swift’s visit here being about selling booster tickets, but he could not account for his not possessing any tickets, or a list of people they were visiting.

“We were just going sort of ad hoc,” explained North. “We would have the tickets mailed out later,” he added lamely, while Swift, still prostrate on the floor, turned his head to the side and threw up on the other cop’s shoes.

With all that, it helped matters immeasurably that the sergeant who arrived two minutes later was a longtime Mighty Johns booster.

He shook North’s hand so hard North felt his shoulder stretched uncomfortably. Swift was still unable to stand, so the sergeant merely patted him on the head as he sat there on his haunches.

“What a run,” said the sergeant. “Now, my father was at the game where Ruggles set the record, and he said it was beyond belief. Well, you beat that record, didn’t you, son?” he said to Swift, slapping him hard on the back. “How does that feel, son, huh?”

Swift turned green and puked on North’s shoes.

North glanced down at his doused sneakers before looking back up at the sergeant and said, “It apparently made him sick, with joy.”

They soon found themselves free to go, but they were told there would be follow-up questions. They went off with another slap on the back each and a big grin from the sergeant, who couldn’t stop talking about Swift’s earth-shattering run. North had to half carry Swift out. The fastest Mighty John was currently neither mighty nor mobile.

For his part, North was beginning to wish they had never broken the damn record.

As they drove away Swift rolled down the window, leaned out, and sucked in air. “I have never smelled anything that bad in all my life,” he moaned.

“Get over it,” said North, who was in no mood for Swift’s complaints. “And you ruined my brand-new shoes.” North was driving in his bare feet; his socks and sneakers had gone into the trash can.

Swift continued, “Not since I fed my basset hound five cans of Vienna sausage and a quart of chocolate milk have I ever smelled anything so disgusting.”

“Knock it off, Jimmy. A woman is dead. And maybe she’s dead because of my questions about that stupid wig. Think how *I* feel.”

Scientists were supposed to be immune to such emotional misgivings. Facts and accompanying results were wonderfully benign and uncomplicated that way. When an experiment failed, you simply recorded the result and moved on to another test. There was no grief, there was no shock, no feeling of personal loss. North the human being was ill-prepared to deal with the death of a stranger over a mildewed wig.

“Gee, I didn’t mean to offend you, Merl! But come on, I mean el primo stinko. I’ve never barfed like that in my life. My gut’s still jumping.”

North pulled the car over, grabbed Swift by the coat collar, and jerked him so close they were almost nose to nose. “If you don’t shut up right this minute, I will tell you in exacting detail precisely how the human body decomposes. And when I get to the subtopic of maggot infestation, I will be so incredibly graphic in my description that it will leave an indelible impression on that pea-sized brain of yours, and I swear to God you will puke your guts out at least once a day for the rest of your entire life. Got it?”

North let him go, put the car in gear, and drove off. For the record, Jimmy Swift didn’t say a single word all the way back, although North did hear him whimper once or twice, the pathetic, record-breaking Mighty John son of a bitch.

After he dropped Swift off, North went back to his dorm room and lay on his bed, staring at a ceiling he had painted in galactic star clusters that represented his unique vision of what actually could be out there. He craved perfect knowledge, exact data. North wanted to see everything as precisely as it actually existed, free of error and devoid of the inane synthesis and self-pitying psychosis of a collective, bleating world of fools ignorant of all that was truly worthwhile and valuable.

The fact that there had been so much misinformation surrounding Herschel Ruggles and his disappearance rankled North mightily. And yet there was a gnawing fear dwelling in some unexplored region of his magnificent brain that was actually nudging North into an acceptance of a lesser truth, a reductive conclusion of half-assed proportion, a sorry compromise of sorts.

At the epicenter of his dilemma was this: When confronted with an unwelcome truth, what did one do? Did one let sleeping dogs lie, as Herman

Bowles had suggested? Most people would, and yet North never had. But here he was not so confident.

The buzzing sound confused him for a moment, until he realized it was only his phone. He pulled it from his pocket. He didn't recognize the number calling him.

"Hello?"

"Merl North, is that you?" said the familiar voice.

"Yes," he said excitedly. "Is that you, Mr. Bowles?"

"Yep. You and that feller Jimmy Swift came to see me earlier."

North sat up so fast he became dizzy. "Did you remember the name of the player?"

"I sure did. Come to me out of the blue. I was sitting on the can taking a dump, in fact, just thinking of nothing, and there he was."

"Right," said North, trying not to visualize any of that. "And his name?"

"Ed Belichek. Called him Little Eddie, that was a joke. He was six-five and about three hundred pounds. Only had one other player who was close to his beef. Had to have special jerseys made up for him and he still stretched the suckers out."

"You're sure it was Belichek in the training room that day?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Once I remembered his name, I recalled pretty much everything about that day like it was yesterday. Belichek got the stinger at the start of the fourth quarter. Couldn't move his dang arm, useless for blocking, couldn't push off the defensive linemen. So I sent him in to ice it. I would've gone in with him or sent somebody, but we were shorthanded that day and I had my hands full with ankle wrapping, and we had two linebackers with dislocated fingers and a cornerback we really needed in there to cover their best wideout. We had to keep stretching him out on the sidelines because his hammy kept tightening. Not like I had dozens of assistant trainers back then. So I told Belichek to ice his shoulder and arm in the whirlpool and get back quick as he could."

"So he was a lineman?"

"Left tackle, most important man on the O-line. Our QB back then wasn't the best. He'd mostly hand off to Ruggles. But he had no pocket awareness. When he got blindsided, the boy got blindsided, if you know what I mean."

"And the police interviewed Belichek, and he saw nothing while he was in the locker room?"

“Far as I know, yeah. I asked him about it later. He didn’t have much to say. I think he fell asleep in the ice whirlpool myself. That does happen. Boys get out looking like a prune with balls the size of peanuts.”

“But I looked at the police records. There was never any mention of Belichek.”

“Maybe that’s because he didn’t see nothing.”

“Do you know where he is now? Belichek, I mean.”

“He played for the New York Giants for about nine years, did okay, as I recall. Never an All-Pro or anything, but he hung in there. Then I heard he bought a bar over in Covington, you know where that is?”

“About forty miles from here, near the state line.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you remember the name of the bar?”

“Keep in mind this was a long time ago.”

“Still, if you can remember.”

“Lemme see. Okay, yeah, um, no, son, I sure don’t.”

“Okay, well, thanks for this, it really helps.”

“You bet. And you tell that Jimmy Swift next game, go for a hundred-and-five-yard return.”

“I will.”

North put the phone down and looked up at his intergalactic ceiling.

It was clear what he had to do.

To move forward, he had to go backward.

In time.

Chapter 14

I JUST DON'T WANT to find another body, okay?" said Swift firmly.

They were riding in North's car on their way to Covington.

"And you think I do?"

"Hey, dude, you didn't puke, *I* did."

"That wasn't because of finding the body. That was because you downed a fifth of Wild Turkey, you idiot!"

"Come on, guys, knock it off. You're acting like two-year-olds."

In the back seat was Molly McIntyre. She gave both of them a look of contempt.

North had invited her because he thought she might be able to get Ed Belichek—who, North had discovered, still owned the Redneck Bar and Grill in Covington—to open up to them about the events from four decades ago.

Swift shot her a glance, running his gaze admiringly over her. "It's nice having you along, Molly. Merl can get a little—"

"—overly focused," she said helpfully.

Swift grinned. "Something like that."

They arrived in Covington, which was a lot like Crucifix, PA, only without a college or a college football team.

They parked in front of the bar and got out. Inside, the place was decked out as a shrine to professional and collegiate football. Banners and helmets and signed memorabilia lined the walls and the tables. The bar spanned one entire wall, and alongside the bottles were framed, autographed photos of football stars from over the years. The place was three-quarters full on a Tuesday evening, evenly split between men and women. The three of them got stares from all over when they walked in. The men's gazes went to McIntyre first, checking her out, then to North and Swift, probably sizing them up as former or current players.

The women glanced past North and focused on the handsome Swift, who grinned back and did a little salute for their pleasure.

McIntyre put her arm through his and said, “Down, boy, or you might find yourself in trouble.”

North walked up to the bar and motioned to the bartender, a woman in her thirties with dark hair tied back with a Steelers bandana. She had on faded jeans, a black tank top that showed off ropy muscles, and a suspicious expression.

“Let me see some ID,” she said automatically.

“I’m not here to drink,” said North, as McIntyre and Swift joined him. “I’m here for information.”

“Then I’ve got no time for you.”

Swift pulled out his ID and held it up; McIntyre did likewise.

She said to North, “Okay, they’re good to go, and you?”

North took out his wallet and showed her his driver’s license. “Now can I ask some questions?” he said.

“Sure, if you buy drinks. If not, get lost.”

“Three Coronas,” said Swift. He pulled out his credit card. “On me.”

The woman brought up the bottles, uncapped them, stuffed them with lime wedges, and slid them across, at the same time taking Swift’s card and running it through the machine.

She glanced down at the name. “Hey, aren’t you the guy who broke Herschel Ruggles’s record?”

“He is,” said McIntyre. She patted North on his broad back. “With this man’s help.”

“Cool,” said the woman. “My old man was from Crucifix. He was there when Ruggles played his last game. That touchdown run? Said it was the greatest thing he’d ever seen.”

North nodded. “I believe the owner of this bar was at the game too. He played left tackle on the team back then. Ed Belichick?”

“Really?” said the woman. “I knew he played for the Giants, but Ed never mentioned playing with Ruggles.”

“So he’s still around?”

“Yeah, as in he *owns* the place.”

“Can we speak to him?”

“Why?”

McIntyre stepped in. “I’m head of the Draven University yearbook committee. We’re doing a special anniversary edition and part of it highlights the year that Ruggles scored that amazing touchdown and then vanished. We’ve been interviewing Mr. Belichek’s teammates and wanted to speak to him as well.”

The woman nodded in understanding. “Sounds cool. Let me check with him.”

She called a man over to take up her bartending duties and disappeared down a long hall.

Swift took a swig of his beer and said admiringly to McIntyre, “Hey, that was real quick thinking. I like that in a girl.”

She looked at him shrewdly. “Really? I thought what you liked in a girl was a little more obvious.”

When the bartender came back she said, “Ed said, okay, he’ll talk to you. It’s just this way.”

She led them down the hall.

“One thing,” she said. “Ed is...not very talkative. I think he might be suffering from too many concussions from football, you know? He’s....well, you can see for yourself.”

They reached the end of the hall and she knocked on the door there. “Ed?” she called out.

“Yeah, okay,” said a gruff voice.

She opened the door and let them pass through. She went back to the bar while the three of them stared confusedly around the darkened room.

“Over here,” said the same gruff voice.

They moved forward and the big desk came into view. And with it the big man behind that desk.

North knew that Belichek was in his early sixties. Yet the man facing them looked to be at least twenty years older. He had gone completely to fat. He looked like he weighed close to four hundred pounds. His skin, even in the bad light, looked unhealthily pale. They could see the burning tip of a cigarette in his left hand. The room reeked of nicotine and smoke.

“Well?” he said expectantly.

North stepped forward. “Mr. Belichek, I’m—”

“I don’t need to know who you are, just why you’re here, son. Beth said something about a yearbook thing at Draven U.?”

McIntyre drew closer. “That’s right, an anniversary edition. And part of it deals with Herschel Ruggles’s vanishing.”

Belichek sat up straighter and took a puff on his smoke. “Who the hell would do an anniversary edition on that?”

“Well, it’s remained a mystery all this time,” pointed out McIntyre. “And mysteries intrigue people.”

“They don’t intrigue me.”

“We’ve interviewed other members of the team and thought you’d like to contribute to the story.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

North said, “But we talked to Herman Bowles. He said you were in the training room that day. You had a stinger. He thought you might have been in the whirlpool.”

“Yeah, well, he thought wrong.”

“You weren’t in the training room?”

Belichek started to say something and then caught himself. “I didn’t say that, buddy, did I?”

“No.”

“I *was* in the training room, just not in the whirlpool. I’d already done the ice route. I was in the *tape* room. They had some painkillers in there. I was taking some and working out the stinger.”

“And you never saw Ruggles come in?”

“You putting words in my mouth again, boy?” Belichek said menacingly.

“No, I understand that’s what you told the police when they asked.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Well, I did. Because that’s what happened.”

“So he never came back there after running into the tunnel?”

“Nope.”

“Seems odd.”

“Why?”

“Because if you run into the tunnel, you can’t help but pass the training room.”

“If he did come in there I never saw him.”

“And the only exit door would be in the sight line of the taping room,” interjected Swift.

“How do you know that?” snapped Belichek.

“I play on the team now,” replied Swift.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. I never saw him.”

McIntyre said, “This is a very nice bar. Very popular. And I guess you’ve had it for a long time.”

His gaze swiveled to her. “I have. It’s worked out real well.”

“I guess you used your money from professional football to fund it,” said North.

“Hell, the money back then was nothin—” He caught himself. “No, that’s right. Put every cent into the place. And it’s paid off.” He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I plan to spend some time with Jack Daniels.”

North looked at Belichek. “Did you know Linda Daughtry?” he asked.

Belichek squinted at him through the cigarette smoke as he poured out three fingers of the whiskey. “Name sounds familiar.”

“She ran the Jenkins Wig Shop in Crucifix. Or her mother did back then. She took it over.”

“Okay, what about her?”

“We were talking to her the other day.”

“Get to the point, kid, I got a drink waiting.”

“When we went back to see her again, we found her dead.”

“Is that right? Accident?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I wouldn’t say that at all.”

Chapter 15

IT WAS THREE DAYS LATER and North was sitting alone in the Mighty Johns' film room. He spent many hours in here, maybe more than anyone else on the team. This was because North was not a natural athlete, not like Jimmy Swift, nor like many of the other players on the team. Studying film was a way for North to make up for that, to look for tendencies, to allow him to get a jump in reacting to a play, to make up for his average speed and agility.

But the film he was now studying had nothing to do with him.

This was the last game Herschel Ruggles would ever play for the Mighty Johns. North was breaking it down frame by frame, like the coaches did when they were using the films for teaching purposes. He did so all the way up to Ruggles's carrying the football into that tunnel, never to be seen again. He had a roster of the team players back then on a piece of paper beside him. Ruggles had worn the number 1 on his jersey. That number had been retired after he disappeared, so no other Mighty Johns player could ever wear it.

The helpful thing was the person filming at the time didn't just record plays on the field. Well, he did, but that had been covered by another cameraman. This film had been done for posterity, North had been told. During Ruggles's last three years at Draven, when it was clear he was the greatest player the university would likely ever have, every game that Ruggles had played in was recorded completely. Time in the game, time on the sidelines, shots of the crowd. North could not have hoped for a better treasure trove of information.

He watched Ruggles with interest before and during the game. He was restless, walking the sidelines, his helmet off, and looking up at the stands. North saw him talk to no one.

But when he went into the game, the man strapped on his helmet, hustled to the huddle, got the play, and settled into his three-point stance; when the

ball was hiked, the man went to war.

Even when the ball wasn't handed off or passed to him, Ruggles made an impact. Four times North watched as pass rushers broke past the O-line—one time due to an error in technique by his own father, Peter North, at right guard. And each time, Ruggles stepped up and leveled the far-larger men at the last moment, giving his QB time to pass the ball or escape danger.

North wound the film back to the beginning of the fourth quarter and then let it roll. He sat back, sipped on a cup of hot tea, and watched with increasing focus. He looked on as Ed Belichick, his arm dangling, talked to Herman Bowles. A couple of minutes after that, a helmeted Belichick, his battle-worn number 68 jersey hanging loosely on him, hustled off the field to take care of his stinger. North observed him all the way to the tunnel. And then, he was gone.

The game continued and the O-line, minus its starting left tackle, was surprisingly good. Or perhaps it was just Ruggles who made them look good.

North watched his father, the big number 50 stretched tightly across his broad shoulders, as he pancaked a defensive tackle before going on to flatten a linebacker, allowing Ruggles to move up the crease for forty yards where a half-dozen Howling Cougars, straining mightily, were required to bring down the running back.

North's father had taught his son the proper technique of a lineman when North had started playing Pop Warner ball as a kid. The balance of the weight, back in the heels for more control but not far enough back to sacrifice explosive thrust. The eyes that never stopped moving. The use of the hands to engage and then disengage defensive linemen. How to pivot to get out in space to confront the edge rushers, how to keep your center of gravity low so a bull rush technique could not work.

These were all things that North had used in his playing time, though he preferred defense to offense. He was not as big as his six-foot-five father, and he certainly didn't have the huge bulk of Ed Belichick.

He went through the film three more times and saw nothing that would provide him with a clue.

In despair, he turned off the machine, left the room, walked fast, and a few minutes later knocked on a door of an apartment a block off campus.

It was late, and Molly McIntyre answered her door looking sleepy and dressed in a short men's T-shirt and nothing else. North had never seen her

thighs before, and he noted how very shapely they were. Her tousled hair was particularly attractive, he thought.

“Merl, what are you doing here?”

“I, uh, I just needed someone to talk to.”

She glanced over his shoulder before saying, “You better come in then.”

They settled on a small couch in the front room. McIntyre had put on a short pink terrycloth robe and sat next to him looking expectant.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, I’m good. I had some hot tea earlier.”

She almost laughed. “Hot tea was not what I was offering.”

“Oh, right, no, I’m fine, thanks.”

He explained to her about his film session and not finding out anything new or helpful.

“Well, you need to give it time, Merl. You’re so smart that something will occur to you.”

“But nothing really has. And I’ve been focusing on this for a long time now. If it were a science project I would have solved it by now.”

She turned to face him, her bare knees touching his jeans. She took his hand. “But this isn’t a science experiment. This has to do with people, some living, some dead. People are not like science, Merl. In many ways science is predictable. You do *a* and *b* and you get *c*. But not with people. They do crazy shit. They are not predictable. That’s what makes them *human*.”

“What you say makes perfect sense. Can I share something with you?”

“Sure.”

“And you won’t think I’m crazy?”

She grinned. “Well, I can’t promise that, but I can say that you are the last person in the world that I would think might be crazy.”

North proceeded to tell her about what he had seen in the tunnel: Someone, perhaps Herschel Ruggles, rushing past him into oblivion.

As he spoke, her amused look slowly dissipated until she looked thoroughly worried.

She patted his hand. “I think maybe you might be focusing on this too much. It might be doing something to you.”

“Making me see things, you mean?”

She looked at him with an uncomfortable expression. “Well, maybe. It can happen. You can want something so bad that...” She glanced down the

hallway, presumably in the direction of her bedroom. But North did not seem to make the connection.

“I do have a gown. And I had a wig.”

“What?” she said, looking a bit more worried now.

He quickly explained about finding the gown and wig.

“So you think Daughtry was killed because she knew something about that wig?” she said. “About where it came from?”

North didn’t answer. He was staring down at some photos on the coffee table.

“What are those?” he asked.

“Oh, these are pictures I’m thinking about using for the anniversary edition.”

He picked up one. “Is this the tunnel we use to go under the stadium?”

“What, no. Oh, I see what you mean. I never noticed that before. No, it’s actually an interior shot of the Draven mansion.”

“The Draven mansion? Where did you get it?”

“From the historical society. When the place was first built Draven allowed them to come in and take pictures. It’s actually kind of creepy. It looks like a mine shaft.”

“It also looks like the tunnel into the stadium,” North said, suddenly looking energized. “Molly, can you go with me somewhere?”

“What, now?”

“No, tomorrow night. I have a little experiment I’d like to conduct, and your help would be invaluable. But I need to explain things and get some things ready.”

“Sure, okay.”

And North proceeded to explain to her what she needed to know.

And the longer he talked, the more McIntyre’s jaw dropped.

Chapter 16

SHE HADN'T ATTENDED a Mighty Johns game since the Ruggles era.

North had checked to make sure. He was approaching this puzzle scientifically now, which meant he had to find and record the *facts*.

He couldn't determine if she had been at "the" game, yet he thought it likely that she had. She had been widowed for nearly forty years now and had *never*—North had learned with the aid of McIntyre and her valuable research—contemplated remarriage.

And McIntyre was in the car next to him heading to perform North's experiment.

She had dressed up for the occasion, wearing a dark skirt, white blouse, and lavender sweater, and she'd had her hair done. North had on a jacket and slacks and a pressed white shirt. McIntyre had fussed over his collar and shirt until they were right.

"Quite spiffy," she said. "You clean up very well."

It had been McIntyre who had arranged this meeting with the woman. McIntyre had interviewed her briefly for the upcoming anniversary yearbook edition.

The house stood on a hill that had been created by fill dirt from one of her husband's vast tract projects; it had settled some as the combination of gravity and the sheer weight of millions of tons of displaced and compacted earth sought lower ground. The house itself was built of stone—what else could it be, thought North, considering the career and sensibilities of its creator? It had been quarried nearby, from another of the man's sedimentary assets. She reportedly lived there alone but for the presence of day servants who cooked the meals, kept the dust and weeds at bay, and laundered the clothes of the shrunken, elderly woman who was their long-time mistress. Yet at night she was completely alone—and preferred it that way, North had

been told.

Using McIntyre as a referral made it easier for North to get in to see her. He had called and she had called back—or a representative had, at least. An appointment had been arranged, and now North and McIntyre made the drive up the coiling black asphalt road, and waited for the electronically controlled iron gates with the initials *JMD* in heavy iron scroll to open and allow them in.

North knocked at the enormous wooden door that had been stained coal black in an apparent tip of the hat to the long-dead man. A woman answered, obviously a maid, judging from her clothing. She led North and McIntyre down passageways of great length with exquisite architectural detailing, and stylishly crowded with antiques, paintings, and other objects of obvious taste and cost. They did not impress North at all, for he had grown up in similar surroundings.

However, McIntyre, who obviously had grown up in far less affluent circumstances, gazed around in abject wonder at everything. But then she shivered and hugged herself. “Not a very warm environment,” she observed.

“I thought you’d already been here, to interview her.”

“No, we spoke over the phone. This is all new to me. I’ve only seen this place in photographs.”

The room they were led to was baronial in size. A fire belched and lurched in a cavernous opening that was fully large enough to hold the Mighty Johns starting offensive eleven with room to spare. In the center of the room were three chairs arranged facing one another.

In one, she sat.

North and McIntyre took the other two. North eased his bulk down as the fire cracked and popped across from him. McIntyre primly crossed her legs and tugged her skirt over her knees, while swiping a hand nervously through her hair.

The wind pressed against the elongated windows, where the last of the sun’s jolly fingertips were sliding away to be replaced by the melancholic ink smudges of dusk. William Faulkner would have been quite comfortable here sipping his favorite libation in these depressingly Gothic confines, thought North, who was surprisingly well read in the literary sense for a scientist. Erskine Caldwell, on the other hand, North mused, would have fled for his scrawny life.

North took a moment to set down the bag that he had brought with him and looked across at the woman, as she stared back at him.

Gloria Peyton Draven was now seventy-five years old, and most people who knew her would say that time had not been kind to the woman from the age of forty on. That was often the case with those possessed of an unassailable beauty during their youth; what way was there to go but down, at least from the shallow heights of physical beauty? An odd wrinkle springing up here or there, the softening of the jawline, the deepening, by millimeters, of the eye sockets, the thinning of lips and skin, the collapse of once-proud cheekbones, was, collectively, all that was needed to rupture the ship, sending the bow to the waves' trough, and lifting the propeller to kiss the air, where neither was designed to survive for long.

On the surface Gloria Draven was just that, a bitter shipwreck of vainglorious proportion, rare enough to be noticed yet just common enough not to be pitied. Below the skin, though, North sensed something far more substantial than a former beauty hollowed by time. He sensed intelligence. And he sensed principles.

"Mrs. Draven, it's Molly McIntyre. We spoke over the phone about the university's anniversary yearbook edition."

To this Draven merely nodded, her gaze fixed on North.

"And I'm Merlin North," he began quietly yet firmly, deciding it was best to feel the woman out a bit, but not be too timid about it.

"I know." Her voice was not quite velvet and not quite suede, perhaps leather, North thought, not really understanding why he was using that type of textured comparison. And yet Draven did seem tactile somehow, tempting one to finger her arm, or pat her back just to see.

"Probably from Jimmy Swift and me breaking Herschel Ruggles's record."

"I care nothing for football and never did. I know who you are because I know who you are," she added testily.

North looked at her strangely for a moment and then decided not to pursue this odd statement. He had other matters of importance to discuss with her and did not want to squander this opportunity over a possibly irrelevant matter. He thought best how to ask his next question. There was really no delicate way around it.

"But you did care for Herschel Ruggles, didn't you?"

She trembled, only slightly, but North noticed it. When McIntyre had said Ruggles had traveled all the way up the ladder on his adulterous rounds with promiscuous wives, North figured Draven would be the one to reside at the very top. When he had seen her in the photograph wearing the blue gown and standing with Ruggles, he had become sure of it. And then there was the matter of the wig.

“I knew him,” she said in a husky voice that spoke of age, experience, and, perhaps most of all, sorrow.

“I think you probably knew him better than most. In fact, I think you knew who he *really* was.”

McIntyre glanced at North, her look slightly panicked.

Draven’s thin, pale lips curled back revealing small, yellowed teeth. The image was that of a dog, fangs bared, protecting its home and hearth, ready to attack, or at least putting on a good show of so doing. The threat was often as effective as the act itself.

“You’re a very young man who has really experienced nothing of the world. I’m speaking of its vast generosity, and its depthless, aching cruelty. Do you really feel qualified to make judgments about someone who has seen far more of both than she ever wanted to in this life or any other?” She glanced at McIntyre. “And you?”

McIntyre stammered, “I...I uh, we just came, that is, Merl wanted—”

Draven silenced her by merely looking away and settled her gaze back on North.

He said, “What I’m trying to do is lay to rest, once and for all, exactly what happened to Herschel Ruggles when he ran into that tunnel. Some people think he disappeared on purpose, that he was in some kind of trouble. Maybe with a woman.” He fell silent and waited.

“And do you believe that?” asked the old woman.

“More to the point, do *you*?”

She dismissed him and his question with a quick stroke of her small hand. “I’m too old to play these silly games,” said she.

“So am I,” replied North.

This got her attention. “Why are you really here?”

In answer he held up the bag. “Do you have a room that Molly could use?”

“Use for what?” she said, looking startled.

“You’ll see, I promise.”

Draven slowly pointed to her left, at a door there.

North handed the bag to McIntyre and nodded. She quickly headed to the door and entered the room behind it.

While she was gone Draven folded her hands in her lap. “You are a most inquisitive young man, I understand.”

“I’m a scientist. It comes with the territory.”

“Oh, I see. Quite impressive.” She did not look impressed at all.

“I’ve been looking into things because I wanted to know the truth.”

“And why is that so important?” she asked.

“What could be *more* important?”

“I can think of lots of things, but I doubt any of them would persuade you.”

“Have you always lived here?” he asked.

“For as long as my memory goes back. No, that’s not so. I remember before I wed, I lived in a walkup in Brooklyn. It was very nice. Nothing like this tomb. It had life, it had purpose.”

“If you feel that way, why do you stay here, then?”

“Do you understand penance?” Draven said.

“I know what it means. I don’t know what it means in the context of you.”

“I stay here as my penance, young man.”

“And what did you do to have to serve that penance?”

“None of your business,” she replied. “None at all.”

Then the door opened, and they both turned to look.

Chapter 17

DRAVEN GASPED.

McIntyre had come out wearing both a wig and the gown. She was turned away from them, as North had instructed, so that Draven could only see her from the back.

“You recognize the gown?” asked North.

Draven slowly nodded. “Where did you find it? You must tell me that.”

“It’s yours?”

Again a nod, her lips moved erratically, yet no words came.

“I found it in a very special room underneath the stadium. I also found a wig. The one that Molly is wearing.”

It was not *the* wig, of course, but a reasonable facsimile that he had bought and which McIntyre had helped him fashion in the style of forty years prior.

McIntyre rejoined them, sitting down next to North.

“Do you recognize this?” asked North, pointing to the wig McIntyre had on.

“No, I’ve never worn a wig.”

“I understand that. I didn’t mean do you recognize the wig, I meant do you recognize the hairstyle?” He pulled from his pocket the news clipping with the photo showing Ruggles, Draven, and her husband at the awards banquet. He passed it over to her. She looked at the picture and then at the wig.

“I see your point,” she said quietly.

“I’m sure you do.” He paused, eyeing the dimensions of the vast hall. “You have a basement corridor, stone, with low ceilings here, correct?”

When Draven looked puzzled, North took out the photograph that McIntyre had back at her apartment. “This space?”

“Oh, yes.” She shivered. “A very cold place. John loved it. I never go down there.”

“I thought as much. They would have needed some safe place to study the effect.”

“The effect?” said Draven.

“I’ve found that the best way to really determine the truth is to replicate the conditions and elements of whatever it is you’re trying to prove.”

Draven now clearly understood what he was getting at. “Follow me.”

It took about an hour, for North had to get the lighting and other conditions in the lower passageway just the way he wanted, which included the removal of all furniture, paintings, and other objects until the space was entirely bare.

As he pulled one painting off the wall, he looked at it and then glanced at Draven. “This is your husband? In uniform?”

“Yes, he fought in World War Two. Well, he didn’t actually fight. He was too old. But he wanted to be part of it and he had important friends in the government. So he had a nice, safe desk job overseas. But to hear him tell it, he beat Hitler all by himself.”

North laid the painting aside and looked at the long hallway, now shorn of all decoration. He smiled at the result. Yes, this would work out very nicely.

Draven and North stood at the far end of the tunnel, for that was certainly what it was now, a tunnel—if not *the* tunnel.

In the spirit of a director about to commence his masterpiece, North called out, “Action.”

At the far end of the tunnel, a door opened, and McIntyre stepped out into the shadows wearing the gown and wig. When they saw her both North and Draven exchanged a knowing glance.

From a distance at least, a youthful Gloria Draven once more stood in their midst.

“Thank you,” said North to McIntyre. “You can go ahead and change.” As McIntyre walked off, North turned and looked at Draven.

“Remarkable,” said the old woman. “Truly remarkable.”

“Even though Molly is taller than you, from a distance and under these conditions anyone could be fooled into thinking you were there when you really weren’t.”

“Yes, but for what purpose?” Draven looked a bit frightened now, which struck North as perfectly normal. It was all a bit frightening.

“If I were a young man, very much in love with a woman, and I saw that

woman, or what I thought was that woman, my first inclination would be to go to her. Of course, up close, I would realize the impersonation. But if she kept moving away from me, down a darkened tunnel, what would I do?"

"You would follow her," said Draven in a hushed tone, as a teardrop splashed onto her wrinkled cheek.

"I would follow her," repeated North. "And when I realized the deception I would be confused, even angry, and then I would probably go back to what I was doing. Unless something prevented me from doing so."

"Prevented you from doing so." It was now Draven's turn to do the mimicking.

After McIntyre rejoined them, North said to Draven, "Were you aware that your husband knew about your affair with Herschel Ruggles?"

In response, the shrunken mistress of the house took North's hand and led them back upstairs, to a small room that was not nearly so ornately lavish as the rest of the home's interior. A few odd jumbles of chairs, a day bed, a plain writing table, no pictures on the warm blue walls, and a small yet spirited fire fronted by a slender mantel of knotted pine completed this tiny sanctuary, for that was what it seemed to be to North.

"I spend most of my time here," she said in response to his look. "The rest of the house was not my doing, this was." She delicately displayed herself—*displayed* seemed to be the appropriate description to North—on the day bed and motioned for them to sit on a comfortable leather settee.

"To answer your question, no, I did not know that my husband knew, though that was awfully presumptuous, arrogant—silly, even—of me, for John was omniscient, at least in matters of importance to him. And I suppose, in a perverse way, *I* was such a matter of importance. Not in the sense that we had a good marriage, for we did not, but in the sense that I was a possession of his, and he was very protective of his possessions."

"And not particularly pleased when others tampered with his property," interjected North.

"Yes."

"Tell me about Ruggles."

"The newspaper clipping you brought, that was the first time I had met him. It was a sports awards banquet, such silly nonsense. Grown men running around and hitting and hurting each other and then feted and rewarded and proclaimed great men for doing so. It made no sense to me at all."

“I could see that,” said North. It had never made much sense to him either.

“At first I lumped Herschel in with all the other silly boys. I had of course heard about his reputation among the ladies, and I found that appalling, I really did. My marriage was not a source of happiness to me, and yet I had made my bed, and I slept in the damn thing every night, *alone*, if you understand me.”

North said that he did, while McIntyre looked sad and clutched North’s arm.

“Well, you can imagine my surprise when I found myself becoming attracted that night to Herschel. Yes of course he was handsome and tall and strong and everyone in the place was fawning all over him. He could have had any woman there.”

“He could have had any one of them, anyone except you,” North corrected her.

“Except me.” She looked into the fire for a bit, and continued to do so even as she spoke again. “We ended up talking, just the two of us. And the more we talked the more complex, troubled, and inspired I found him. He was a magnificent athlete, and the truly great ones, I’ve been told, so often stop right there. They possess otherworldly physical ability and nothing more, as though God had wanted to spread the wealth a bit and so, upon creation, had never given all possible gifts to one person. Yet what I found most remarkable about Herschel Ruggles was this quality of destructive melancholy, I guess one would call it. I wasn’t quite old enough to be his mother, yet I did have maternal instincts toward him.” She stared into the fire. “He also had a curious ambivalence about his physical gifts that I discovered later he worked very hard to cover up. It seemed to me he spent his entire life trying to live up to the image that people had of him, and it made him terribly depressed.”

She looked at North. “This may be hard for you to believe, but I don’t think Herschel Ruggles really even enjoyed playing football.” An ironic smile graced her lips. “It was never him on that field, you know, not really. It was as though when the game started, he stepped out of his real self, left it on the sidelines, and became Herschel Ruggles the mightiest Mighty John there ever was or ever would be.” She patted North’s hand. “You could break his records, young man, but you could never top the man. He was too talented, too good, you see. He wasn’t like the rest of mankind. But with those great

gifts come terrible burdens imposed by *us*, the less gifted. Do you know what it felt like to believe that you were never supposed to lose? That you were never supposed to be stopped once your hands touched that ridiculous little ball? He carried that with him every day, just as he carried that ball—that ball *and chain*, more like it. He needed to be the perfect student, the perfect athlete, and, despite those vicious rumors about his philandering, he was the perfect gentleman. *I* was his only indiscretion. You see, the masses will suffer nothing less than flawlessness in our earthbound gods. And, at least back then, ironically, part of that faultless image was as a ladies' man—a predator, if you will—who took what he wanted of the fairer sex. And no one would begrudge him that, at least in those prefeminist days. Yet he wasn't that way at all. Every day he carried those expectations, and they were literally crushing him. He could never be what he actually was, if he even knew who that person truly was. I felt terribly sorry for him, though he never sought anyone's pity."

North said, "And you helped him through it? Intellectually? Emotionally?"

She smiled and a rapturous laugh came from somewhere deep inside her small body and whipsawed into the room with its urgency. "Merl North, we were lovers. Don't believe that we were not."

She eyed McIntyre, who let a tiny smile escape her lips in a sign of understanding.

Draven said, "I'm no saint, I'm probably not going to Heaven, though my suffering has been long on this earth."

"I can see that."

"Yet I did bring some good to him. At least I think I did."

Now North reached across and took one of her hands in his. "Gloria, he followed you down that tunnel, or what he thought was you. Right in the middle of a football game, an important game to him because it would determine a bowl berth. In the midst of over twenty-four thousand fans screaming his name in triumph because he had just performed the most remarkable feat anyone had ever witnessed on a football field, he chose to follow you down a tunnel instead of returning to the game and basking in their idolatry. I'd say that you did more than just bring him some good. I'd say he loved you far more than the game he played so brilliantly. If you believe nothing else, believe that. I don't need to conduct an experiment to verify the truth of the man's feelings for you. They are as obvious to me as

the most indisputable principles of science, perhaps even more so.”

Gloria Draven’s eyes filled with fat tears that dribbled down her fallen cheeks and spattered onto the shawl she wore around her collapsed shoulders.

“I had always hoped it would be so,” she said in a subdued voice. Then she dropped her head and started to weep.

North felt McIntyre grip his shoulder. When he turned to her, there were also tears in McIntyre’s eyes. She said quietly, “That was beautiful, Merl.”

Draven continued to weep for another minute while North averted his gaze and made no sound. He would do nothing to deny her that very personal moment. McIntyre did likewise.

Draven finally wiped her eyes and looked at him. “What can I tell you that will help?”

“Did you ever make an arrangement with Ruggles to see him during that game?”

“No. My husband forbade me to go.”

“Forbade you? Was that unusual?”

“Nothing my late husband did could be termed unusual, for his life was one long list of outrageous acts.”

“Did it make you suspicious that Ruggles disappeared on the very day he would not allow you to attend the game? Did you ever envision a connection?”

“I am, by nature, a suspicious woman. I had my dalliance with Herschel, though we both saw it as much more than that. However, my husband’s sexual indiscretions numbered in the dozens. The double standard was alive and well back then. I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised about my husband’s continuing affairs even at his advanced age, what with my being his third wife and all. But to answer your question, no, I did not see such a connection. As I said, I didn’t know John knew about us, and my own belief, which you have just proved erroneous, was that Herschel himself had chosen to disappear. Chosen to disappear because of his depression, and chosen not to include me in that flight. In his new life, wherever it would take him.”

North was puzzled by this response. It was an angle he had not considered. “Would you have gone with him?”

She said fiercely, “Of course I would have!”

“So all these years, you thought he had *abandoned* you?” He paused, though she made no move to respond. “That *isn’t* great penance, Gloria, for

you did nothing wrong. What you did was a great *sacrifice*.” He paused and then added, “You might make it to Heaven after all.”

“I would assume Herschel would be there waiting for me. It is nice to think that, at least. I have had a long life, and though I am stronger than I look, I am also very tired. I never thought I would grow weary of living, for who wants to die? But I am. I am tired of living, at least in this body. And in this world. I know it’s hard for you to see that because you both are young and vibrant, your whole lives ahead of you. But it does happen, you know, that sense of ‘this is enough.’”

North rose from his seat and her gaze rose with him. McIntyre stood as well.

“You know what happened to him, don’t you? My husband *was* involved.”

“I have no hard evidence, but I believe so,” said North, “though if he was he obviously had help.”

Her eyes searched his. They seemed to plumb the depths of his heart, soul, and mind, leaving nothing unexamined, like scientists always strove for and sometimes achieved. “Who? Who helped him?”

“That’s for me to find out. And I promise you that I will.”

Chapter 18

THE MIGHTY JOHNS had just finished their practice, and the team members dutifully marched back into the locker room. Swift's and North's lockers were next to each other. North sat down and took off his practice jersey and shoulder pads.

North was dejected because while his experiment at Draven's home had uncovered a good deal that he had not known, he wasn't sure how to move forward from there. He still didn't know what had happened to Ruggles. He strongly suspected that someone impersonating Gloria Draven had been in that tunnel when Ruggles had entered it. And he had followed her. Perhaps to his doom. And while he believed that John Milton Draven had been involved, the man certainly had not murdered Linda Daughtry.

He believed that Ed Belichek had lied to them. He had been in the training room and he had seen both Ruggles and the woman impersonating Gloria Draven; that North was reasonably certain of. And he had done some digging into Belichek. The man had made little money playing for the Giants. So where had the cash to buy and run that bar come from?

John Draven, that's where.

And Belichek was clearly holding something back from them. If he had known why they were really there, North believed the man would never have agreed to see them. Now he was wondering about a way to talk to Belichek again.

Maybe I should go to the police with what I know now.

"Are you thinking, Merl, or are you constipated? I can't tell, they sort of look the same on you."

North glanced up to see Swift grinning at him. "Thinking," he replied curtly.

His friend took off his cleats and sweaty socks. "Okay, for a minute there I

thought I'd have to shove an Ex-Lax down your throat."

"I hope you make it to the NFL, Jimmy."

"Why?"

"Because standup comedy is not in your future."

"Ha-ha. So when are you going to ask Molly out?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on. She's got the serious hots for you. And she is one sexy lady. And brains, too. You have to like that."

"You may parade your love life around, Jimmy, I choose not to."

"Okay, I'm just saying don't be surprised if somebody beats you to it."

North was about to reply when another of their teammates came by.

Ben Jacoby was a tight end, six-four, two forty, with the widest shoulders North had ever seen, and the biggest hands. He had a real shot at going pro, along with Swift.

But right now he was fuming and struggling with his jersey.

"Idiots, effing morons," barked Jacoby.

"What's up, Ben?" said Swift.

"Look at my damn jersey," said Jacoby. "I had to get two guys to help me get it on. And now I can't get the sucker off."

"What happened?" asked North.

"The laundry guy shrunk it. He said he used the wrong detergent or something. Look at my jersey numbers! They're so stretched you can barely read them. You want to give me a hand, fellas?"

Swift and North pulled and tugged and cursed and tugged some more, with the result that, with a rending of material, they were finally able to get the jersey off.

North held it out to him. "This thing is for the trash, Ben."

Jacoby took it. "Tell me about it. I have half a mind to put *that* punk in the washing machine. Second time he's done this to me."

He walked off and North plopped back down in front of his locker. Swift sat down, too, and started laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked North.

"Ben's number eighty-six."

"Right, so?"

"Well, his numbers were so stretched he looked like number eighty-eight."

Swift gaped as North leapt to his feet. "Hey, Merl, where are you going?"

North rushed away without answering, leaving Swift sitting there shaking his head. He looked across the locker room at two other players who were also staring after North.

“What’s got into Merl, Jimmy?” asked one of them.

Swift grinned and said, “Ex-Lax.”

North raced into the film room, dug through the boxes, found the video, and popped it into the player. He sat down, hit the remote, and fast-forwarded to where he needed to go.

He slowed the speed down and let it go frame by frame. When things were slowed down you saw things that you didn’t see at normal speed; North knew that better than anyone.

He watched Ed Belichick, helmet off, speaking to Herman Bowles. Then Belichick was lost in the crowd of players. Two minutes later North sat enraptured as Belichick rushed off the field, his helmet now on.

North looked at the man’s jersey. It was *baggy* on him.

He rewound the tape to when Belichick was talking with Bowles. The number 68 was stretched tautly across the huge man’s chest. North thought back to what Bowles had told him. That they could hardly find jerseys to fit the man since he was the biggest player they had.

Well, either Belichick had inexplicably grown smaller in the shoulders and chest in the two minutes that had passed in the video . . .

Or the man leaving the field that day was not Ed Belichick.

When North rewound the tape and looked at another series of plays another revelation came to him.

And when the truth finally hit him, Merl North had never been more stunned in his life.

Chapter 19

NORTH HAD RECRUITED SWIFT and McIntyre once more for what he hoped was the final leg of this Odyssey-like journey. They had driven for nearly five hours, nearly across the breadth of the state, over both good and not-so-good roads. They could have flown, but North carried something that made traveling by plane problematic. As they neared their destination, North took in the familiar scenery. How many times had he driven this route, turned at the same spot, advanced like a good hound toward home?

“Wow” was all Swift could say as the house, mansion—estate, rather—came into view. Though they were close friends and teammates, Swift had never been here before. North was often embarrassed that he came from such wealth, and he liked to keep it separate from his life at Draven University.

McIntyre also looked impressed but said nothing, though she did glance sideways at North.

“Casa North,” said North with all the enthusiasm of a hopeless sinner near death. His father had built this place hundreds of miles from his alma mater in a ruggedly remote area that promised nothing to anyone. Peter North had made his fortune elsewhere, and then had retreated to this isolated location to erect his cathedral of glorious excess that few would ever see.

“If I had grown up in a place like this, I never would have left it,” said Swift.

“Yes you would, Jimmy. Trust me. There are only so many bathrooms one can use. And having to travel about a day to play with other kids got a little tedious.”

North pulled into the motor courtyard and stopped his car in the same spot he always did, the one next to his father’s big Mercedes. Despite a six-bay garage, Peter North liked to keep his main ride out front, his son knew.

North took the bag from the trunk of his car, and they all went inside,

where they were greeted by Peter North's valet of sorts. His name was William, and he had been with the family since before North was born. His father, North had learned, had always wanted an English-born and -bred valet, and William had fit the bill.

"He's expecting you," said William. "He's playing billiards."

North was surprised. "This is Thursday. He doesn't play pool on Thursdays."

"He knew you were coming. I think he thought you might like to play."

William looked at Swift and McIntyre. "You could perhaps make it a foursome."

As they started off, William pulled North aside. "FYI, he's not quite all there tonight, sir. A little heavy in the cups, as they say where I'm from."

"I understand." And North *did* understand.

Peter North was indeed smacking billiard balls, sending them careening wildly along the velvet. A cigar dangled from one corner of his broad mouth. Everything about his father was overly wide, thought North. Except the shoulders.

"Boy, come on in and see if you can give an old fart a good match. Hundred bucks says I kick your ass, Merl."

Then he saw McIntyre and his manner changed completely.

He was indeed in his cups, and his words, while not exactly slurred, seemed extra heavily licked by his tongue before being expelled from his mouth.

"My, my, and who is this lovely young lady?"

"I'm Molly McIntyre, Mr. North. I go to Draven with Merl. And that's Jimmy Swift over there."

Peter took in Swift and grinned. "Hell, that's right. You broke the record, you little speedball, didn't you?"

"I did, with your son's help."

Peter shook his head. "Herschel Ruggles didn't need any help and neither did you, Jimmy. Remember that, boy."

North put his bag down on the edge of the pool table. "I'd like to show you something, Dad."

His father banked the seven ball into the corner pocket. "Show away, buddy boy."

North reached into the bag and pulled out the Mauser. He set it on the

edge of the billiard table. “Here’s your pistol back. It’s the one you said you brought back from Vietnam. It’s actually a German make, by the way, World War Two era, not Vietnam. Just so you know that *I* know.”

Peter straightened and took a long puff on his cigar. He blew the smoke out, and the wispy cloud almost obscured his entire face for a few seconds. He picked up the pistol, and Swift took a nervous step back. McIntyre was rooted to where she was standing.

After he checked the empty box magazine in front of the trigger, he pointed the gun at the head of an eight-point buck hanging on the wall and fired an imaginary shot, killing the animal a second time.

“German, you say. I didn’t know you had taken it. I guess I was mistaken about Vietnam. Or maybe you got it wrong, Merl.”

“I don’t get things like that wrong.” He slipped his hand inside the bag once again. “I have something else to show you.”

“You’re just show-and-tell boy today, aren’t you?” Peter looked at Swift and smiled, slapped the young man on the shoulder, asked him how he was, if he wanted a drink. Didn’t they want a drink?

“No, they don’t,” answered North for all of them.

Peter went over to the little bar in the corner, put his cigar in an ashtray, and poured himself a martini before popping five olives, one after the other, into his mouth. The man had a large and voracious appetite for everything. When he did something, it was done! North had, until recently, admired that quality about his father.

Peter edged up to McIntyre. “You look like you could use a drink, Molly. I make a nice little mojito.”

“No, really, I’m fine.”

“You sleeping with my son? I hope you are. Otherwise, I’m going to be thinking he doesn’t like girls.”

Thoroughly embarrassed, McIntyre said nothing. Peter smiled at her discomfort and continued to chew his olives.

He stopped chewing when North pulled the gown and the wig out of the bag.

“I don’t know if you heard about Linda Daughtry,” North said. “She’s dead.”

“Linda who?”

“Daughtry. Runs...ran the wig shop over near the university. She was

found hanged in her home. Jimmy and I found her.”

Peter swallowed the rest of his martini, picked up his cue stick, and neatly smacked the four ball home. He took a moment to chalk his stick and readied another shot.

“You know Linda Daughtry, Dad.”

“If you say so, Merl. I know lots of people.” He grinned at Swift. “It’s not exactly page one news. Peter North knows folks.”

“You dated a few times. I have a photo of you both here.” He lifted the paper out of the bag. “The college yearbook committee is putting together a special anniversary edition, and they’ve dug up lots of interesting things, including this photo of the two of you, with your names listed.”

“Dated lots of women in college, son.” Peter smacked Swift on the arm again. “Bet you do too, don’t you, Jimmy? Bet you are one helluva skirt magnet. Probably teach my son some lessons, couldn’t you? And after breaking that record, damn, I bet the gals are after you hook, line, and sinker, boy, don’t lie and tell me they’re not.”

Before North could say anything else, his cell phone rang. He answered it, listened for a few moments, said thank you, and clicked off.

His father had watched him carefully and then said, “Merl, if you’ve got business, don’t let me keep you son, I’m perfectly fine all by my lonesome. Why don’t you and Jimmy beat it, and Molly and I can have some drinks and then enjoy whatever else might come up?”

A rattled McIntyre took a step away from the drunk man.

“I have a question to ask you, Dad,” said North.

“Ask away, son.”

“Did John Draven pay you off first, and then you in turn paid Linda Daughtry to impersonate Gloria Draven in the tunnel that day? Or did Draven just pay the two of you separately?”

In response, Peter laid aside the cue stick, went over, and made up another martini. “You sure you all don’t want to join me?”

A subdued Swift shook his head while North just stared at his father. A nervous McIntyre edged closer to Swift.

“And then of course there’s Ed Belichick,” said North. “He was perhaps more important to your plan than Daughtry.”

“Belichick? That’s a blast from the past. What the hell does he have to do with anything?”

“You switched places with him during the fourth quarter of the game. I watched the film. You left the field in his jersey with his helmet on so no one would know. But while you were both the same height, he was far broader than you. So his jersey was too big for you and your jersey was way too small for him; it was so stretched across his chest you could barely make out the numbers, while his hung loosely off you. But with helmets on, not even your teammates would know the difference, not in the heat of the game. And Belichick’s blocking technique was far different from yours. I would know since you beat that into my brain from my Pop Warner days. And Belichick wasn’t used to playing right guard; I could see that in the film. But his size and speed enabled him to make the transition well. In fact, he played the position far better than you could. Probably why he made it to the pros. And you didn’t.”

“And why would I want to change places with Ed Belichick?” asked Peter, looking up from making his drink.

“Because you had to get to the locker room. You were waiting in the locker room when he got there.”

“Who?”

“Herschel Ruggles!”

Peter took a sip of his fresh drink. “You’re making no sense at all, boy. Zip, nada.”

“Maybe you told Ruggles earlier that you had gotten a message from Gloria Draven, since Ruggles probably confided in you about the affair. Perhaps you acted as a go-between for them. I spoke with Gloria Draven. She knew who I was, and not from playing football for Draven. She knew who I was because she knew who *you* were.”

Peter shook his head. “Gloria Draven? Didn’t know she was still alive. Quite a beautiful woman back then. The years will have taken their toll. They do, you know. Especially on the ladies.” He eyed McIntyre and held up his drink. “Enjoy it while you got it, babe.”

“She’s a lot more than beautiful, Dad. She’s also very intelligent.” North paused and then continued, “Or you could have forged a message from Gloria and left it for Ruggles. The note might have said that if Ruggles scored in the direction of the Mighty Johns locker room that he should just keep running into the tunnel, that she would be there to give him, what? A kiss? A hug? Maybe even the news that she was going to divorce her husband and marry

him? Or perhaps it was as simple as Daughtry hanging out near the entrance. Ruggles scores, sees what he thinks is the love of his life, and heads over. But she slinks inside and draws him in, ultimately to his death.”

On this Peter put up a wide hand. “Hold on, son, just hold on. I want you to come with me. I have something to show you.”

Chapter 20

THEY FOLLOWED HIM from the billiards room to his study near the back of the house. Peter sat behind his desk and motioned for them to sit across from him in a row of chairs. He lit up another cigar and blew smoke at them. He smiled.

“So we were at the part where Daughtry gets Ruggles inside. And then what? I mean, this is really getting good.”

North was not listening. He was sniffing the air and feeling his sinuses closing up in protest. It was the same smell as before. Now any lingering doubt had just been erased.

“I thought you said you had something to show us,” said North.

“I do. Later. Now go on with your silly story.”

“You were in the locker room. They would have passed you. At some point, Ruggles is going to return to the game, especially if Daughtry keeps flitting away, which she has to do because she can’t allow Ruggles to catch up to her and see that she’s not Gloria. That’s where you came in. You might have come out of the locker room, told Ruggles that Gloria was indeed waiting for him, farther down the tunnel, to keep him going after her. And just in case he didn’t, you had a backup plan. The German World War Two Mauser from Vietnam. Did Draven give it to you? He served during World War Two. He could have brought it back with him. I guess your guilt made you lie to me about the gun’s origin. Hell, you could have said it was a collector’s piece from World War Two and I wouldn’t have known the difference. Yet perhaps you were trying to erase, in your own mind, what you had done.”

“And what exactly was that, son? What the hell had I done?” Peter barked, sitting forward. “Do you really think I shot Ruggles in the tunnel in the middle of a damn football game, and just happened to keep the gun I

committed the deed with so the police could find it? And what exactly did I do with the body? Huh?” This was the first display of raw emotion Peter had shown, and Swift and McIntyre looked worriedly at North.

“You neither killed Ruggles yourself nor did you bury the body,” said North calmly, his gaze directly on his father. “You wouldn’t have had time. But you weren’t the only one in that tunnel. There were others. Other men. At least three, probably, counting Draven. Ruggles was a very strong man and they would have taken no chance. Now, Draven was at the game that day, I checked. Only he left his seat shortly after the kickoff and never returned. I also checked that.”

Peter grinned and sat back. “That’s my boy, a first-rate checker.”

The words were now slurring from the big man, who somehow looked smaller than ever. In all except science, North had never felt adequate to his father. Not as good an athlete, surely not as dynamic a businessman. His father had charisma his son never would. Merlin North, despite possessing brilliance in his chosen field, had always assumed himself an unequivocal failure in his father’s eyes. Now it all seemed too easy; the great competitor vanquished long ago, perhaps by his own demons. And it was clear to North now that there must have been many such demons for his father.

“There’s a very curious room located very deep in the tunnel. It’s the room where Daughtry kept the gown and wig, and also where she transformed herself into Gloria, something she obviously couldn’t do beforehand, because someone might have seen her. Daughtry was the perfect accomplice because her mother ran the wig shop back then, and she could get a wig and fashion it properly without anyone knowing. And she was also the same size and height as Gloria. With your charming ways, you no doubt persuaded her to cooperate; and Draven’s money was an added inducement.”

“Is that right?”

“You turned Ruggles over to Draven and his men, and then you went back out the tunnel and rejoined the team. By then the place was pandemonium. No one would have noticed you coming back out and realized that you weren’t Belichek. In a short period of time everyone would be focused on the fact that Herschel Ruggles had disappeared.”

“Interesting story, son. You should be a writer of *fiction*.”

“Draven, no doubt being the sort of person he was—cold, manipulating, and ruthless—would have wanted to confront the man who was the object of

his wife's desire, if for no other reason than to let Ruggles, the greatest competitor of them all, know that Draven had trumped him. And right after Ruggles's most memorable touchdown run ever, the old bastard must have cherished every moment of it."

Peter smiled and wagged a finger at him. "God, son, that imagination, and I thought scientists weren't supposed to even have one."

"I would hope that even if time had permitted, you would have refused to participate in the actual killing. Though very recent events make me doubt that conclusion."

His father squinted at him and said coldly, "Recent events?"

"Linda Daughtry didn't hang herself."

Swift looked at him. "How do you know she didn't?"

"There was no chair underneath the body, Jimmy."

Swift shot a penetrating glance at Peter, who looked only at his son.

"Go on, Merl," said Peter, "finish your tall tale."

"They took Ruggles to the room I've already spoken of, killed him, and buried him there. His grave and the rest of the room were then paved over with stone, the perfect hiding place."

"Interesting theory."

"It's more than that. At my direction, the police took up that stone floor and recovered Herschel Ruggles's body, or rather his skeleton. There were also remnants of his street clothes, shoulder pads, cleats, uniform—one could still see the famous number 1 on his jersey—and what was left of the football." North paused and then added, "Ruggles's arm was still curled around the football, they tell me."

Peter sat up and the color in his face drained away.

North added, "Since there is no statute of limitations on murder, the case was never officially closed." North took a long breath. "And then we have the more recent murder." He paused, watching his father closely. "When did Linda Daughtry arrive here? A few hours after she spoke with me? It's a short flight." His father stared blankly at him. "The police have already talked to the airline. As well as the cab company that drove her here." He took another sniff. "And the perfume smell here is the same that reeks at her shop. It's almost as good as a fingerprint or DNA—and by the way, they found unaccounted-for samples of both at her home. I let them take samples of my DNA. They got a familial match with the ones found at Daughtry's."

Peter stubbed out his cigar in an ashtray and sat back, a grim smile on his lips.

North continued. “She came here and told you about the wig I had found, which she recognized as being the one she wore to impersonate Gloria Draven forty years ago. You flew her back in your private plane that same day. I checked that, too, before coming here. You went to her home sometime on the morning of the day that she was murdered and confronted her. Perhaps at the meeting here she told you she wanted more money to keep silent. It’s pretty clear that after Ruggles died you had been paying her to keep silent about her role in all this.”

Peter said, “Well, it’s not clear to me. But then you’ve been known to screw things up before.”

“By the way, the police have Belichek in custody. He confessed to having switched places with you in the medical tent behind the Mighty Johns’ bench. And he also told the police that Draven paid him well to do it. And that you’ve also been paying him all these years to keep his mouth shut. That was the phone call I just got.”

“I see,” said Peter. And he truly did seem to finally see.

“Whether she knew the plan was to murder Ruggles or not, Daughtry had a lot less to lose than you did. She was definitely the weak link in your chain. And from the little I saw of her and what I found out subsequently, she struck me as a woman shrewd and daring enough to take advantage of that opportunity, especially after you became wealthy. And you paid her, and continued to pay her, just like you did Belichek. A very close examination of your financial records will show the trail, no doubt. And that will also solve the mystery of why the owner of a second-rate wig shop in a blue-collar town could afford such a nice house and a luxury car. But then perhaps you became tired of paying. Maybe you felt she wouldn’t be able to keep her mouth shut if the case was stirred up again, and if she started to feel too much pressure. So down went the chandelier and up went Linda Daughtry.”

Peter leaned forward. “If you have so much *evidence*, why aren’t the police here to arrest me?”

“Because I asked for and received permission to talk to you first.” North’s voice quavered as he said this, but he kept his gaze directly on his father. The man at least deserved that. No averting eyes from a disloyal son. This was going to be man-to-man.

To his credit, Peter absorbed this stunning information in a calm and dignified manner. "I see," he said again, this time with a lingering finality. He reached into his desk and pulled out a pistol, a large one.

"*This* is what I wanted to show you, son. This is the gun I brought back from Vietnam. Nasty thing. Take your head off if you're not careful."

They all three stood and backed away from him.

"Jesus!" said Swift, who placed himself between McIntyre and the gun.

"Jesus, indeed," said Peter North, who aimed the gun at Swift and fired right as McIntyre cried out.

The shot tore into the young man's thigh and he dropped to the floor, screaming in pain. He pressed his hand against the large hole in his leg where the chalk white tip of his shattered femur poked through. A stunned North and McIntyre rushed to their friend's aid. North tore off a piece of his shirt and used it and a letter opener he grabbed off his father's desk as a tourniquet to stop the loss of blood. While McIntyre kept the tourniquet in place, North ripped open Swift's pants leg and was able to see that the bullet had fortunately missed the critical arteries located there, or else his friend would have bled to death in minutes. The bullet had gone through his leg, thankfully missed McIntyre, and was embedded in the floor. Swift kept screaming and thrashing, while McIntyre held him tightly, tears streaming down her face as she tried to calm the wounded man.

North glared furiously at his father, who just stood there, the gun still in his hand. "Why the hell did you shoot him?" he screamed. It was the first time he had ever raised his voice to his father.

Peter looked surprised at the query. "Well, I couldn't very well shoot my own son, now could I? Or the pretty gal. And I had to shoot somebody. I'm *angry*, Merl. You just screwed up my whole life."

"Well, dammit, be angry at me. Not him. Not anybody else," North shouted back.

"There are some clean cloths in that closet over there. And you might want to get him some water, fluids to keep his blood pressure up," advised Peter. "Learned that in 'Nam. Or perhaps he could use that stiff drink now." He grinned and sat back down. "After a particularly tough game, Ruggles and me would knock back two six-packs to make the pain go away. God, we had some great times together." He smiled even as Swift bled and moaned.

It was then that North realized his father had completely lost touch with

reality.

“Jimmy needs an ambulance! Call an ambulance!” cried out McIntyre.

As North quickly made the call, his father said, “Forget him, he’ll be fine. Hell, you should have seen the hit Ruggles took his sophomore year against Notre Dame. Four men plowed into him at the same time, I mean helmet to helmet. And what do you think happened?” Peter slapped his leg in glee. “The four went down and he didn’t. I’ve never seen anything like it. Not in my entire life. He spun around and then catapulted backwards over them. Backwards! And scored. The guy was a cat, you couldn’t knock him off his feet.” He shook his head. “Why the hell did God make that bastard so perfect? So lucky?”

North finished the 911 call, grabbed the cloths and some water, and helped Swift to drink it. He said, “Jimmy, the ambulance will be here in four minutes. I told them about your injury. They’ll be prepared to take care of your pain and everything. The hospital is only twenty minutes from here. It’s a really good one, with a trauma center. I should know, my father helped build it.” He gripped his friend’s shoulder. “You’re going to be fine. I promise you.” North’s eyes glistened with tears. “And I’m so sorry this happened. I...I never should have brought either one of you here. I’m...sorry, Jimmy.”

Swift thanked him with a forced smile and then went back to grimacing, while McIntyre continued to hug him tightly.

North rose and faced his father. “A friend wouldn’t have betrayed a friend. Yet you did. And for what? All of this.” He looked around the expensively decorated room. “A large sum of money was Draven’s reward for your complicity, wasn’t it? A stake you used to build an even greater fortune. I always thought you had made it all yourself. But you made it on the blood of your friend. You became rich and he became dead before he had even lived. Now tell me, who’s the lucky bastard?”

“I named the goddamn stadium after him, didn’t I? That cost me a million bucks, sonny boy! And I live with my guilt every day. You don’t know the half of it, you little asshole.”

“*You* created the source of your *own* guilt. Through your jealousy and your greed. So don’t try the ‘poor me’ plea!”

“Ruggles had lived his entire life already. That was all he was good for, running with a football. Well, he had his great run and then it was time to

move aside.”

“Why, so you could take your rightful place as the anointed one? You were a mediocre lineman with marginal athleticism, just like me. You made a fortune using someone else’s money, which you obtained by helping to coax a man you called a friend to his death. And you murdered your accomplice because you were fearful your guilt would become known and you would lose all you had acquired so dishonestly!” North hesitated as he watched his father’s face go from lightheartedness powered by insanity to an ashen countenance governed, if not exploited, by returning reason. He didn’t know which one scared him more, the insanity or the reason.

North continued, “I always envied you. I aspired to be like you in a way I thought I never could because you seemed so special. You were voted ‘Most Honorable’ of your graduating college class. Was there ever any greater irony? I wanted to make you proud of me, because I thought earning your respect and your acclaim was a good thing. God, I don’t even like football, but I played it because you did.” North’s shoulders dropped. “I feel like I’ve wasted my life, seeking approval from a man I should have loathed all these years instead of loved.”

His father’s expression had darkened to such a degree that North had no reason to believe that the man would not break his rule and shoot his son.

“Merl!” exclaimed McIntyre. She glanced at the gun Peter still held. “Be careful.”

And yet North stood his ground before his father because it was finally time that this confrontation took place. Merlin North, in all his athletic ineptitude, yet with all his intellectual preeminence, felt as though his greatest role right now was as the proxy for Herschel Ruggles finally facing down his Judas.

Instead of raising the pistol on his son, Peter set it aside and lit a cigarette, picking a flake of tobacco off his tongue.

“All you just said was true, Merl, right down to the tiniest detail. I would expect nothing less from a genius.” He said the last with not quite a sneer, yet not with love and kindness, either. “I *was* jealous of Ruggles down to the last fiber of my soul—and my soul runs deep, boy. On a football field, there was none better than the great Ruggles. Off the field Herschel wasn’t a ladies’ man, like all the rumors said. And he wasn’t a dumb jock, either, which actually would have made accepting his success a little easier for folks like

me. We cannot accept people without flaws, Merl. Whenever we find them, we either stone them to death or *make* them flawed, one or the other. He was a good man, but with an abiding distress, a personal impotency that ran far deeper than I think even he realized. After every game he kept telling me, ‘Pete, this is it for me. I don’t like hurting people. I don’t like performing for the crowds. I don’t like having to be unconquerable on every play.’ He would say this while we’re drinking our beer and mending our wounds, and then come the next Saturday he would suit up and do it all again. Why, I don’t know, other than he didn’t have anything else in his life that rivaled what he could do on the field. But he didn’t crave that level of success, not like most people would have. And yet it was like he had nothing to replace it with, so he kept doing it. But I’ll tell you for a fact that Ruggles could have walked out that locker room door after scoring that touchdown and never looked back. And he would’ve died a happy man.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t let that happen.”

Peter stubbed out his cigarette on the top of his leather-tooled desk. “I almost did. That’s the one part you couldn’t find out, not with all your brains. Ruggles came into the tunnel after the touchdown run because I’d earlier given him a note that said Gloria would be there waiting for him if he scored. You were right; I acted as a go-between for them because they *trusted* me. Daughtry dressed up as Gloria and was waiting for him at first near the entrance, so he could see her, and then she slipped inside and went around the corner and a little way past the locker room. Draven and his goons were waiting farther down the tunnel.”

“But your whole plan was based on his scoring,” said North. “What if he hadn’t?”

His father gave him a disappointed look. “Up to that point in the game Ruggles had only scored one touchdown, Merl. He’d never scored less than three in any game. And with the inducement of the note? I knew the man was going to make it to the end zone. Hell, he could score whenever he really wanted to. And I knew he would really want to after I gave him the note, right before the start of the fourth quarter. And then I switched places with Ed and left the game right after. Kyle Stevens took Ed’s spot at left tackle. He knew nothing about any of this; he was Ed’s regular backup.”

“Why did Daughtry have to impersonate Gloria if you had already induced Ruggles into the tunnel with the note?”

“That was Draven’s doing. He wanted Ruggles to believe that Gloria had betrayed him. That she really didn’t love him at all. See, the old bastard was just that kind of a man. When he destroyed you, Draven destroyed you.”

North shook his head. “And he has a university named after him.”

“I was the one who initially told Draven about Ruggles and Gloria. Draven was worth more than God. I thought there might be something in it for me, and boy was there. Draven made me a rich man before I’d even left college.”

“I hope the blood money was worth it,” North said as coldly as he could.

His father ignored this and said, “I had the Mauser pistol Draven had given me in case I needed to persuade him even more. Ruggles came in, not even out of breath after that touchdown run, which to this day I’ve never even seen. He passed the locker room, poked his head in, and was surprised to see me. Like you found out, he thought it was Belichek in there, not me. I made some stupid explanation. He didn’t care about that. He said he’d seen Gloria. I told him she really wanted to see him and had taken a great risk to come here. See, those were my lines, my *paid* lines. I told him to go after her, that she was waiting for him down the tunnel; I told him I’d cover for him.”

Here Peter paused and fingered his gun. “You know what he said to me? He said he wasn’t going to do that. He loved Gloria, he said, but it would never work. She would never leave Draven for somebody like him. You have to understand that he didn’t have a real high opinion of himself. Everybody talked about him playing professional ball. Back then those guys made jack shit. But he never would’ve played after college. His heart wasn’t in it. Hell, he would’ve won the Heisman that year, and probably never touched another football after that.

“And then I got the surprise of my life. It seems Ruggles wanted out right then and there. He made a proposition to *me*, in the middle of my little scheme with Draven, he made me a proposal, can you believe that?” Peter chuckled while shaking his head in disbelief. “He said he wanted to disappear, and do something with his life that didn’t involve toting a ball along with all those impossible expectations. He could grab his street clothes, pop the lock on the exit door, and change out of his uniform before he got to the parking lot; it would’ve been easy. He was going to hitchhike over to the bus depot in the next county and grab a ride out west, start over. I could make up a little cover story for him and that would be that. He wanted to go out on

top, because he said, ‘Pete, you should’ve seen that run. My lord.’ He said, ‘Pete, even for me it was something to see. It was something really special.’” Here, Peter stopped to dab at his eyes, but the tears were coming too fast to be swiped away by his shaky fingers.

“And what did you do?” said North. He could barely breathe, looking at his father slowly dissolving in front of him.

“I smiled at my friend. Said I’d be glad to help. I walked over to his locker, grabbed up his clothes. Then I pulled out my gun and pointed it at him.” Peter shook his head violently, presumably at the image this conjured for him. “God, you should have seen his face. He had finally made his decision, and the burden of the world had been lifted. And then here I came with my gun and my greed and my jealousy and blasted it all to Hell and back.” He stopped once more and looked squarely at his son. “I could have let him go, but I didn’t. Instead, I took Herschel Ruggles, the mightiest of the Mighty Johns and a man whose cleats I didn’t deserve to lick, and I delivered him to the devil bastard of all devils. I presented him to a man whose heart was even blacker and colder than mine, if you can believe it.”

“What did Ruggles say to you if anything?” The tears were now streaming down North’s face, matching his father’s drop for drop.

Peter took one long breath. “He said...he said, ‘You have a good life, Pete. And never forget your old friend, Herschel Ruggles.’” He looked up at North. “And damn if I ever have. He’s been right here with me, all the way through my *good* life.” He glanced at his son, his face heavy with anticipation. “Tell me something...where’d you find the wig?”

“A special friend led me to it,” North said. “And just so you know, the police are on their way here.”

Peter stood, straightened his shirtsleeves, and buttoned his collar button. He picked up the gun.

“Better let me have that, Dad.” North reached out for the weapon.

“You’ll have a good life, Merl. Because you deserve it. And if you’ll do nothing else for me, do this. Forget your old man. Don’t carry me around your neck all your life, because that’s not your burden. That one, son, that one is all mine.”

North reached out for the gun again.

But his father placed it in his own mouth and pulled the trigger.

Chapter 21

THAT FOUL EAST WIND was blowing when, almost four years later, North came back to Draven University. He had graduated with the highest honors, had earned his PhD at MIT, and was now teaching in his beloved field of physics at a prestigious college in the west, far away from the troubling east wind here and all the stench it carried.

Jimmy Swift had recovered from his wound, though he would never play football again. He had gotten a good job with a senator on Capitol Hill in Washington and was moving up the ranks swiftly. There was even talk of his running for office in the future. He had the looks and an outgoing personality. People loved being around him. And he had enough brains to complete the package.

He had, with North's great appreciation and encouragement, made a decision not to live in the past, but to forge ahead with the future that could be his, bum leg and all. And he had done so with Molly McIntyre, now his wife. She had ridden with him in the ambulance that awful night while North stayed behind with his father's body and dealt with the police. Perhaps their shared experience of the Herschel Ruggles journey had been the catalyst for their sudden romance. She and North had remained friends, though, even as her love for Swift sparked and then flourished. He had just visited them on this trip east. They were expecting a child, they had told him. They were very happy and he was happy for them. They wanted him to be the godfather, a role he accepted with pleasure and honor.

Now North had returned to the home of the Mighty Johns before heading back west. After his father had died, Casa North had been sold, and North had given the proceeds away to charity, along with the rest of the money his father had made. He didn't want it, for he knew it now to be blood money overlaid with a coat of filthy coal dust.

North had kept his promise to Gloria Draven and told her the truth, or at least his version of it. All Gloria found out from North was that Herschel Ruggles loved her, had run into that tunnel to be with her, and would have gone anywhere with her. He no doubt would be awaiting her in Heaven, North had said. With that knowledge, the woman quickly had left this life, on her terms, dying less than a month later. She had been found in her little sanctuary of a room with the news clipping of her and Ruggles lying across her body.

North had told a lie, he knew. He had deviated from the facts, an unforgivable act for a scientist. Yet for North, there was absolutely nothing wrong with that in this instance—to hell with the pristine requirements of science. Perfection was not life, life was living with the flaws we all had, he now believed.

As he had waited for the police to arrive, North had looked at his father's body, trying to ignore the fact that part of the man's head was missing from the impact of the bullet fired into it. He didn't know what he had expected to feel: grief, sadness, depression...relief. But he had felt none of these things. The fact was, sitting there alone with his father's corpse, North had felt nothing at all.

The whole experience had been a painful one for him, though. North's dedication to the discovery of truth at all costs had been severely tested. What had happened to Swift had been his fault, and cost his friend a shot at the NFL. But one did not get concussions working on Capitol Hill, at least not on a weekly basis. North told himself that perhaps Swift would live a longer, healthier life by not catching and running with an oddly shaped ball on Sundays for the vicarious pleasure of millions.

And while his integrity had survived this journey intact, it had made North more fully respect not just the truth, but also the *consequences* of such truth. And yes, he had finally come to accept that sometimes the cold, harsh facts were better left unsaid.

Let sleeping dogs lie? Yes, sometimes we have to.

That might have been the reason why he had felt compelled to make one final pilgrimage here. To examine once and for all—and hopefully lay to rest as well for all time—the personal devastation that the solving of Herschel Ruggles's disappearance had caused him.

He examined the trophy case in the small stadium entry, where photos of

Herschel Ruggles and his gravity-defying ability dominated everything else. But in one corner there was a relatively new photo that North spent some time looking at. It was a picture of him snapped right as he hit that wedge of orange and black allowing Jimmy Swift and him to have their moments of fame. It preserved for all time the image of the quantum tunneler who had exited before he had entered. It was a marvelous display of what brains and the art of physics could do on any given Saturday in the fall, when the crowd wanted blood and pain, and young, reckless men would sacrifice all they had for a few precious moments of glory on a field of dirt and grass, or neurons and cortical columns, if you still believed Merlin North.

If only these sedentary spectators understood the true cost of this “game,” as they called it. They cheered on Saturday and then went home, secure in their patronage of such an outstanding sport. Would they so readily come on Sunday, or Monday, and help the player pee into a bottle because he was too sore and swollen to make it to the bathroom? Would they come and push him around in a wheelchair at age forty when his once-splendid wheels were no longer capable of supporting him? Would they be there when at age fifty the player succumbed to the collective battering that had reduced his insides to that of an eighty-year-old?

North thought not. North knew not.

In the tunnel, he needed no chalk line to find it. The fallen door had long since been removed. North stepped through the opening and proceeded over to the entry into the “great shit” room that, of course, was no longer there. In fact, it never had been, at least in mankind’s puny one-dimensional existence.

North believed that a time warp underneath Herschel Ruggles Field had enabled him to step partially into the past and discover the clues he needed to solve the mystery of the man’s disappearance, never anticipating that it would also lead to the absolute destruction of his own father. Newton’s Third Law of Motion still held true: When an object exerts a force on a second object, the second object exerts an equal and opposite force on the first. God, it had indeed.

Had North been the ultimate spoiler in the observer effect on a quantum state? Had his sheer will and intensity not allowed the pot to boil? Indeed, had it been his destiny to unearth the secret of his father’s betrayal? Had some unknowable power waited all these years for North to appear and finally wrestle the mystery to its logical conclusion? There were really no

answers to be had, at least no conclusive ones. Yet by merely asking the questions, North felt better for it, not only as a man of science but, more important, as a human being.

And North also believed that a second crevice in the walls of the dimensional universes that kept folks in their proper lanes had allowed a wronged man to rise, Phoenix-like, from his awful potter's grave in here. And that slash in the space-time continuum had enabled Herschel Ruggles to enter a place of even greater depth under the earth and settle the score with the wretched, foul person who had taken his life away.

North tried to imagine what John Milton Draven's face must have looked like when he saw the spectral image of Herschel Ruggles enter that small pocket of life a hundred feet under the surface at the Gloria No. 3 mine. What he must have been thinking even as he felt those iron fingers close around his scrawny throat, inexorably tightening until the John of the Mighty Johns had been defeated by a force he could never come close to equaling, in life or in death.

Obviously, North could not prove whether Ruggles, utilizing some time-dimensional gash, had actually been able to take out his revenge on Draven, yet North hoped he had. There were many things North had unearthed that could not be explained by conventional means. Yet even if the football star had been unable to have a final confrontation with his killer, Herschel Ruggles had lived on, in part because of the disappearance orchestrated by Draven, a bleak, insufferable man whom history had totally forgotten. This was despite a university being named after him, because when one thought of Draven University, the only name conjured was that of Herschel Ruggles.

No scientific formula could have done it any better.

"I told you, great shit."

North turned around and stared at the doorway, where a figure looked back at him. In the poor light it was impossible to see who it was, yet North had no doubt as to the man's identity.

"BJ?"

The man did not step forward, and North did not shine the light he carried with him at BJ.

"Who are you, really?" asked North.

"Just a man who moseys around, helping folks who sometimes need it."

"You helped me," said North. "You made a lot of things clearer to me."

“You helped yourself.”

“I want to thank you.”

“You already have.”

And though he never remembered how it came to be, North somehow found himself out of that room and free of that tunnel and standing under the bluest sky and under the most brilliant sun that he could ever recall in this stark, man-made valley of perpetually darkened hues.

And even that stubborn east wind had subsided, bothering him no longer, as Merlin North walked out of Herschel Ruggles Field for the last time.

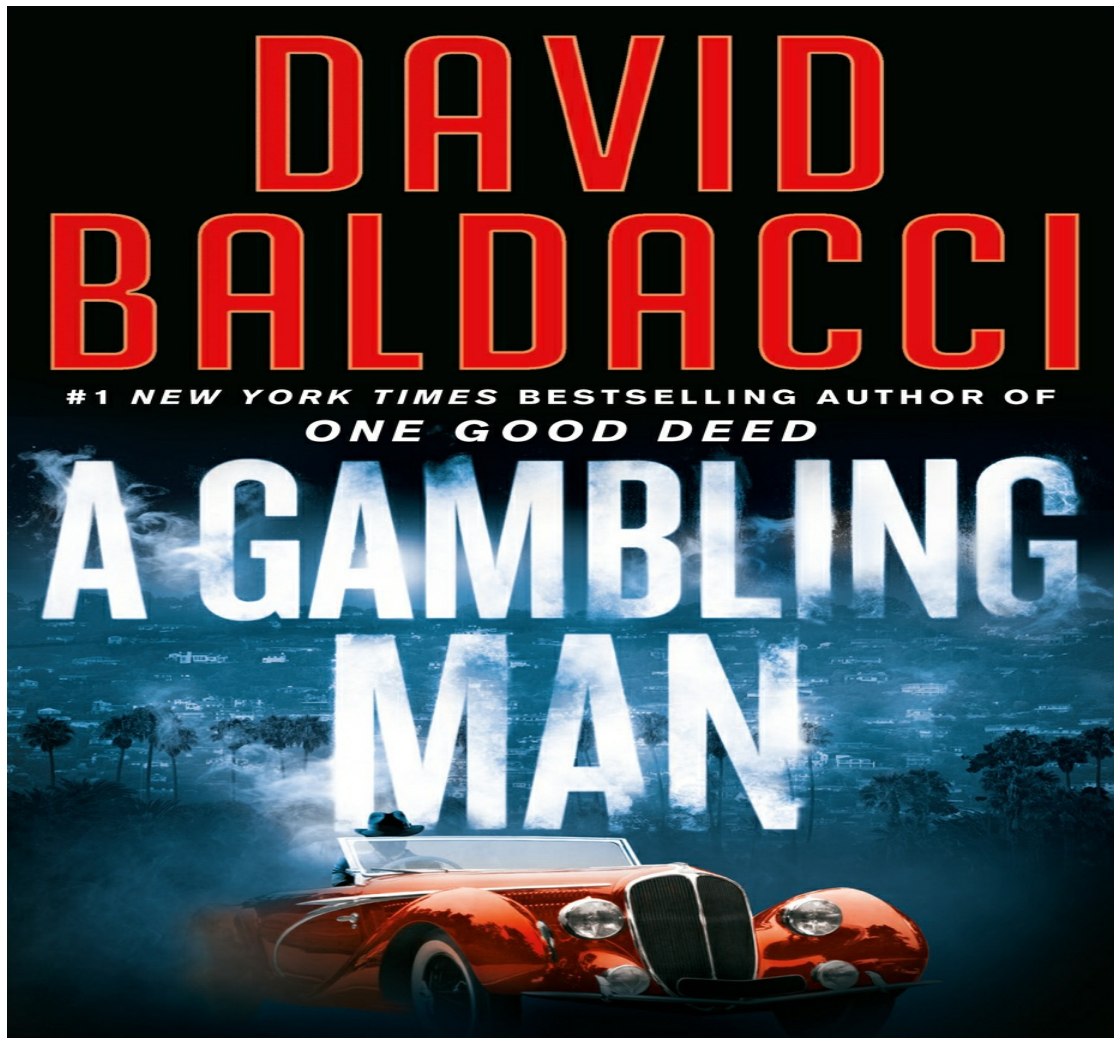
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ALOYSIUS ARCHER RETURNS IN DAVID BALDACCI'S #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING THRILLER:



AVAILABLE NOW
A preview follows.

Chapter 1

WITH A NEW DECADE LOOMING, Aloysius Archer was on a creaky bus headed west to California to seek as much of a life as someone like him could reasonably expect. A roof over his head, three squares a day, a pint of decent liquor every now and then, and a steady supply of his Lucky Strikes to keep his mouth supple and amused. And a job. Actually, more of a profession. He needed that right now. It was like seeking water while in a desert, you just required it and didn't care how you got it. Otherwise, he'd be a chump, and there was no future in that.

He took off his hat and swiped at his short, dark hair before resettling the fedora into place.

Hell, maybe I am shooting for the moon after all. But why not?

Archer wasn't yet thirty. After fighting in the Second World War, he'd spent time in prison for a crime of which he was essentially innocent, though the law hadn't recognized such nuance and stuck him behind bars anyway. However, he *would* have gladly pled guilty to a charge of gross stupidity. It had involved a woman, and Archer just seemed to lose all of his common sense when they were around.

He was a little over six-one, and his frame had been hardened first by the Army and then by prison, where the strong didn't necessarily survive, but such an attribute certainly improved your chances. He had a serviceable brain, quick-enough wits, and a work ethic deep enough to carve a good life somewhere given the chance. Archer was hoping to find that opportunity in a town on the water in California where he was eager to start his new phase in life under the tutelage of a veteran private eye named Willie Dash.

But first, he had to get there. And these days, nothing was easy, particularly long-distance travel across a country that was so big it never seemed to end.

He looked out of the bus's grimy window and eyed the street-spanning metal sign they were passing under:

RENO THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD

He had no idea what that meant, but it sounded intriguing. They pulled into the bus terminal and he grabbed from the overhead rack his large, brand-new leather satchel. He had on a two-piece tan wool pinstripe suit, with a patterned green single-Windsor-knotted tie, fronting a starched white shirt and topped by his crown-dented fedora with a brown band. Everything else he owned in the world was in the satchel. It wasn't much, but it was a lot more than he'd had when the prison doors had opened not that long ago.

He got a recommendation on a place to stay the night from a gal behind the bus counter with blonde hair that wrapped around her neck like a naughty mink stole and mischievous blue eyes to match. She had a curvaceous figure that reminded him of the photo of a swimsuit-clad Ava Gardner he had kept in his helmet during the war. After telling her he was headed to California, she handed him a map, along with a recommendation for where to grab his dinner.

"My name's Ginger," she said with a broad smile. "Maybe I'll see you around town later."

He doffed his hat to her, returned the smile, and trudged on, his grin fading to a grimace. He didn't care if she was Ginger Rogers, he was keeping his distance, naughty hair and eyes be damned.

"You look lost, soldier," said the voice.

Archer was outside the depot now, fully immersed in the delicious heat that seeped up from the pavement and gave him a hug. The speaker was a man in his late sixties, straight as a rake, thin as a lathe, with tumbleweed-white hair and a fluffy mustache that dipped nearly to his chin. He had on a dark suit that needed a good sponging and a creased black hat with a soiled burgundy band. A silver watch chain spanned his dappled white vest, which covered a sunken chest and belly.

Archer put his satchel down on the pavement, pulled a half-full pack of Lucky Strikes from his pocket, struck a match on the bottom of his shoe, and lit the end of the cigarette. He waved the spent match like a sparkler and tossed it down. The man looked so lustfully at his smoke that Archer slid one out and offered it to him. He accepted with gratitude on his features and used a dented chrome lighter to do the honors. They puffed for a bit, each

squinting at the other through the spawned, mingled fog of twin Luckys.

“Just in town,” replied Archer with a bit of a shiver as the sun began its descent after a hard day’s labor, and the heat shriveled down into the pavement like a receding flame.

The man eyed both the satchel and the bus depot behind and nodded. “Can see that.”

“And I’m not lost. Just going to my hotel.”

“Didn’t mean geographically. More metaphorically.”

“You sound educated, or are you just fortunate with how words spill out of your mouth?”

“Time fills your head up, if you allow it. Some don’t. They just put a lid on and end their life as they began it, ignorant as babies.” He put out a shaky, thinly veined hand with dark spots here and there. “I’m Robert Howells, but my friends and some of my enemies call me Bobby H. And you are?”

Archer shook his hand but said, “Why do you want to know?”

“Just making small talk, son, don’t get jumpy on me.”

“I go by Archer.”

“Your first time in Reno?” asked Howells.

Archer puffed on his smoke and nodded slowly. “Just passing through.”

“On to California? San Fran? Los Angeles? That’s where Hollywood is. Most beautiful women in the world. Streets paved with gold, and the water tastes like wine.”

“And none of that is true.”

“Not a bit. Well, maybe the gals. But they ain’t free, son. And there goes all my standard conversation right out the window.”

“Fact is, I *am* heading to California, but it’s a place north of Los Angeles. According to the Rand McNally.”

“You have a certain look the camera might find interesting. Maybe I’m staring at the next Gary Cooper?”

“I have no interest in being the next Gary Cooper or looking into cameras. I’m not saying I can’t act, because I pretty much do every time I open my mouth.”

“What *is* your ambition then?”

Archer finished his smoke and patted it dead on the pavement with the heel of his right wingtip. “No offense, Bobby H, but I don’t know you. And trouble with strangers is not something I’m casting about for.”

Howells frowned. "You seem closer to my age, at least in your lack of adventurous nature."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Do you know why they call Reno the biggest little city in the world?"

Archer shook his head.

"It's because you can get whatever New York or Philadelphia or Boston or even Los Angeles can provide."

"And what do you think I want?"

"What do most young men want after a war? You fought, I take it?"

"That's nearly five years gone by now."

"But it was a big war with long legs. We won't be forgetting it anytime soon."

"So what *do* I want?" Archer asked again.

"A good time with no duties appurtenant thereto."

"*Appurtenant*? Now you sound like a lawyer. They run second to dead last in popularity with me to undertakers. And it's a long way up from there."

"Do you wish a good time with no consequences?"

Archer wondered if the old man was drunk or doped or both. "I never assumed there was such a thing."

"In Reno there is."

"Well, good for Reno. And what do you get out of telling me that?"

"You don't believe in generosity for generosity's sake?"

"And I don't believe in Santa or pennies from Heaven either. Ever since age seven."

"For a young man you seem old and gray in spirit."

"And getting older every minute I'm standing here gabbing with you."

"The passion of youth has been smote clean from you, and that's a damn shame, son."

Archer lit another Lucky and eyed the man, awaiting his next move. It was at least passing the time in the biggest little city on earth.

"Okay, I can understand your cynicism. But let me make another observation. One that has personal advantages to me."

Archer flashed a grin. "Now we're getting somewhere. I knew you had it in you."

Howells fingered his chin. "You look like a man able to take care of himself."

“That doesn’t tell me anything I don’t already know.”

“Here it is then: Can you protect others?” asked Howells.

“Who are we talking about here?”

“We are talking about me.”

“And why do you need protection?” asked Archer.

“I have enemies, as I said.”

“And why do you have enemies?”

“Some folks have them, unfortunately, and I’m one of those folks. So what do you say?”

“I have no interest in making your enemies my enemies. So you have a good day.”

Archer tipped his hat, turned, and walked off with his satchel. Howells called after him. “You would desert an old man in need, soldier?”

Over his shoulder Archer said, “Just wait for a fellow to fall off a truck and *he’s* your man, *Bobby H.*”

Chapter 2

IN HIS HOTEL ROOM, which looked like a shower stall with half-hearted ambition, Archer ditched his hat on the bed, tucked his satchel in the narrow closet with two feeble hangers dangling from the wooden rod, and sat in the one chair by the one window. He parted the faded and frayed curtains and stared out at Reno. It just looked average, maybe a little below that, in fact. Yet maybe it punched above its weight, like he always tried to do.

He smoked another Lucky and took a drink from the flask he carried in his jacket pocket. Archer didn't need beautiful women, watery wine, or golden boulevards. He just desired a steady paycheck, something interesting to do with his time, and the small slice of self-respect that came with both.

The rye whiskey went down slow and burned deliciously along the way. Thus fortified, he took out the letter typed on sandpaper stationery with the name "Willie Dash, Very Private Investigations" imprinted at the top and giving an address and a five-digit phone number in Bay Town, California. Included with the letter was the man's business card, stiff and serious looking with the same address and telephone information as the letter. A tiny magnifying glass rode right under the business name. Archer liked the effect. He hoped he liked the man behind it. More to the point, he hoped Willie Dash liked him.

The missive was in response to one Archer had written to Dash at the advice of Irving Shaw, a state police detective Archer had met while in a place called Poca City, where Archer had served his parole. Shaw and Dash were old friends, and Shaw believed Archer had the makings of a gumshoe; he'd thought Dash might be a good mentor for him. Archer had mentioned Shaw in the letter because he hoped it would move Dash to at least write back.

Not only had Dash written back but he'd suggested that Archer come to

Bay Town and see what might be possible. He had promised Archer no job, just the opportunity to seek one, depending on how Dash viewed things. Archer didn't need false promises or mealy-mouthed platitudes. He just needed a fair shot.

He put the letter and business card back in his jacket pocket, gazed out the window again, and noted that it was nearing the dinner hour. He had passed clusters of eateries along the way here, and one had stood out to him because it had also been the establishment naughty Ginger had told him about.

He grabbed his hat, pocketed his hefty room key, which could double as a blunt instrument if need be, and set out to fill his time and his belly.

It was a short walk to the Dancing Birds Café. The place was tucked away down a side street off Reno's main drag. The broad windows were canopied by red-and-green-striped awnings, the door was solid oak with a brass knocker barnacled to the wood, and a flickering gas lantern hung on the wall to the right of the door. Archer took a moment to light up a Lucky off the open flame. Breathing in the methane reminded him of the war, where if you weren't sucking foul odors like cordite into your lungs, you'd think you were either dead or someone had upped and taken the war elsewhere.

He opened the door and surveyed the place. Seven in the evening on the dot, and it was packed as tight as a passenger ship's steerage class, only these people were better dressed and drinking niftier booze. Waiters in black bow ties and short white jackets seemed to hop, skip, and jump in frenetic furtherance of their duties. Archer looked for the "dancing birds" but saw no evidence of winged creatures performing the jitterbug. Either the place was misnamed, or he was in for a real surprise at some point.

At the far end of the room was a raised stage with a curtain, like one would see at a theater. As Archer stood there, hat in hand, the curtains parted and out stepped four long-limbed platinum blondes dressed so skimpily they looked ready to hop into bed for something other than sleep. Each of them held a very large and very fake bird feather in front of them.

A short, tubby man in a penguin suit waddled onstage and over to a microphone the size of two meaty fists resting on a stand. With deliberate dramatics he announced that the four ladies were the eponymous Dancing Birds and would be performing for the entertainment of the patrons now either eating or, in the case of half the tables that Archer could see, *drinking* their dinners.

About the time the ladies started to sing and hoof it across the wooden stage while twirling their feathers and twitching their hips, a bow-tied gent came up and told Archer there was room for him if he didn't mind sharing a table.

"Works for me," Archer said amiably.

He was led to a table that was nestled right next to the stage, where a man in his fifties sat. He was short and well-fed, and his calm, regal expression and sharply focused eyes told Archer that he was a man used to giving orders and seeing them obeyed, which was a decent gig if you could get it and then hold on to it. The tux handed Archer a stiff menu with the food items written in free-flowing calligraphy, took his order for three fingers of whiskey and one of water, and departed. Archer hung his fedora on the seat back and nodded to the other man.

"Thanks for the accommodation, mister," he said.

He nodded back but didn't look at Archer; he kept his gaze on the Birds.

When Archer's drink came the man turned and eyed the whiskey. "Good choice. It's one of the best they serve."

"You have knowledge of the bar here?"

"In a way. I own the place. Max Shyner." He raised a flute of champagne and clinked it against the whiskey glass.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Shyner. My name's Archer. And thanks a second time for the table spot, then. Wondered why you had such a good seat for the show."

"You like the Dancing Birds?" he said, returning his gaze to the stage.

Archer gave a long look at the Bird on the end, who responded with a hike of her eyebrows, the lift of a long fishnet-stockinged leg in a dance kick, and a come-hither smile before she tap-tapped to the other end of the stage with the rest of the feathered flock.

"Let me just say how could a breathing man not?"

"You just in town?" Shyner asked.

"Why, do I look it?"

"I know most of the regulars."

"Passing through. Bus out tomorrow."

"Where to?"

"West of here," he said vaguely, not wanting to offer anything more.

"California, then?" Shyner said.

“Maybe.”

“Well, son, any farther west and you’d be drinking the Pacific.”

“Suppose so,” replied Archer as he took a sip of the whiskey. He picked up the menu. “Recommend anything?”

“The steak, and the asparagus. They both come from near here. Get the Béarnaise sauce. You know what that is?”

“We’ll find out.” Archer gave that order to the waiter when he next came by and got a finger of whiskey added to what he had left. “So how long have you owned this place?”

“Long enough. I was born in Reno. Most are from someplace else, at least now. Great transition after the war, you see.”

“I guess I’m one of them,” replied Archer.

“Where in California? I got contacts, in case you’re looking for work.”

“Thanks, but I think I got something lined up.”

“The Golden State is growing, all right, why people like you are rushing to get there. Me, I’m more than content with this piece of the pie.”

“Who’s she?” asked Archer, indicating the Bird who had given him the eye.

“Liberty Callahan, one of my best. Sweet gal.” He pointed a finger at Archer. “No ideas, son. She wants to get into acting. Don’t think she’ll be here long, much to my regret.”

“I’m just passing through, like I said. I’ve got no ideas about her or any other lady.”

Shyner leaned forward, his look intense and probing. “You like to gamble?”

“My whole life’s been a gamble.”

“I mean, in a casino?”

Archer shook his head.

Shyner drew a fist of cash from his pocket and peeled off fifty dollars in sawbucks.

“You take this, with my compliments, and go try your luck at the Wheelhouse. It’s my place.”

“You give out folding money to all the folks passing by?” said Archer. “If you do, you might want to stop before you run out.”

Shyner leaned in more so Archer could smell the champagne on the man’s breath and Old Spice cologne on the ruddy cheeks. “Little something you

need to know about casinos, young fella. No matter what the game, the casinos have the edge. With blackjack and roulette it's a little less, with craps and slots a little more. But there's no game where the House *doesn't* have the advantage. My job is to get folks into my place. Even if I have to front them a bit. In the long run it pays off for me."

"Well, with that warning, aren't you defeating your purpose of recruitment?"

Shyner laughed. "You forget the element of human nature. I give you a little seed money and you'll pay that back and more on top in no time."

"Never got the point of gambling. Life's uncertain enough as it is."

"Gambling will be here long after I'm dead and buried, and you too. People are born with weaknesses and they pass them on. Sort of like Darwinism, only the stupid survive."

"I might try your place, but I'll do it with my own coin, thanks."

"You sure?"

"Sure as I'm sitting here with a man who owns a casino."

Shyner put the cash away and lit up a short, thin cigar and blew wobbly rings to the high plastered ceiling. "You surprise me, Archer. I've done that fifty-dollar bit more times than I can remember and you're the first to turn it down."

"So what about all those casinos in Las Vegas? Don't they give you competition?"

Shyner waved this concern away. "In twenty years it'll be a ghost town and no one will even remember the name Las Vegas, you mark my words."

His steak and asparagus came, and Archer ate and washed it down with another two fingers.

"Can I at least comp your meal, Archer?"

"What do I have to do in return?"

"Just go to my casino. Two blocks over to the west. You can't miss it."

Archer laid down a dollar for his meal and drinks.

"So you're not going to the Wheelhouse then?" said Shyner in a disappointed tone.

"No, I am. Just on my terms instead of yours."

"Action doesn't start up till around ten. You'll want the full picture."

As he left, Archer gave Liberty Callahan a tip of his hat as she was singing a solo while reclining on a baby grand piano that had been wheeled onstage.

She hit him with a dazzling smile and then kept right on singing without missing a beat. Her voice sounded awfully good to Archer. She waved bye-bye with her fake feather as he left the nest.

Archer had to admit, he liked the lady's style.

Chapter 3

THE WHEELHOUSE WAS LOCATED in a building about as big as an aircraft carrier, but with nicer furniture, no portholes, and enough booze to launch her. Inside an army of gamblers was looking to win big, although almost all would lose what they had brought plus what they hadn't brought. Archer didn't need Shyner to tell him the odds favored the House. Somebody had to pay for the liquor, the neon, and the ladies, and the chubby old man who owned it all and liked his champagne and fifty-dollar suckers.

Pretty much every game of chance invented was being played in the main room as cocktail waitresses in black stockings and low-cut blouses made their rounds with drinks, smokes, and the occasional teasing look that hinted at additional services available after hours for those few with any cash left. The bar set against one wall was packed because the liquor was half price, or so said the sign overhead. Drunk people no doubt increased the casino's odds even more, figured Archer.

As ten struck on his timepiece, he checked his hat and strode across the main floor to the cashier booths. He had never gambled in a casino, but Archer *had* gambled. First in prison, and then in private games where the odds were a little better than at this place, the booze came out of flasks or thimbles masquerading as shot glasses and the only ladies present were housewives coming to drag their no-account hubbies home while they still had twin nickels to their names.

He paid for ten bucks' worth of chips, then ambled over to a craps table and from a distance studied the bets on the board until the table opened up for new action like the jaws of a prowling gator. He continued to watch three guys crap out after two tosses each. Then two more rollers in the wings fell out, one passing out drunk, the other blowing his whole stake on the last throw of the dice.

A man at the rail turned and saw Archer. He beckoned for Archer to join him.

After Archer did, the man said, “Listen up, son, this here fella about to throw has been hot three nights in a row.”

Archer looked down at the gent speaking. He was small and around sixty with fine white hair and a pair of rimless specs worn low on his squat, red-veined nose. He was encased in a seersucker suit with a snazzy blue bow tie and two-tone lace-up shoes. His nose and flushed face stamped him as a man who liked his drink more than he liked just about anything else.

“Is that right?” said Archer.

“Yes sir. That boy can roll.” He held out a flabby hand. “Roy Dixon.”

“Archer.”

They shook hands as the stickman standing behind the casino’s table bank called for fresh bets. The new shooter stepped up to one end of the table shaking out his arms and undoing kinks in his neck, like he was about to enter a boxing ring and not the green felt of a craps table that might be the most complicated betting game ever devised. Archer thought he could even see the guy’s eyes roll back in his head for a second before he shook it all clear and got ready to either do the House damage or get grizzly-mauled by a pair of dice weighing an ounce. The two base dealers handled all the chip traffic, while the seated boxman, a burly man wearing a green visor and a sour expression, watched all of this like his life and all those he knew and loved depended on his not missing *anything*.

“Okay, son, let’s make some money,” said Dixon, who made his bet on the Pass line.

“How?” said Archer.

“Hey, you.”

Archer looked up to see one of the base dealers drilling him with a stare. “The button’s off, pal. Got a new shooter coming up, no point made. You stand by the rail, you got to bet. That’s prime real estate, buddy. Didn’t your mama ever teach you that?”

Everyone laughed and more than a few gave Archer patronizing looks. He placed some chips next to Dixon’s on the Pass line.

“Thank you, sonny boy, now don’t you feel all better inside?” said the dealer.

Dixon leaned over and whispered to Archer, “He’s gonna roll seven on his

come out roll.”

“How do you know that?”

“Shit, ’cause he always does.”

The stickman presented the shooter, a tall, thin man with curly brown hair and wearing a two-piece beige suit with a wrinkled white shirt and no belt, with five dice. He picked his deuce and handed the trio back to the stickman, who dumped them in his shake-out bowl.

“Dice out, no more bets allowed,” announced the stickman.

The shooter blew on the dice and rattled them once in his right hand.

“Throw with one hand only, and both dice have to hit the back wall,” instructed the stickman.

The shooter looked at him incredulously. “Hell, you think I don’t know that? How long I been throwing here, Benny?”

“Just saying,” was Benny’s only reply.

The shooter let fly, and the dice bounced off the far U-wall of the table.

The stickman announced, “We got a Big Red, natural seven. Pass line wins, no-pass goes down.”

Dixon said, “What did I tell you? We just doubled our money.”

Their chips doubled, and Archer looked intrigued as the dealers worked the payoffs and oversaw new bets.

“Now what?” asked Archer.

“He’s going to make his point on this next roll.”

Dixon set his chips down on certain betting squares and Archer followed suit.

A few moments later: “Shooter rolls a ten,” announced Benny. “Point is made, folks.”

The bets were posted again and the shooter was handed the dice. They banged off the far end of the table and came to rest.

“Little Joe on the front row,” bellowed Benny. “Hard four.”

Archer looked at the twin twos staring up from the faces of the dice. Then he looked at his pile of chips growing. He and Dixon bet again.

“Boxcars,” called out Benny as double sixes stood up after careening off the wall. “Twelve craps, come away triple.”

“What does that mean?” asked Archer.

“The Wheelhouse pays triple the field on boxcars,” Dixon said, looking down with relish at his now-towers of chips.

“Hey, pal, shouldn’t we quit while we’re ahead?” said Archer.

“What the hell’s the point of that?” countered Dixon.

Archer took some of his chips off, while Dixon did not.

The next roll was another winner and Dixon grinned at Archer. “You’re too timid, son. First rule of craps, you ride a hot shooter all the way to the very end.”

Archer glanced at the shooter. A cigarette dangled from his lips, a line of sweat rode on his brow, and his eyes spoke of too much booze, drugs, and maybe overconfidence. If ever a man looked done in and done out, this was the hombre, Archer thought. He lifted all his chips off the edge of the fabric and slid out his reserve chips from the slots in the table and took a step back as the boxman eyed him with contempt.

“Running out on a hot shooter, bub?” Archer just stared at him. The boxman added with a sneer, “Then go find your mommy. It’s time for your bottle of milk, *junior*.”

Dixon moved every single one of his chips forward onto new bets on the Pass line and come field a second before Benny handed the dice to the shooter.

As Archer walked away, a huge groan went up from the table as Benny gleefully called out, “Seven out.” The next sound was his stick coming down and raking away all the chips that had bet on the shooter continuing to roll. The House had come roaring back and the lives of the bettors gathered round came careening down to earth like a doomed plane.

Archer looked back to see Dixon staring at the spot where all his chips used to be. The king had lost his kingdom, as they all eventually did.

“I better go find that bottle of milk,” Archer said to himself.

Chapter 4

HEY. HEY, YOU!”

Archer looked over and saw the woman waving enthusiastically at him.

It was Liberty Callahan, of the Dancing Birds troupe, sitting at the roulette table. She had changed out of her stage outfit and lost her condor-sized feather. While her sparkly dress was tight, her welcoming smile, promising skittish fun with few rules, was even more appealing to Archer. And yet when he more soberly took in her toothy smile and frisky appearance, Archer saw in it prison guards itching to bust his head, chain gangs to nowhere, and food that was not food at all. That was what had happened to him the last time a gal had called out to him like that. A sob story, a poorly planned escape from her tyrannical father, the arrival of the police, a change in heart by the gal after her old man put the screws to her, with the result that Archer had donated a few years of his life to busting up rocks and seeing the world through the narrow width of prison cell bars. Still, he ordered a highball from the bar and took a seat next to her. He just couldn't seem to help himself. He was an internal optimist. Or just stupid.

“I'm Liberty Callahan.”

“I'm Archer.”

She shot him a curious look. “That's a funny name.”

“It's my surname.”

“What's your given name?”

“Not one I 'give' out.”

Her features went slack and put out, but Archer didn't feel unduly bothered by this. Any first meeting was a nifty place to lay out the ground rules. And his new universal ground rules were to take no one into his confidence and to listen more and talk less.

“Suit yourself, *Archer*.” She turned to play with her little stack of chips.

He said, “Mr. Shyner pointed you out to me back at the café. Told me your name too.”

She eyed him cautiously. “That’s right, you were at his table.”

Archer eyed the wheel and the dealer standing in the notch cut out of the elongated table, while the gamblers sipped on drinks and conspired on their future bets. He heard all sorts of talk coming in one ear about this method and that superstition coupled with that infallible telltale sign of where a spinning ball would come to rest in a bowl full of colored numbers in slots that were spinning the other way. People had colorful chips in hand that looked very different from the ones Archer had been using at the craps table.

The table had a sign that said minimum and maximum bets differentiated between inside and outside bets. Archer had no idea what any of that meant.

“He told me you want to get into acting?” said Archer.

Her smile emerged once more, showing every tooth in her arsenal, including a jacketed porcelain crown in the back that was so white it looked nearly pewter in the shadowy cave of her mouth.

She nodded, her smile deepening. “People calling out your name and wanting your autograph. Your picture in the newspapers. Somebody else driving you around and you travel with your own maid. It all sure sounds swell. So, yeah, I want to try my hand at it. Stupid, maybe. Long shot, sure, but why not me, right?”

“So what are you going to do about it?” asked Archer evenly.

“Hey, hey!” called out the dealer. He was beady-eyed and thick at the waist but with a steady hand in which the little ball already rested. “You got a seat, you got to bet.”

“Sorry,” said Callahan. She quickly put a chip on ten black.

Archer pulled out some of his crap chips.

The dealer shook his head. “No, no, you need to use *roulette* chips here, sonny. Let me see what you got there.”

Archer pulled out all of his chips and showed them to the dealer. The man eyed him with interest as he totaled them up, scooped them away, and placed a stack of colorful chips in front of Archer.

“Okay, what do you want each to be worth?”

“Excuse me?” said Archer.

The dealer told him what his crap chips had been worth. “But you get to pick how much each of *these* chips are worth, while not going over the total

value of the chips you just turned in.”

“Why so complicated?”

“It’s not complicated. It’s roulette. Everybody at the table has a different color chip. They tell me what they’re worth and I keep that in my head. What’s complicated?”

Archer glanced over the chips and gave the man a number.

“Thanks, genius,” the dealer said as he placed a like-colored chip atop the rail by the wheel and then placed a number marker on it that coincided with the chip value Archer had given him.

The dealer grinned at Archer. “Memories are iffy, marker chips make it easy.”

“Yeah, I can see that, *genius*.” He put a chip on ten black next to Callahan’s.

The ball was dropped and the wheel spun by the dealer. People kept betting until the ball was about to drop and then the dealer called out, “No more bets.” Seconds later Archer and Callahan lost their chips because the ball decided twenty-one red all the way on the other side was a much more comfortable resting place than ten black.

Callahan took a sip of her cocktail and said, “I’m going to Hollywood. That’s what you do if you want to be in the movie business, Archer. Ain’t you heard of that place?”

“I don’t go to many movies. Never saw the point. They’re not real.”

“Well, that *is* the point.”

“If you say so.”

“Life is crap, Archer. You go to the movies to get away from that for a little bit. Get some pixie dust thrown on you for a precious two hours.”

“And when the two hours are up and the pixie dust falls off, your life is still crap.”

“Boy, it must be fun walking in your shoes,” she observed.

“But then you go back to the movies for more pixie dust, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

Archer said, “So you’re an addict. Might as well be smoking reefer. Movies are about making money. And putting butts in seats. No butts in the seat, no autographs, no maids, and no newspaper pics.”

She frowned. “Thanks for popping the one dream I have.”

Archer sipped his highball and tapped a finger against the tabletop. “We

all have dreams. Point is, what are you going to do about it? Just *going* to the place doesn't seem like enough. I'll bet it's chock-full of people wanting to do the same thing as you."

"I *know* that. I need to take some classes and work on how I walk and how I talk."

"You can already walk and talk. And dance, too, and sing. I'm witness to that. You do it pretty swell, in fact."

Surprisingly, her frown deepened at this compliment. "But there's a lot more to acting than that. You have to have what they call the 'it' factor. The camera has to love you. It has to capture something in you that maybe even you don't see. That's how a star is made."

"Heard that a bunch of actors fought in the war. Hank Fonda, Clark Gable. Lots."

"Oh, poor Clark Gable. Wasn't it awful what happened to his wife, Carole Lombard?" said Callahan. "That plane crash after she was out promoting war bonds. Her mom was with her but didn't like to fly. She wanted to take the train back. Lombard wanted to take a plane to get back to Gable faster. They said she and her mom flipped a coin. Her mom lost and they took the plane. And it flew right into a mountain."

"Yeah, I heard about that while I was overseas. Damn shame."

"So you fought?"

Archer shrugged. "Sure, like most everybody else."

"I worked in a factory making bombs."

"Dangerous work."

Callahan took a moment to pull a Camel from a pack she slid from her purse. She held out the smoke for Archer to light, which he did, using a box of matches he took from a stack next to a green glass ashtray overflowing with smoked butts. The air was thick with so much smoke Archer thought a fog had materialized inside.

She cupped his hand with hers as he lit the Camel. She glanced up at him as their skin touched, but he wasn't looking at her, with good reason. He waved the match dead and plunked it with the other wreckage into the ashtray. Then he sat back and watched her smoke. She did it well.

She said, "One girl I knew at the factory got killed in an accident. And I lost a brother and a cousin in the war. One in Germany and one in France. They're buried over there. I want to make enough money to go see their

graves and put flowers on them,” she added, her expression growing even more somber, but her eyes lifted to his. “You lose anyone in the war?”

“Just almost myself.”

“Right,” she said, apparently disappointed by this.

“So Hollywood then?” prompted Archer. “Your dream?”

“Yes. And don’t give me a hard time about it,” she added in a pouty voice that Archer didn’t much care for. Women, he’d found, did that to move men one way or another.

The dealer suddenly barked, “Hey, lovebirds, you gonna bet or you gonna give up your seats, ’cause that’s the choice you got to make. And do it before I die of old age, will ya?”

Callahan looked at the man with an expression that gave Archer pause. It was akin to a snake sizing up its next meal. He didn’t like it, but he could understand it. With a slow, methodical, full-of-meaning motion, she pushed her remaining chips onto twenty-two black.

“You sure about that, honey? Just that one bet,” said the dealer, giving her an eye back as though to evaluate her mental acuity.

Turning to Archer she said, “It’s the year I was born, 1922. And I like black better than red, always have.”

Archer slid all of his roulette chips next to hers.

She jerked so violently her Camel came close to hitting her in the eye.

“Archer, that’s too many chips for a single ride on the wheel. Soften the blow with other bets on white, black, even, odd. Don’t be a dummy, spread the risk.”

“Lady’s talking smart,” said the dealer.

Archer finished his highball and sensed the others at the table watching him, wondering whether he was mad, rich, just stupid, or all three. “Thing is, I didn’t earn it. I just followed a guy over at the craps table and got out before I lost it all. For me, it’s free money.”

“Ain’t no such thing, buddy,” barked the dealer.

Archer eyed him. “You in the business of *not* taking bets, *buddy*?”

The man chuckled and spittle ran down his chin. He didn’t bother to wipe it away. “Your funeral, pal. So just to be clear, you’re doing a straight up bet on twenty-two black with no outside odd or even, red or black column bets? How about some inside splits, corners, street, double street? Last chance, amigo.”

“If I knew what any of that meant, I’d answer you,” said Archer. “But all I know is if that little ball drops on twenty-two black, we win.”

“You know the odds?” asked the dealer nervously.

Archer glanced around the bowl. “You got thirty-six numbers.” Then he noted the zero and double zero slots that were in green felt rather than red or black.

“What are those numbers?” he asked.

The dealer grinned. “That’s where the House gets its advantage, pal, didn’t you know?”

“You mean, it doesn’t count for the odds?”

The grin deepened. “Nope, just two more numbers to add to the thrill. See, that’s what *advantage* means.”

“So thirty-six minus one means the odds are longer than the road from heaven to hell and the payoff is thirty-five to one, although the wheel has *thirty-seven* opportunities to lose.”

“You’re picking it up real fast, pardner,” said the dealer, eyeing the big stack of chips on twenty-two black. His eyebrow twitched and a sweat bubble sprouted over this twitch like a mushroom after a hard rain. “Like taking candy from a baby,” he said, but there was no spirit behind it.

“So you gonna spin the wheel and drop the ball, or do I have time for a smoke break?” asked Archer.

Callahan gripped Archer’s hand under the table and gave him a pointed smile that showed all teeth and the jacketed crown that now looked more white than pewter.

The dealer looked around the table and then glanced to the ceiling and muttered something Archer couldn’t hear.

The wheel was spun, the dealer sent the ivory ball spinning in the opposite direction, and Archer and Callahan waited for what seemed an eternity for the game to do what it was designed to do.

The bona fide absurdity of the endeavor was not lost on Archer. He watched a dozen reasonable-looking adults eyeing a little ball like it was the most important thing they would ever witness in their entire lives.

It’s a damn miracle we won the war and aren’t speaking German.

“No more bets,” barked the dealer.

A moment later, Callahan shrieked, “Omigod,” as the ball dropped into the slot for twenty-two black.

She threw her arms around Archer and kissed him on the lips, almost knocking him out of his seat.

“Damn,” said the dealer, shaking his head.

“How much did we win?” asked Archer quietly. “I mean in money, not wafers.”

The dealer eyed the bets and then the markers and said mournfully, “Little over four grand for you. Two hundred and eighty bucks for the lady.”

“Holy Jesus,” exclaimed Callahan.

“We’ll cash out now,” said Archer, giving the dealer a dead stare.

The man slowly counted out a number of regular casino chips. He slid a small pile to Callahan and a far larger stack to Archer.

Archer took his stacks of chips, split them evenly, and handed one stack to Callahan.

“What are you doing?” she said, bug-eyed. “You won those, not me.”

“I just followed your bet, Liberty. I would’ve won nothing except for you. So a fifty-fifty split seems fair.” He lit a Lucky Strike and eyed the dealer through the mist. “After all, it was free money.”

“Do you...? I mean, are you...? Oh, Archer.” She kissed him again, this time on the cheek and not with as much fury, so he held firm in his seat.

The dealer said, “Hey, look, the night’s young. You folks sure you won’t let me try to win some of that back? My boss ain’t gonna be happy with me.”

Archer flipped him a fifty-dollar chip. “He might still be unhappy. But you won’t be, amigo.”

The man caught the chip and looked surprised. “Didn’t figure you for a class act. My mistake, buddy.”

“I think you figured me just right, but four grand can bring class to any bum.”

After Archer and Callahan reclaimed their hats from the hat check girl, they turned chips into dollars at the cashier’s desk, and Archer carefully folded the money over and put it through a slit in his hat’s lining. Callahan’s stash disappeared into her purse.

“How about a drink?” she said. “To celebrate? On me? Not here. They water everything down. I know a place.”

He studied her for so long she finally said, “What!”

“Works for me.”

“What took you so long?”

“The guy usually does the asking, not the girl.”

“Well, I’m the other way around, Archer. You hang around me long enough, you’ll figure that out.”

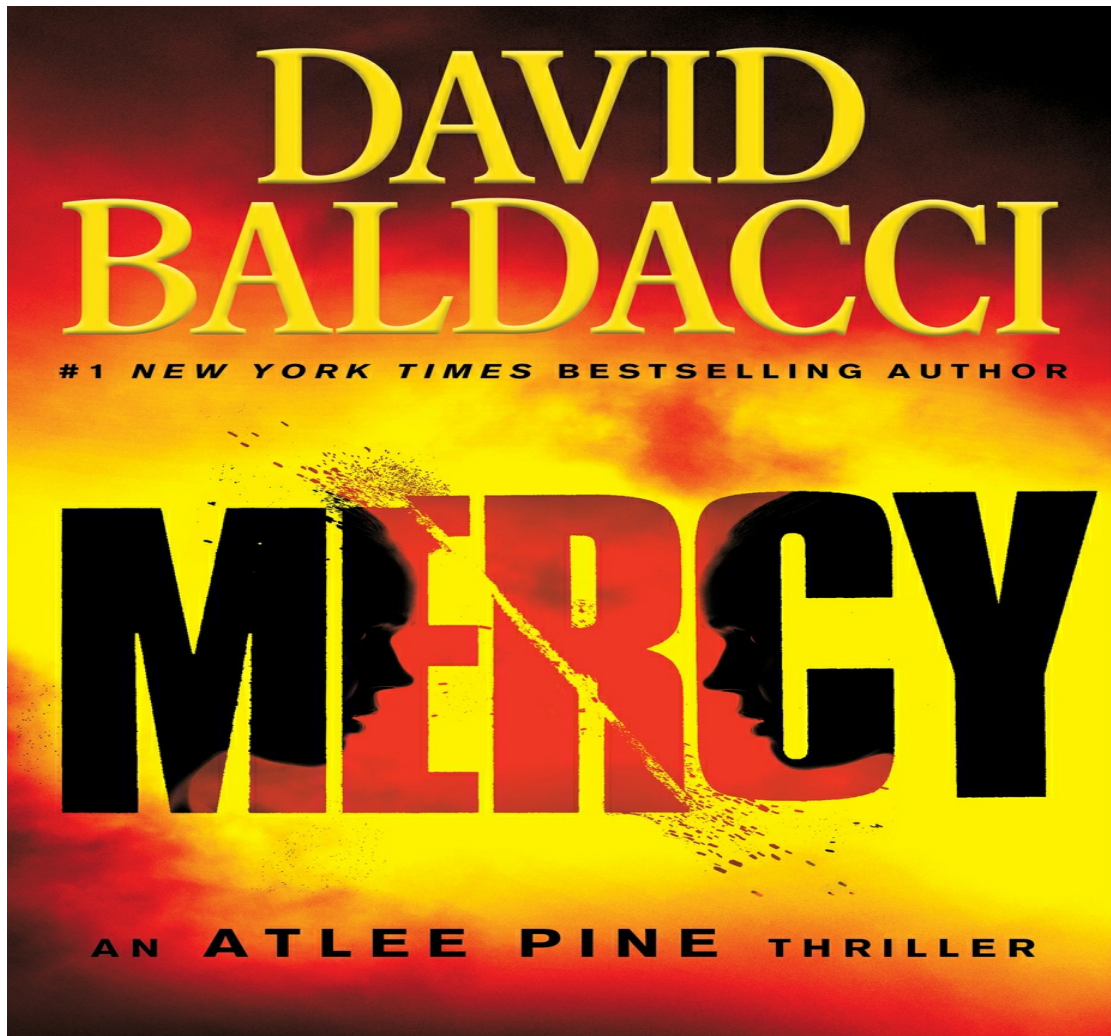
“Maybe I will. Or maybe I won’t. But let’s go get that drink,” he added with a measure of calm bordering on ambivalence.

“You’re a strange bird. Most folks after winning all that would be sort of giddy.”

“I don’t think I have any giddy left.”

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ATLEE PINE IS CLOSER TO FINDING HER LONG-LOST SISTER
THAN EVER BEFORE, IN #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR DAVID BALDACCI'S RIVETING NEW THRILLER:



AVAILABLE NOVEMBER 2021
A preview follows.

Chapter 1

INCH BY SOLID INCH, Atlee Pine watched the battered coffin being lifted to the surface from where it had rested six feet down for nearly two decades. Coffins and bodies were not supposed to be retrieved. They were supposed to stay right where they were planted, at least until a dying sun lashed out across space and bid farewell to all on earth.

But, for Pine, it was just that kind of day.

Just that kind of year, actually.

She gazed over at a black crow as it stridently cawed from its perch on the branch of a sickly pine overlooking the pierced grave. The bird seemed to think its meal was being delivered up as a boxed lunch, and the creature was getting impatient.

Well, I'm thirty years impatient, Pine thought.

Pine was an FBI special agent. Five eleven in bare feet, she possessed a muscular build from years of lifting massive amounts of weights, first for athletic glory, and currently to survive the rigorous demands of her occupation. Some agents spent careers mainly on their butts staring at computer screens or *supervising* agents on the streets. Pine was not one of them.

Her normal beat was in Arizona, near the Grand Canyon. It was a lot of ground to cover, and she was the only FBI agent out there. Pine preferred it that way. She hated bureaucracies and the paper pushers who lived and died by their stifling mountain of rules that got you nowhere fast. Certainly not with putting bad people away, which was really the whole point for her.

She was currently in Virginia working on something personal. This was her one shot to get things right in her life.

Next to Pine was her administrative assistant at the Bureau, Carol Blum.

Pine and Blum were searching for Pine's twin sister, Mercy Pine, who had

been abducted from their shared bedroom in Andersonville, Georgia, when the girls were just six years old. Pine had nearly been killed by the abductor, surviving by a combination of sheer luck and, Pine supposed, her absolute unwillingness to die. She hadn't seen Mercy since. It was an incident that had destroyed the Pine family and stood as the one traumatically defining moment of her life.

They had tracked Mercy's whereabouts to a place near Crawfordville, Georgia, in Taliaferro County, the most rural and least populated county in the state. She had been given the name Rebecca Atkins and had been kept as a prisoner until she'd escaped many years ago. Now the trail was as cold as a morgue freezer.

Joe Atkins, one of her captors, had been found murdered the day after Mercy had escaped. His wife, Desiree, had disappeared at the same time. Pine had unearthed that her sister's kidnapper was a man named Ito Vincenzo. He was the brother of Bruno, a mobster who had held a grudge against Pine's mother, Julia. She had acted as a mole for the government in its successful attempts to bring down several New York crime families back in the 1980s. Members of crime families did not like to be brought down. They held it against you. The Vincenzo family had certainly held it against the Pine family. At the urging of his murderous brother, Ito Vincenzo had tried to obliterate the Pines, and had largely succeeded.

The Bureau had recently put out a PSA using an image of Mercy captured at the exact moment she had broken free from her improvised prison cell. Pine had hoped that if Mercy was alive she would see the notice and come forward. That had not happened, so Pine had decided to work on a different lead.

Years ago, her mother had told Pine that her father, Tim Pine, had killed himself. Subsequently, she had learned that Tim was not her biological father. A man named Jack Lineberry was. Lineberry had been nearly killed in an attack aimed against Atlee Pine in an unrelated case. The revelation that he was her father had stunned Pine, but what she had found out recently had shocked her just as much, if not even more. That was why she was here.

I know all families are dysfunctional, but mine seems to be the undisputed world champ in that competition.

The coffin finally reached the surface and was shifted away from the hole and set on the grass. Its metal carcass was visibly damaged by water, and also

by sitting in the earth all those years. She wondered how preserved the contents would be.

A forensics team hurried forward, quickly prized open the coffin, and placed the human remains in a body bag. They zipped it up and loaded it into the back of a black van, which was quickly driven away. Pine thought she knew who was in that grave. But thoughts weren't enough, certainly not for an FBI agent, or a grieving daughter, hence the exhumation. DNA identification was as definite as it got. That would reveal who had been in the coffin, of that she was certain.

Pine had never been to this grave in rural Virginia, for the simple reason that her mother had lied to her about where her father's supposed suicide had taken place. Her mother had also told her that her father had been cremated and his ashes scattered by her at some unknown place. All lies. But then again, it seemed everyone had lied to her about her past.

She now believed the man in the grave was none other than Ito Vincenzo. He had apparently discovered Tim Pine's whereabouts and come to exact revenge on him. Only he had ended up being the one to die.

Pine had also been led to believe that her parents had divorced because of irreconcilable differences related to their guilt over Mercy's disappearance. Now she knew that Tim had faked his death, and her mother had voluntarily left her remaining daughter shortly thereafter. Julia Pine had in fact joined her ex-husband, and they had vanished together.

And left me all by my lonesome. Thanks, guys. What great parents you turned out to be.

Chapter 2

PINE LOOKED AT CAROL BLUM. In her sixties, a mother of six grown children, and a longtime employee of the Bureau, Blum had become something of a surrogate mother to the federal agent, to some degree taking the place of the one who had abandoned her.

Blum stared resolutely at her boss, who had her hands shoved deep into her jeans pockets, and whose features held a frown that seemed to run out of room on her face.

“How soon will they know if it is Ito Vincenzo?” asked Blum.

“Hopefully a couple of days max. I gave them samples of his DNA.”

“How’d you get those?”

“From his son’s and grandson’s bodies. A familial match under these circumstances constitutes a slam dunk.”

“Yes, of course,” Blum said quickly. “There’s no other way a DNA connection to the Vincenzo family could be in that grave.”

They walked back to the car and drove off.

“So what now?” asked Blum.

“We have some time, since the Bureau has given us an official leave of absence.”

“It was the least they could do after you and Agent Puller solved that case in New York.”

John Puller was an Army investigator who had teamed with Pine to run to ground a blackmail operation that had reached into the highest levels of the country’s power structure. Puller had been shot in the process, but he was on his way to a full recovery.

“You were in on all that, too, Carol. And you almost lost your life because I screwed up.”

“You also *saved* my life.”

“After needlessly putting it in danger,” countered Pine. As she turned out of the cemetery she added, “If Mercy sees the PSA she might come in. That would be the ideal scenario.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then it could be that she’s...no longer alive.” Pine shot a glance at Blum. “I’ve accepted that possibility, Carol. A long time ago. I know Mercy was alive when she got free from the Atkinses. But a lot could have happened in between.”

Blum said, “And it doesn’t seem like the Atkinses did anything to, well, to educate her or...” Her voice trailed off and she looked uncertainly at her boss.

“Let’s just acknowledge it—she looked like a wild person,” said Pine slowly. “And I’m not sure how she could manage to function in society on her own, at least mainstream society. And people who live on the fringes with no support can be exploited.” Pine looked out the window and said dully, “The person I saw in that video...could be exploited.”

“But she was resilient and resourceful, Agent Pine. Look at how she survived the Atkinses and then outsmarted them and escaped.”

“And Joe Atkins ended up dead with a knife sticking in his back,” replied Pine.

“I already told you how I feel about that. He deserved what he got.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, Carol. But I am saying that if Mercy *did* kill him, if she is violent, then the intervening years might not have been kind to her. She might have done other things.”

“You’re thinking that she could have hurt other people?”

“Or, more likely, had been a victim of violence,” Pine said.

“Which brings me back to my original question: What do we do now?”

“Her last sighting was near Crawfordville, Georgia. She got away that night, or at least it appeared she did.”

“What do you mean ‘appeared’?” asked Blum.

“Desiree Atkins has never been found. There are at least three scenarios that I can see.” Pine counted them off on her fingers. “She killed her husband and fled. Mercy killed her and fled. Or Desiree killed Mercy and fled.”

“Why would Desiree kill her husband?”

“By all accounts, she was a sadistic nut. We heard a gunshot on the video and just assumed it was Joe firing at Mercy. But what if Desiree had the gun

and was doing the shooting? What if Joe tried to stop her? He gets the gun away but she stabs him.”

“So you think Joe might have wanted Mercy to get away? I just don’t see that. When the truth came out they *both* would have been in a great deal of trouble.”

“I’m saying it’s possible, not probable. She might have managed to kill Mercy, then Joe got nervous and wanted to call the police, so she stabbed him and fled with Mercy’s body. Only it would have been a real chore for her to lift the body into Joe’s truck. Desiree was tiny, and Mercy looked to be over six feet and probably outweighed her by seventy pounds. And they brought cadaver dogs in after we found out what happened there. There are no bodies buried anywhere in that area. So that option is out. But what if Joe helped her get rid of Mercy’s body, then got cold feet or regrets? Then Desiree plunged the knife in his back.”

Blum mulled over this. “Or, like you said, Mercy could have killed both of them. She left Joe’s body and maybe took Desiree’s remains and buried them somewhere far away.”

“It’s possible. But that would mean Mercy would have had to drive the truck.”

Blum said, “Surely she could have figured that out.”

Pine shook her head. “The truck has a manual transmission. I don’t know anybody, particularly someone who has been kept in a hellhole for years and never attempted to drive *anything*, who could have figured out how a clutch works. Certainly not under such stressful conditions. And I can’t see the Atkinses having taught her.”

“So what are you saying then?”

“I’m saying, Carol, that I think it was *Desiree* who took off that night in the truck. But I think she went alone.”

“Because the jig was up, you mean?”

Pine nodded. “Yes. So, to answer your initial question of what to do now, I think we head back to Georgia and see if we can pick up a very, very cold trail.”

“And Jack Lineberry? Will you stop in to see him while we’re in Georgia?”

To that, Pine said nothing.

She had mixed feelings about her biological father. And their last

encounter had been disastrous. She was not expecting anything better the second time around. But ultimately the fault lay with him, not her. That's just what happened when every word out of your mouth was a lie.

Chapter 3

PINE STARED OUT THE WINDOW of the rental car at Crawfordville, in densely wooded Taliaferro County, Georgia. Here, you'd never see an assailant coming before it was too late. Thick foliage was a killer's best friend, whether they were hunting deer or people.

They had flown into Atlanta from Virginia, rented the car, and driven here. They had already checked in with Dick Roberts. He was the retired, straight-as-an-arrow county sheriff who had helped them when they were down here the first time. It had been Roberts who, years before, had answered the 911 call and found Joe Atkins's body. The question had always been—who'd stuck the knife blade there? Roberts also had been with Pine when they had discovered Mercy's old prison cut into a knoll some distance away from the Atkinses' house, and when they had found and viewed the video chronicling her sister's escape. Roberts knew that Mercy was Pine's sister, and that this case was personal to her.

No, it's not just personal. I'm betting my entire professional life on finally solving this thing. There is no going back for me.

A sense of panic seized her for a moment, like a swimmer who realized they were caught in a riptide with a limited and risky way back to shore. Then she glanced out the window, drew a long, calming breath, and silently chastised herself to get a grip, that she was acting like a child.

Roberts had given them the route that the Atkinses' truck had to have taken that night to where it was later found. They were now retracing that route. It was along a rural road; all the roads here were rural and winding and devoid, for the most part, of living things, except for the critters residing in the woods. They counted only five homes along the way. Three of them were occupied; two were abandoned. They stopped and asked their questions and found out that none of the people living here now were there during the

relevant time period.

After the last interview, Pine and Blum drove to the spot where the truck had been found. It was an old Esso gas station long since abandoned, with the four letters and the neon tubes backing them having been used for target practice over the intervening years; only the sign's metal spines survived. It was a bare, eroded filament of civilization in a forest that looked determined to reclaim its own. They sat in the car next to where the gas pumps used to be. Pine took a look around, and the view was as desolate as her hopes. But then something occurred to her.

"Okay, the truck and Desiree ended up here," said Pine. "But why *here*?"

Blum gazed around. "I think this is a place to *meet* someone. 'Hey, so and so, come get me at the Esso station.' It was probably the only such landmark around. Desiree didn't know when the body would be found. She wanted to get away, but not in a vehicle that could be traced."

"And the 'so-and-sos' are pretty limited. In fact, there are only two possible choices, to my mind."

"Len and Wanda Atkins, her in-laws," replied Blum. "But Sheriff Roberts said that he talked to them after Joe was killed and Desiree disappeared. They both said they hadn't heard from Desiree."

"And they were both probably lying to save their own asses. You saw the picture of Mercy with them. They *knew* she was being held against her will. They knew if this all came out, they were going to prison. That's why they got the hell out of here pretty soon after Mercy escaped and Joe was killed. I'm now certain that Desiree called them that night and told them what had happened. They arranged to meet her here where she abandoned the truck. They drove her somewhere, maybe a bus or train station. And off she went to start a new life with a new identity. Then they went back to their trailer and were there when they got the word the next day about their son." She eyed Blum. "Any of that seem unlikely to you?"

"No, it all sounds spot-on, Agent Pine."

Then Pine's eyes narrowed and her look became less certain. "But it *does* seem unlikely that they would just take Desiree's word for it that he was dead. They might have thought they could still save him, or that she was even lying about it. But if he *was* dead, they would have been terrified that animals could have torn Joe's remains apart overnight. And we know that didn't happen."

“So maybe *they* were the ones to make sure their son’s body wasn’t desecrated?”

“Which means we need to find Len and Wanda Atkins and ask them that directly.”

“If they’re still alive.”

“If they are, they would be getting Social Security and Medicare. We could find them that way.”

“And he was a Vietnam vet. He was wounded. So...”

Pine picked up this thought thread. “That means he might be in contact with the VA for meds and treatments and the like. That would actually be faster for us than going through the HHS bureaucracy, because I don’t really have good contacts there.”

She pulled out her phone.

“Who are you calling?” asked Blum.

“Who else? John Puller. He already helped me get Len Atkins’s military records.”

She spoke with Puller, who told her he was recovering quickly from his injuries. He also said he knew several people at the VA because of his father being in one of their facilities, and he would do all he could to help her locate Len Atkins.

She thanked him and clicked off. “Okay, we’ll let him work his magic.”

“While he’s doing that, do you think you should go and visit Jack Lineberry?”

Pine’s expression hardened and she glanced out the car window. Lineberry’s image swelled up in her head like a nightmare. “You asked me that before.”

“And you never answered me, which is why I’m asking again.”

“Why should I go see him?” asked Pine, her tone heated.

“Like it or not, he is your biological father. And the way you left it with him?”

“Look, I’m not proud of what I did.”

“And now it’s time to move on to another level with him.”

Pine glanced sharply at her friend. “And why do I have to do that?”

“Because you’re going to need his help, whether you find your sister or not.”

Pine looked even more confused. “Come again?”

“I presume you still want to find your mother. And Tim Pine, now that you almost certainly know he wasn’t in that grave. And Jack can be a valuable asset in helping you do that. However, I’m not asking you to cut him any slack.”

“Good, because I don’t intend to,” interjected Pine.

“But,” continued Blum imperturbably, “I think he is trying his best to do the right thing. And he *is* your father. And if you don’t at least make an effort to have a relationship with him, I think you’re going to regret it later.”

“I regret a lot of things, Carol,” said Pine. But she put the car in gear and headed on to see the man who had lied to her more than any other person in her life.

Except for my damn mother.

Chapter 4

JACK LINEBERRY'S ESTATE WAS AN hour south of Atlanta. He had made an enormous fortune in the financial world and owned, in addition to this main residence, a penthouse in Atlanta and a pied-à-terre in New York, as well as a private jet. It was a lifestyle that most people would be thrilled to enjoy. Pine was not among them.

If you need that many toys to enjoy life, then you're still a child.

They had already called ahead and arranged to meet with him. They checked in at the front gate, were admitted into the house, and escorted to Lineberry by one of the maids. He was still in bed, the woman told them—which alarmed Pine, because it was well into the afternoon.

They entered the room and the maid left. The space was dark and overly warm, with all the window shades lowered. It was like a tomb with wallpaper and carpet, and living people. The effect unnerved Pine.

"Jack?" said Pine.

Something stirred on the bed. A pajama-clad Lineberry struggled to sit up, and finally managed to do so. Pine and Blum drew nearer and looked down at him. Their features betrayed their alarm at the state of the man. He looked like he had aged two decades since the last time they had seen him. A tall, handsome man in his sixties, he looked shrunken, withered, fragile, and, most tellingly, done with life.

Blum said, "Jack...what happened?"

He focused on her with a pair of weary, bloodshot eyes, his brow crinkling in annoyance approaching anger. "Nothing...happened. I'm...doing okay."

"You don't *look* okay," Pine said bluntly. "You don't look okay at all."

"That's *your* opinion," he replied testily.

"That would be any reasonable person's opinion," countered Pine.

"I was *shot*, Atlee. It's not like I have a case of the flu. Nobody just pops

back from that. Particularly not someone my age.”

“I realize that,” she began before glancing at Blum. “And I know I was mad beyond all reason after my last visit here.”

“You had every right to be as angry as you were. I feel like I got off easy, actually.”

“Don’t go all chivalrous and make this harder than it has to be,” she said in a lighter tone.

He held up his hand before she could go on. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, Atlee. At this time in my life it’s imperative to do so.”

“Thinking about what?” she said sharply, not liking his fatalistic tone.

“About you, about Mercy, about your mother and Tim. And, finally, about me.”

Pine drew up a chair next to the bed and sat down. “And what have you concluded?”

Part of her didn’t want to know his answer, but in life you needed to listen to things you didn’t want to hear, maybe those most of all.

“Well, first of all, I’m leaving everything I have to you and Mercy.”

Pine immediately shook her head, recoiling at this news. “Jack, I don’t—”

“Please hear me out. Please. It’s important!”

Pine shot Blum another glance, and the woman nodded with a pleading look on her face.

She sat back, folded her arms over her chest, assumed a stubborn expression, and said, “Okay. I’m listening, but that’s not the same as agreeing.”

“I *am* your and Mercy’s father. That gives me certain responsibilities, none of which I have lived up to.”

“You didn’t know where—”

He interrupted. “I knew more than I let on. And what I didn’t know I could have found out. The bottom line is, I have behaved abominably throughout this entire thing. I doubt any man could have been a worse father.”

He was so distressed that Pine felt her anger at him start to fade. She sat forward and laid a hand on his arm. “Jack, you were between a rock and a hard place. There was nothing simple about the situation.”

“Well, it’s simple for me now. I have two daughters. You are my only family. Parents often leave what they have to their children and that’s what

I'm going to do, too. If you don't want it, that's fine, give it away to whoever and whatever you like. But you can't stop me from doing it," he added sharply. "I've already had my lawyers draw it all up and it's signed. There's nothing you can do about that."

"Okay, Jack, if that's what you want."

"It is."

"But you've got a lot of years ahead of you. So this is sort of premature."

"No one knows what tomorrow will bring, Atlee, we both know that better than most." Before she could say anything he asked, "Have you found out more about Mercy, or your mother and Tim?"

Pine told him about the grave being exhumed and awaiting confirmation that the body there was indeed Ito Vincenzo's. She informed him of their steps to track Desiree Atkins that night, and their deduction that she had met Len and Wanda and they had helped her to flee.

"You mean the people who were in that photograph with Mercy?" said Lineberry.

"Yes."

"Do you really think you can find them after all this time?"

"With the technology and databases available today, it's hard to stay hidden."

"And you're hoping they can tell you what happened to Desiree?"

"That's right. And if we can find Desiree she might be able to shed some light on that night and even on where Mercy might have gone."

"She might not have any incentive to tell you," Lineberry pointed out.

"There are ways she can be persuaded. She's looking at prison time for what she did. And if she murdered her husband or..." Pine drew a quick breath. "She'll talk."

Lineberry, with an effort, sat up a little straighter. The conversation seemed to have animated him. "There's one more thing," he said.

Pine looked at him warily. Her real father had already thrown one curveball at her with the inheritance thing; she had no interest in another one. "Yes?"

"I know that you've been doing all of this searching on your dime."

Pine's brow furrowed. She hadn't been expecting this. "So?"

"It's not fair that you continue to do so. I have the resources that—"

She got his meaning. "No, Jack, this is my search for—"

“It’s mine too!” he snapped, so unexpectedly they all simply froze. Lineberry actually looked stunned that he had the energy to do it. He continued more calmly, “If you use some of *my* resources, you might get to the truth faster. For instance, the use of my jet to get around.”

Pine began to shake her head but Blum said, “Go on, Jack. We’re listening.” She gave Blum a glare but remained silent.

“And I know you’ve been using rental cars and the like. That is not necessary. Take the Porsche SUV. It’s just sitting in the garage doing nothing. And...and I’ve opened an account with funds in it that you have the authority to access from anywhere.” He slid open the drawer on his nightstand and took out two pieces of plastic. “One debit, one credit. There is no limit on the amount you can charge. The four-digit PIN for the debit card is your birthday, month and day.”

“Jack, I can’t take your money.”

“It’s not my money, Atlee. It’s *our* money. And it’s not like you’re going to be using it to go on vacation. You’re using it to find your sister and my daughter. And your mother and Tim. I presume that when you’re working as an FBI agent, the more resources you have to accomplish the job, the better. Am I wrong?”

“Well, no,” she said slowly.

“Then I don’t see what the damn problem is, do you?” he added bluntly, as though daring her to conjure a reason that would thwart his will.

Well, thought Pine, he had niftily turned the tables on her this time. She even felt a grudging pride for how he was handling this.

Meanwhile, Blum reached out and took the cards. “There is no problem, Jack. Your very generous offer of help is much appreciated. Isn’t that right, Agent Pine?”

Pine looked at her and then at Lineberry’s weary yet hopeful features, and her expression softened. “Thank you, Jack. That *is* very kind and very helpful.”

He sat back, obviously relieved.

Blum handed the cards to Pine, who put them in her pocket.

Lineberry said, “And if you won’t stay here, I would like you to use my place in Atlanta as a base. And you can fly in and out of there if need be on my jet. I’ll ensure that it’s ready to go at all times. I certainly won’t be using it for a while.”

“Okay, Jack,” said Pine. She glanced at Blum. “That will be fine. But we may not be staying there much. We need to go where the leads take us.”

“Understood,” he said quickly.

“But I don’t want people waiting hand and foot on us. We can take care of ourselves.”

“I thought you might say that, so I have already given the staff there three months’ fully paid leave. You’ll have the run of the place all on your own.”

“That is very generous,” said Blum.

“It’s only fair,” said Lineberry emphatically. “For everybody.”

Pine asked, “Is there anything you can remember that might provide a lead as to where my mother and Tim could have gone?”

Lineberry gazed solemnly at Pine. “In answer to that, I’m going to give you something that your mother asked me *never* to let you see.”

Pine sat up straight now, every muscle tensed, her adrenaline spiking to such a degree she found it difficult to form her one-word response. “W-what?”

He once more reached into the drawer and this time pulled out a gray envelope. “When you read this, I want you to keep in mind that you must do the exact opposite of what your mother writes in here.”

“When did she send it to you?” said Pine, ignoring this curious piece of advice.

“It was around the time she left you. It just turned up in my office mail one day. I had given Tim my contact information when I saw him in Virginia. The letter has no return address. But you can see that the postmark is Charleston, South Carolina. I think she might have been on her way to meet up with Tim when she sent it to me from there.”

He held out the envelope to Pine. She stared at it like it was a gun being pointed at her. Then she took it, albeit grudgingly. She looked at the handwriting on the envelope. It was clearly her mother’s.

“I...I think I’ll read this later,” Pine said in a hushed tone.

In a shaky voice Lineberry said, “I should have given it to you before now. There really is no excuse except that for a large part of my adult life I was steeped in the art of keeping secrets. It’s not an excuse, you understand. It’s just...reality. At least it was for me.”

“Does this give any indication of where they might have gone?” asked Pine.

“Not that I could find.”

“What did you mean when you said I should do the exact opposite of what she writes?”

“Now *that* will be clear when you read it,” said Lineberry.

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About the Author

DAVID BALDACCI is a global #1 bestselling author, and one of the world's favorite storytellers. His books are published in over forty-five languages and in more than eighty countries, with 150 million copies sold worldwide. His works have been adapted for both feature film and television. David Baldacci is also the cofounder, along with his wife, of the Wish You Well Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting literacy efforts across America. Still a resident of his native Virginia, he invites you to visit him at DavidBaldacci.com and his foundation at WishYouWellFoundation.org.

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