

Chapter 1

The driver pulled up in front of a shuttered bodega and tapped his GPS.

“No such address,” he said. “But it’s got to be this block.”

His look told me I had one last chance—he’d gladly drive me back to that quaint little cobblestoned street where I’d flagged him down.

“Here is fine,” I said.

“Suit yourself.”

He started peeling away before I had both feet planted on the sidewalk. I took a second to get my bearings, then turned and headed down a dim corridor of crumbling rowhouses, my brother’s SOS call playing on a loop in my head:

I swear, Teen—it’s bad this time.

It’s always bad, Bill.

Not like this.

So hang up and dial 911.

Teen, please ...

He kept hammering at me with his nasal, junkie twang.

Just give me the goddamn address, I said.

Of course, he wouldn’t tell me what kind of trouble he was in—not over the phone. *Shit’s that bad, Teen.*

The driver had guessed right—I found Bill’s squat near the end of the block, sandwiched between a vacant lot and a burned-out brownstone. At a little after midnight, a half-dozen men crowded the stoop—some with brown paper bags, some sucking on joints, their voices loud and relaxed—like a summer block party in late October. Bill wasn’t one of them, and he wasn’t waiting at the curb like he’d promised. I dug out my phone, stepped behind a delivery van and called his latest prepaid number. Straight to voicemail.

The old rage came charging back. I’d dragged my ass out of a warm bed. I’d lied to Tom, my husband, told him I’d been called in to cover the graveyard shift (lately, all our fights were about Bill). I had to be at work for real in six hours, yet here I was again, upending my life on a dime. For what? So that ungrateful shit could leave me dangling out here like murder bait? How many times can you rescue a man who just keeps hurling himself back in the water?

It was the old fear that kept me from storming off. Visions of Bill writhing on the floor, choking on his own vomit. No time to call 911—do something quick or your big brother dies. Maybe he was up there now in that grimy, off-books shelter, locked in a bathroom stall or hidden under a blanket, gagging and changing colors, having his deathbed epiphany—the moment that could actually turn him around if only he lived through it.

I checked my pocket to make sure the Narcan was still there.

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The men on the stoop let me pass without so much as a glance. Inside, I found a kind of reception desk—a card table flanked by red plastic chairs—but nobody keeping watch. Off to the side was a doorway with a black bed sheet hanging from the molding. I walked over and drew the sheet back a few inches. What had once been a sprawling parlor now looked like a Civil War pest tent—malformed rows of cots and bedrolls

and air mattresses, belongings lying ad hoc on the floor, slumped male bodies shuffling here and there with no purpose or conviction. I asked the nearest of them where I could find Bill Morgan.

“Three flights up,” he said. “Room with a real door.”

There were more men congregating on the stairs, leaning against a wall on one side, the remains of a banister on the other. A skeletal kid in his late teens drank spaghetti from a can. An old man poked around inside a broken transistor radio. Others just sat there. This crew gave me a hard look but didn't say anything.

More sheets hung from door frames all along the poorly lit second-floor hallway, marking a series of dormitories that I imagined residents graduated to after time served downstairs. I heard rustling and dragging feet and snoring and an occasional voice. The curtains did little to hold in the stench of sleeping men who drank and smoked far more often than they bathed.

The fourth floor was a loosely converted attic with the rafters and insulation still exposed. A plywood door with a hook for a handle stood between sagging columns of cardboard boxes. No light here save what filtered up from the floor below. I stepped forward, gave the door a few gentle taps. Nobody stirred. I knocked harder, then grabbed the hook and pushed. The door swung open. There wasn't any lock—just a chain and plate on the inside.

Bill wasn't there. I switched on the bulb hanging from the ceiling, reached back and pulled the door shut. The room stunk like bleach and stale cigarettes. To the left was a thin mattress lying on a built-in bed frame. No bedding, no pillow. To the right, a small sink with dark yellow stains running up from the drain. Faded synthetic carpeting covered what little floor there was. I guessed the bed, the sink and the door made this the luxury penthouse suite. Standing with a knee on the edge of the bed and one foot on the floor, I could palm both walls.

I went over to a small window and opened it, then stood gulping air and taking in the view: a half-dozen tiny yards and the backs of other brownstones. No fire escape. Not even a tree branch to grab onto.

And no trace of Bill.

I told myself he'd show up any minute. Nothing to worry about. Maybe the bleach was a good sign. Maybe he'd been cleaning to keep the cravings at bay. He must have stepped outside for a smoke with the guys. Somehow, I'd missed him on my way in. This was probably a twelve-step thing. He'd called me here to apologize for his many sins. Bill wouldn't know how else to summon me. He wouldn't know how to be Bill without his little sister dragging him off a ledge.

Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. I heard fighting coming from the floor below. Neither voice was Bill's. I wondered if the bleach fumes were poisoning me. Just for something to do, I lifted the mattress and looked underneath. There was dust, grime, a Canadian penny and a sketchpad—a black, soft-covered, pocket sketchpad with the seams fraying through the spine.

I knew then that something was very wrong. There were only two things my brother couldn't do without, two things he needed to make it through the day: heroin and a little black book. The first, he knew how to get at a moment's notice; the second, he never let out of his sight.

Chapter 2

Since we were little, since before child services split us up, Bill had a gift. Making three-dimensional objects appear on a flat surface came naturally to him. So naturally that he took it for granted, couldn't understand why everyone didn't draw as well as him. I still have the first sketch he sent me from reform school—a pen and ink rendering of a porcupine some kids had trapped in a garbage can behind the cafeteria. I hung it on the wall in my bedroom. The Davidsons, my new adoptive parents, said he must have traced it out of a book, but I knew they were wrong: he'd sat up late in his bunk with a flashlight and drawn it from memory, same as he used to do when we shared a room.

It was a teacher at Stony Brook Academy who first convinced Bill to keep a “journal in pictures.” She thought it might help him open up. Not that Bill was shy. He'd just stopped talking—total, round-the-clock silence. It lasted long enough to scare a few counselors, but not long enough to land him in a psych ward. The journal, however, stuck. Twenty-plus years later, he still went everywhere with a pencil in one hand and a sketchpad in the other. He drew while he ate, while he talked, while he rode the subway. I imagined he kept on drawing with the needle in his arm—right up to the moment he nodded off. Once the last centimeter of a pad was filled, he tossed it. It wasn't about posterity for Bill. It was about getting from one hour to the next.

I dusted the pad off on my jeans, then stood with it by the window. For a while I just stared at the cover, afraid of what I'd find inside. I thought maybe Bill had left it behind on purpose—maybe there was something in it he wanted me to see. A clue or a confession. Some truth he'd been unwilling to share until now. The question was, did I want to know Bill's truth? Maybe Tom was right—maybe decades of junk had worn Bill's cerebral cortex down to nothing. Maybe he was too far gone to ever come back. I'd open

his sketchbook and see ... what? Jagged lines veering off the page? Deranged fantasies? Goat heads and hexagrams? Baby skulls on pikes?

So many maybes. I opened the damn book.

The early drawings were all wispy spirals and billowing shadows, like he'd been teaching himself to draw the wind. Sketch by sketch, the spirals morphed into barbed wire; the shadows turned into smoke rising from industrial chimneys. Then came a series of portraits—page after page of the same man's face. He looked to be in his mid-fifties, with gorge-like smile lines and close-cropped hair. The drawings—maybe a dozen of them—were identical save for a detail here and there. Bill must have spent hours stabbing in the five-o'clock shadow with a razor-fine pencil point. The shading under the eyes appeared blue and purple even in black and white. Whatever else the drugs had done to Bill, he still had his motor skills.

The rest of the pad was blank. I flipped through the empty pages, hoping for a more personal and direct message, but there wasn't one. There was, however, a phone number written on the inside back cover. No accompanying name or information, but I figured I knew who it belonged to—or at least I knew what he looked like. I pulled out my phone, typed in the digits. Any friend of Bill's was likely to be up at this hour. Before I could hit call, the door to the room flew open.

“Oh, I'm sorry, miss. Didn't mean to startle you. I saw the light was on and thought Billy'd come back.”

The man stood in the doorway holding one hand out in front of him, palm upward. A proper New York City cockroach was using the hand like an obstacle course, crawling over and between his splayed fingers, its slick body contracting and then expanding with each pass.

The man was old but not elderly. He wore a flannel shirt, unbuttoned, no T-shirt underneath. I couldn't tell if he had six-pack abs or was just malnourished. Maybe he was one of those homeless who spend their days doing pull-ups at the park. If he'd been drinking, I couldn't smell it over the bleach.

"Who's your friend?" I asked.

He smiled down at the cockroach like it was a newborn puppy.

"Henrietta," he said. "I was going to introduce her to Billy."

"Henrietta the cockroach?"

"They make better pets than you'd think. Low maintenance and easy enough to replace. This one's a real beauty. Quick-witted, too. If they had a Westminster for bugs, she'd get first ribbon."

"I'm sure she would," I said. "My name's Tina. I'm Bill's—Billy's sister."

He grinned.

"Samuel," he said. "Samuel, not Sam."

"Nice to meet you, Samuel."

"Billy ain't here no more. Unless maybe you come to see his other friend?"

"Other friend?"

"Dumb Jake. I'm looking after him. I promised Billy I would."

"Dumb Jake needs looking after?"

Samuel nodded.

"He ain't dumb like that, though. He just don't say much. He and Billy are real close. I wouldn't let nothing happen to Dumb Jake."

"It's strange that Billy never mentioned him."

"Well, Jake's the shy type. He don't like folks talking about him. But deep down he's good people. You want me to take you to him?"

"I'd like that," I said. "I'm always curious about Billy's friends."

"All righty, then. Time to say goodnight, Henrietta."

He bent forward like he was going to kiss the cockroach on its glistening back. Instead, he flung it to the ground, mashed it into the carpet with his bare heel, and shuffled away from the corpse.

"I'd best put on my slippers," he said. "It's chilly outside."

Chapter 3

The odor of bodies and dope and liquor was somehow more suffocating on the descent. Samuel walked heel-to-toe, like he'd learned the hard way not to wake anyone. When we reached the bottom, he turned and whispered:

"We'll have to take a detour. Given the hour."

He moved behind the card table and opened a small door I'd assumed led to a closet.

"Hold tight now," he said. "It gets real dim down here."

The railing was a long metal pipe bolted to the concrete wall. I felt chips of paint flaking off on my palm. Samuel waved his hand in the air to break up the spider webs. He missed as many as he caught.

We passed through a second door and into total darkness.

"Isn't there an overhead light?" I asked.

"Not with a bulb in it."

I dug my phone back out of my pocket, swiped on the flashlight and handed it to Samuel.

"Try this," I said.

He held the screen up, facing him, then jerked his head away.

"Shit's purple now," he said.

He guided me in baby steps down a kind of aisle cutting through a large open space with a low ceiling. Every now and then I'd have to duck under a pipe or a wooden beam. The vent windows on either side were painted black. Samuel's slippers smacked against the concrete floor.

We walked past busted cots leaned up against columns of water-damaged boxes, a wheel-less shopping cart bedded with newspaper, the shells of an old washer and dryer. At the end of the aisle was a thick wooden door. Samuel opened it, and we kept going up a short flight of steps, into a decent-sized yard cluttered with stripped bicycles and more gutted appliances.

"Almost there," Samuel said.

He kicked aside a wooden plank and squatted down.

"I'm here now Dumb Jake," he called. "Brought you a visitor."

Hunching forward, he muscled two anvil-shaped bricks out of the way and pulled back a long swath of blue tarp. The air around us filled up with flies.

"Now, Jake," Samuel said, "I told you I wasn't gonna make you no more food until you finished what I already brought."

If Dumb Jake said anything back, I didn't hear it. Samuel looked at me over his shoulder.

"Don't be shy, girl. Come say hello."

I went into a crouch and sidled forward. As an EMT, I'd been called to enough crime scenes to know what I'd find. Dumb Jake hadn't been dead long. The rats hadn't turned up yet, and the blood running from his mouth was still damp. He lay atop the blanket he must have been wrapped in when he was transported here. He'd been shot in the stomach, then posed with his hands covering the wound. Beside the body were a fly-covered liverwurst sandwich and a porno mag.

Bill hadn't been lying—not this time: the trouble was real.

I gently retrieved my phone from Samuel and pointed the light at Dumb Jake. He was in his mid-to-late fifties, well fed, well dressed, thinning hair slicked to one side, aftershave still potent. He wasn't the man in the sketchpad, and he didn't look like anyone Bill would know by choice. Parole officer, maybe? Plainclothes Vice?

"Hello there, Dumb Jake," I said.

"Save your breath," Samuel said. "He don't converse worth a damn."

"It's late. He must be tired. We should let him rest."

"Yeah, okay. You come back tomorrow in the daylight. Maybe he'll be more lively then."

He took out a grease-stained handkerchief, spit into it, leaned over and wiped at the blood on Jake's face.

"Good night now," he said. "You sleep good. In the morning, you'll tell me your dreams."

I lowered the tarp. Samuel set the bricks back in place.

"So, it was Billy who asked you to look after Dumb Jake?" I asked.

"That's right. Until he gets back."

"Did he say when that would be?"

"Never does."

"Billy's stayed here before?"

"Oh yeah. That boy's a comer and a goer."

Maybe, I thought, but this time he'll stay gone.

I'd had plenty of experience dealing with mentally broken patients. It didn't matter if they were psychotic or just slightly delusional. The trick was to keep them talking, play along, make them feel

important, then filter for the truth. Deep down, Samuel knew Jake was dead; get him the right medication, and he'd be as reliable a witness as anyone else. Which was probably why he went off his meds in the first place.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Samuel," I said. "Billy's in danger. A lot of danger. If I find him in time, I can save him. But I can't do that without you. You were the last person that I know of who saw Billy."

He looked suddenly very sober, like he was corralling his faculties, preparing for the enormous effort it would take to cut through whatever had gone wrong in his wiring.

"How do I help?" he asked.

"Just tell me everything you remember about the time before Billy left tonight. Start at the beginning. Did you meet Dumb Jake out here, or up in the room?"

"Up in the room. I was lying next door, reading my magazines. I could hear them talking—Billy, Jake, and a third guy who split before Billy called me over. Sounded like they was having a real interesting conversation, or at least all three meant what they said."

"Could you make it out?"

"Not much. They was shouting, but hushed like. Like they was trying to shout without anybody hearing."

"Did you catch any of what they said?"

"There was something about a letter."

"A letter?"

"A love letter, I think. You know, a rivalry-type scenario."

"Were Billy and Jake still arguing when you went over to Billy's room?"

"I didn't go over there like that. Billy called for me later, after they'd gone quiet. Said he needed my muscle."

"For what?"

"Dumb Jake had passed out drunk. He was lying on the bed, wrapped up like a mummy. Billy always keeps a lot of bedding. He gets real cold at night, like he has no blood in him. Anyways, he asked if I knew someplace where Jake could sleep it off. Somewhere private, cause Jake was real shy, and he'd be embarrassed by the state he was in. He liked getting drunk, but he didn't like no one seeing him drunk, or seeing him wake up from being drunk.

"I thought of this tarp straight off. Truth is, I'd been planning to make a tent out of it for myself, as a kind of getaway—a place to be alone when the mood struck. So, me and Billy carried him down here."

"When was this?"

"Three, four hours ago? Not too early to be drinking, but early for him to be so drunk."

"The two of you carried him straight down the stairs?"

"People don't ask no questions around here."

"But you said Dumb Jake didn't want to be seen?"

"That's why Billy swaddled him up. No telling who it was covered like that."

"Smart," I said. "You have any idea where Billy might have gone? Where else he sleeps?"

Samuel shrugged.

"We ain't friends like that. We don't talk much about life outside of here."

The thought seemed to depress him, or maybe he was just getting tired. Either way, I doubted there was much more he could tell me. What I needed now was a moment alone with the deceased.

“Did you hear that?” I asked. “My stomach’s growling. I haven’t eaten since lunch. Any chance you’d make me one of those sandwiches?”

He smiled, glad to be facing a problem he could solve.

“Come along, now,” he said. “I’ll fix one right up.”

I hesitated.

“Would you mind bringing it to me out here? The air helps me think.”

“No problem. Just stay where you are. Mustard okay?”

“Perfect.”

“Maybe I’ll throw in some canned peaches.”

I watched him disappear into the building, counted ten-Mississippi, then tipped over one of the bricks and rolled the tarp back. I did what I’d seen detectives do with more than one DOA: I went through his pockets. Whatever else happened, he hadn’t been robbed. I laid his keys, wallet, phone, money clip, and vape pen out on the tarp beside him. The money clip was stretched to capacity, the top bill a crisp-looking hundred.

One item was clearly missing: his gun. An empty black-leather holster remained strapped under his left arm.

I looked inside the wallet. My guess hadn’t been far off. Jake Bickert was a private detective. He’d worked for a midtown firm called Empire Investigations. According to his driver’s license, he was fifty-four years old, five-eleven, lived in Queens, and wouldn’t be donating his organs.

Stop while you still can, I told myself. Stuff his shit back in his pockets and call the cops.

I should have started dialing the second Samuel introduced me to Dumb Jake, but 911 hadn’t been so much as a whisper in the far reaches of my mind. Why not? Probably because I’d decided a long time

ago that no one would ever take Bill from me again. He wasn't just my brother—he was the only person I'd always known. Every other familiar face disappeared twenty years ago, the day our father killed our mother. There were new faces for a while—lawyers, journalists, cops, social workers—but none that lasted, and then the state packed Bill off to Stony Brook Academy because his “juvenile record” made him “unfit for adoption.” A bullshit vandalism charge—twelve-year-old Bill drawing with spray paint on the side of a liquor store.

I'd stood with my brother through some of his darkest hours, but I'd never seen him hurt anyone. Not physically. He'd snatch the last dollar from your purse to score his next fix, but he wouldn't take it by force. Beneath the addiction, he cared about other people. There were times when I thought he got hooked because he cared too much. If he'd pulled the trigger, then there had to be a story. Self-defense, an accident, mistaken identity. Something. Call the cops now, and the only story I'd have to tell would sound very, very bad. Bill arguing with the dead man. Bill disposing of the dead man. Bill the ex-con, the junkie, the orphan who'd spent his life bouncing between institutions on the taxpayer's dime. Why not toss the key?

I scanned the surrounding windows. Most of them had gone dark. No prying eyes that I could see. I took Bickert's phone, then used his thumb to gain access. An alert said he had a half-dozen missed calls. No voicemails. I swiped over to his text messages, hoping for an exchange that might explain what he wanted with my brother. But Bickert hadn't been much of a texter. There was a note from his pharmacy asking him to pick up his prescription, another from Delta asking him to rate his recent flight. Both were more than a week old.

I hit the phone icon and tapped on *Recents*. I saw it right away. The number behind those missed calls. I'd dialed it myself that morning. Tom's number. My husband.

I went a little numb. Then I felt like I was on one of those rides where the floor drops out from under you while you're spinning at hundreds of miles per hour. I couldn't tell if I was plummeting through space or sitting still while the world imploded around me.

The spinning stopped when I felt my own phone buzzing in my pocket. I pulled it out. The screen lit up with a text from a private caller. The message was just two letters, one of them repeating.

SHHHHHH ...