

## Prologue

*Las Vegas, Nevada*  
*October, 1970*

Chase Wheeler was smiling when he entered the busy casino kitchen; he knew what was coming. As soon as the mostly-immigrant staff spotted him, the catcalls began—*Ice cream man! Ice cream man! There he is!*

Chase was tall and gangly and fresh into his twenties, still struggling with acne and the other echoes of adolescence. He waved like the Queen of England at the playful mock-adoration of his co-workers. This had become part of the joke. In his other hand was a bowl of Baskin Robbins banana nut ice cream covered in plastic wrap.

“Don’t let it melt, ice cream man!”

“Be sure that spoon is sterile, ice cream man!”

“Remember to tuck the napkin into his shirt, ice cream man!”

Chase laughed. He’d been working at the Desert Inn for just over a year and had come to like these people very much.

“Wish me luck,” he shouted back, “I’m going up!” This announcement earned him a round of applause.

He passed into a tiny alcove. There were tall shelves stocked with dry goods on either side, and the door to a service elevator at the back. He pushed the button and waited, his boyish grin fading away. The door slid aside and he stepped in. As it closed again, the busy-kitchen noisiness faded to silence.

He shut his eyes and breathed deep. Then he removed a small key from his pocket and inserted it into the control panel. He pushed the button for the penthouse, and the car began rattling upward. His heart began pounding. When the door opened again, he saw a young black man of superhuman size, dressed in a guard’s uniform complete with sidearm. The brief hallway behind him terminated at a locked door. There was a folding chair tucked in a corner, and a rolled-up magazine lay on the floor next to it.

“Come on,” the man said, waving Chase forward with both hands. He had never formally introduced himself, and the uniform bore no nametag, so Chase had given him a nickname—The Big Scary Guard. Chase had learned quickly that anonymity was the law of the land up here, so everybody needed a nickname.

“IDs,” Big Scary demanded, and Chase took out his wallet. He was required to produce two—his driver’s license and his Desert Inn employee card. He had forgotten the latter once and received no small measure of grief for it. Since then, he left a reminder note on his dresser at home.

Big Scary inspected each ID as if he’d never seen them before; as if Chase didn’t come up here every day at the same time with the same bowl of the same ice cream. Big Scary even went so far as to hold the IDs up so he could compare the

photos to the actual person. Chase said nothing, just prayed he wasn't transmitting any signals that would expose how nervous he was. Today's visit represented a significant departure from the routine, although no one but Chase and his host knew that.

Big Scary handed the IDs back and turned to the door, unlocking it with a key that was attached to his belt by a retractable wire. He pushed it back and stepped aside so Chase could pass. Then it was closed and relocked per procedure, which always felt like walking into a prison cell at the start of a very long sentence.

The anteroom was nearly as spartan as the hallway. The main furnishings were two well-used desks, both battleship gray. They had rotary phones and were covered with piles of folders and papers, and there were cheap wooden cabinets on the walls above them.

A man was seated at each desk when Chase came in. Both wore conservative business suits, had equally conservative haircuts, and appeared to be in their late thirties or early forties. Just like Big Scary, neither had ever formally introduced himself, so Chase gave them names based on their personalities as well—Jerk A and Jerk B.

"Well, if it isn't the Good Humor Man," the one on the right said. This was Jerk B, and he struck Chase as a classic example of the kind of person who found himself considerably funnier than anyone else does. "Here to make your delivery, Good Humor Man?"

"Yes."

"Did you sanitize the bowl and the spoon as per the boss's directive?" asked Jerk A. He had received the higher designation because he was the older of the pair and appeared to be in charge.

"Yes."

"And that is banana nut? *The* banana nut?"

"Yes." *We have over fifty gallons of it in the freezer downstairs per your boss's orders,* Chase thought. *What other kind would it be?*

"I need to see it."

Chase came forward and held it out. Jerk A looked it over, taking longer than any reasonable person would need to inspect ice cream.

"Exactly eleven ounces?"

"Yes."

"And where's your uniform?" Jerk B asked, now as somber as his partner.

"I'm sorry?" Chase was currently wearing his Desert Inn attire, which bore the casino's logo on the shirt pocket and was made of the most uncomfortable polyester on the planet. "I'm already in my—"

"I mean your Good Humor uniform!" Jerk A shouted, followed by a fresh explosion of laughter. "The one with the little hat!" He slapped the desk repeatedly, consumed by his own comic brilliance. Jerk B permitted himself a tolerant smile.

"I'd better get in there and give this to him," Chase said, "before it melts."

"Go on," Jerk B said.

There was another door on the opposite side. Just as Chase reached it, Jerk B reminded him to ring the little bell on his ice cream truck when he went in.

The next room wasn't much bigger than the service elevator, and it was lit only by a dim red bulb on the ceiling. It reminded Chase of the darkroom that his Uncle Pete, a professional portrait photographer out in Seattle, had in his basement.

Chase closed the door and temporarily set the bowl on an empty shelf. The one just below it held several cardboard boxes and bottles of isopropyl alcohol. He took a handful of paper towels, dampened them with the alcohol, and wiped down every exposed inch of skin on his body. The towels were then discarded in a small trash can with a foot pedal. The next step was to cover his shoes with a pair of disposable booties, then put on rubber gloves and a dust mask.

When he took the ice cream in hand again, his heart was hammering. He knew it was nothing more than a prop this time. When he opened the second door, the red light shut off automatically, and he found himself enveloped in cool darkness. He stepped inside, shut the door quietly, and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust. There was no source of illumination here, but the heavy shades that had been installed to cover the windows still bore a pale glow from the blazing Nevada sun.

The other physical adjustment he made—one that had become a necessity since that first day—was to breathe through his mouth instead of his nose. The musky stench of human excrement was awful. It was the odor of bus stations and public restrooms and hospital beds magnified exponentially. He had heard that there were rows of glass jars filled with urine lined up against the far wall. But he had no way of knowing this for certain because he had never been over there. In the eleven weeks since he had been given this assignment, he had only been able to determine two things—the centerpiece of the room was a large hospital bed with nightstands on either side, and there was a large television positioned at the foot of the bed for the occupant's entertainment. Chase had come to feel that the occupant in question was, in fact, not only the real centerpiece of the room, but of this entire floor of the Desert Inn, of the hotel itself, of several others in town, and of countless other business interests around the world. Chase thought this because the man who lay not more than ten feet away from him was one of the wealthiest people in human history.

He became aware of the man's slow, wheezy respiration. Then the voice, thin and reedy and still colored by a Texas accent. A voice that had not been heard by the public in decades. The voice of Howard Robard Hughes—

“Chase?”

“Yes sir.”

“You brought the ice cream?”

“Yes sir.”

“Please set it down on the table here. Set it on the corner nearest to you, with a one-inch margin on both sides of the right angle.”

“Yes sir.”

“I've laid out a pathway for you.”

Chase translated the word ‘pathway’ as a succession of fresh Kleenex tissues from one of the dozens of boxes that were also supposedly kept in this room.

Hughes's fear of germs were already legendary in the media. Chase Wheeler was one of the few people who could provide firsthand testimony to the accuracy of those reports.

The fact that Hughes had gone to the trouble of laying out the tissues not only touched Chase but also told him that Hughes had gotten out of his bed. Chase took this as a very good sign. He had grown to genuinely care about the man with a kind of selflessness that the billionaire's other minders could not fathom. Hughes's fortune meant nothing to him; he had been born on the lower rung of society's ladder and had never known anything else.

His vision reached a point of clarity where he could at least make out the line of tissues. He followed it to the nightstand and set the bowl down. As he tried to position it according to Hughes's wishes, he bumped a glass filled with water. It struck several others, causing a series of silvery notes to ring out.

"Oops—I'm sorry about that, sir."

He estimated that he was no more than a few feet from Hughes now, and the reek of the man's living decay was wretched.

"It's there," Chase said finally, "with the plastic wrap still on it."

This statement, as well as the one that preceded it, was technically a violation of procedure. The rule was that you could not speak to Hughes unless he spoke to you first. At the moment, however, Chase didn't care. The sympathy he felt for the man was overwhelming. He had also gotten the impression that Hughes regarded him differently from the others; a way that was special. When he began with this routine, he knew Hughes had already tried out several others on the kitchen staff. And the reason Hughes had settled on him was because Hughes felt he could trust him. Chase believed this because Hughes had said as much. He was fully aware of Hughes's capacity for ruthlessness. He knew, for example, of the cold-hearted manner in which Hughes destroyed the reputation of Maine politician Owen Brewster, who tried to embarrass him during a Senate wartime investigation. Hughes emerged from the incident unscathed and saw to it that Brewster lost his seat in the next election. In spite of this vivid example of Hughes's power and vindictiveness, Chase felt no real fear of him.

Through the inky darkness, Chase could just see Hughes reach over and touch the bowl of ice cream. His fingers squeaked on the clear plastic.

"Thank you for bringing it, Chase."

"You're welcome."

A long pause followed, segmented only by Hughes's unsteady breathing. Chase had grown used to these random breaks in their discourse. Early on, he thought Hughes was simply drifting in and out of sleep. He had since come to understand that the man followed his own sense of timing and felt no concern for the way it might inconvenience others. It would not have mattered to Chase under ordinary circumstances, for Hughes would have dismissed him after the ice cream was set in place. But the last few visits had been anything but ordinary. There had been additional instructions each time, all of which lead to the final request Hughes made now.

“Did you take care of the things I asked?”

“Yes sir, I did.”

“Exactly as I described?”

“Yes.”

“And you found a place?”

“Yes. It’s in—”

“No, don’t tell me. I can’t know.”

“Yes sir.”

Another pause. Then the sound of rustling fabric. Hughes was removing something from under his pillows.

“It’s ready. Come and take it, please.”

Chase moved forward until his knees made contact with the bed. He groped gingerly through the air until he felt a sheaf of papers. As he went to take them, his fingers brushed over those of his employer. The latter were hard and bony, the skin stretched tight. There was no direct contact because of the rubber gloves. But enough sensitivity remained to make Chase think about the grinning plastic skeleton that hung in the corner of his old high school science class.

“Be careful with it,” Hughes said. “You know what it is.”

“Yes sir. Your will.”

“My last will and *testament*.”

“Yes sir.”

“It’s more important than ever because I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be around.”

“Please don’t say that, sir.”

“It’s okay, Chase. It comes to all of us eventually.”

“I know, but...still.”

“Keep it hidden like we discussed and don’t say anything to anyone,” Hughes told him. “Not even your family.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t you read it, either.”

“No sir.”

“You won’t be safe if you do.”

“I won’t read it, I promise.”

“Some very powerful people are going to be very angry with what I put in there.” He cleared his throat before adding, “The same people who’ve been keeping me here for the last four years.”

“I—I’m sorry?”

“The public thinks I’ve become a recluse, Chase. I guess that’s true by all outward appearances. But it’s not by my own choice. I’d walk out of here right now if I could. I’m being held captive.”

“By who?”

Chase immediately regretted asking this, afraid he’d stepped too far outside the protocol. He braced himself for a scolding, but no amount of emotional fortification could have prepared him for what Hughes said next.

“By some people who are trying to bring this great country of ours down,” Hughes replied.

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At first Chase thought he’d misheard it.

“You think I’m crazy.” Hughes said through the darkness.

“No sir.”

“Yes you do. You think I’m delusional from all those codeine injections they’re giving me, right?”

Chase knew of the rumors about this but had prayed they weren’t true. His hatred of the men outside increased a hundredfold now that he had confirmation.

“I have heard about those injections, yes.”

“I haven’t had a shot in almost two weeks.”

“You...you haven’t?”

“I’ve been pretending I have a cold so they won’t give them to me. It’s too dangerous at my age to receive them if I’m sick. I needed the time to get everything written down. I’ve been working on it for awhile now, writing and rewriting. I can’t remember the last time my thoughts were so clear. But my window of opportunity is closing. They’re getting suspicious because no one has a cold for this long.”

“Well...no, I guess not.”

“You still don’t believe me,” Hughes said flatly. “I can hear it in your voice. Am I right? I need to know I can rely on you, so I need to know you believe in what I’m saying.”

“It’s hard because...you know, America—”

“Because we’re so powerful? Economically? Militarily?”

“Well...sure.”

“Chase, the nation that runs the world changes all the time. Don’t make the mistake of thinking any country gets to sit on that throne forever. In 1500 it was Spain, but two hundred years later it was France, under Napoleon. A hundred years after that it was Great Britain. Do you know anything about the Achaemenid Empire?”

“No sir.”

“Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, they were the most powerful civilization in history. They had more than fifty million citizens, and their influence stretched from modern-day Turkey and Israel in the west to Pakistan’s Indus River in the east. They freed slaves, built roadways, ran a reliable postal system, and most of their citizens were prosperous. They were much more powerful in their day than we’ve ever been in ours. Yet only the historians remember any of this.”

“I’ve never even heard of them,” Chase said.

“Yes you have,” Hughes shot back quickly, “But today we call them Iran.”

“Oh my God.”

“Oh my God’ is right. When it comes to global power, they’re not even in the top ten anymore.”

“And that could happen to us?”

“It’s already happening, and they asked me to be a part of it because of my money and my connections. But I wouldn’t do it. I guess this sounds a little corny and sentimental, but I have great affection for this country. I wouldn’t have been able to do the things I’ve done anywhere else but here. My father wouldn’t have made his fortune, and I wouldn’t have made mine. But the problem with being a great nation is that it stirs up jealousy and resentment everywhere else. Sooner or later, someone gets tired of it and decides to take action.”

“And there are people like that doing things to us right now?”

“Yes.”

“They sound crazy,” Chase said.

“I thought so too. Much too crazy to really accomplish much. But now I’m starting to see things happening out there, things that are going on right under our noses. But we won’t realize it until it’s too late. The scale of what’s been planned...you wouldn’t believe it.”

Chase suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He no longer had any doubt Hughes was being truthful. The man had never been so lucid and articulate. This was not the eccentric hermit they wrote about in the newspapers. This was someone in full control of his faculties.

“Who are they, Mr. Hughes? And how are they doing all of—”

“There’s no time to explain that now, Chase. It’s all there in those papers. Please—I’m trusting you.”

“You can.”

“I hope so. You have to bring them to a probate court immediately after I’m gone.”

“Yes...yes sir.”

“The court will need to verify the handwriting.”

“Okay.”

“Hide it now, in your clothes like we discussed.”

Chase went folding the pages into thirds, a simple task that his shaking hands made all the more challenging. Then he reached around back, lifted his shirt, and tucked them into his pants. Dropping the shirt again would provide the necessary cover, he hoped.

“I did it.”

“Good.”

Hughes let out a long sigh. “I guess that’s it.”

Chase hesitated, feeling the urge to say something more.

As if sensing this, Hughes said in the most defeated voice Chase had ever heard, “Go on, Chase. Take care of this for me.”

“Yes sir.”

“Thanks.”

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When Chase reappeared, Jerk B said, “If you spend anymore time with him, people’ll start to think you’re a couple.” The stupid grin was back in place. “They’ll be wondering when the two of you are going to send out wedding invitations!”

Chase laughed along this time, hoping it would provide the necessary distraction. Jerk A, however, was watching him with a kind of malignant suspicion and seemed to have missed the joke. *They don't like anyone getting too close to him*, Chase thought, and not for the first time. *He's their golden ticket, and they don't want anything to mess that up*. Chase was all but certain the handwritten pages that were tucked in the back of his pants would lay waste to whatever plans these two had made concerning their foreseeable futures. *I have to get out of here*.

He held up the empty bowl. "He still makes me wait while he eats it."

"Yeah? Does he also make you feed it to h—"

"He didn't do that before you started coming," Jerk A said. He leaned forward, his eyes thinning in a prosecutorial glare. "He didn't do that with any of the others before you, either."

Chase looked away, then regretted it. Hadn't he heard on some TV show that breaking eye contact was a sign of guilt?

Then a flash of inspiration struck.

"It was probably because of what I said a few weeks ago."

"And what was that?"

"When I went in with the ice cream, I asked if I should take away the dirty bowl from the day before."

The Jerk twins seemed confused by this revelation.

"I guess it was the word 'dirty' that bothered him. Y'know—the idea that a dirty bowl had been sitting there all that time. So he asked me to stay while he ate, then told me to take the bowl with me when I left."

Jerk B looked to Jerk A in the same way a child looks to a parent for a reaction before they decide on their own. Jerk A, Chase saw with some relief, was mulling over the idea.

"At first I thought it was weird," Chase went on, intuitively understanding that he had to retain control of the conversation if he was to close the deal. "But then I remembered about his fear of germs and all that." He snickered and twirled his finger by the side of his head. "Crazy."

Jerk B didn't wait for his colleague's reaction this time. His eyebrows rose in delighted surprise at this show of impertinence from the lower ranks.

Jerk A, however, maintained his careful scrutiny, apparently operating on the theory that Chase would give a sign of culpability if he waited long enough. Chase had never known such anxiety, and it took all the strength he possessed to maintain a casual bearing.

"Go on," his interrogator said at last, motioning toward the exit with his thumb. "Just get out of here. And going forward, we'll decide if there are to be any changes in procedure."

"Yes sir," Chase said politely.

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Eight days week later, Las Vegas police went to the top floor to the Desert Inn and found it abandoned, with no indication of where Hughes and his entourage had gone. Five days after that, they opened a missing-persons report on Chase



Michael Wheeler. No one made any connection between the two incidents at the time.

Chase was never found—nor was any kind of documentation concerning the dispensation of Howard Hughes’s vast estate following his death in April of 1976.

## One

*Henderson, Nevada  
Present Day*

Randy Miller made a quick left into his kitchen as another bullet zipped by. He went past the refrigerator adorned with his kids' watercolor paintings and school announcements and monthly lunch schedules, sweeping several of these items off the stainless steel surface and sending dozens of plastic ABC magnets clattering to the floor.

As he drew closer to the doorway on the other side, he took note of the silverware drawer. It held several large knives, and for a brief instant he considered going for one. The idea was just as quickly dismissed; there wouldn't be enough time. And somewhere along the farthest reaches of his mind he remembered a movie in which one of the characters had warned against the stupidity of bringing a knife to a gunfight.

A muted cough from the silenced pistol sent another shot within inches of his head and splintered the doorframe. He gasped and dove through it at an angle and let out a wrenched scream when his bare knees slid across the hall carpet.

There was a nightlight in the wall next to an accent table, and he slapped it from the outlet as he scrambled to his feet, casting the hallway in darkness. Then he took off in a mad sprint for the far end, knowing he posed an easy target as long as he remained in such a confined space.

The basement door came up on the right, and he yanked it back to form a barrier, hoping beyond hope that his pursuer would slam into it face first. He thought about going down there, maybe finding something he could use as a weapon. But a quick mental inventory told him there was nothing that would serve that purpose. Then again he wasn't trying to fight this guy—he was trying to lead him out of the house and away from his family. *If it does come to a fight*, Randy thought, *I'll do it*. He was a large, physical individual who, in spite of having an essentially peaceful soul, knew how to use his hands when necessary. But he'd just as soon avoid any such confrontation. He knew why this lunatic was here, and his only objective now was to keep him clear of Jeanine and the kids. He could deal with the other part of it afterward.

The hallway ended in an intersection—to the left was a staircase to the second floor, to the right was the door into the garage. He had already formulated a plan that involved the latter. There was a cordless phone out there. He would grab it and dial 911. He wouldn't even have to say anything—emergency services would trace the location and police would be on their way in minutes. *And if this nut follows me, I'll go out the side door and into the yard while we're waiting*.

Just as he wrapped his hand around the doorknob, however, he heard his wife's first scream. The first coherent thought that squirmed through his fear was, *How did he get up there so fast?* Then he heard the shooter step into the hallway at the far

end, and Randy lunged left as three more shots came. Then the kids cried out too, both of them.

He reached the top of the steps and kept going. Allie and Mark's bedroom doors were wide open. Even though Allie was only ten, she already had a well-developed sense of privacy and kept her door closed at all times. Some of the items on her dresser had been knocked to the floor—her jewelry box, several of her stuffed animals, her iPod.... The sight of this drove up Randy's anger until it was level with his trepidation. The very fact that this animal might have violated his little girl's personal space made him feel murderous.

Another shriek—this time it was Allie—told him they were all in the master bedroom. He sprinted to it, pushed the door back, and found them there—his wife and children, cowering in the presence of the most horrifying human being he had ever seen. The man—who was currently living his life under the name of Robert Grant—was bullishly large, the eyes dark and cruel, and his long hair pulled tight and rolled into a ball at the back. For all that, he was also clean-shaven and had a healthy pallor that seemed oddly out of place. Randy had the fleeting thought that this made him seem like a highly successful individual—a successful *criminal*—which was all the more unnerving. Grant held his weapon out as Randy's family clung to each other.

Randy held his hands up, barely aware that he had also begun crying. “Okay, okay! Don't hurt them, please!”

Grant swung his weapon—a nine millimeter—around until it was inches from Randy's nose.

“Where are they?” he said. It was the voice of one whose programming did not include a sense of humor.

“Th-they're not here.”

“Where *are* they?” He thumbed the hammer back.

“I swear to you they're *not...here....*”

Grant took a step forward, his face twisted in a snarl, and used the weapon to strike Randy on the side of the head. His wife and children exploded in wails as he went down. Then came a vicious kick to the kidneys. Randy let out a scream and twisted like a worm on hot pavement.

Grant stood over him. “Pay attention.”

Randy turned, his face screened with sweat. “Okay...yes.”

The gun was aimed again, this time toward someone on the bed. Randy couldn't see who.

“No! Please!”

“You have five seconds to tell me where they are. After that, I start killing your family while you watch. Five....”

“I swear they're not here. I swear it!”

“Four.”

“Come on, please! I *swear to God* they're not—”

“Three.”

“PLEASE, NO! PLEASE DON'T!” He was sobbing like a child now.

“Two.”

“Jesus, *no!*”

“One.”

Randy screamed out “*THEY'RE AT MY BROTHER'S HOUSE!!!*” but half of this was cut off by a shot that spat from the barrel with an accompanying flash. There were collective shrieks from the others...and then an icy silence. Randy got to his knees to see which of the three had been taken from him, knowing that if he survived this night he would have the image of the lifeless body burned in his memory for eternity.

He saw the bullet hole, which did not run through any of his loved ones but instead tunneled into the wall a few inches above his wife's head, and his first thought was, *How could he have missed?*

“That's to let you know I'll do it,” Grant said conversationally. “Now, are you lying to me about the pages being at your brother's house? Because if I think you are, here's what I'm going to do—I'm going to take the pleasure of killing all of you, and I'm going to start by age, youngest first.”

Randy Miller had never known such blazing terror. “I swear he has them. “He's a lawyer, and he has a safe in his office. I thought they'd be best kept in there when you...when you started calling.”

Grant studied him close. “Even if I believe you, that still doesn't solve the problem we have here.”

“What? What do you mean? I don't want the pages anymore. They've been nothing but trouble. You can have th—”

“I'm talking about the four of you.”

When the implied meaning sunk in, Randy's level of panic went into the stratosphere. Somewhere in the midst of this rocketing alarm he realized this guy wasn't just a brute—he was a sociopath.

“You're going to kill us all? That's not going to get you the p—”

Grant leaned in and backhanded him across the face, sending Randy spinning to the floor again. A pain brighter than a thousand suns blossomed in his jaw, but a memory broke through it as well—his high school psychology course. At the urging of the class, the normally prim Mrs. Donner had spent one memorable afternoon talking about homicidal tendencies. The kids had never been so absorbed, such was their youth and the naïve comfort of knowing they would surely never encounter anyone like this.

Realizing he was now at the mercy of such an individual—and that the next people to see him and his family would probably be whatever civic officials discovered their bullet-riddled bodies—Randy was overcome by a surprising sense of liberation. *If we're all going down*, he thought, *he is too*.

He looked under the dresser and saw exactly what he prayed he would see—the two squash rackets he and Jeanine had hidden there after they caught Allie and Mark using them in a living-room ‘swordfight.’

He got on all fours and let out an agonized moan. Although the pain was still sparkling in his head like fireworks, the moaning was nothing but theater. *Please let this*

*work...oh please God, please let this work....* He swayed a moment, creating the illusion that he was disoriented, and moved closer to the dresser.

Grant said, "I'm sorry, but I have to." Then came the click of the hammer being set into place again.

Randy reached under the dresser and wrapped his fingers tight around one of the handles, then pulled the racket out and brought it up in one fluid motion. It struck Grant's forearm the moment he fired. Randy did not pause to evaluate the results, but rather drew the racket back and swung again. This is where he got lucky—the long side of the oval frame connected perfectly with Grant's mouth, which had formed into a perfect lowercase 'o.' The gun tumbled from his hand as he clutched the point of impact. Randy did not have even a split second to enjoy this bit of good fortune because his attacker recovered quickly and lunged. Randy rolled over, took the gun in hand, and fired off a wild shot of his own. It whistled past Grant's head and shattered the dressed mirror into a million pieces.

Grant turned and raced from the room as Randy kept firing. Drywall exploded in chunks, spraying everywhere. Randy went out into the hallway, fired one more, then screamed, "*I'm calling the police right now!!!*"

He could hear the back door being thrown open, and when he returned to the bedroom he saw his assailant sprinting across the lawn. He considered firing another shot or two, then thought better of it. It was unlikely he could hit the target at this range, and he wanted to preserve whatever ammunition was left in case the animal came back.

He said breathlessly, "Where's my cellphone? We've got to call 911." He kept shifting his gaze from the door to the window, as if Grant might reappear any moment. "Jeanine? The cellphone? Where is—"

He turned and found her holding Allie tight against her chest and sobbing. Randy went cold when he saw the blood spreading rapidly across the child's nightshirt.

## Two

Jason Hammond stood on the sandy margin between the bay and the jagged, vine-tangled palisade at the northern end of his New Hampshire estate. He stood there and wished he was just about anywhere else.

The boathouse, the dock, the zigzagging wooden steps that led up to the rest of the property—all were worn to the point of near dysfunctionality. As someone blessed with more money than he would ever need, he wasn't worried about the financial demands of repairing or replacing these things. It was the emotional aspects that troubled him on this clear, windy afternoon.

He was dressed casually, in jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The lagoon-sized portion of the Atlantic Ocean that was trapped in the rock-walled cove behind him gyrated sluggishly, and a few dozen gulls sailed around overhead. One would occasionally swoop down and pluck something out of the water as the others cried out their resentment.

He had a spiralbound notebook in one hand and a pencil in the other. A part of him burned to just make the decisions and be done. Another governed him not to do anything in haste. And underlying all this conflict was the most powerful desire of all—to do nothing. But the only other living occupant on the property had nagged him relentlessly until he committed himself. That was the essence of Noah Gwynn these days—nudging, pushing, pulling, nagging...whatever it took. *We're not related by blood*, Jason thought on many occasions, *but we may as well be. He's the closest things to family I've got left.* And Noah had been focused on “bringing the estate back into the land of the living,” as he put it, for the last month and a half.

Noah believed there were only two approaches. The first was to faithfully recreate what had always been there—have the builders use the same materials and follow the same blueprints that Jason's late father had drawn up long ago. The second was to tear everything down and start fresh—all new materials, all new designs...all new everything.

The latter strategy was the more reasonable for reasons obvious enough. The property would be safer, more durable, fully modernized, better suited for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, etc. And, of course, giving the property a new face would be “...more conducive to focusing on the future,” as Noah had said several times. The unspoken caveat there, delivered with the man's usual gift for diplomacy, was *...and letting go of the past.*

Jason looked from one landmark to another—the boathouse, the steps, the dock, back to the boathouse. With the wind blowing his hair every which way, he went over to a large, weather-smoothed boulder and sat down. Even the boulder held memories—he and his family used to set their towels on it after a swim. The sun would heat it like a stovetop, and everything dried quickly. This image brought a flood of others. He had, in fact, been fighting them back them all day. But this time he let them come, and figures began to move before him in a ghost play.

The first was his mother, smiling and radiant as she maintained that rarified balance between girlish and matronly. She wrapped in a terrycloth robe, her face protected by sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat. Holding her hand was a seven-year-

old version of himself, replete with a perfect tan and his normally black hair lightened ever so slightly by repeated afternoons in the sun. He—or, rather, his mother—kept it styled in a Beatlesque mop-top, as was acceptable for virtually all small boys. They strolled along the shoreline, examining the soppy border that separated land and sea. They would pause occasionally, and his mother would crouch down to point something out. They would then discuss what they had found, and in a way that never struck the little boy as tiresome or dull. She would cover the natural history—what every creature ate, where it lived, how it related to others in its world, and so on. But this was the concrete, and she also wanted her son to understand the abstract—their delicacy, their inherent beauty, and their value.

Then came an image of Jason's father, from whom he had inherited his lean, athletic build and satiny black hair. Jason was perhaps twelve or thirteen in this vision, which put his father somewhere in his early forties. They were both in bathing suits, t-shirts, and baseball caps. The time had come, Alan Hammond decided, to begin teaching his son how to negotiate the open seas. He had a traditional sloop at the time, a J-24 with a single foresail. They were standing on the dock, and Jason's father was pointing out the craft's every detail. The vocabulary alone was formidable—mast, boom, tiller, winch, chainplate, jibsheet, shroud... Alan Hammond did not possess his wife's oratorical gift, but the sheer depth of his knowledge kept the boy absorbed. And Jason was excited, not just because he was being groomed for an obvious rite of passage but because he and his father were getting along like best friends. This had not been the case in recent times, for Jason had reached an age where he began to truly understand the scope of his father's wealth and, more pointedly, grow uncomfortable with how his father had acquired some of it. This had led to heated exchanges that often resulted in long periods of silence between them.

From there came the remembrance of the night he spent talking with his sister. He was sixteen, Joan eighteen, and it came at the end of a particularly tense week between him and his father. His mother had been doing volunteer work overseas and was thus unable to fulfill her customary role as mediator and peacekeeper. This latest quarrel had peaked in a shouting match followed by Jason storming out of the house and coming down here to cool off. Joan had always made a point of remaining neutral during these episodes, but on this evening she surprised her brother by taking up their mother's diplomatic duties.

She sat down a few feet from him on the sand and just listened. After most of the rage had blown out of him, they were able to engage in a real conversation. The topic that night was the conflict between excessive profiteering and staying true to one's beliefs. Jason said he could not resolve it to the point where he was able to accept all of their father's practices. Joan offered her thoughts here and there. Then she got an inflatable beachball from the boathouse, and they rolled it back and forth as Jason's anger gradually tapered off. The subject soon turned to other issues, and by morning Jason felt as though he had undergone an emotional purge.

Tears threatened, as they did so often now. Jason had never been much of a crier, yet no more than a day or two passed without an episode of some kind. He kept the grief to himself, releasing it only when he was certain Noah was nowhere

near. He knew Noah loved him, and the feeling was certainly reciprocated. But he couldn't bring himself to share the suffering; not with Noah, not with anyone. Sometimes he wished he could, because the weight of it was unbearable. The emptiness, the confusion, and, worst of all, the longing...the terrible, endless longing. He didn't even realize one person could feel such pain and survive.

He got off the big rock and went to the boathouse. The door opened with a dry creak. Inside was a disorganized mess of fishing poles and rotting nets and styrofoam buoys and crab traps. And there in the corner, deflated and filthy, was the beachball in question.

Like everything else in here—and on the rest of the estate, for that matter—it had not served a useful purpose since time out of mind.

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“Tell me honestly, how's he doing?”

Noah didn't want to lie to Darren Redeker, friend and neighbor of the Hammond family for decades.

He stood in Jason's office, located on the first floor of the estate's enormous main house and dominated by an L-shaped mahogany work station. It was a cramped former a sitting area that went largely unused by the Hammond family back in the day. There were papers and folders everywhere, and an Apple computer with a massive screen.

Noah fingered open the microblinds to see if Jason was anywhere in sight. “I just don't know, Darren. Some days he seems perfectly fine, but on others...”

“The last time we spoke, you said he was attending services again. But I haven't seen him there lately.”

“He *was* going, then he stopped. And he won't tell me why. When I ask him about it, he won't give a direct answer.”

“Did something happen?”

“If it did, I certainly wouldn't know.” Noah sighed heavily. “I thought he was completely back on track where his faith was concerned. I thought that issue was closed. I guess not.”

“Hmm...well, what's he doing with himself otherwise?”

“No idea there, either. I think he's still itching to keep up his role as homegrown superhero. Fighting evil, bringing the bad guys to justice. It makes me very uneasy. I mean, please don't misunderstand—he *is* a superhero in many ways. He's donating more money to charitable causes than his father ever did. He's directed the company to work on new projects that have the sole function of making the world a better place, like child safety devices and advanced medical technologies. And I can't tell you how many times he's read about someone's misfortunes in the newspaper or on the Internet and, like a magician waving his wand, made their problems disappear. And always anonymously, too. He's stubbornly devoted to that crazy idealism everyone else loses when they grow up. When you combine that with his wealth and that big brain of his, he's like a character in some fantasy movie. But this *isn't* a movie. This is real life.”



Redeker laughed. “You have to admit, Noah, some of the things he’s done have been unbelievable. Michael Rockefeller, Amelia Earhart, and now the Kennedy thing...wow. Nobody thought the truth behind the assassination would ever come out. Jason did the whole nation a service with that.”

“And almost got killed in the process.”

“So what would you prefer he be doing?”

“Something that won’t put him in the path of danger all the time. Like going back to school and finish up his degree. Go for the Ph. D. and become a professor of history like he talked about before Alan, Linda, and Joanie were killed. When he was a kid, I couldn’t get him to shut up about history. Ancient Greece, the Mexican Revolution, the Renaissance, the Gilded Age. Even recent periods like the Sixties fascinated him. I’d love to turn him back to all that.”

“Does he do any studying these days?”

“Not really. Not for the reasons he should be.”

“That’s too bad.”

“And if he won’t do any of that, I’d like to get him to take more of an interest in the business. His father spent forty years building an industrial empire, and Jason regards it like a Mac machine. Keeping him focused on it is like pulling a mule up a hill.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I think he’s trying to avoid the harsh realities he needs to face here. Mainly that his family is never coming back, and that the world is moving on. If he doesn’t keep up with it, it’s going to move on without him. He has to accept it all and live in the present.”

“Is that why you’re having him redo the place?”

Noah nodded. “Absolutely. It’s just a starting point, but it’s an important one. The estate looks exactly as it did on the day they all died. And I think that’s what he wants—to keep it as a kind of museum. But that’s unhealthy and unrealistic. He *has* to live for today, not yesterday. He can’t see the road ahead if he’s looking in the rearview mirror all the time.”

Noah thought he spotted some movement at the top of the grassy hill that overlooked the inlet. It turned out to be a lone heron strutting around in the late-afternoon breeze.

“A lot of people don’t come back from a loss of that magnitude,” Redeker said, “Some just fall apart. I’ve seen my fair share of suffering. And look who I’m talking to—this isn’t unfamiliar territory for you, either, considering the loss of your—”

The rest of his comment was cut off by a call-waiting beep. Noah held the phone back and peered over his glasses. He did not recognize the number, although he could tell from the area code that it was somewhere in Nevada. A friend from his Boston youth had moved there a few years back, and they spoke from time to time.

“Darren? I’m sorry, but there’s another call coming in. Can I get back to you?”

“Of course. Take your time.”

“Thanks.”

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Noah thumbed the FLASH button.

“Hello?”

At first there was nothing but static and road noise, as if the caller was standing near a busy highway.

“Hello?” Noah said again. He gave it a few more seconds, then moved his thumb to the OFF button. Just before he pressed it, a voice came through the speaker—

“Hello?”

Noah tensed at the clear terror in the man’s voice. “I’m here,” he said. “Who is this?”

“Are you Jason Hammond?”

“No, I’m his personal assistant, Noah Gwynn. Personal assistant, housekeeper, you name i—”

“You have to help us, please. I need to talk to Mr. Hammond.”

“All right, who—”

“We really need help, badly.”

“Okay, but I can barely understand you.”

“Please—” The man paused to take several rapid breaths.

“Who are you?” Noah said firmly. “And where are you calling from?”

More staccato breathing, almost gasping now.

“My name is Stuart Miller. I’m an attorney from Reno, Nevada.”

“Okay, Mr. Miller, and how can I help you?”

“My brother, Randy, was attacked the other night. His whole family was. Some lunatic with a gun. My niece was shot.”

Miller broke down following this last admission, his cries rising to a childlike pitch.

“Oh no—is she all right?” Noah asked.

“We don’t know yet. She’s alive, but...” His sobs were segmented by a series of nasal hitches. “We don’t know. But we need help. Please, can I speak to Mr. Hammond?”

“He’s here, Mr. Miller, but...I’m sorry if this sounds impersonal under the circumstances, but what does your situation have to do with him? Shouldn’t you contact the police?”

“We already have. They said they couldn’t guarantee our protection.”

“Our?”

“I’m part of this, too.”

“Part of what?”

There was another pause here while Miller reigned in his emotions. The hiss of nearly three thousand miles and the cacophony of road noises returned.

“I think it has something to do with Howard Hughes’s lost will,” he said finally.

Noah felt his stomach drop, and the urge to roll his eyes was overwhelming. The words he wanted to say hung there on his lips—*I’m sorry, but Jason doesn’t handle*

*such matters anymore.* But as he had been instructed by Jason to pass along all such messages....

“Can you say that again, please?”

“Howard Hughes and his lost will. That’s why they were attacked.”

“Umm—that doesn’t sound quite on the level to me.”

“I know it’s hard to believe. Trust me, I know. But I can prove it. I can prove that what I’m telling you is the truth.”

“How’s that?”

“Are you near a computer?”

“Yes....”

Miller instructed him to open the web browser and do a Google search. Eleven articles came up, all from the previous day, and all from legitimate media outlets in the Las Vegas area. A family of four was attacked in their suburban home in the middle of the night. The parents refused to comment on what might have motivated their attacker. Then, after their daughter was treated at a local hospital, they disappeared. The attending emergency-room physician urged them to return because the little girl’s condition was far from stable. Regardless, no one had heard from them since. The police were looking.

Noah was still not convinced. Perhaps Miller had seen the same articles and sensed an opportunity. Very convenient, his call. And strange that none of the journalists had mentioned a brother.

But Miller expected this and told him the whole story. By the end, Noah believed him.

And wished he’d never answered the call in the first place.