

One

Elliot's Overture

Dallas, Texas

You probably won't remember me. But I remember you.

An indelible snapshot of person, place and time etched in my mind. A black and white negative appearing every time I close my eyes, like recalling the exact moment of your first kiss. A hint of spearmint on bated breath. Lips softer than silk ... Yeah, funny thing memories. They can be both a blessing and a curse.

I see you've moved on. Done well for yourself, despite everything. Easy for some. How long has it been? Far too long, huh? I've a question. You've never told that wife of yours, have you? And certainly not the kids.

Still don't know who I am?

Not surprising I guess, after all this time. I bet you thought I was dead and buried, certainly not one to darken your doorstep. Invade your space. Clutter your personal radar screen. Yeah, bet you thought there'd be nothing but plain sailing weather forever and a day.

You still don't remember me? A shame. Though there's plenty of that going around these days, the ability to forget. The ability to justify one's actions. All anyone need do is look around. The cop on the take. The banker willing to turn a blind eye. The

lawyer who only sees billable hours. Every damn politician. No, you're not alone.

But I remember what you did. I was powerless to stop your primal impulses back then. Remember those? The ones you've managed to suppress all these years. That you tucked away in a distant corner of your mind. Or have you? Tell me, do you still feel the urge to let them come out and play?

Oh, and guess what? Though you've probably already had an inkling by now. I'm back, and I've switched sides. An unrestricted free agent, you might say, with a whole new game plan. I'm no longer playing with a defensive mindset. No more putting up metaphorical stop signs for you to plough straight through. I'm going on offense, baby.

Who am I? Yeah, isn't that the million-dollar question? I'm the itch you can't scratch. The memory that never completely fades away. The recurring nightmare waking you at 3:00 a.m. every damn morning. The lurking danger you sense out the corner of your eye. The cold sweat leaking from your pores.

I'm your conscience.

No, fuck that. I've evolved. I'm something far worse.

And I'm coming for you.

Elliot Kruger read through what he'd written, rubbed weary eyes with wrinkled hands, and sighed with despair. Not too bad for a first draft, he thought, but far too wordy. In a fit of piqué, he crossed out several paragraphs in one fell swoop. Better, but still not close

enough to the effect for which he was searching. After he'd reworked a sentence here and added a word or two there, the final product slowly began to take shape. Like staring into a setting sun to see a looming figure slowly come into focus. Closer to the short, sharp, shock to the system he was hoping to capture. After another harried hour spent poring over every word, he felt he'd produced the clear and concise message he was looking to convey.

Lost in his thoughts, Elliot watched the last vestiges of sunlight slowly retreat across the kitchen table. Wads of balled-up notepaper, ample evidence of past failures, cast long shadows across the scarred wooden surface like a tiny mountain range in relief. Scraps from a half-eaten TV dinner sat congealing in its plastic tray. He'd not had much of an appetite for weeks now, but not surprising really. Though even as his world crumbled around him, he felt a sense of ... freedom. A renewed sense of purpose. He always had worked well under pressure, when faced with a deadline.

As the tremor in his left hand became more pronounced, Elliot pushed away from the table and retrieved the pill bottle from the counter next to the sink. He popped two Levodopa in his mouth and washed them down with a glass of tap water. He knew the shaking would pass fairly quickly once the pills worked their magic. Then he could complete his final task of the evening.

All was in readiness for his departure. The compact suitcase he'd packed earlier in the day stood waiting by the front door. The one-way ticket to Detroit, his passport, phone, and wallet lay on the sofa table in the hallway. Elliot paid them no mind as he ambled down the hall to the living room.

There, an antique Underwood typewriter he'd received as a retirement gift held pride of place atop a rosewood cabinet. His co-

workers thought the relic from the 1920s a fitting reminder of his forty-five years in the newspaper industry. He wondered if his co-workers would be proud of how he was about to put it to use.

Elliot set the typewriter down on the kitchen table then tore the cellophane from the set of index cards he'd purchased that afternoon. The pack contained twenty-five 4x6 thin, blank pieces of cheap cardboard. Barring mistakes, he'd only need four.

Rolling the first of the cards into the Underwood, he checked one last time that he was happy with the message. Satisfied, he began typing. The keys were stiff to the touch but he pounded out word after word with assurance.

You probably won't remember me.
But I remember you.

Elliot removed the first card, placed it into an unmarked envelope, then sealed the flap. On to the second.

Who am I? I'm the itch you can't
scratch. The memory that never
completely fades away.

Before he began on the third card, he surveyed his surroundings. Dirty dishes lay piled in the sink. Dust covered every surface. Garbage overflowed from the trash can in the corner. He once prided himself on his cleanliness. But all that changed four weeks earlier when he made the trip home from Medical City Dallas ... alone.

By the third card he was reading aloud as he typed.

I'm your conscience.

Tears leaked from his eyes, blurring the keys, and caused him to mistype a word. He tore the card from the typewriter in anger and tossed it over his shoulder.

A more cautious man would've been concerned with leaving behind evidence. Valuable clues to his intentions. But all Elliot felt was the boiling rage that had been building within for more than two decades. A rage that would soon be set free.

All he cared about were the same 127 words typed on each of the four separate cards.

Elliot slid the card into the final envelope and placed all four on the sofa table next to his phone. Addresses were unnecessary. He'd done his research. As much as he could, at any rate. His plan of action, years in the making and updated as needed, was set in stone. And it would begin tomorrow with an early morning flight from which he knew he would not return.

...And I'm coming for you.

Two

Just a Name

Ann Arbor, Michigan

Joe Stephens pushed the half-eaten plate of roasted sea scallops to the center of the table. Normally his favorite dish at the Black Pearl, but tonight the sight of the plump bivalves nestling in a congealing sea of zucchini cream risotto turned his stomach. Even the Sauvignon Blanc he favored tasted too sweet. He knew the reason why but was loathe to admit it. Sliding his chair back from the table he crossed one leg over the other, snatched his lighter and ever-present pack of Camels from his jacket, and surveyed the traffic on Main Street from the curbside patio.

The first deep drag helped calm his nerves. He held it in for as long as a man of his age and sketchy health could then blew a long stream of blue-tinged smoke skyward. A freshening northerly breeze quickly whisked it away to dissipate into the night sky. Late summer in Ann Arbor was his favorite time of year. Warm sun-drenched days, followed by cool evenings with a hint of autumn in the air. Much like the hometown of his youth. Quaint. Verdant. Serene. That was until the student hordes returned for the fall semester at the University. Of course, his own hometown wasn't always as serene as he would care to remember. But that was in

another lifetime of which he'd mostly forgotten. Until this afternoon, at least.

His sense of unease began earlier in the week with the envelope he'd discovered mixed in with his business mail. No address. No postage. Just his name on the front written in a scratchy scrawl. He first thought it a prank. A thinly veiled threat meant to unsettle. His mind wandered to the many customers he'd fleeced in one way or another over the years. After twenty years in Ann Arbor, the list was quite extensive. But the cliental utilizing his creative accounting services weren't known for their subtlety. A short drive into the surrounding countryside followed by a vigorous beating – or something much worse – was more their calling card, not an envelope clandestinely dropped through a mail slot. Two days later, and the note had all but slipped his mind. That was until his final appointment of the day.

- *Teresa, what do I have on for the rest of today?*
- *I'm assuming your grey suit, silly. Same as you've worn all day.*
- *No, I mean what's in my appointment book?*
- *Appointments. Is this some kind of test?*

The day's earlier conversation momentarily brightened his mood. He kept Teresa around for her ability to fill out a blouse rather than an appointment book. Anything above answering the phone he considered a gift from the Gods.

Joe massaged his temples and decided upon a different tack.

- *Do I have any more appointments scheduled for today?*
- *Oh, why didn't you just say that?*

Teresa sashayed into his office. The twenty-five-foot strip of carpet between their two desks her own fashion week catwalk. She held the appointment book open as if about to commence preaching.

- *Just one more appointment today at six.*

The name was not one familiar to him. The reason for the meeting carelessly not noted by Teresa. Though, he thought, that wasn't too unusual. Just to watch her flounce around the office in her skimpy outfits was worth the salary expenditure.

Promptly at six, the door to his outer office opened and Joe heard Teresa offer his visitor a cup of coffee. As Joe stood to greet him, he heard the man wisely decline. She bragged her specialty blend should win awards. He thought the only thing her foul brew would win was a conviction for the prosecutor after she'd poisoned some poor unsuspecting soul. A moment later she ushered the man into Joe's office.

He walked with a slight stoop. His skin the color of putty. Joe surmised he was in his mid-sixties, at least a decade older than himself. And by all appearances, not long for this world. Sensing the appointment wouldn't result in any long-term relationship, Joe's mind shifted to how best to quickly end the meeting and make his way down the street to the Black Pearl for dinner.

As they shook hands across the desk, Joe introduced himself and asked how he could be of assistance. The man spoke not a word and eyed him warily. He held a thin folder in his hand which he delicately placed on the desk as he sat down. Joe found himself midway between annoyed and intrigued by the man's silence. When

the man finally spoke – just two words – Joe’s annoyance turned to fear.

Two words.

A name.

A name he’d shed decades earlier along with the last vestiges of his previous life.

- *Yes, I know who you are. Or ... were.*

Joe had no idea where this conversation was going. But if the cold sweat running freely down his back was any indication, nowhere good.

A keen poker player, Joe pulled himself together. He knew maintaining his composure was the best strategy for the moment. And to keep his cards close. This man knew his former name, so what? The key was what else did he know?

- *What do you want?*

- *For now, for you to listen.*

He sat transfixed behind his desk for most of the next hour. Powerless to break the spell spun by this frail man named Elliot. Amazed at the level of research undertaken. Unbelieving that after all this time his past had been unearthed. Dredged from the depths of history to be laid out before him like a decaying corpse.

- *You may have this.*

Once the man named Elliot had spoken his piece, like a dispassionate prosecutor making his case before a captivated jury, he returned his notes to the folder, slid it across the desk, then uttered not another word.

Joe recoiled from the folder as if it was radioactive. Then the words spewed out. The readymade excuses he'd recited over and over so many times he'd come to believe them.

- *It was a different time. I did my duty. I was just following orders. So much water has flowed under the bridge ... Surely, you must understand. I ask again, what do you want? Is it money? I can ...*

The man named Elliot, remained silent, held up one hand to put a stop to Joe's ramblings, then rose from the chair. The look of disgust on his face speaking volumes. Then he turned and made his way from the office. Stopping in the doorway, he looked over his shoulder and spoke almost in a whisper.

- *I know you received the card. Read it again.*

Then he was gone.

Joe plunged the butt of his Camel into the risotto and tipped the last of his wine into the potted plant at his side. That the man named Elliot had seemingly disappeared without making any demands gave Joe no sense of calm. More a sense of foreboding that he may reappear at any time. Also, of the power he held in his liver-spotted hands. The power to ruin Joe's life. In a rush, he'd locked the folder in his desk draw.

Out of sight ...

Why he hadn't just immediately shredded the papers he couldn't say. Though their destruction wouldn't change a thing. Not so long as the bastard named Elliot lived.

Meanwhile, the index card hand-delivered to his office earlier in the week burned a hole in his suit's breast pocket. The words now making perfect sense. His mind a runaway train on a collision course with his past.

Bustling along Main Street, wheezing from too many cigarettes and too little exercise, he called Gretchen, his wife of eighteen years. It was movie night with her girlfriends, so he knew she wouldn't answer. He left a terse message letting her know he'd be home late. Both of his teenage children were off at one summer camp or another; he thanked God for little mercies. Joe next called the number of an associate who was an expert at making problems disappear.

Joe recalled the words on the card while waiting for his call to be answered.

You probably won't remember me.
But I remember you.

How long has it been? Far too long, huh? I've a question. You've never told that wife of yours, have you? And certainly not the kids.

It was a short drive north of town to the secluded nature area bordering Barton Pond where they agreed to meet. Joe wasn't yet convinced he was making the correct decision, but he knew his associate could be relied upon to be level-headed. A voice of reason when it came to these matters. That a contract killer could be considered in such terms Joe found mildly amusing. Then he remembered what was at stake.

You still don't remember me? A shame. Though there's plenty of that

going around these days, the ability to forget. The ability to justify one's actions. No, you're not alone.

He followed Main Street north to where it passed under Highway 14 and became Huron River Drive. The two-lane road hugged the river, though in the inky blackness only the occasional shimmer of moonlight upon its surface was visible through the trees. Maples and red oaks draped over the road; his headlights carving a narrow tunnel through the darkness. At night, this section of road reminded him of his homeland; twisting ribbons of narrow asphalt slicing through dark mountain passes. Fortunately, here in Michigan, there weren't people in the forest looking to kill him.

Who am I? I'm the itch you can't scratch. The memory that never completely fades away. The recurring nightmare waking you at 3:00 a.m. every damn morning. The lurking danger you sense out the corner of your eye. The cold sweat leaking from your pores.

How had this frail man named Elliot discovered his secret? Certainly not a countryman; the accent was all wrong. Joe was at a loss for an explanation. His papers, he knew, were immaculate. Perhaps, his chosen name ...? But he was such a small cog in the overall machinations of the time. And so long ago.

Dark memories caused a chill to pass through his body. A sinister portent. His mother described the feeling as someone stepping on one's grave.

No sooner had Joe shaken off his disquietude than he was blinded by the sudden illumination of a vehicle's high-beams mere

feet from his rear bumper. He flinched involuntarily as his eyes struggled to focus. Positive that only a moment earlier he'd been the only car on this lonely stretch of road. The car, inches from his bumper, weaved left then right as if making to pass. The dazzling headlights flashing from one side-view mirror to the other. Joe swore in his mother tongue wondering what was happening. He sped up only for the car behind to keep pace. Adjusting his mirrors did little to minimize the glare. Then, the realization he'd drifted across the center line. He noticed the oncoming headlights with seconds to spare. In his panic, he yanked the wheel hard back to the right. Far too hard. The over-correction caused him to lose control in the soft gravel lining the shoulder of the road. Next thing he knew his car was tumbling out of control through the underbrush down towards the river.

Joe's late model Ford Explorer rolled three times before coming to rest upside down in five feet of water. He'd blacked out for a moment but the river's cold water was a literal slap in the face. Water rushed in through the driver's side window and the cabin quickly began to fill.

It was his habit to drive with the window down, to keep the cabin from smelling of smoke. A brief thought flashed through his mind; his wife was right, if he quit smoking he'd live longer.

A younger, fitter man would've had no problem holding his breath for the time needed to release the seatbelt and scramble through the window to safety.

I'm your conscience. No, fuck that. I've evolved. I'm something far worse.

An aging man who smoked far too much, exercised far too little, and who was weighed down by a guilty conscience drowned in less than a minute.

And I'm coming for you.

On the road above, a dark-colored sedan sat idling. Its headlights now extinguished. A moment later it pulled away from the shoulder and continued sedately along Huron River Drive.