



CARTER

LOVECRAFT

JONATHAN L.
HOWARD

CARTER & LOVECRAFT

JONATHAN L. HOWARD

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In memory of my father, Noel Howard, 1923–2014.

A better man than I shall ever be, but that's no reason not to keep trying.

Chapter 1

THE KILLER IN RED HOO

Crying and laughing, Charlie put his S&W Model 5946 between his teeth, squeezed the trigger, and excused himself from life.

Carter watched him drop, unable to comprehend what he was seeing, unable to take in that his friend had just killed himself for no reason. No reason at all.

But there had to be a reason. There's *always* a reason. This was something to do with Suydam. That was Suydam's fault.

Carter turned to where Suydam sat propped against the wall, sitting in a pool of his own blood and piss, but there would be no answers coming from him. His eyes were open, and he was dead. He was smiling.

When the scene came back to Carter again and again over the following months, he would always remember the *clack* of the pistol's aluminum frame against Charlie's teeth, the smell of blood, and the smile on dead Suydam's face. It wasn't a malevolent smile, that was the worst of it. It wasn't cunning or triumphant. It was happy. Suydam was happy Charlie had gutshot him, happy that he was dying, maybe even happy that Charlie had seen the joke, too, and followed him into darkness, a 9mm bullet as his invitation.

The kid was crying in the other room where Carter had left him, hopeless little jerking, mechanical sobs of a terror that had gone on too long. Carter looked at the bodies for a moment longer, holstered his Glock 19, and went to the boy, to stay with him until the backup arrived.

* * *

It was going to be a great day. They just knew it. It was going to be one of those Hollywood cop days when the clues line up and they'd just follow them straight to the perp. And what a perp. What an arrest it would be.

The United States had a disproportionately high number of serial killings compared to other developed countries, a result of wide spaces, ease of procuring weapons, and—just maybe—it looking so damn cool on TV and in the movies. Want your fifteen minutes? Here's how you do it, sport. Just be sure to score at least five victims. You're not a real serial killer unless you've got at least five kills, just like a World War I fighter ace. Five's the trick, sport.

Not all at once, either. That makes you a mass killer, not a serial killer, and mass killers are just douches. Those Columbine kids? That dickwad in Norway? Fuck 'em. Delayed gratification is the mark of the intelligent mind. That's how you get into the forensic pathology books. That's how you get a movie made about you. Mass killers, the movie gets made about the *victims*. Fuck that. Mass killers are just children who want all the candy *now*. A serial killer is a spider in a web, see? Not *that's* juice.

Despite which, there still aren't enough serial killers to go around, and the FBI tends to run down the most high profile, both because serials often break federal laws along the way and because they're the Fed's. Simple as that. Even a city as large as New York doesn't get many serial killers, but that's largely because the higher the population density, the tougher it is to get away with a string of killings. Too many eyes, too many ears.

This one had been getting away with it somehow, though, and that made him special. He took children, always male, always between the ages of six and eleven, and chose targets purely on the basis of opportunity, according to the FBI profile. Opportunity meant that kids from poorer families, larger families that just couldn't keep an eye on all their children, tended to be targeted. But a middle-class white-bread kid from Greenwich Village was taken, too. So, the profiler concluded, class and race were unimportant to the killer. Only gender and age.

Seven abductions over a period of fifteen months, and four bodies recovered. The CSU reports turned up little of use apart from a *modus operandi*. None of the boys had suffered sexual assault, but all had suffered amateur surgery that had ultimately resulted in their deaths. All the surgery was to the brain, and to the eyes. The techniques used showed no training whatsoever, and only the slightest understanding of the aims of brain surgery. Sections of skull were removed without reference to the structure of the plates, simply cut and torn away to reach areas of the parietal and occipital lobes. No attempt to preserve the meninges layers across the surface of the brain had been made; the profiler clearly had no interest in preserving the victims' lives post-operation.

Tox screens showed traces of Rohypnol and ethanol, presumably used as a makeshift anesthetic, but also stronger traces of amphetamines. The conclusion was that the surgery was carried out while the victim was drugged and incapacitated and, once complete, the victim was brought to a high state of awareness. Cops who had seen a lot read the reports and were silent, the kind of heavy silence made by a little bit more of a human soul dying.

The LDC had been very clear that he did not want this son of a bitch to get a name. He was not to be tagged with some cool-sounding title that the press would get ahold of and, somewhere down the line, use as the title of a best seller.

Within half an hour, the detective-investigators were quietly calling the unknown subject "The Child-Catcher."

* * *

The Child-Catcher sucked as a surgeon, but he was doing all right for himself as killer. The abductions occurred all over the city and its suburbs, and the body dumps found so far were spread out. Analysis showed no pattern, which made the detectives think the unsub himself was analyzing possible abduction and dump sites before using them. There was *always* a pattern. Even attempts to leave no pattern left a pattern of their own. This was different; there really was nothing. All the analysis could say was that the killer was based in New York, probably. The detectives nodded slowly; they'd kind of figured that themselves.

All they could do was hope for the Child-Catcher to make a mistake, careful though he'd been until then. Historically, all serial killers get sloppy. While their MOs might evolve, repeated success made them overconfident. Some psychologists were of the opinion that this was because they wanted to be caught, but the practical nature of the police made them think it was just likely to be human nature, the desire to do just enough and no more.

For the first crime, the unsub would pull out all the stops, cover all the bases, dot every "i." It would be difficult and nitpicking, but they didn't want to be caught, so they would go to any trouble. Then,

they got away with it, next time they might think—even if only subconsciously—I *didn't need to do that one thing on the list. That didn't make any difference.* So they skip it, and they get away with it again. With every iteration, they shave away a little bit of security, until they shave that bit too much and let the hounds have a sniff of them. Then it's all over, even if not straightaway. The fuse is lit, though; they're as good as apprehended.

The thought that the Child-Catcher had probably shed several onion skins of security since his first crime gave the detectives hope. Maybe there was already a clue out there. Maybe next time he would fuck up spectacularly and give himself up on a plate. They could only keep the net tight, scrape up every fragment of evidence from the first killings, look for the missing, and watch for anything new.

“Anything new” turned out to be the eighth abduction. Detective First Grade Charlie Hammond and his partner of two years, Detective Third Grade Dan Carter, were on the scene seven minutes after the 911 came in, only thirty seconds behind the beat car. The 76th Precinct covers Red Hook, which doesn't have the concentrations of Hispanic citizens found elsewhere in the city. The uniformed officers were trying to get the story out of the missing boy's mother, but their Spanish wasn't proving equal to the job.

Charlie Hammond showed his badge and said, “*Señora, ¿cuándo fue la última vez que vio a su hijo?*”

Carter thought her face would stay with him—the dull shock, the drained color, the flickers of rising panic as she realized her boy's picture might end up on the evening news for all the wrong reasons. He thought her face would join the other flashes, other images that stick with every cop, but he was wrong. After what was to come, he couldn't remember her face at all. When her son was returned to her later, he only recognized her in the way he might if he'd seen her in a picture.

She replied slowly, as if just awoken. “*El hombre del camión. De pronto agarró a Thiago y lo tiró por dentro.*” She said it in a near monotone, as if disbelieving her own words.

Carter's Spanish was still at the night school stage, but he understood enough to follow the gist of it. She'd actually seen the unsub?

She'd done better.

She held out a crumpled and ragged piece of paper, a receipt she'd found in her pocket when she had needed something to write on in a hurry. And there it was, in jagged, anxious figures, traced and retraced over in her anxiety for there to be no mistake in their reading: a license plate number.

* * *

The pickup's registered address wasn't even a mile away. Hammond and Carter went there, leaving the uniforms with the mother, and called for backup en route.

Hammond drove. Once Carter had put in the call, it grew quiet in the car. It wasn't just nerves and excitement, although that was there, too. There was a strong sense that something was not right. Carter could feel it, and he was damn sure Hammond could, too. There was always the chance it wasn't the Child-Catcher, they had to allow for that. There was always the chance it was just some happy-go-lucky pedo who'd decided to try it on when the city was on high alert for a serial child abductor.

But neither of them believed it wasn't the Child-Catcher for a second. Even if it wasn't, it was still a serious crime, and they were more than happy to deal. But it was him. It so *was* him.

“He's been pretty smart up to now,” said Carter. The suspect even had a name now, but they still said “he” and knew what they meant. According to the license number, his name was Martin Suydan. He had no criminal record.

Hammond said nothing, didn't even grunt. Carter said nothing else.

They traveled without lights or sirens, hopeful of catching the unsub unawares, and Hammond slowed the car a hundred yards from the address and parked out of sight. They walked the remaining distance, talking as if they were just walking around the corner to get a sandwich and a coffee, just two guys. As they walked, they covered the angles between them, looking without appearing to look sensitive to the sight of a dark blue pickup or a man with a seven-year-old boy with him. Always at the edge of vision. Always at the corner of the eye.

The house, when they cleared the corner, was larger than expected. It looked like it had been a hardware store at some time in the last few years, with maybe a couple of rooms to live in on the second story. Those days had gone, all the stock dispersed, and—unless the interior had seen a lot of work that left the exterior untouched—its sole current resident must have had a lot of space to call his own.

The street corner belonging to the building was occupied by an open yard behind a chain-link fence. Sitting there was the dark blue pickup. It was out in the open, its rear plate easily readable from the street, no attempt to hide or disguise it at all. Carter wondered if maybe there was something in the forensic psychology theory about serials wanting to be caught after a while. If Suydam was their man, he hadn't just shed a layer or two of protective caution, he'd dumped the whole thing.

They still had no direct cause to enter the property, however, although they knew that even as they moved out of the redbrick building's arcs of vision, a warrant was being prepared. They would just have to wait until it arrived with a whole posse of other officers, and probably a SWAT team. Of course, while all that was going on, Suydam could be quietly peeling Thiago Mata's skull like a hardboiled egg.

Carter and Hammond reached a side door on the alley. The same thoughts were going through both their minds, along with the same misgivings.

"I thought I heard a kid cry out just then," said Hammond, but he said it without emphasis. There had been no cry. "Did you hear it?"

Carter looked at Charlie Hammond, then across the street. The place was quiet. He breathed out heavily through his nose. He didn't want to leave the kid alone with Suydam a second longer than he had to, but if they fucked this up, the Child-Catcher might walk.

He drew breath to speak.

The shrill squeal of a young child in pain came to them through the door.

* * *

Hammond led in. There was no sign the door was reinforced, and there was no time to go around another door in any case. He quickly and quietly tried the handle, but it was locked.

"Knock, knock," he said under his breath, landed a flat-footed kick against the lock that tore the striking plate clear out of the frame, and followed through immediately, allowing himself to be skylined against the daylight only for a second. Carter was next, moving across and by, into the shadows of the other side of the door.

Their guess that the place was a former store was borne out by the open floor plan, tall shelves still in place, and an exposed area of concrete where a counter had once stood. Sunlight streamed through narrow horizontal slits left unpainted at the top of the blacked-out windows. To the left, a wide staircase angled up through a left-hand turn to the second story. They heard movement up there, feet on bare boards, and a child's subdued sobbing.

There was little cover on the first floor, but they should still have cleared it before moving on. Hammond wasn't for waiting, though; their eyes had barely adjusted to the darker interior before

was moving to the foot of the stairs. There were a few crates toward the windows at the far end that was possible somebody might hide behind. Hammond angled his head at them for a second, as if there was a good enough search. It was a fair reading of the ground that there would be no ambush from that direction, but it bothered Carter then and later that they didn't do it by the book. No reason—there was nobody hiding there—but it bothered him. One of those little things that nags irrationally. Maybe if they'd done it properly, things would have turned out differently.

With Carter covering him, Hammond was first up the stairs. He moved quietly, but not silently. Anyone upstairs would have heard him if they were listening, and after the kicking in of the door, how could they not be listening? Carter was a few steps behind him, so he saw Suydam second.

Hammond called, "NYPD! Drop your weapon!" and Carter knew right then that it was all going to turn to shit, though he didn't truly know how. Not really. He expected maybe Hammond to get hit, Suydam to be using the Mata boy as a shield or maybe even have a shotgun or an automatic weapon. He was wrong about all that.

There was a beat. Carter paused on the stairs and looked back the way they had come, but there weren't being ambushed. Suydam was running solo. Carter was debating whether to move forward or maybe not if it startled the suspect when Hammond fired.

Once. Just once.

Hammond was ex-military, and had enjoyed his time in the army. He loved his gun, and maybe his gun loved him back for all the attention he gave it. Everything he did that related to firearms he did *per doctrine*. He had told Carter enough times that when he had to fire, he would always fire at least twice.

Afterward, the single shot was another thing that would bother Carter.

Then Hammond was moving again, doctrine in place: gun braced in both hands, stop to fire, keep moving when not firing. Carter followed him up.

Suydam was down, sitting against the wall. They were on a broad landing that looked like it had once been another shop floor, a little smaller than the first since an area was walled off for offices and storage. Where the floor below had been abandoned even by its solitary tenant, however, it was plain that he spent a lot of time here.

And there it was. Right there. An actual psycho wall.

Chapter 2

THE DOOM THAT CAME TO SUYDAM

Suydam had done the thing real serial killers never do: he had mapped his madness onto the wall. In the experience of the police, serial killers were only marginally organized. They might have a reasonably detailed *modus operandi*, but then they'd erode it over time and repetition until it wasn't worth shit. They might prepare, but only as much as they would for any hunting trip. They might keep trophies, but they tended to be small and personal, such as jewelry or a lock of hair. They might express their nature, but only as a notebook, or sometimes as paintings.

None, as far as Carter knew, not a single fucking lunatic, would actually do the Hollywood thing and make a psycho wall. They turned up in movies and TV all the time—great, intricate tapestries of psychosis in tiny handwriting on a thousand notes pinned to a wall, or written directly onto the plaster. Random pictures, usually religious, would dot it, some things would be circled, and some things would be connected to others by hand-drawn lines or lengths of string. It all looked very good on the screen, some handsome actor examining the wall by flashlight (the psycho never has working lights), zeroing in on the single thing in the whole mass of details that would set them on the trail of the killer before he could claim his final victim: the martyrdom of Saint Anthony; the pharaonic curse of Tennyson's illustrations for the "Alice" books. Whatever.

In reality, serial killers were rarely as imaginative as screenwriters. They just wanted to kill people and then masturbate themselves raw afterward. They had no handbook telling them that they had to be themed, had to leave clues, had to present a puzzle. In the police's experience, these people were only special in their own minds. "Well, fuck you, buttercup, and get over yourself" was the unofficial mind-set.

Hammond was not an imaginative man. The psycho wall did not distract him for a second. Instead, he moved to where Suydam sat, blood leaking out of him in lazy pulses, and kicked a gun away. It skittered across the bare floorboards and stopped near Carter as he reached the top of the stairs. He saw it was a strange little thing: a Taurus PLY, its barrel reaching no farther than the end of the trigger guard. CSU later identified it as the smaller caliber .22 model rather than the .25. It was another thing wrong with the day. Suydam's last line of defense was a tiny holdout pistol intended for concealed carry. It wouldn't even take hollow points. Carter's own backup pistol was a Ruger LCR-357, and he was content to bet his life on it. The Taurus was a dissuader, in his opinion, not a killer. It was a strange choice.

Of course, it turned out it didn't matter at all. CSU also discovered the Taurus wasn't even loaded.

Carter angled around the floor himself, since Hammond was staying by Suydam, but the area was obviously clear. The staircase opened into the middle of the floor, with a wooden railing guarding the well. There was nothing else in the room, no furniture, no crates, nothing. Just Carter, Hammond, Suydam, and the big end wall covered in crazy. Carter spared it a glance then.

The left end of the wall looked like the Hollywood version, all notes and pictures. The other three quarters of the wall, however, was something else again. When Carter had been a kid, his mother had taken up a craft hobby. She would take corkboard and cover it with cloth, usually black, mount pictures into it, and then spend hours running colored embroidery floss between the pins, back and forth, until the picture picked out by the pins became apparent. At the time, he'd called it lame, but that was just because of where he was in his life. He'd actually kind of liked watching the pattern form as she worked on her pin art, more than when it was finished.

The wall was the biggest piece of pin art he'd ever seen. Every pin was labeled with a small slip of paper that had been printed out, clipped, and glued up there. There was no pattern he could see in the labels. Some were locations, some were names, others were numbers, and others were even abstract nouns like "Desperation" and "Unawareness." While he could see no pattern in them, there was clearly one in the great loom of crisscrossing lines. It wasn't much of a pattern, to be sure. No inverted cross or pentacle for the forensic psychologists to get excited about. Just a thick, even field of colorful strings, with a distinct thickening in the density of intersections running from the upper right down about a third of the way along from the bottom-right corner on the lower edge.

"Where's the boy?" asked Hammond.

"This"—Suydam shifted where he sat, as if trying to make himself more comfortable, and flinched slightly—"hurts more than I thought it would." He raised the hand he'd been holding to the wound and examined it. A drop of blood fell from the dark red fingers and palm. His expression was as though he were considering an unpleasant thought rather than watching his life leak out of him.

"The *boy*, Suydam! What the fuck did you do to him?"

Suydam looked up at Hammond as if finding a wry humor in all this. "I pinched him. Quite hard. He squealed like a good 'un. Like a little pig. I knew he was the right one for the job, soon as I saw him on the street. Whining little crybaby. Perfect." He nodded at the closed door farther along the wall. "He's in there, Officer. I hope you have candy. Whining little shit that he is."

Hammond nodded to Carter, but Carter was already moving to the door. He took position on one side and tried the handle.

Suydam watched it all with amusement. "There's no one else here, Detective. I'm done. No more tricks. No more games."

Carter ignored him. He opened the door and followed through in a crouch.

A moment later, he called back, "He's here! Looks unharmed!"

"See?" said Suydam to Hammond. "I'm all done. The jig is up. The dance is over."

"Shut up," said Hammond. He called back to Carter, "Don't bring the kid in here. Call it in."

Suydam nodded. "Good idea. Coming in here might traumatize him, the poor baby."

Carter was already ahead of his partner, but was having trouble getting a signal for his cell. The building seemed to be steel framed, or maybe there was construction mesh in the walls. Either way, it was behaving like an unintentional Faraday cage as far as getting reception was concerned. He went to the window and finally got a one-bar signal.

In the other room, Suydam said weakly, "Hey, Detective. I think you killed me."

Hammond said nothing. He didn't say *good*, but he plainly thought it.

"Was planning on being dead already. Blizzard of bullets, you know. Suicide by cop." He coughed. "Seems to work out for everybody else who tries it. While we're waiting for me to go into shock, how's this? How about I tell you why I did it?"

"I don't care, Suydam."

"Oh. Okay. Okay. How about I tell you what all that's about?" He nodded at the psycho wall.

Hammond glanced at it. He really, *really* wanted to tear it down, but he knew it had to stay intact until it had been recorded. ~~He envied the people who would finally get to cut every thread, pull out every nail, remove every label.~~ He hated the look of the threads, like a thick layer of web. He hated how this expressed just what was so fucked up about Suydam, and how Suydam had created it like a work of art. He glared at it, following the threads with his eyes. He hardly noticed that Suydam was still speaking. Hammond didn't listen, but he heard.

Carter told Thiago Mata to stay where he was, that the bad man had been caught, and that Thiago would soon be back with his mom. He went back into the other room, the loom of madness on the wall.

Carter saw Hammond shoot himself through the mouth. He saw Suydam dead and smiling. He saw the caul of Suydam's insanity, his perception, his reason, and his reasons hung upon the wall. There must have been a breeze in the room, for it seemed to swell slowly outward before lapsing back.

Carter understood none of it, and that was just as well.

* * *

It was a difficult public relations pitch. The serial killer without a nickname, known as the "Child Catcher," had been quickly and successfully run to ground before he could harm his most recent victim. The boy, Thiago Mata, had been rescued unharmed, and gentle questioning by child services had revealed he had suffered nothing at the hands of Martin Suydam but for being pinched, once and viciously, on his upper arm. He wanted to tell the child psychologist all about that at great length and repeatedly. He had a bruise, here, see? Thiago didn't care about the abduction, the ride in the pickup to the old building, or any of that. He really resented being pinched, however. The man had told him to cry out as if hurt, and he had tried, but it hadn't satisfied the man, who became angry and pinched Thiago hard here, see? On the upper arm. There's a bruise, see?

Two detectives, hearing a cry, had due cause to enter the premises. They had encountered Suydam, who, on being challenged, aimed a gun at one of the detectives. The detective, Charlie Hammond, fired upon Suydam once. He hit Suydam in the stomach with a 9mm round, which perforated the lower border of the spleen and the mesocolon, severing the splenic artery, before hitting and jamming into the spine. Suydam hemorrhaged massively, the body cavity filling with blood, and lapsed into shock within a few minutes before dying.

This was all to the good. Then the heroic cops narrative hit the rocks when the shooter stuck his pistol in his mouth and sucked on a 9mm himself. There was no reason for it.

Charlie Hammond was a fifteen-year veteran. His psych reports were clean, his home life was simple. He was once divorced, amicably and on the grounds of mutual incompatibility. She had moved to Chicago, and they still corresponded regularly by e-mail.

He drank in moderation, and got drunk maybe once a year, always in company. There was no secret drinking, judging by his apartment afterward. He was in a six-month relationship with a paramedic whom he'd met through the job. It was going well.

Charlie had no imagination, not the kind that makes people brood. When anyone who knew him was told he had killed himself, the first reaction was always disbelief. *Charlie? Charlie Hammond? Are you talking about the same guy?*

The department's PR people mulled it over for a while and settled on referring to the entire posse of police who were en route to the house in Red Hook when it all went down as "the arresting officers and Suydam dying when he aimed a gun at police, and one of the officers tragically dying due to an accidental weapon discharge. They'd worry about the fallout when it was all yesterday's news.

That was for public consumption. Internally, Charlie shot himself because “the balance of his mind was disturbed.” It could happen to anyone.

Carter thought of the last time but one that he saw Charlie, angry with Suydam, but in complete control of himself. Then the last time, crying and laughing, tears on his face, the pistol between his teeth. He knew Charlie Hammond. For two years they’d been partners, day in, day out. He knew Hammond’s moods, his enthusiasms, his pet hatreds. He knew Charlie Hammond as well as anyone else on earth, and he just could not draw a line between those two moments. Carter could not begin to imagine what had happened in the three or four minutes he was out of the room, checking on the boy and making the call.

Martin Suydam had wanted to die, that much was obvious. The blatant kidnap in broad daylight using a vehicle registered to him. Using the boy’s cry to bring in the police he knew were out in the street. Provoking fire by waving an empty pistol at them. Suicide by cop, an unusually well-developed plan for it. Why he should want that was another thing.

Hammond’s funeral came and went. His ex flew in from Chicago to attend, and she wept real tears at the graveside. His girlfriend was still in shock; she’d seen him just a few hours before when their paths had crossed. He’d been fine, talking about taking her out before the end of the week. Good times. His ex sat with her afterward, and they talked quietly.

Carter felt like an intruder. Every cop present knew he’d been right there when it happened, and couldn’t say a word as to the “why” of it. Some of them seemed to resent him, as if it was his fault. Others pitied him, and Carter liked that less still.

* * *

He stuck it for barely six months after that. He got a new partner, but there was no empathy between them at all. The guy had come up from Miami and pretty obviously wasn’t happy about it. Carter never did find out why he had transferred if he hated New York so much. There were rumors he’d been forced out of Miami, but Carter didn’t care about the gossip one way or another; he simply didn’t want to be a cop anymore.

He handed in his resignation, astounding his lieutenant, who then spent an hour trying to talk him out of it. If he stayed on for another six or so years, the lieutenant argued, he could take early retirement instead. Why jump now when he’d covered half the distance? Carter couldn’t give him a straight answer. He didn’t have one even for himself. It was just time to go, that was all. He missed Charlie, and the job wasn’t the same anymore. It was time to go.

He didn’t mention the dreams he still had, of Charlie standing there with the gun in his mouth. Except, in his dreams, Suydam wasn’t dead yet. He was sitting there, just like he had been, but he was looking at Carter. Carter could never quite read the expression on Suydam’s face in the dreams. It wasn’t a nightmare where things were arranged to scare him, it wasn’t as if Suydam was grinning like Freddy Krueger or any shit like that. It was more like Suydam was in a bad situation, had made his best play to get out of it, and failed. He looked desperate. He looked scared. He looked hopeless.

Then the *clack* of gunmetal against teeth, and Carter’s first thought was always, *Don’t do that, you’ll chip your enamel*, and then the gun went off.

Now Charlie was dead, and Suydam was dead. Suydam always went from being alive to dead at the shot, without actually dying. Suydam was alive, or he was dead. In the dreams, there was no transition.

The dream didn’t end there. Carter would turn to go and get the boy, but he would stop because there was something behind him. He turned, and there was nothing there but two dead men, and the psycho wall. The threads billowed as if there was a wind blowing through the wall.

When he went to fetch Thiago Mata, sometimes he was alive, and sometimes he was dead, skulls cracked open and amateur surgery carried out on his brain. Either way, he always complained about the bruise on his arm. Once, and once only, the dead version of Thiago Mata told Carter why Suydam had been killing boys, but Carter didn't understand the words—simple, English words—and was awfully confused and frustrated.

* * *

Daniel Carter did nothing at all for a month after resigning from the NYPD. Then he printed off DOS-0075-f-1-a from the Department of State's Division of Licensing Services site, and applied for a license. It took a while for him to think of five people to put down as character witnesses, mainly because he would need their signatures and he wanted the thing finished and ready to go as soon as possible. He ended up spending a full day finding the ones he'd chosen and having them sign. It made him feel like a bail enforcement agent, another license the DOS-0075-f-1-a covered. He had checked the first box, though.

APPLICATION AS (Check only ONE):

X Private Investigator

While Carter waited for the bureaucracy to sort that out for him, he downloaded another PD form, printed it out, and filled in as much as he could until he could find an office. He was going to need a business address; the home address he'd used on the private investigator's license application looked halfhearted to him. He wanted a real business address this time, something real to enter into the PD Form 643-041 Handgun License Application. He filled it out with particular attention to section one of the form, "Letter of Necessity," a detailed explanation as to why the applicant's "employment requires the carrying of a concealed handgun."

Chapter 3

FACTS CONCERNING THE LATE ALFRED HILL

The office was three blocks away from Suydam's house. At least Carter didn't have to go past the house when driving to and from his apartment.

The Suydam house was sure to be demolished. The locals didn't like having a "murder house" in their neighborhood, and a developer had already stepped forward, offering to demolish and clear the site. They'd made a very small attempt to pass this off as civic altruism, but nobody thought they wanted anything but the real estate, and the developer gave up the pretense quickly.

The house had a cellar, and Carter was glad he hadn't seen it. Suydam had carried out his experiments in altered perception there, and the bodies of the remaining boys were found under fresh concrete in a subcellar. Suydam himself had consumed industrial quantities of hallucinogens—LSD, *Salvia divinorum*, psilocybin, and, his personal favorite, DMT—and painstakingly noted his experiences. These he had tabulated in a complex system that was identified as being largely based on the Aarne-Thompson classification system for folklorists. These sets and subsets were, in turn, weighted by an apparently arbitrary system of significances rendered as numbers to two decimal places. The system was sketched out in detail, though without anything but the most abstract explanation, in the notebooks discovered in Suydam's bedroom. The system was mapped out more briefly on the left-hand side of the psycho wall.

The rest of the wall defied analysis. Several hundred pictures were taken to form a detailed mosaic, and a CSU tech undertook to create a database of the wall in her own time. The case was, after a while, closed.

Carter was obliged to attend the inquiry into the shooting, and it was deemed justifiable, Suydam's intent on being an asshole to the grave by provoking the police into shooting him. It got out that Hammond had shot himself, and one tabloid made a front cover story of it. By the next day somebody famous for being famous had suffered a wardrobe malfunction, and a random cop eating his gun was no way near as newsworthy as a celebrity nipple.

* * *

Now here Carter was, a gumshoe.

He hadn't been entirely sure what he was getting into, but it turned out that it was exactly what he had expected and nothing more. None of the additional work that he hoped would lift the job out of the mundane ever came along. Most of it was divorce work, some skip traces, background checks, and missing persons where the person obviously wanted to stay missing, but had left somebody behind who isn't so cool with that notion. Very occasionally he had to attend court as a witness. Far too often he spent his entire day on the Internet, accessing assorted databases—tax, voter registration, DMV. He'd only used such databases peripherally when he'd been a cop; usually somebody else was qu

happy to do it. Now, however, he had a notebook full of passwords for privileged access databases that the public never got a sniff of, a notebook of the kind he had been told by his computer guy not to keep, as it was a bad security risk. *Fuck that*, thought Carter. How was he supposed to keep all those passwords straight otherwise?

That morning he had a client turn up in the office, which was something that didn't happen so much. Usually contact was made by phone or by e-mail. Perhaps only one in five clients, if that, actually wanted to sit in his office and talk to him, face-to-face.

None of the one in five was ever a smoky femme fatale, talking in one-liners and sitting provocatively on the corner of his desk. The desk was from IKEA, as was the single filing cabinet where he kept hard copies of contracts, and so were the chairs on either side of his desk. None of them would have suited a sultry femme fatale disporting herself upon them. She would have seemed out of place in the pine-toned office, with its pine-toned furniture and the sandy-haired man behind the desk with the face of a poetic boxer, as an ex-girlfriend of Carter's had once described him.

This time it had been a woman in the uniform of a diner waitress on her midmorning break. She said she had finally had enough of her husband's "fooling around," but Carter saw that what she really resented was his reluctance to pull his weight. It wasn't that her husband was fucking around, it was that he was doing it on her nickel. She wanted a divorce, and she wanted everything. Carter thought she had a good chance of getting it, too. He explained the legalities of what he did, and what sort of evidence would be necessary to get the day in court she wanted. He took her details and those of her husband, talked through what sort of plan he would use to gather evidence and how much it would come to. She didn't balk when he mentioned money, which was good. She'd made some inquiries on her own, and had made sure she had the money available for his services. He understood he was being paid in better than a year's tips; she had been planning this for a while.

He saw her out, and crossed to the window to watch her leave the small office block's side exit and walk to her car. He liked to do this; people skimmed his life at a tangent and then were gone again. It was easy to believe that they puffed into smoke when they walked out of his office. Watching them cross the parking lot kept them vital just a little bit longer.

He watched her drive away in an old white Honda, turned, and found Henry Weston sitting quietly in the chair on the "client" side of the desk.

* * *

He didn't know the man was Henry Weston at that point. He had no idea who Henry Weston was, nor had he ever heard of him. But now there was a man of about five feet six who couldn't have been a pound over 120 pounds, with neat dark hair parted on the left side, wearing a three-piece suit that wasn't flashy, nor was it cheap.

Carter hadn't heard a thing. The spring in the door handle creaked when compressed. The upper hinge squeaked slightly. These were both noises to which he had grown very familiar over the last eighteen months.

The man who would presently turn out to be Henry Weston smiled at Carter. It was a very open, disarming smile. Nothing smug or supercilious about it; it was the smile of a man who'd heard a good joke and wished to share it.

"I'm sorry," said Carter. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I came in," said the man, as if to reassure him.

Carter didn't need reassurance on that point, but it was kind of the man to offer it, all the same.

"Can I help you, Mr....?" Carter held out his hand.

The man regarded it for a moment, then remembered his manners. He rose to his feet (the chair clicked a little when he rose, Carter thought. Why had it been silent when he sat?) and shook Carter's hand. It was a firm, dry handshake. Possibly too firm; he didn't try to crush Carter's bones, but the flesh itself was quite unyielding, more like shaking a neoprene hand than one of flesh and blood.

"My name is Henry Weston," said the man. "I have a card." This he carefully extracted from his jacket's breast pocket and passed to Carter for examination.

Carter took it and sat down, gesturing to Weston that he should retake his own seat. He did so, and the chair clicked as it took his weight.

Carter examined the card. *Henry Weston*, it read. *Lawyer*. There was the address of the law firm Weston Edmunds, in Providence.

"Weston," said Carter. He tapped the card. "Of Weston Edmunds?"

"Yes," said Weston, still delighted with the world. "Yes, indeed. That is me."

"Joint owner."

"Sole owner. Mr. Edmunds is no longer with us, alas. But we'd just had the stationery printed, so it seemed a shame to change the name of the law firm."

Carter didn't find that funny, but Weston was amused enough for both of them. Carter opened his browser on his laptop and carried out a brief search. "Founded 1925," he said, keeping the surprise out of his voice.

"Indeed so. Mr. Edmunds died some considerable time ago. The firm has remained a family concern of the Westons ever since. And here I am."

And here he was. This wasn't sitting well with Carter; the Weston Edmunds website showed he was not some provincial lawyer sitting in his office and just handling small local business, like some sort of Jimmy Stewart character. Weston Edmunds handled complex litigations, intellectual property and communications rights, patents, and venture capital. It had a staff of more than a hundred, and they worked in a very nice office building, if the website was being honest. Weston must be a very rich man.

And here he was.

"Is this a ... personal matter?" asked Carter.

"Yes!" Weston seemed even more delighted. "Yes, it is. There is good news!" His smile vanished and he looked aghast, as if he'd insulted Carter unintentionally. "Oh, but there is bad news, too. May I see some identification before we go any further?"

"You're in my office," said Carter. "You know who I am."

"I know I am in the right place, but it would be infelicitous if it turned out I was talking to the wrong man. It is a legal nicety, but I must insist on seeing some item of photographic identification."

Carter took out his wallet with ill grace, and passed Weston his investigator's license. He had already found a picture of Weston on his website, so didn't necessarily require some ID reciprocation, although it was tempting to ask for it in retaliation. After all, the site could be bogus. But no, he didn't really believe that, and he himself was not the retaliatory type, in any case.

Weston looked at it for barely a moment before passing it back. "As I say, a nicety, but a necessity. His smile deepened, a man continually delighted with everything. Carter wondered how much of his vast fortune was going into medications. Few men are that pleased with the world and their fellow humans, and not one of that few is a lawyer.

Carter accepted his license back and returned it to his wallet. "You said there was bad news."

The smile fled again. "There is. I am so very sorry. I bring bad tidings. Alfred Hill is dead."

Carter shook his head. "I don't know any Alfred Hill."

Weston seemed curious rather than surprised by this. "You are sure?"

Carter racked his memory, but nothing emerged. "I don't think so."

"No family by that name?"

Here Carter was on firmer ground. "Definitely no Hills in my family. That, I would have remembered. No, I'm sorry, Mr. Weston, you've made a wasted trip."

"Splendid." The smile returned as if at the flick of a switch. "If you do not know Alfred Hill, then you will not feel any grief at his passing. That leaves only good news." He lifted a slim aged-leather briefcase from the floor beside his chair. Carter looked at the old-style satchel case with some envy for what it implied; that Weston was so rich, he could use things that were comfortable for him rather than having to project an image all the time.

Weston undid the case's clasp and removed a handful of documents, apparently its only contents. "You are the sole beneficiary of his estate. It does not comprise a great deal, but one is grateful to be remembered at all, hmmm?"

"I don't understand this. I've never heard of the man."

"He had heard of you, obviously. The identification in his last will and testament is quite specific." Weston did not stop smiling. "There is no mistake. Somehow, you have touched upon this man's life, and he decided to reward you for that at the time of his passing."

"There's nothing in the will to say why?"

"Nothing." Weston removed a piece of folded cream paper from an onionskin envelope and passed it over. "The will is brief, but exact."

Carter read it carefully, then again. "Can I make a copy of this?"

Weston spread his hands. "You may keep that copy, Mr. Carter."

"Isn't this the original?" It certainly seemed like it; the paper was heavy—at least thirty-two-pound bond, probably more—and felt expensive. The signatures seemed to have a different sheen from the printed text of the will when he angled them in the light, as if they were handwritten and not scanned and copied.

Weston was unconcerned. "I don't believe so, but even if it is, what of it? You are the sole beneficiary, after all."

Carter read the will through carefully, paying special attention to the details of Alfred Hill, and then to the nature of the bequest itself. The former told him nothing except Hill's home address, and the latter turned out to be the same thing.

"He's left me his house?"

Through the two or three minutes that Carter had been reading, Weston had simply sat there and watched him, the genial smile never leaving his face. "Indeed."

"I don't have any use for a house in Providence."

"Hardly my concern, Mr. Carter. I have executed Alfred Hill's last will and testament, and my role in this is complete. Do what you will with the Hill residence."

Carter skimmed through the document again. "How did he die?"

"How did Mr. Hill die? I thought you didn't know him?"

"I don't. I'm just interested."

"The cause of Mr. Hill's death is unknown. Indeed, even its occurrence is uncertain."

Carter looked at him. "You're saying there's no body?"

"Mr. Hill is missing, presumed dead. The court has ruled him so *in absentia*."

"He's been missing for seven years?"

"Seven years with sight of neither hide nor hair, Mr. Carter. Without communication with friends

family, without a trace at any and all of his known haunts, and our diligent inquiries have revealed no banking or tax activity. We hired private investigators to find what they could, which was nothing. A tiny bit ironic that the trail ultimately ended in the office of another private investigator, isn't it, Mr. Carter?" Weston was still smiling. Carter wondered if it would start to hurt after a while. "I enjoy irony. There's so little to surprise one in life anymore. Such coincidences are small delights."

Carter didn't care about just how much Weston gloried in the rich tapestry of life. "Then the property has been unoccupied for *seven years*? What condition is it in?"

"I'm sure that I have no idea, Mr. Carter. I am no Realtor, only a humble lawyer." Strangely, Carter didn't find the word "humble" coming from the mouth of the senior partner of a large law firm as disgusting as he might have. Weston was a rich man, of that there was no doubt, but the money truly seemed to be just a side effect of his job to him.

"So I might go there and find it ruined, or burned out, or gone altogether?"

"Well, I doubt that, as it was searched pursuant to the claim of death *in absentia*. It was still there then. Nothing untoward was drawn to my attention, so I suppose it still has its roof on, at the very least."

Carter considered; the drive up to Providence would take the best part of four hours. He couldn't start on the surveillance for the divorce job until the following week because the subject was currently out of town, and he only had a couple of searches left to do on a background check he'd taken on the previous day. Those could wait.

"Okay, I'll have a look at it," he said.

"Excellent," said Weston. "Even if it isn't a luxury condominium with gold-plated taps, Mr. Carter, I'm sure the simple pleasure of a windfall will go some way toward compensating you for your time. He gestured to the will. "You have the address there. Here"—he produced a pristine white envelope from those he had taken from the briefcase—"are the deeds, here is a local map with the location marked—"

"My car has GPS."

"Of course it does. And here are the keys." He produced a key ring holding two Yales and a mortice key. "My people tell me the latter is for the rear door, which was double bolted on the inside, so you shouldn't bother with that if I were you."

"Your people."

"My investigators." The thin wad of documents was now in Carter's possession, and Weston made a small spread of his hands, like a magician demonstrating that he had made them vanish. "I think that concludes our business." He stood, and Carter rose, too. "It has been a pleasure to meet you, and I hope your inheritance gives you cause for happiness. Enjoy it in good health, Mr. Carter."

They shook hands once again, and Carter accompanied Weston out into the hall. When the lawyer was out of sight on the stairs, Carter closed his door and walked to the window. More than usual, he wanted to watch the man out in the real world beyond his office. He had suffered a hard enough time believing in Weston while he had been in the same room as him, never mind now that he was out of sight.

Carter waited five minutes, but Weston did not appear in the parking lot. Carter went out into the hallway and looked over the banister, but there was no one down there at all. Finally, he descended the stairs himself and walked out the entrance. There was no sign of Weston.

Carter concluded there was no mystery; he had left by the rear service entrance. An eccentric choice, but Weston seemed to enjoy doing things differently. The world whirled on, and everything made sense.

Chapter 4

PROVIDENCE

Carter had been to Providence a handful of times in his life, and never by choice. It was always something to do with a case, or to help somebody out, but he had never willingly been to the place. He didn't like the city at all, but he couldn't have told you why. He knew the dislike was irrational; that didn't mitigate it in the slightest. The small flurry of optimism he had felt that this unexpected inheritance might be worth something was dampened long before the lawyer Weston had belittled him by implication; the discovery that it was in Providence, of all places, had already killed his buzz magnificently.

It was an old city, but he didn't feel that when he went there. It felt artificial to him, as if it were procedurally generated by some video game. There was never a sense of place he could feel comfortable with, just the nagging idea that they were constructing the city as he traveled into it, and struck it like a stage set when he left. He had once read a book by William S. Burroughs called *The Place of Dead Roads*. In it, there was an artificial town run by a conspiracy. It looked like any other place, but if you hung around long enough, you'd realize the old-timers were always having the same conversation in the same words, that the same things happened in the street again and again, that the existence of the town as a town was nothing more than a mechanical tableau, designed to encourage the casual visitor in the belief that all was normal, and that the casual visitor should move on.

Providence felt like that to Carter, except he could swear he could hear the clockwork whirring behind the bland facades of the buildings, the flutter of script pages when he turned away. He did not like Providence at all, and he didn't care what Providence thought of him in return.

The address was in an area to the northeast of the city he had not heard of before—Hastings. Carter's dislike of Providence grew calcified and unforgiving as he navigated the streets of Hastings. Everything seemed to be of white clapboard construction, every house looking like every other house. It was like driving through Stepford.

Carter felt a headache starting to nag. The GPS said he was close, so he pulled into the parking lot of a small strip mall next to a row of stores in older buildings. He bought himself some aspirin and a bottle of water, swallowed a couple of tablets, and went to find the golden castle he'd inherited.

* * *

He walked down the row of stores—hairdressers, sandwich shop, vacuum cleaner repairs, car parts, a couple boarded up—and was surprised to realize that the numbers were closer than he'd gauged to the address. He wasn't sure what to think when he reached 1117 Havilland Street, and found it was a store, too. To be exact, a bookstore. To be perfectly exact, a functioning bookstore.

Hill's Books he read on the sign. *Antiquarian & Secondhand*. The store window was lined with a yellowish, amber-colored plastic film, to protect the books from sunlight, he guessed. Beyond it, he could see

sets of encyclopedias, Dickens, Henry James, Shakespeare, and examples of prints like maps and stiffly engraved soldiers of the Continental Army. Everything looked yellowed and old, not entirely due to the colored light.

Inside, he could see electric lights were on, and the sign hanging in the door said *Open*. With misgivings, Carter entered.

A bell, an actual bell with a coiled brass striker mounted by it, struck a bright note as he swung the door open. The shop smelled just like every old bookshop he had ever been in. Not a huge number, but the smell was distinctive and not unpleasant. Everything other than the books seemed varnished and polished—the floorboards, the shelves, and the fancy paneling that rose up to hip height on the walls. It didn't look new. Nothing in the shop looked new.

No, that wasn't quite correct. Behind the counter, an African American woman was watching him with an open book on her lap. She was, he guessed, somewhere around her mid-twenties, not conventionally pretty, with broad cheekbones that would have given her the look of a lazy cat but for the very intelligent dark eyes that were currently looking at him. Not conventionally pretty, perhaps, but he found her attractive all the same. She wasn't simply looking at him, he realized; she was assessing him.

Seeing that he was studying her in return, she smiled. "Hi," she said, rising from her stool. She closed the book and put it on the counter by her. He unconsciously noted the title: *Diablerie Stereoscopic Adventures in Hell*. It took her a long time to get from "H" to the last "i" in "Hi." She had a voice that made Katharine Hepburn sound like Phyllis Diller. "Can I help you?"

Carter couldn't decide whether the smile was fake, flirtatious, or just patronizing.

"I guess so," he said. "This is 1117 Havilland, yeah?"

The smile faded. "Yes," she said. Her tone had become more cautious.

"I ... Look, this is going to sound weird. Do you know an Alfred Hill?"

"He's my uncle." She had been leaning lightly on the counter with her fingertips, but now she straightened up.

Carter wasn't sure what to make of the present tense in that answer. Despite himself, his curiosity instincts were starting to nag.

"You've seen him recently?"

"What are you? An investigator? Debt collector?"

Carter looked around him. The shop was in pristine condition: the stock properly displayed, the interior neat, the exterior maintained. On a shelf behind the counter was a little cartoonish vinyl figure of some sort of monster, bright green, with tentacles dangling from its face and thin bat wings on its back.

Carter had been expecting a musty old house with maybe a few shingles missing and probably a few mice running around. A functioning bookstore with staff in it was nowhere in his plans.

"No. Well, yes, I *am* an investigator, but that's not why I'm here."

"No? Why all the questions, then?"

Carter knew this wasn't going to go down well, but bit the bullet and said it anyway. He pointed vaguely around him. "This place. It's mine."

The woman's face hardened. "What the actual *fuck* are you talking about?"

"You always talk to strangers like that?" She said nothing, but just glared at him. He figured she might throw a punch if he didn't explain things quickly. "Your uncle's been missing seven years, that right? He's been declared legally dead. Didn't you know that?"

Her expression of surprise being quickly overwhelmed by anger indicated clearly that she had no

known that at all. “This is the first I’ve heard about it. Who the hell...? How could that happen without them telling me? I work here. He’s my uncle, damn it! How is it...? Who told you?”—

“Your uncle’s lawyer did.”

“He did *what*? How could he do that without warning me? Wait ... why was he talking to you?”

“I’m the beneficiary of your uncle’s will.”

“I haven’t—”

“I’m the *sole* beneficiary.”

The anger left her as suddenly as it had come. She looked at him as if he’d just come in to tell her he was very sorry, but he’d just run over her dog. She sat down heavily on the stool.

“This isn’t right,” she said finally.

“I’m sorry,” said Carter, and he was. He knew there were plenty of people in the world who would be enjoying themselves in his situation. *Thanks very much for all your hard work. Now fuck off while I strip this place of whatever it’s worth.* He wasn’t one of them. “You’ve been working here for seven years without your uncle?”

“I dropped out of postgrad. He gave me the job.” She looked hopelessly at him. “Not even a year later he didn’t come down one day.” She nodded at the ceiling, and Carter understood her to mean there was an apartment above. “I went to check on him, but he wasn’t there. His car was still around the back, but no sign of him. He hadn’t come back by the evening, so I called the police. Yeah, it must be seven years. Yeah...”

She reached under the counter and pulled out several ledgers. She checked the covers where accounting years were written in ballpoint until she found the one she wanted. She flicked through the pages. “Son of a bitch,” she said, her finger on an entry. “Seven years ago today.” She looked up angrily at him. “You didn’t hang around, did you? Couldn’t wait to grab the place.”

“You’ve got me all wrong,” said Carter. “The lawyer came to me. I hadn’t even heard of your uncle before this morning. I don’t know why he named me in his will at all. This is as weird to me as it is to you. I came up here thinking I’d inherited some run-down, abandoned house. A working bookstore. I wasn’t expecting this at all.”

She was looking at him suspiciously. “You didn’t know Alfred?”

“Never even heard his name before.”

“So who are you?”

“I’m Dan Carter.”

There was a flicker in her face at that, but he couldn’t exactly identify what it meant. It wasn’t surprise or recognition nearly as much as it was realization, but the expression was gone in a moment.

The bell rang again, and the woman looked across at the entrance. This time she was startled. A man was making his way past the freestanding bookshelves to the counter. Carter sized him up very quickly. He knew a real Armani suit when he saw one, a pair of Salvatore Ferragamos that would have left much change from a grand, and a shirt and tie that he suspected could well be Kiton. He looked at the man’s face—not movie star handsome, but self-assured and undeniably charismatic—blond and blue-eyed—and thought, *Politician*.

“Hi,” said the man to the woman behind the counter, but his gaze slid over Carter. “Not interrupting business, am I?”

“Ken, I—” The woman seemed more flustered now than she had at the discovery that the bookstore belonged to Carter. “I wasn’t expecting you for an hour. It’s—” She shook her head hopelessly. Carter felt sorry for her. It wasn’t a good day.

“What’s going on?” said Ken, with the half smile of somebody whose instinct is to be friendly, but

who will tear off your head if you turn out to be a problem. He looked curiously at Carter. "Is there a problem?"

"No. Yes. Yes, there's a problem. Alfred's been declared legally dead."

"Alfred..."

"My uncle, Ken! Hill's Books?" She ran her hand distractedly through her hair, black drizzled with red. "My uncle."

"I'm sorry, Emily. I know it must be a shock, but it can't be a complete one, surely? You've always known the day was going to come."

"Yes, but..." She looked at Ken and sagged with defeat. "I kinda thought I'd get this place."

Ken raised an eyebrow. "The will's been read so soon?" Emily nodded. "Then what's happening here?"

There seemed no point in dragging it out. "I've inherited it," said Carter.

Ken squared up to him, no longer smiling at all. "And who are you?"

Dan decided he didn't like Ken. It wasn't a great revelation; he disliked people who wore suits worth more than his car. It wasn't envy so much as irritation with the sense of entitlement that came with such lifestyles. He could put up with most things, but arrogance—whether from some gangbanger or this Ivy League fuck—he had no time for.

"What's your interest?"

"Emily is my girlfriend," said Ken, indicating Emily with a backward jerk of his thumb. He didn't look at her as he did it. "I have an interest."

Carter looked at him, then her, and back to Ken. It wasn't an obvious pairing. In the movie, she would be played by Zoë Kravitz and he would be played by Aaron Eckhart. It wouldn't be perfect casting, but that was the gist of it.

"I'm Daniel Carter," said Carter, and extended his hand. It was a measured gesture. Ken could ignore it and look an asshole, or he could accept it and lose the wind from his sails. Carter knew he would go for the political option, and he did.

He took Carter's hand and shook it one of those firm, dry handshakes, delivering a squeezing pressure of a precise number of Newtons decided upon by focus groups that politicians practiced. Carter still didn't like him, and couldn't see that changing anytime soon.

"Ken Rothwell."

The Rothwells. Of course. It would be.

"How are you related to Alfred?" asked Rothwell.

"As far as I know, I'm not. This is as big a surprise to me as it was to..." He looked to the woman. "Emily, was it? We never really got around to introducing ourselves properly."

She nodded.

"As big a surprise as it was to Emily," Carter continued. "Out of the blue."

"So, what are you going to do with the place?"

"I have no idea. I didn't know there was a store at the address, a going concern. I'll have to think about it." He looked past Rothwell to Emily. "Maybe I can just sell it to you. I don't know what to do with a bookstore."

She shook her head quickly. "I can't. I couldn't afford it. Some of the stock, it's worth a lot, never mind the building itself."

So get your rich boyfriend to buy it for you, thought Carter.

"Emily, we need to get moving," said Rothwell. "One of the donors can't stay for the fund-raiser, so I need to talk to her before it starts. That's why I'm here early."

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