ONE

Before she became the Girl from Nowhere—the One Who Walked In, the First and Last and Only, who lived a thousand years—she was just a little girl in Iowa, named Amy. Amy Harper Bellafonte.

The day Amy was born, her mother, Jeanette, was nineteen years old. Jeanette named her baby Amy for her own mother, who'd died when Jeanette was little, and gave her the middle name Harper for Harper Lee, the lady who'd written *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Jeanette's favorite book—truth be told, the only book she'd made it all the way through in high school. She might have named her Scout, after the little girl in the story, because she wanted her little girl to grow up like that, tough and funny and wise, in a way that she, Jeanette, had never managed to be. But Scout was a name for a boy, and she didn't want her daughter to have to go around her whole life explaining something like that.

Amy's father was a man who came in one day to the restaurant where Jeanette had waited tables since she turned sixteen, a diner everyone called the Box, because it looked like one: like a big chrome shoe box sitting off the county road, backed by fields of corn and beans, nothing else around for miles except a self-serve car wash, the kind where you had to put coins into the machine and do all the work yourself. The man, whose name was Bill Reynolds, sold combines and harvesters, big things like that, and he was a sweet talker who told Jeanette as she poured his coffee and then later, again and again, how pretty she was, how he liked her coal-black hair and hazel eyes and slender wrists, said it all in a way that sounded like he meant it, not the way boys in school had, as if the words were just something that needed to get said along the way to her letting them do as they liked. He had a big car, a new Pontiac, with a dashboard that glowed like a spaceship and leather seats creamy as butter. She could have loved that man, she thought, really and truly loved him. But he stayed in town only a few days, and then went on his way. When she told her father what had happened, he said he wanted to go looking for him, make him live up to his responsibilities. But what Jeanette knew and didn't say was that Bill Reynolds was married, a married man; he had a family in Lincoln, all the way clean over in Nebraska. He'd even showed her the pictures in his wallet of his kids, two little boys in baseball uniforms, Bobby and Billy. So no

matter how many times her father asked who the man was that had done this to her, she didn't say. She didn't even tell him the man's name.

And the truth was, she didn't mind any of it, not really: not the being pregnant, which was easy right until the end, nor the delivery itself, which was bad but fast, nor, especially, having a baby, her little Amy. To tell Jeanette he'd decided to forgive her, her father had done up her brother's old bedroom as a nursery, carried down the old baby crib from the attic, the one Jeanette herself had slept in, years ago; he'd gone with Jeanette, in the last months before Amy came, to the Walmart to pick out some things she'd need, like pajamas and a little plastic tub and a wind-up mobile to hang over the crib. He'd read a book that said that babies needed things like that, things to look at so their little brains would turn on and begin to work properly. From the start Jeanette always thought of the baby as "her," because in her heart she wanted a girl, but she knew that wasn't the sort of thing you should say to anyone, not even to yourself. She'd had a scan at the hospital over in Cedar Falls and asked the woman, a lady in a flowered smock who was running the little plastic paddle over Jeanette's stomach, if she could tell which it was; but the woman laughed, looking at the pictures on the TV of Jeanette's baby, sleeping away inside her, and said, *Hon, this baby's shy. Sometimes you can tell and others you can't, and this is one of those times.* So Jeanette didn't know, which she decided was fine with her, and after she and her father had emptied out her brother's room and taken down his old pennants and posters—Jose Canseco, a music group called Killer Picnic, the Bud Girls—and seen how faded and banged up the walls were, they painted it a color the label on the can called "Dreamtime," which somehow was both pink and blue at once—good whatever the baby turned out to be. Her father hung a wallpaper border along the edge of the ceiling, a repeating pattern of ducks splashing in a puddle, and cleaned up an old maple rocking chair he'd found at the auction hall, so that when Jeanette brought the baby home, she'd have a place to sit and hold her.

The baby came in summer, the girl she'd wanted and named Amy Harper Bellafonte; there seemed no point in using the name Reynolds, the last name of a man Jeanette guessed she'd never see again and, now that Amy was here, no longer wanted to. And Bellafonte: you couldn't do better than a name like that. It meant "beautiful fountain," and that's what Amy was. Jeanette fed and rocked and changed her, and when Amy cried in the middle of the night because she was wet or hungry or didn't like the dark, Jeanette stumbled down the hall to her room, no matter what the hour was or how tired she felt from working at the Box, to pick her up and tell her she was there, she would always be there, you cry and I'll come run-

ning, that's a deal between us, you and me, forever and ever, my little Amy Harper Bellafonte. And she would hold and rock her until dawn began to pale the window shades and she could hear birds singing in the branches of the trees outside.

Then Amy was three and Jeanette was alone. Her father had died, a heart attack they told her, or else a stroke. It wasn't the kind of thing anyone needed to check. Whatever it was, it hit him early one winter morning as he was walking to his truck to drive to work at the elevator; he had just enough time to put down his coffee on the fender before he fell over and died, never spilling a drop. She still had her job at the Box, but the money wasn't enough now, not for Amy or any of it, and her brother, in the Navy somewhere, didn't answer her letters. *God invented Iowa,* he always said, *so people could leave it and never come back.* She wondered what she would do.

Then one day a man came into the diner. It was Bill Reynolds. He was different, somehow, and the change was no good. The Bill Reynolds she remembered—and she had to admit she still thought of him from time to time, about little things mostly, like the way his sandy hair flopped over his forehead when he talked, or how he blew over his coffee before he sipped it, even when it wasn't hot anymore—there was something about him, a kind of warm light from inside that you wanted to be near. It reminded her of those little plastic sticks that you snapped so the liquid inside made them glow. This was the same man, but the glow was gone. He looked older, thinner. She saw he hadn't shaved or combed his hair, which was greasy and standing all whichaway, and he wasn't wearing a pressed polo like before but just an ordinary work shirt like the ones her father had worn, untucked and stained under the arms. He looked like he'd spent all night out in the weather, or in a car somewhere. He caught her eye at the door and she followed him to a booth in back.

—*What are you doing here?*

—*I left her,* he said, and as he looked at where she stood, she smelled beer on his breath, and sweat, and dirty clothes. *I've gone and done it, Jeanette. I left my wife. I'm a free man.*

—*You drove all this way to tell me that?*

—*I've thought about you.* He cleared his throat. *A lot. I've thought about us.*

—*What us? There ain't no us. You can't come in like you're doing and say you've been thinking about us.*

He sat up straight. —*Well, I'm doing it. I'm doing it right now.*

—It's busy in here, can't you see that? I can't be talking to you like this. You'll have to order something.

—Fine, he answered, but he didn't look at the menu on the wall, just kept his eyes on her. *I'll have a cheeseburger. A cheeseburger and a Coke.*

As she wrote down the order and the words swam in her vision, she realized she had started to cry. She felt like she hadn't slept in a month, a year. The weight of exhaustion was held up only by the thinnest sliver of her will. There was a time when she'd wanted to do something with her life—cut hair, maybe, get her certificate, open a little shop, move to a real city, like Chicago or Des Moines, rent an apartment, have friends. She'd always held in her mind a picture of herself sitting in a restaurant, a coffee shop but nice; it was fall, and cold outside, and she was alone at a small table by the window, reading a book. On her table was a steaming mug of tea. She would look up to the window to see the people on the street of the city she was in, hustling to and fro in their heavy coats and hats, and see her own face there, too, reflected in the window, hovering over the image of all the people outside. But as she stood there, these ideas seemed like they belonged to a different person entirely. Now there was Amy, sick half the time with a cold or a stomach thing she'd gotten at the ratty day care where she spent the days while Jeanette was working at the Box, and her father dead just like that, so fast it was as if he'd fallen through a trapdoor on the surface of the earth, and Bill Reynolds sitting at the table like he'd just stepped out for a second, not four years.

—Why are you doing this to me?

He held her eyes with his own a long moment and touched the top of her hand.*—Meet me later. Please.*

He ended up living in the house with her and Amy. She couldn't say if she had invited him to do this or if it had just somehow happened. Either way, she was instantly sorry. This Bill Reynolds: who was he really? He'd left his wife and boys, Bobby and Billy in their baseball suits, all of it behind in Nebraska. The Pontiac was gone, and he had no job either; that had ended, too. The economy the way it was, he explained, nobody was buying a goddamn thing. He said he had a plan, but the only plan that she could see seemed to be him sitting in the house doing nothing for Amy or even cleaning up the breakfast dishes, while she worked all day at the Box. He hit her the first time after he'd been living there three months; he was drunk, and once he did it, he burst out crying and said, over and over, how sorry he was. He was on his knees, blubbering, like *she'd* done something to *him.* She had to understand, he was saying, how hard it all was, all the changes in his life, it was more than a man, any man, could take. He loved

her, he was sorry, nothing like that would happen again, ever. He *swore* it. Not to her and not to Amy. And in the end, she heard herself saying she was sorry too.

He'd hit her over money; when winter came, and she didn't have enough money in her checking account to pay the heating oil man, he hit her again.

—*Goddamnit, woman. Can't you see I'm in a situation here?*

She was on the kitchen floor, holding the side of her head. He'd hit her hard enough to lift her off her feet. Funny, now that she was down there she saw how dirty the floor was, filthy and stained, with clumps of dust and who-knew-what all rowed against the base of the cabinets where you couldn't usually see. Half her mind was noticing this while the other half said, You aren't thinking straight, Jeanette; Bill hit you and knocked a wire loose, so now you're worrying over the dust. Something funny was happening with the way the world sounded, too. Amy was watching television upstairs, on the little set in her room, but Jeanette could hear it like it was playing inside her head, Barney the purple dinosaur and a song about brushing your teeth; and then from far away, she heard the sound of the oil truck pulling away, its engine grinding as it turned out of the drive and headed down the county road.

—*It ain't your house,* she said.

—*You're right about that.* Bill took a bottle of Old Crow from over the sink and poured some in a jelly jar, though it was only ten o'clock in the morning. He sat at the table but didn't cross his legs like he meant to get comfortable. *Ain't my oil, either.*

Jeanette rolled over and tried to stand but couldn't. She watched him drink for a minute.

—*Get out.*

He laughed, shaking his head, and took a sip of whiskey.

—*That's funny,* he said. *You telling me that from the floor like you are.*

—*I mean what I say. Get out.*

Amy came into the room. She was holding the stuffed bunny she still carried everywhere, and wearing a pair of overalls, the good ones Jeanette had bought her at the outlet mall, the OshKosh B'Gosh, with the strawberries embroidered on the bib. One of the straps had come undone and was flopping at her waist. Jeanette realized Amy must have done this herself, because she had to go to the bathroom.

—*You're on the floor, Mama.*

—*I'm okay, honey.* She got to her feet to show her. Her left ear was ringing a little, like in a cartoon, birds flying around her head. She saw

there was a little blood, too, on her hand; she didn't know where this had come from. She picked Amy up and did her best to smile. *See? Mama just took a spill, that's all. You need to go, honey? You need to use the potty?*

—Look at you, Bill was saying. *Will you look at yourself?* He shook his head again and drank. *You stupid twat. She probably ain't even mine.*

—Mama, the girl said and pointed, *you cut yourself. Your nose is cut.*

And whether it was what she'd heard or the blood, the little girl began to cry.

—See what you done? Bill said, and to Amy, *Come on now. Ain't no big thing, sometimes folks argue, that's just how it is.*

—I'm telling you again, just leave.

—Then what would you do, tell me that. You can't even fill the oil tank.

—You think I don't know that? I sure as by God don't need you to tell me that.

Amy had begun to wail. Holding her, Jeanette felt the spread of hot moisture across her waist as the little girl released her bladder.

—For Pete's sake, shut that kid up.

She held Amy tight against her chest. *—You're right. She ain't yours. She ain't yours and never will be. You leave or I'm calling the sheriff, I swear.*

—Don't you do me like this, Jean. I mean it.

—Well, I'm doing it. That's just what I'm doing.

Then he was up and slamming through the house, taking his things, tossing them back into the cardboard cartons he'd used to carry them into the house, months ago. Why hadn't she thought it right then, how strange it was that he didn't even have a proper suitcase? She sat at the kitchen table holding Amy on her lap, watching the clock over the stove and counting off the minutes until he returned to the kitchen to hit her again.

But then she heard the front door swing open, and his heavy footsteps on the porch. He went in and out awhile, carrying the boxes, leaving the front door open so cold air spilled through the house. Finally he came into the kitchen, tracking snow, leaving little patches of it waffled to the floor with the soles of his boots.

—Fine. Fine. You want me to leave? You watch me. He took the bottle of Old Crow from the table. *Last chance,* he said.

Jeanette said nothing, didn't even look at him.

—So that's how it is. Fine. You mind I have one for the road?

Which was when Jeanette reached out and swatted his glass across the kitchen, smacked it with her open hand like a ping-pong ball with a paddle. She knew she was going to do this for about half a second before she did, knowing it wasn't the best idea she'd ever had, but by then it was too late. The glass hit the wall with a hollow thud and fell to the floor, unbro-

ken. She closed her eyes, holding Amy tight, knowing what would come. For a moment the sound of the glass rolling on the floor seemed to be the only thing in the room. She could feel Bill's anger rising off him like waves of heat.

—*You just see what the world has in store for you, Jeanette. You remember I said that.*

Then his footsteps carried him out of the room and he was gone.

She paid the oil man what she could and turned the thermostat down to fifty, to make it last. *See, Amy honey, it's like a big camping trip we're on,* she said as she stuffed the little girl's hands into mittens and wedged a hat onto her head. *There now, it's not so cold, not really. It's like an adventure.* They slept together under a pile of old quilts, the room so icy their breath fogged the air over their faces. She took a job at night, cleaning up at the high school, leaving Amy with a neighbor lady, but when the woman took sick and had to go into the hospital, Jeanette had to leave Amy alone. She explained to Amy what to do: stay in bed, don't answer the door, just close your eyes and I'll be home before you know it. She'd make sure Amy was asleep before creeping out the door, then stride quickly down the snow-crusted drive to where she'd parked her car, away from the house, so Amy wouldn't hear it turning over.

But then she made the mistake one night of telling someone about this, another woman on the work crew, when the two of them had stepped out for a smoke. Jeanette had never liked smoking at all and didn't want to spend the money, but the cigarettes helped her stay awake, and without a smoke break there was nothing to look forward to, just more toilets to scrub and halls to be mopped. She told the woman, whose name was Alice, not to tell anyone, she knew she could get in trouble leaving Amy alone like that, but of course that's just what Alice did; she went straight to the superintendent, who fired Jeanette on the spot. *Leaving a child like that ain't right,* he told her in his office by the boilers, a room no bigger than ten feet square with a dented metal desk and an old easy chair with the plush popping out and a calendar on the wall that wasn't even the right year; the air was always so hot and close in there Jeanette could barely breathe. He said, *You count your lucky stars I'm not calling the county on you.* She wondered when she'd become someone a person could say this to and not be wrong. He'd been nice enough to her until then, and maybe she could have made him understand the situation, that without the money from cleaning she didn't know what she'd do, but she was too tired to find the words. She took her last check and drove home in her crappy old car, the Kia she'd

bought in high school when it was already six years old and falling apart so fast she could practically see the nuts and bolts bouncing on the pavement in her rearview mirror; and when she stopped at the Quick Mart to buy a pack of Capris and then the engine wouldn't start up again, she started to cry. She couldn't make herself stop crying for half an hour.

The problem was the battery; a new one cost her eighty-three dollars at Sears, but by then she'd missed a week of work and lost her job at the Box, too. She had just enough money left to leave, packing up their things in a couple of grocery sacks and the cartons Bill had left behind.

No one ever knew what became of them. The house sat empty; the pipes froze and split like bursting fruit. When spring came, the water poured from them for days and days until the utility company, realizing nobody was paying the bill, sent a couple of men to turn it off. The mice moved in, and when an upstairs window was broken in a summer thunderstorm, the swallows; they built their nests in the bedroom where Jeanette and Amy had slept in the cold, and soon the house was filled with the sound and smell of birds.

In Dubuque, Jeanette worked the night shift at a gas station, Amy sleeping on the sofa in the back room, until the owner found out and sent her packing. It was summer, they were living in the Kia, using the washroom behind the station to clean up, so leaving was just a matter of driving away. For a time they stayed with a friend of Jeanette's in Rochester, a girl she'd known in school who'd gone up there for a nursing degree; Jeanette took a job mopping floors at the same hospital where the friend worked, but the pay was just minimum wage, and the friend's apartment was too small for them to stay; she moved into a motel, but there was no one to look after Amy, the friend couldn't do it and didn't know anyone who could, and they ended up living in the Kia again. It was September; already a chill was in the air. The radio spoke all day of war. She drove south, getting as far as Memphis before the Kia gave out for good.

The man who picked them up in the Mercedes said his name was John—a lie, she guessed, from the way he said it, like a child telling a story about who broke the lamp, sizing her up for a second before he spoke. *My name is . . . John.* She guessed he was fifty, but she wasn't a good judge of these things. He had a well-trimmed beard and was wearing a tight dark suit, like a funeral director. While he drove he kept glancing at Amy in the rearview mirror, adjusting himself in his seat, asking Jeanette questions about herself, where she was going, the kinds of things she liked to do,

what had brought her to the Great State of Tennessee. The car reminded her of Bill Reynolds's Grand Prix, only nicer. With the windows closed you could barely hear anything outside, and the seats were so soft she felt like she was sitting in a dish of ice cream. She felt like falling asleep. By the time they pulled into the motel she hardly cared what was going to happen. It seemed inevitable. They were near the airport; the land was flat, like Iowa, and in the twilight she could see the lights of the planes circling the field, moving in slow, sleepy arcs like targets in a shooting gallery.

Amy, honey, Mama's going to go inside with this nice man for a minute, okay? You just look at your picture book, honey.

He was polite enough, going about his business, calling her baby and such, and before he left he put fifty dollars on the nightstand—enough for Jeanette to buy a room for the night for her and Amy.

But others weren't as nice.

During the night, she'd lock Amy in the room with the TV on to make some noise and walk out to the highway in front of the motel and just kind of stand there, and it didn't take long. Somebody would stop, always a man, and once they'd worked things out, she'd take him back to the motel. Before she let the man inside she'd go into the room by herself and carry Amy to the bathroom, where she'd made a bed for her in the tub out of some extra blankets and pillows.

Amy was six. She was quiet, barely talked most of the time, but she'd taught herself to read some, from looking at the same books over and over, and could do her numbers. One time they were watching *Wheel of Fortune,* and when the time came for the woman to spend the money she'd won, the little girl knew just what she could buy, that she couldn't afford the vacation to Cancún but could have the living room set with enough money left over for the his-and-her golf clubs. Jeanette thought it was probably smart of Amy to figure this out, maybe more than smart, and she guessed she should probably be in school, but Jeanette didn't know where there were any schools around there. It was all auto-body-repair and pawn shops and motels like the one they lived in, the SuperSix. The owner was a man who looked a lot like Elvis Presley, not the handsome young one but the old fat one with the sweaty hair and chunky gold glasses that made his eyes look like fish swimming in a tank, and he wore a satin jacket with a lightning bolt down the back, just like Elvis had. Mostly he just sat at his desk behind the counter, playing solitaire and smoking a little cigar with a plastic tip. Jeanette paid him in cash each week for the room and if she

threw in an extra fifty he didn't bother her any. One day he asked her if she had anything for protection, if maybe she wanted to buy a gun from him. She said sure, how much, and he told her another hundred. He showed her a rusty-looking little revolver, a .22, and when she put it in her hand right there in the office it didn't seem like much at all, let alone something that could shoot a person. But it was small enough to fit in the purse she carried out to the highway and she didn't think it would be a bad thing to have around. *—Careful where you point that,* the manager said, and Jeanette said, *Okay, if you're afraid of it, it must work. You sold yourself a gun.*

And she was glad she had it. Just knowing it was in her purse made her realize she'd been afraid before and now wasn't, or at least not so much. The gun was like a secret, the secret of who she was, like she was carrying the last bit of herself in her purse. The other Jeanette, the one who stood on the highway in her stretchy top and skirt, who cocked her hip and smiled and said, *What you want, baby? There something I can help you with tonight?*—that Jeanette was a made-up person, like a woman in a story she wasn't sure she wanted to know the end of.

The man who picked her up the night it happened wasn't the one she would have thought. The bad ones you could usually tell right off, and sometimes she said no thanks and just kept walking. But this one looked nice, a college boy she guessed, or at least young enough to go to college, and nicely dressed, wearing crisp khaki pants and one of those shirts with the little man on the horse swinging the hammer. He looked like someone going on a date, which made her laugh to herself when she got into the car, a big Ford Expo with a rack on the top for a bike or something else.

But then a funny thing happened. He wouldn't drive to the motel. Some men wanted her to do them right there, in the car, not even bothering to pull over, but when she started in on this, thinking that was what he wanted, he pushed her gently away. He wanted to take her out, he said. She asked, *What do you mean, out?*

—Someplace nice, he explained. *Wouldn't you rather go someplace nice? I'll pay you more than whatever you usually get.*

She thought about Amy sleeping back in the room and guessed it wouldn't make much difference, one way or the other. *As long as it ain't more than an hour,* she said. *Then you got to take me back.*

But it was more than an hour, a lot more; by the time they got where they were going, Jeanette was afraid. He pulled up to a house with a big sign over the porch showing three shapes that looked almost like letters but not quite, and Jeanette knew what it was: a fraternity. Some place a

bunch of rich boys lived and got drunk on their daddy's money, pretending to go to school to become doctors and lawyers.

—*You'll like my friends,* he said. *Come on, I want you to meet them.*

—*I ain't going in there,* she said. *You take me back now.*

He paused, both hands on the wheel, and when she saw his face and what was in his eyes, the slow mad hunger, he suddenly didn't look like such a nice boy anymore.

—*That,* he said, *is not an option. I'd have to say that's not on the menu just now.*

—*The hell it ain't.*

She threw the door of the truck open and made to walk away, never mind she didn't know where she was, but then he was out too, and he grabbed her by the arm. It was pretty clear now what was waiting inside the house, what he wanted, how everything was going to shape up. It was her fault for not understanding this before—long before, maybe as far back as the Box on the day Bill Reynolds had come in. She realized the boy was afraid, too—that somebody was making him do this, the friends inside the house, or it felt like it to him, anyway. But she didn't care. He got behind her and tried to get his arm around her neck to lock her with his elbow, and she hit him, hard, where it counted, with the back of her fist, which made him yell, calling her bitch and whore and all the rest, and strike her across the face. She lost her balance and fell backward, and then he was on top of her, his legs astride her waist like a jockey riding a horse, slapping and hitting, trying to pin her arms. Once he did this it would all be over. He probably wouldn't care if she was conscious or not, she thought, when he did it; none of them would. She reached into her purse where it lay on the grass. Her life was so strange to her it didn't seem like it was even her own anymore, if it had ever been hers to begin with. But everything made sense to a gun. A gun knew what it was, and she felt the cool metal of the revolver slide into her palm, like it wanted to be there. Her mind said, *Don't think, Jeanette,* and she pushed the barrel against the side of the boy's head, feeling the skin and bone where it pressed against him, figuring that was close enough she couldn't miss, and then she pulled the trigger.

It took her the rest of the night to get home. After the boy had fallen off her, she'd run as fast as she could to the biggest road she could see, a wide boulevard glowing under streetlights, just in time to grab a bus. She didn't know if there was blood on her clothes or what, but the driver hardly

looked at her as he explained how to get back to the airport, and she sat in the back where no one could see. In any case, the bus was almost empty. She had no idea where she was; the bus inched along through neighborhoods of houses and stores, all dark, past a big church and then signs for the zoo, and finally entered downtown, where she stood in a Plexiglas shelter, shivering in the damp, and waited for a second bus. She'd lost her watch somehow and didn't know the time. Maybe it had come off somehow when they were fighting and the police could use it as a clue. But it was just a Timex she'd bought at Walgreens, and she thought it couldn't tell them much. The gun was what would do it; she'd tossed it on the lawn, or so she remembered. Her hand was still a little numb from the force of it going off in her fist, the bones chiming like a tuning fork that wouldn't stop.

By the time she reached the motel the sun was rising; she felt the city waking up. Under the ashy light, she let herself into the room. Amy was asleep with the television still on, an infomercial for some kind of exercise machine. A muscled man with a ponytail and huge, doglike mouth was barking silently out of the screen. Jeanette figured she didn't have much more than a couple of hours before somebody came. That was dumb of her, leaving the gun behind, but there wasn't any point worrying over that now. She splashed some water on her face and brushed her teeth, not looking at herself in the mirror, then changed into jeans and a T-shirt and took her old clothes, the little skirt and stretchy top and fringed jacket she'd worn to the highway, streaked with blood and bits of things she didn't want to know about, behind the motel to the reeking dumpster, where she shoved them in.

It seemed as if time had compressed somehow, like an accordion; all the years she had lived and everything that had happened to her were suddenly squeezed below the weight of this one moment. She remembered the early mornings when Amy was just a baby, how she'd held and rocked her by the window, often falling asleep herself. Those had been good mornings, something she'd always remember. She packed a few things into Amy's Powerpuff Girls knapsack and some clothing and money into a grocery sack for herself. Then she turned off the television and gently shook Amy awake.

"Come on, honey. Wake up now. We got to go."

The little girl was half asleep but allowed Jeanette to dress her. She was always like this in the morning, dazed and sort of out of it, and Jeanette was glad it wasn't some other time of day, when she'd have to do more coaxing and explaining. She gave the girl a cereal bar and a can of

warm grape pop to drink, and then the two of them went out to the highway where the bus had let Jeanette off.

She remembered seeing, on the ride back to the motel, the big stone church with its sign out front: OUR LADY OF SORROWS. If she did the buses right, she figured, they'd go right by there again.

She sat with Amy in the back, an arm around her shoulders to hold her close. The little girl said nothing, except once to say she was hungry again, and Jeanette took another cereal bar from the box she'd put in Amy's knapsack, with the clean clothing and the toothbrush and Amy's Peter Rabbit. Amy, she thought, you are my good girl, my very good girl, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. They changed buses downtown again and rode for another thirty minutes, and when Jeanette saw the sign for the zoo she wondered if she'd gone too far; but then she remembered that the church had been before the zoo, so it would be after the zoo now, going the other direction.

Then she saw it. In daylight it looked different, not as big, but it would do. They exited through the rear door, and Jeanette zipped up Amy's jacket and put the knapsack on her while the bus pulled away.

She looked and saw the other sign then, the one she remembered from the night before, hanging on a post at the edge of a driveway that ran beside the church: CONVENT OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY.

She took Amy's hand and walked up the driveway. It was lined with huge trees, some kind of oak, with long mossy arms that draped over the two of them. She didn't know what a convent would look like but it turned out to be just a house, though nice: made of stone that glinted a little, with a shingled roof and white trim around the windows. There was an herb garden out front, and she thought that must be what the nuns did, they must come out here and take care of tiny growing things. She stepped up to the front door and rang the bell.

The woman who answered wasn't an old lady, like Jeanette had imagined, and she wasn't wearing a robe, whatever those things were called. She was young, not much older than Jeanette, and except for the veil on her head was dressed like anybody else, in a skirt and blouse and a pair of brown penny loafers. She was also black. Before she'd left Iowa, Jeanette had never seen but one or two black people in her life, except on television and in the movies. But Memphis was crawling with them. She knew some folks had problems with them, but Jeanette hadn't so far, and she guessed a black nun would do all right.

"Sorry to bother you," Jeanette began. "My car broke down out there on the street, and I was wondering—"

"Of course," the woman said. Her voice was strange, like nothing Jeanette had ever heard, like there were notes of music caught and ringing inside the words. "Come in, come in, both of you."

The woman stepped back from the door to let Jeanette and Amy into the front hall. Somewhere in the building, Jeanette knew, there were other nuns—maybe they were black, too—sleeping or cooking or reading or praying, which she guessed nuns did a lot of, maybe most of the day. It was quiet enough, so she supposed that was probably right. What she had to do now was get the woman to leave her and Amy alone. She knew that as a fact, the way she knew she'd killed a boy last night, and all the rest of it. What she was about to do hurt more, but it wasn't any different otherwise, just more pain on the same spot.

"Miss—?"

"Oh, you can just call me Lacey," the woman said. "We're pretty informal around here. Is this your little girl?" She knelt in front of Amy. "Hello there, what's your name? I have a little niece about your age, almost as pretty as you." She looked up at Jeanette. "Your daughter is very shy. Perhaps it is my accent. You see, I am from Sierra Leone, west Africa." She turned to Amy again and took her hand. "Do you know where that is? It is very far away."

"All these nuns from there?" Jeanette asked.

Standing, the woman laughed, showing her bright teeth. "Oh, goodness no! I'm afraid I am the only one."

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Jeanette liked this woman, liked listening to her voice. She liked how she was with Amy, the way she looked at her eyes when she talked to her.

"I was racing to get her to school, you see," Jeanette said, "when that old car of mine? The thing just kind of gave out."

The woman nodded. "Please. This way."

She led Jeanette and Amy through the hallway to the kitchen, a big room with a huge oak dining table and cabinets with labels on them: CHINA, CANNED GOODS, PASTA AND RICE. Jeanette had never thought about nuns eating before. She guessed that with all the nuns living in the building, it helped to know what was where in the kitchen. The woman pointed to the phone, an old brown one with a long cord, hanging on the wall. Jeanette had planned the next part well enough. She dialed a number while the woman got a plate of cookies for Amy—not store-bought, but something somebody had actually baked—then, as the recorded voice on the other end told her that it would be cloudy today with a high temperature of fifty-five degrees and a chance of showers moving in toward evening, she pretended to talk to AAA, nodding along.

"Wrecker's coming," she said, hanging the phone back up. "Said to go outside and meet him. Said he's got a man just around the corner, in fact."

"Well, that's good news," the woman said brightly. "Today is your lucky day. If you wish, you can leave your daughter here with me. It would be no good to manage her on a busy street."

So there it was. Jeanette wouldn't have to do anything else. All she had to do was say yes.

"Ain't no bother?"

The woman smiled again. "We'll be fine here. Won't we?" She looked encouragingly at Amy. "See? She is perfectly happy. You go see to your car."

Amy was sitting on one of the chairs at the big oak table, with an untouched plate of cookies and a glass of milk before her. She'd taken off her backpack and was cradling it in her lap. Jeanette looked at her as long as she would let herself, and then she knelt and hugged her.

"You be good now," she said, and against her shoulder, Amy nodded. Jeanette meant to say something else, but couldn't find the words. She thought about the note she'd left inside the knapsack, the slip of paper they were sure to find when Jeanette never came back to get her. She hugged her as long as she dared. The feeling of Amy was all around her, the warmth of her body, the smell of her hair and skin. Jeanette knew she was about to cry, something the woman—Lucy? Lacey?—couldn't see, but she let herself hold Amy a moment longer, trying to put this feeling in a place inside her mind, someplace safe where she could keep it. Then she let her daughter go, and before anybody said another word, Jeanette walked from the kitchen and down the driveway to the street, and then kept right on going.

TWO

From the computer files of Jonas Abbott Lear, PhD
Professor, Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology,
Harvard University
Assigned to United States Army Medical Research Institute
of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID)
Department of Paleovirology, Fort Detrick, MD

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Monday, February 6 1:18 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: Satellite linkage is up

Paul,

Greetings from the jungles of Bolivia, landlocked armpit of the Andes. From where you sit in frigid Cambridge, watching the snow fall, I'm sure a month in the tropics doesn't sound like a bad deal. But believe me: this is not St. Bart's. Yesterday I saw a snake the size of a submarine.

The trip down was uneventful—sixteen hours in the air to La Paz, then a smaller government transport to Concepción, in the country's eastern jungle basin. From here, there aren't really any decent roads; it's pure backcountry, and we'll be traveling on foot. Everybody on the team is pretty excited, and the roster keeps growing. In addition to the group from UCLA, Tim Fanning from Columbia caught up with us in La Paz, as did Claudia Swenson from MIT. (I think you told me once that you knew her at Yale.) In addition to his not inconsiderable star power, you'll be happy to hear that Tim brought half a dozen grad assistants with him, so just like that, the average age of the team fell by about ten years and the gender balance tipped decidedly toward the female. "Terrific scientists, every one," Tim insisted. Three ex-wives, each younger than the last; the guy never learns.

I have to say, despite my misgivings (and, of course, yours and Rochelle's) about involving the military, it's made a huge difference. Only USAMRIID has the muscle and the money to pull together a team like this one, and do it in a month. After years of trying to get people to

listen, I feel like a door has suddenly swung open, and all we have to do is step through it. You know me, I'm a scientist through and through; I don't have a superstitious bone in my body. But part of me just has to think it's fate. After Liz's illness, her long struggle, how ironic that I should finally have the chance to solve the greatest mystery of all—the mystery of death itself. I think she would have liked it here, actually. I can just see her, wearing that big straw hat of hers, sitting on a log by the river to read her beloved Shakespeare in the sunshine.

BTW: congrats on the tenure decision. Just before I left, I heard the committee voted you in by general acclaim, which didn't surprise me after the department vote, which I can't tell you about but which, off the record, was unanimous. I can't tell you how relieved I am. Never mind that you're the best biochemist we've got, a man who can make a microtubule cycloskeletal protein stand up and sing the "Hallelujah Chorus." What would I have done on my lunch hour if my squash partner hadn't gotten tenure?

My love to Rochelle, and tell Alex his uncle Jonas will bring him back something special from Bolivia. How about a baby anaconda? I hear they make good pets as long as you keep them fed. And I hope we're still on for the Sox opener. How you got those tickets I have no idea.

—Jonas

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Wednesday, February 8 8:00 a.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: Re: Go get 'em, tiger

Paul,

Thanks for your message, and of course for your very sage advice re: pretty female postdocs with Ivy League degrees. I can't say I disagree with you, and on more than one lonely night in my tent, the thought has crossed my mind. But it's just not in the cards. For now, Rochelle is the only woman for me, and you can tell her I said so.

The news here, and I can already hear a big "I told you so" from Rochelle: it looks like we've been militarized. I suppose this was inevitable, at least since I took USAMRIID's money. (And we're talking about a lot of money—aerial recon doesn't come cheap: twenty thousand bucks to retarget a satellite, and that will buy you only thirty minutes worth.) But still, it seems like overkill. We were making our final

preparations for departure yesterday when a helicopter dropped out of the sky at base camp and who should step off but a squad of Special Forces, all done up like they were ready to take an enemy pillbox: the jungle camo, the green and black warpaint, the infrared scopes and high-power gas-recoil M-19s—all of it. Some very gung ho guys. Trailing the pack is a man in a suit, a civilian, who looks to be in charge. He struts across the field to where I'm standing and I see how young he is, not even thirty. He's also as tan as a tennis pro. What's he doing with a squad of special ops? "You the vampire guy?" he asks me. You know how I feel about that word, Paul—just try to get an NAS grant with "vampire" anywhere in the paperwork. But just to be polite, and because, what the hell, he's backed by enough firepower to overthrow a small government, I tell him, sure, that's me. "Mark Cole, Dr. Lear," he says, and shakes my hand, wearing a big grin. "I've come a long way just to meet you. Guess what? You're now a major." I'm thinking, a major what? And what are these guys doing here? "This is a civilian scientific expedition," I tell him. "Not anymore," he says. "Who decided this?" I ask. And he tells me, "My boss, Dr. Lear." "Who's your boss?" I ask him. And he says, "Dr. Lear, my boss is the president of the United States."

Tim was plenty ticked off, because he only gets to be a captain. I wouldn't know a captain from Colonel Sanders, so it's all the same to me. It was Claudia who really kicked up a fuss. She actually threatened to pack up and go home. "I didn't vote for that guy and I'm not going to be part of his damned army, no matter what the twerp says." Never mind that none of us voted for him either, and the whole thing really seems like a big joke. But it turns out she's a Quaker. Her younger brother was actually a conscientious objector during the Iran War. In the end, though, we calmed her down and got her to stay on, so long as we promised she didn't have to salute anyone.

The thing is, I can't really figure out why these guys are here. Not why the military would take an interest, because after all, it's their money we're spending, and I'm grateful for it. But why send a squad of special ops (they're technically "special reconnaissance") to babysit a bunch of biochemists? The kid in the suit—I'd guess he's NSA, though who really knows?—told me that the area we were traveling into was known to be controlled by the Montoya drug cartel and the soldiers are here for our protection. "How would it look for a team of American scientists to get themselves killed by drug lords in Bolivia?" he asked me. "Not a happy day for U.S. foreign policy, not a happy day at all." I didn't contradict him, but I know damn well there's no drug activity where we're going—

it's all to the west, on the altiplano. The eastern basin is virtually uninhabited except for a few scattered Indian settlements, most of which haven't had any outside contact in years. All of which he *knows* I know.

This has me scratching my head, but as far as I can tell, it makes no difference to the expedition itself. We just have some heavy firepower coming along for the ride. The soldiers pretty much keep to themselves; I've barely heard any of them even open their mouths. Spooky, but at least they don't get in the way.

Anyway, we're off in the morning. The offer of a pet snake still stands.

—Jonas

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Wednesday, February 15 11:32 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: See attached
Attachment: DSC00392.JPG (596 KB)

Paul,

Six days in. Sorry to be out of touch, and please tell Rochelle not to worry. It's been hard slogging every step of the way, with dense tree cover and many days of constant rain—too much work to get the satcom up. At night, we all eat like farmhands and fall exhausted into our tents. Nobody here smells very nice, either.

But tonight I'm too keyed up to sleep. The attachment will explain why. I've always believed in what we were doing, but of course I've had my moments of doubt, sleepless nights when I wondered if this was all completely harebrained, some kind of fantasy my brain cooked up when Liz became so sick. I know you've thought it too. So I'd be a fool not to question my own motives. But not anymore.

According to the GPS, we're still a good twenty kilometers from the site. The topography is consistent with the satellite recon—dense jungle plain, but along the river, a deep ravine with cliffs of limestone pocketed with caves. Even an amateur geologist could read these cliffs like the pages of a book. The usual layers of river sediment, and then, about four meters below the lip, a line of charcoal black. It's consistent with the Chuchote legend: a thousand years ago the whole area was blackened by fire, "a great conflagration sent by the god Auxl, lord of the Sun, to

destroy the demons of man and save the world." We camped on the riverbank last night, listening to the flocks of bats that poured out of the caves at sunset; in the morning, we headed east along the ravine.

It was just past noon when we saw the statue.

At first I thought maybe I was imagining things. But look at the image, Paul. A human being, but not quite: the bent animal posture, the clawlike hands and the long teeth crowding the mouth, the intense muscularity of the torso, details still visible, somehow, after—how long? How many centuries of wind and rain and sun have passed, wearing the stone away? And still it took my breath away. And the resemblance to the other images I've shown you is inarguable—the pillars at the temple of Mansarha, the carvings on the gravesite in Xianyang, the cave drawings in Côtes d'Amor.

More bats tonight. You get used to them, and they keep the mosquitoes down. Claudia rigged up a trap to catch one. Apparently, bats like canned peaches, which she used as bait. Maybe Alex would like a pet bat instead?

—J

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Saturday, February 18 6:51 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: more jpgs
Attachment: DSC00481.JPG (596 KB), DSC00486 (582 KB), DSC00491 (697 KB)

Have a look at these. We've counted nine figures now.

Cole thinks we're being followed, but won't tell me by who. It's just a feeling, he says. All night long he's on the satcom, won't tell me what it's all about. At least he's stopped calling me Major. He's a youngster, but not as green as he looks.

Good weather, finally. We're close, within 10K, making good time.

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Sunday, February 19 9:51 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject:

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Tuesday, February 21 1:16 a.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject:

Paul,

I'm writing this to you in case I don't make it back. I don't want to alarm you, but I have to be realistic about the situation. We're less than five kilometers from the grave site, but I doubt we'll be able to perform the extraction as planned. Too many of us are sick, or dead.

Two nights ago we were attacked—not by drug traffickers, but bats. They came a few hours after sunset while most of us were out of our tents doing the evening chores, scattered around the campsite. It was as if they had been scouting us all along, waiting for the right moment to launch an aerial assault. I was lucky: I had walked a few hundred yards upriver, away from the trees, to find a good signal on the GPS. I heard the shouts and then the gunfire, but by the time I made it back the swarm had moved downstream. Four people died that night, including Claudia. The bats simply engulfed her. She tried to get to the river—I guess she thought she could shake them off that way—but she never made it. By the time we reached her, she'd lost so much blood she had no chance. In the chaos, six others were bitten or scratched, and all of them are now ill with what looks like some speeded-up version of Bolivian hemorrhagic fever—bleeding from the mouth and nose, the skin and eyes rosy with burst capillaries, the fever shooting skyward, fluid filling the lungs, coma. We've been in contact with the CDC but without tissue analysis it's

anybody's guess. Tim had both his hands practically chewed to pieces, trying to pull them off Claudia. He's the sickest of the lot. I seriously doubt he'll last till morning.

Last night they came again. The soldiers had set up a defense perimeter, but there were simply too many—they must have come by the hundreds of thousands, a huge swarm that blotted out the stars. Three soldiers killed, as well as Cole. He was standing right in front of me; they actually lifted him off his feet before they bored through him like hot knives through butter. There was barely enough of him left to bury.

Tonight it's quiet, not a bat in the sky. We've built a fire line around the camp, and that seems to be keeping them at bay. Even the soldiers are pretty shaken up. The few of us who are left are now deciding what to do. A lot of our equipment has been destroyed; it's unclear how this happened, but sometime during the attack last night, a grenade belt went into the fire, killing one of the soldiers and taking out the generator as well as most of what was in the supply tent. But we still have satcom and enough juice in the batteries to call for evac. Probably we should all just get the hell out of here.

And yet. When I ask myself why I should turn back now, what I have to go home to, I can't think of a single reason. It would be different if Liz were still alive. I think for the past year some part of me has been pretending that she'd simply gone away for a while, that one day I'd look up and see her standing in the door, smiling that way she did, her head cocked to the side so her hair could fall away from her face; my Liz, home at last, thirsty for a cup of Earl Grey, ready for a stroll by the Charles through the falling snow. But I know now that this isn't going to happen. Strangely, the events of the last two days have given my mind a kind of clarity about what we're doing, what the stakes are. I'm not one bit sorry to be here; I don't feel afraid at all. If push comes to shove, I may press on alone.

Paul, whatever happens, whatever I decide, I want you to know that you have been a great friend to me. More than a friend: a brother. How strange to write that sentence, sitting on a riverbank in the jungles of Bolivia, four thousand miles away from everything and everyone I've ever known and loved. I feel as if I've entered a new era of my life. What strange places our lives can carry us to, what dark passages.

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Tuesday, February 21 5:31 a.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject: Re: don't be dumb, get the hell out, please

Paul,

We radioed for the evac last night. Pickup in ten hours, which is the nick of time as far as everyone's concerned. I don't see how we can survive another night here. Those of us who are still healthy have decided we can use the day to press on to the site. We were going to draw straws, but it turned out everyone wanted to go. We leave within the hour, at first light. Maybe something can still be salvaged from this disaster. One bit of good news: Tim seems to have turned a corner during the last few hours. His fever's way down, and though he's still unresponsive, the bleeding has stopped and his skin looks better. With the others, though, I'd say it's still touch and go.

I know that science is your god, Paul, but would it be too much to ask for you to pray for us? All of us.

From: lear@amedd.army.mil
Date: Tuesday, February 21 11:16 p.m.
To: pkiernan@harvard.edu
Subject:

Now I know why the soldiers are here.

THREE

Situated on four thousand acres of soggy East Texas piney woodland and short-grass prairie, looking more or less like a corporate office park or large public high school, the Polunsky Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, a.k.a. Terrell, meant one thing: if you were a man con-

victed of capital murder in the state of Texas, this was where you came to die.

On that morning in March, Anthony Lloyd Carter, inmate number 999642, sentenced to death by lethal injection for the murder of a Houston mother of two named Rachel Wood whose lawn he had mowed every week for forty dollars and a glass of iced tea, had been a resident of the Administrative Segregation Block of Terrell Unit for one thousand three hundred and thirty-two days—less than many, more than some, not that in Carter's sense of things this made a lick of difference. It wasn't like you got a prize for being there the longest. He ate alone, exercised alone, showered alone, and a week was the same as a day or a month to him. The only different thing that was going to happen would come on the day the warden and the chaplain appeared at his cell and he'd take the ride to the room with the needle, and that day wasn't so far off. He was allowed to read, but that wasn't easy for him, it never had been, and he had long since stopped fussing with it. His cell was a concrete box six feet by ten with one window and a steel door with a slot wide enough to slip his hands through but that was all, and most of the time he just lay there on his cot, his mind so blank it was like a pail with nothing in it. Half the time he couldn't have said for sure if he was awake or still sleeping.

That day began the same as every other, at 3:00 A.M., when they turned on the lights and shoved the breakfast trays through the slots. Usually it was cold cereal or powdered eggs or pancakes; the good breakfasts were when they put peanut butter on the pancakes, and this was one of the good ones. The fork was plastic and broke half the time, so Carter sat on his bunk and ate the pancakes folded up, like tacos. The other men on H-Wing complained about the food, how nasty it was, but Carter didn't think it was so bad on the whole. He'd had worse, and there were days in his life when he'd had nothing at all, so pancakes with peanut butter were a welcome sight in the morning, even if it wasn't morning in the sense of being light out.

There were visiting days, of course, but Carter hadn't had a visitor in all the time he'd been in Terrell except for the once, when the woman's husband had come and told him that he'd found Christ Jesus who was the Lord and that he'd prayed on what Carter had done, taking his beautiful wife away from him and his babies forever and ever; and that through the weeks and months of praying, he'd come to terms with this and decided to forgive him. The man did a lot of crying, sitting on the other side of the glass with the phone pressed to his head. Carter had been a Christian man himself from time to time and appreciated what the woman's husband was saying to him; but the way he spoke the words made it seem like his forgiv-

ing Carter was something he'd chosen to do, to make himself feel better. He certainly didn't say anything about putting a stop to what was going to happen to Carter. Carter couldn't see how saying anything on the subject would improve the situation, so he thanked the man and said God bless you and I'm sorry, if I see Mrs. Wood in heaven I'll tell her what you did here today, which made the man get up in a hurry and leave him there, holding the phone. That was the last time anybody had come to see Carter at Terrell, two years ago at least.

The thing was, the woman, Mrs. Wood, had always been nice to him, giving him an extra five or ten, and coming out with the iced tea on the hot days, always on a little tray, like folks did in restaurants, and the thing that had happened between them was confusing; Carter was sorry about it, sorry right down to his bones, but it still didn't make sense in his head, no matter how he turned it around. He'd never said he hadn't done it, but it didn't seem right to him to die on account of something he didn't understand, at least before he had the chance to figure it out. He went over it in his mind, but in four years it never had come any clearer to him. Maybe coming to terms, like Mr. Wood had done, was the thing Carter hadn't been able to see his way to. If anything, the whole thing made less sense than ever; and with the days and weeks and months all mashed together in his brain the way they were, he wasn't even sure he was remembering the thing right to begin with.

At 6:00 A.M., when the shift changed, the guards woke everybody up again, to call out names and numbers, then moved down the hallway with the laundry bags to swap out boxers and socks. This meant today was a Friday. Carter didn't get a chance to shower but once a week or see the barber except every sixty days, so it was good to have clean clothes. The sticky feeling of his skin was worse in summer, when you sweated all day onto yourself even if you lay still as a stone, but from what his lawyer had told him in the letter he'd sent six months ago, he wouldn't have to go through another Texas summer in his life. The second of June would be the end of it.

His thoughts were broken by two hard bangs on the door. "Carter. Anthony Carter." The voice belonged to Pincher, head of the shift.

"Aw, come on, Pincher," Anthony said from his bunk. "Who'd you think was in here?"

"Present for cuffs, Tone."

"Ain't time for rec. Ain't my day for the shower neither."

"You think I got all morning to stand here talking about it?"

Carter eased himself off the bunk, where he'd been looking at the ceiling and thinking about the woman, that glass of iced tea on the tray. His

body felt achy and slow, and with effort he lowered himself onto his knees with his back facing the door. He'd done this a thousand times but still didn't like it. Keeping your balance was the tricky part. Once he was kneeling, he pulled his shoulder blades inward, twisted his arms around, and guided his hands, palms up, through the slot that the food came through. He felt the cold bite of the metal as Pincher cuffed his wrists. Everybody called him Pincher on account of how tight he did the cuffs.

"Stand back now, Carter."

Carter pushed one foot forward, his left knee making a grinding sound as he shifted his center of gravity, then rose carefully to his feet, simultaneously withdrawing his cuffed hands from the slot. From the far side of the door came the clanking of Pincher's big ring of keys, and then the door opened to show him Pincher and the guard they called Dennis the Menace, on account of his hair, which looked like the kid's in the cartoon, and the fact that he liked to menace you with the stick. He had a way of finding spots on your body that you never knew could hurt so bad with just a little poke of wood.

"Seems like somebody's come to see you, Carter," Pincher said. "And it isn't your mother or your lawyer." He didn't smile or anything, but Dennis looked to be enjoying himself. He gave that stick of his a twirl like a majorette.

"My moms been with Jesus since I was ten years old," Carter told him. "You know that, Pincher, I told you that about a hundred times. Who is it wants me?"

"Can't say. Warden set it up. I'm just supposed to take you to the cages."

Carter supposed this was no good. It'd been so long since the woman's husband had come to visit; maybe he'd come to say goodbye, or else to tell him I changed my mind, I don't forgive you after all, go straight to hell, Anthony Carter. Either way Carter didn't have anything else to say to the man. He'd said sorry to everyone over and over and felt done with it.

"Come on with you then," Pincher said.

They led him down the corridor, Pincher gripping him hard by an elbow to steer him like a kid through a crowd, or a girl he was dancing with. This was how they took you anywhere, even to the shower. Part of you got used to people's hands being on you this way, and part of you didn't. Dennis led the way, opening the door that sealed administrative segregation from the rest of H-Wing and then the outer, second door that took them down the hall though general population to the cages. It'd been almost two years since Carter had been off H-Wing—H for "hellhole," H for "hit my black ass with that stick some more," H for "Hey, Mama, I'm

off to see Jesus any day now"—and walking with his eyes pointed at the ground, he still let himself peek around, if only to give his eyes something new to look at. But it was all still Terrell, a maze of concrete and steel and heavy doors, the air dank and sour with the smell of men.

At the visiting area they reported to the OD and entered an empty cage. The air inside was ten degrees warmer and smelled like bleach so strong it made Carter's eyes sting. Pincher undid the cuffs; while Dennis held the point of his stick against the soft spot under Carter's jaw, they shackled him in the front, legs too. There were signs all over the wall telling Carter what he could and couldn't do, none of which he wanted to take the trouble to read or even look at. They shuffled him over to the chair and gave him the phone, which Carter could manage to hold in place against his ear only if he bent his legs halfway up his chest—more damp crunches from his knees—pulling the chain taut across his chest like a long zipper.

"Didn't have to wear the shackles the last time," Carter said.

Pincher barked a nasty laugh. "I'm sorry, did we forget to ask you nicely? Fuck you, Carter. You got ten minutes."

Then they left, and Carter waited for the door on the other side to open and show him who it was had come to see him after all this time.

Special Agent Brad Wolgast hated Texas. He hated everything about it.

He hated the weather, which was hot as an oven one minute and freezing the next, the air so damp it felt like a wet towel over your head. He hated the look of the place, beginning with the trees, which were scrawny and pathetic, their limbs all gnarled up like something out of Dr. Seuss, and the flat, windblown nothingness of it. He hated the billboards and the freeways and faceless subdivisions and the Texas flag, which flew over everything, always big as a circus tent; he hated the giant pickup trucks everybody drove, no matter that gas was thirteen bucks a gallon and the world was slowly steaming itself to death like a package of peas in a microwave. He hated the boots and the belt buckles and the way people talked, *y'all this* and *y'all that,* as if they spent the day ropin' and ridin', not cleaning teeth and selling insurance and doing the books, like people did everywhere.

Most of all, he hated it because his parents had made him live here, back in junior high. Wolgast was forty-four, still in decent shape but with the miscellaneous aches and thinning hair to show for it; sixth grade was long ago, nothing to regret, but still, driving with Doyle up Highway 59 north from Houston, springtime Texas spread all around, the wound felt fresh to him. Texas, state-sized porkchop of misery: one minute he'd been

a perfectly happy kid in Oregon, fishing off the pier at the mouth of the Coos River and playing with his friends in the woods behind their house for endless, idle hours; the next he was stuck in the urban swamp of Houston, living in a crappy ranch house without a scrap of shade, walking to school in one-hundred-degree heat that felt like a big shoe coming down on his head. The end of the world, he'd thought. That's where he was. The end of the world was Houston, Texas. On his first day of sixth grade, the teacher had made him stand up to recite the Texas Pledge of Allegiance, as if he'd signed up to live in a whole different country. Three miserable years; he'd never been so glad to leave a place, even the way it happened. His father was a mechanical engineer; his parents had met when his father had taken a job the year after college as a math teacher on the reservation in Grande Ronde, where his mother, who was half Chinook—her mother's family name was Po-Bear—was working as a nurse's aide. They'd gone to Texas for the money, but then his father was laid off when the oil bust hit in '86; they tried to sell the house but couldn't, and in the end, his father had simply dropped the keys off at the bank. They moved to Michigan, then Ohio, then upstate New York, chasing little bits of work, but his father had never righted himself after that. When he'd died of pancreatic cancer two months before Wolgast graduated from high school—his third in as many years—it was easy to think that Texas had somehow done it. His mother had moved back to Oregon, but now she was gone too.

Everyone was gone.

He'd gotten the first man, Babcock, from Nevada. Others came from Arizona and Louisiana and Kentucky and Wyoming and Florida and Indiana and Delaware. Wolgast didn't care much for those places, either. But anything was better than Texas.

Wolgast and Doyle had flown into Houston from Denver the night before. They'd stayed the night at a Radisson near the airport (he'd considered a brief side trip into the city, maybe tracking down his old house, but then wondered what in hell he'd want to do a thing like that for), picked up the rental car in the morning, a Chrysler Victory so new it smelled like the ink on a dollar bill, and headed north. The day was clear with a high, blue sky the color of cornflowers; Wolgast drove while Doyle sipped his latte and read the file, a mass of paper resting on his lap.

"Meet Anthony Carter," Doyle said, and held up the photo. "Subject Number Twelve."

Wolgast didn't want to look. He knew just what he'd see: one more slack face, one more pair of eyes that had barely ever learned to read, one more soul that had stared into itself too long. These men were black or white, fat or thin, old or young, but the eyes were always the same: empty,

like drains that could suck the whole world down into them. It was easy to sympathize with them in the abstract, but only in the abstract.

"Don't you want to know what he did?"

Wolgast shrugged. He was in no hurry, but now was as good a time as any.

Doyle slurped his latte and read: "Anthony Lloyd Carter. African American, five foot four, a hundred and twenty pounds." Doyle looked up. "That explains the nickname. Take a guess."

Already Wolgast felt tired. "You've got me. Little Anthony?"

"You're showing your age, boss. It's T-Tone. T for 'Tiny,' I'm thinking, though you never know. Mother deceased, no dad in the picture from day one, a series of foster homes care of the county. Bad beginnings all around. A list of priors but mostly petty stuff, panhandling, public nuisance, that kind of thing. So, the story. Our man Anthony cuts this lady's lawn every week. Her name is Rachel Wood, she lives in River Oaks, two little girls, husband's some big lawyer. All the charity balls, the benefits, the country clubs. Anthony Carter is her *project.* Starts cutting her lawn one day when she sees him standing under an overpass with a sign that says, HUNGRY, PLEASE HELP. Words along those lines. Anyway, she takes him home, makes him a sandwich, puts in some calls and finds him a place, some kind of group home she raises money for. Then she calls all her friends in River Oaks and says, Let's help this guy, what do you need done around the place? All of a sudden she's a regular Girl Scout, rallying the troops. So the guy starts cutting all their lawns, pruning the hedges, you know, all the things they need around the big houses. This goes on about two years. Everything's hunky-dory until one day, our man Anthony comes over to cut the lawn, and one of the little girls is home sick from school. She's five. Mom's on the phone or doing something, the little girl goes out into the yard, sees Anthony. She knows who he is, she's seen him plenty of times, but this time something goes wrong. He frightens her. There's some stuff here about maybe he touched her, but the court psychiatrist is iffy on that. Anyway, the girl starts screaming, Mom comes tearing out of the house, she's screaming, everybody's screaming, all of a sudden it's like a screaming contest, the goddamn screaming Olympics. One minute he's the nice man who shows up on time to cut the lawn, next thing you know, he's just a black guy with your kid, and all the Mother Teresa shit goes out the window. It gets physical. There's a struggle. Mom somehow falls or gets pushed into the pool. Anthony goes in after her, maybe to help her, but she's still screaming at him, fights him off. So now everybody's wet and yelling and thrashing around." Doyle looked at him quizzically. "Know how it ends?"

"He drowns her?"

"Bingo. Right there, right in front of the little girl. A neighbor heard it all and called the cops, so when they get there, he's still sitting on the edge of the pool, the lady floating in it." He shook his head. "Not a pretty picture."

Sometimes it was troubling to Wolgast, how much energy Doyle put into these stories. "Any chance it was an accident?"

"As it happens, the victim was on the varsity swim team at SMU. Still did fifty laps every morning. The prosecution made a lot of hay with that little detail. That and the fact that Carter pretty much admitted to killing her."

"What did he say when they arrested him?"

Doyle shrugged. "He only wanted her to stop screaming. Then he asked for a glass of iced tea."

Wolgast shook his head. The stories were always bad, but it was the little details that got to him. A glass of iced tea. Sweet Jesus. "How old did you say he was?"

Doyle flipped back a couple of pages. "I didn't. Thirty-two. Twenty-eight at the time he went into custody. And here's the thing. No relatives at all. Last time anybody came to see him in Polunsky was the victim's husband, a little over two years ago. His lawyer left the state, too, after the appeal was turned down. Carter's been reassigned to somebody else in the Harris County PD office, but they haven't even opened the paperwork. Ipso facto, nobody's watching the store. Anthony Carter goes to the needle on June second for murder one with depraved indifference, and not one soul on earth is paying attention. The guy's a ghost *already.*"

The drive to Livingston took ninety minutes, the last fifteen minutes on a farm-to-market road that carried them through the intermittent shade of piney woods and open fields of prairie grass spangled with bluebonnets. It was just noon; with luck, Wolgast thought, they could be done by dinner, enough time to drive back to Houston and dump the rental and get on a plane to Colorado. It was better when these trips were quick like that; when he lingered too long, if the guy was hemming and hawing and drawing it out—never mind that they always took the deal eventually—he'd start to get a queasy feeling in his stomach about the whole thing. It always made him think of a play he'd read in high school, *The Devil and Daniel Webster,* and how he, Wolgast, was the devil in this deal. Doyle was different; he was younger, for starters, not even thirty, a cherry-cheeked farmboy from Indiana who was glad to play Robin to Wolgast's Batman, calling him "chief" and "boss," with a streak of old-fashioned midwestern patriotism so unalloyed that Wolgast had actually seen him tear up at the

national anthem at the start of a Rockies game—a game on TV. Wolgast hadn't known they still *made* people like Phil Doyle. And there was no question Doyle was smart, with a good future ahead of him. Fresh out of Purdue, his law school applications already in the works, Doyle had joined the Bureau right after the Mall of America Massacre—three hundred holiday shoppers gunned down by Iranian jihadists, all the horror captured by security cameras to be replayed in painstakingly gruesome detail on CNN; it seemed like half the country was ready to sign on to something, anything that day—and after finishing his training at Quantico, he had been posted to the Denver field office, assigned to counterterrorism. When the Army had come looking for two field agents, Doyle had been the first in line to volunteer. Wolgast couldn't quite figure that; on paper, what they were calling "PROJECT NOAH" had looked like a dead end, and Wolgast had taken the assignment for just that reason. His divorce had just come through—his marriage to Lila hadn't ended so much as evaporated, so it had taken him by surprise, how blue the actual decree had made him—and a few months of travel seemed like just the thing to clear his mind. He'd gotten a small settlement in the divorce—his share of the equity in their house in Cherry Creek, plus a piece of Lila's retirement account from the hospital—and he'd actually thought about quitting the Bureau entirely, going back to Oregon and using the money to open up a small business of some kind: hardware, maybe, or sporting goods, not that he knew anything about either one. Guys who quit the Bureau always ended up in security, but to Wolgast the idea of a small store, something simple and clean, the shelves stocked with baseball gloves or hammers, objects with a purpose you could identify just by looking at them, was far more appealing. And the NOAH thing had seemed like a cakewalk, not a bad way to spend his last year in the Bureau if it came to that.

Of course, it had turned out to be more than paperwork and babysitting, a lot more, and he wondered if Doyle had somehow known this.

At Polunsky they were ID'd and asked to check their weapons, then went to the warden's office. Polunsky was a grim place, but they all were. While they waited, Wolgast used his handheld to check for evening flights out of Houston—there was one at 8:30, so if they hustled they could make it. Doyle said nothing, just flipped through a copy of *Sports Illustrated,* like he was waiting at the dentist. It was just after one when the secretary led them in.

The warden was a black man, about fifty, with salt-and-pepper hair and the chest of a weight lifter compressed under his suit vest. He neither rose nor offered to shake their hands as they entered. Wolgast gave him the documents to look over.

He finished reading and looked up. "Agent, this is the goddamnedest thing I've ever seen. What in the hell would you want Anthony Carter for?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. We're just here to make the transfer."

The warden put the papers aside and folded his hands on his desk. "I see. And what if I said no?"

"Then I would give you a number to call, and the person on the other end of the line would do his best to explain that this is a matter of national security."

"A number."

"That's correct."

The warden sighed irritably, spun in his chair, and gestured out the wide windows behind him. "Gentlemen, do you know what that is out there?"

"I'm not following you."

He turned to face them again. He didn't seem angry, Wolgast thought. Just a man accustomed to having his way. "It's Texas. Two hundred sixty seven thousand square miles of Texas, to be precise. And the last time I checked, Agent, that's who I work for. Not for anybody in Washington, or Langley, or whoever the hell is on the other end of that number. Anthony Carter is an inmate in my care, and I'm charged by the citizens of this state to carry out his sentence. Short of a phone call from the governor, I'm going to do exactly that."

Goddamn Texas, Wolgast thought. This was going to take all day. "That can be arranged, Warden."

He held up the papers for Wolgast to take. "Well then, Agent. You better arrange it."

At the visitors' entrance they collected their weapons and returned to the car. Wolgast got on the phone to Denver, which patched him through to Colonel Sykes on an encrypted line. Wolgast told him what had happened; Sykes was irritated but said he'd make the arrangements. A day at the most, he said. Just hang around and wait for the call, then get Anthony Carter to sign the papers.

"Just so you know, there may be a change in protocol coming your way," Sykes told him.

"What sort of change?"

Sykes hesitated. "I'll let you know. Just get Carter to sign."

They drove to Huntsville and checked into a motel. The warden's stonewalling was nothing new—it had happened before. The delay was aggravating, but that was all it was. A few days from now, a week at most, Carter would be in the system, and all evidence that he'd ever existed

would be wiped from the face of the earth. Even the warden would swear he'd never heard of the guy. Somebody would have to talk to the deceased's husband, of course, the River Oaks lawyer with the two little girls he now had to raise himself, but that wasn't Wolgast's job. There would be a death certificate involved, and probably a story about a heart attack and a quick cremation, and how justice had, in the end, been served. It didn't matter; the job would get done.

By five they hadn't heard anything, so they changed out of their suits into jeans and walked up the street to find a place for dinner, choosing a steak joint on a commercial strip between a Costco and a Best Buy. It was part of a chain, which was good—they were supposed to travel lightly, to leave as little an impression on the world around them as possible. The delay had made Wolgast antsy, but Doyle seemed not to mind. A good meal and a little time off in a strange town, courtesy of the federal government—why complain? Doyle sawed his way through a huge porterhouse, thick as a two-by-four, while Wolgast picked at a plate of ribs, and when they'd paid the check—in cash, pulled off a wad of fresh bills Wolgast kept in his pocket—they took a pair of stools at the bar.

"Think he'll sign?" Doyle asked.

Wolgast rattled the ice in his Scotch. "They always do."

"I suppose it's not much of a choice." Doyle frowned into his glass. "The needle, or whatever's behind curtain number two. But even so."

Wolgast knew what Doyle was thinking: whatever was behind the curtain, it was nothing good. Why else would they need death row inmates, men with nothing to lose?

"Even so," he agreed.

A basketball game was playing on the television above the bar, the Rockets and Golden State, and for a while they watched in silence. It was early in the game, and both teams seemed sluggish, moving the ball around without doing much of anything with it.

"You hear anything from Lila?" Doyle said.

"Actually, yeah." Wolgast paused. "She's getting married."

Doyle's eyes widened. "That guy? The doctor?"

Wolgast nodded.

"That was fast. Why didn't you say something? Jesus, what'd she do, invite you to the wedding?"

"Not exactly. She sent me an email, thought I should know about it."

"What did you say?"

Wolgast shrugged. "I didn't."

"You didn't say anything?"

There was more to it, but Wolgast didn't want to go into it. *Dear Brad,*

Lila had written, *I thought you should know that David and I are expecting a child. We're getting married next week. I hope you can be happy for us.* He'd sat at the computer staring at the message on the screen for a good ten minutes.

"There was nothing to say. We're divorced, she can do what she wants." He drained his Scotch and peeled off more bills to pay. "You coming?"

Doyle passed his eyes over the room. When they'd first sat at the bar, the place was nearly empty, but more people had come in, including a group of young women who had pushed together three tall tables and were drinking pitchers of margaritas and talking loudly. There was a college nearby, Sam Houston State, and Wolgast supposed they were students, or else they worked together somewhere. The world could be going straight to hell in a handbasket, but happy hour was happy hour, and pretty girls would still fill the bars in Huntsville, Texas. They were wearing clingy shirts and low-cut jeans with fashionable tears at the knees, their faces and hair done for a night on the town, and they were drinking furiously. One of the girls, a little heavy, sitting with her back to them, wore her pants so low on her spine that Wolgast could see the little hearts on her underwear. He didn't know if he wanted to get a closer look or throw a blanket over her.

"Maybe I'll stay awhile," Doyle said, and raised his glass in a little toast. "Watch the game."

Wolgast nodded. Doyle wasn't married, didn't even have a steady girlfriend. They were supposed to keep their interactions to a minimum, but he didn't see how it was any of his business how Doyle spent his evening. He felt a flicker of envy, then put the thought aside.

"Okay. Just remember—"

"Right," Doyle said. "Like Smokey Bear says, take only pictures, leave only footprints. As of this moment, I'm a fiber-optic sales rep from Indianapolis."

Behind them, the girls broke into laughter; Wolgast could hear the tequila in their voices.

"Nice town, Indianapolis," Wolgast said. "Better than this one, anyway."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Doyle replied, and grinned mischieviously. "I think I'm going to like it here just fine."

Wolgast left the restaurant and walked up the highway. He'd left his handheld behind at the motel, thinking they might get a call during dinner and have to leave; but when he checked it now, he found no messages. After the noise and activity of the restaurant, the quiet of the room was unset-

tling, and he began to wish he'd maybe stayed with Doyle, though he knew he wasn't very good company these days. He removed his shoes and lay on his bed in his clothes to watch the rest of the game, not really caring one way or the other about it, but it gave his mind something to focus on. Finally, a little past midnight—eleven in Denver, a little too late, but what the hell—he did what he'd told himself he wouldn't do and dialed Lila's number. A man's voice answered.

"David, it's Brad."

For a moment David didn't say anything. "It's late, Brad. What do you want?"

"Is Lila there?"

"She's had a long day," David said firmly. "She's tired."

I know she's tired, Brad thought. *I slept in the same bed with her for six years.* "Just put her on, will you?"

David sighed and put the phone down with a thump. Wolgast heard the rustling of sheets and then David's voice, saying to Lila, *It's Brad, for Pete's sake, tell him to call at a decent hour next time.*

"Brad?"

"I'm sorry to call so late. I didn't realize what time it was."

"I don't believe that for a second. What's on your mind?"

"I'm in Texas. A motel, actually. I can't tell you where exactly."

"Texas." She paused. "You hate Texas. I don't think you called to tell me you're in Texas, did you?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have woken you. I don't think David's too happy."

Lila sighed into the phone. "Oh, it's all right. We're still friends, right? David's a big boy. He can handle it."

"I got your email."

"Well." He heard her breathe. "I kind of figured. I supposed that was why you called. I thought I'd hear from you at some point."

"Did you do it? Get married."

"Yes. Last weekend, here at the house. Just a few friends. My parents. They asked for you, actually, wanted to know how you were doing. They always really liked you. You should call them, if you want. I think my dad misses you more than anyone."

He let the remark pass—more than anyone? More than you, Lila? He waited for her to say something else, but she didn't, and the silence was taken up by a picture that formed in his mind, a picture that was actually a memory: Lila in bed, in an old T-shirt and the socks she always wore because her feet got cold no matter the time of year, a pillow wedged between her knees to straighten her spine because of the baby. Their baby. Eva.

"I just wanted to tell you I was."

Lila's voice was quiet. "Was what, Brad?"

"That I was . . . happy for you. Like you asked. I was thinking that you should, you know, quit your job this time. Take some time off, take better care of yourself. I always wondered, you know, if—"

"I will," Lila cut in. "Don't worry. Everything is fine, everything is normal."

Normal. Normal, he thought, was what everything was not. "I just—"

"Please." She took a deep breath. "You're making me sad. I have to get up in the morning."

"Lila—"

"I said I have to go."

He knew she was crying. She didn't make a sound to tell him so, but he knew. They were both thinking about Eva, and thinking about Eva would make her cry, which was why they weren't together anymore, and couldn't be. How many hours of his life had he held her as she cried? And that was the thing; he'd never known what to say when Lila cried. It was only later—too late—that he'd realized he wasn't supposed to say anything at all.

"Damn it, Brad. I didn't want to do this, not now."

"I'm sorry, Lila. I was just . . . thinking about her."

"I know you were. Goddamnit. God*damn*it. Don't do this, *don't.*"

He heard her sob, and then David's voice came on the line. "Don't call back, Brad. I mean it. Understand what I'm saying to you."

"Fuck you," Wolgast said.

"Whatever you say. Just don't bother her anymore. Leave us alone." And he hung up the phone.

Wolgast looked at his handheld once before hurling it across the room. It made a handsome arc, spinning like a Frisbee, before slapping the wall above the television with the crunch of breaking plastic. He instantly felt sorry. But when he knelt and picked it up, he found that all that had happened was the battery case had popped open, and the thing was perfectly fine.

Wolgast had been to the compound only once, the previous summer, to meet with Colonel Sykes. Not a job interview, exactly; it had been made clear to Wolgast that the NOAH assignment was his if he wanted it. A pair of soldiers drove him in a van with blacked-out windows, but Wolgast could tell they were taking him west from Denver, into the mountains. The

drive took six hours, and by the time they pulled into the compound, he'd actually managed to fall asleep. He stepped from the van into the bright sunshine of a summer afternoon. He stretched and looked around. From the topography, he'd have guessed he was somewhere around Ouray. It could have been farther north. The air felt thin and clean in his lungs; he felt the dull throb of a high-altitude headache at the top of his skull.

He was met in the parking lot by a civilian, a compact man dressed in jeans and a khaki shirt rolled at the sleeves, a pair of old-fashioned aviators perched on his wide, faintly bulbous nose. This was Richards.

"Hope the ride wasn't too bad," Richards said as they shook hands. Up close Wolgast saw that Richards's cheeks were pockmarked with old acne scars. "We're pretty high up here. If you're not used to it, you'll want to take it easy."

Richards escorted Wolgast across the parking area to a building he called the Chalet, which was exactly what it sounded like: a large Tudor structure, three stories tall, with the exposed timbers of an old-fashioned sportsmen's lodge. The mountains had once been full of these places, Wolgast knew, hulking relics from an era before time-share condos and modern resorts. The building faced an open lawn and beyond, at a hundred yards or so, a cluster of more workaday structures: cinder-block barracks, a half dozen military inflatables, a low-slung building that resembled a roadside motel. Military vehicles, Humvees and smaller jeeps and five-ton trucks, were moving up and down the drive; in the center of the lawn, a group of men with broad chests and trim haircuts, naked to the waist, were sunning themselves on lawn chairs.

Stepping into the Chalet, Wolgast had the disorienting sensation of peeking behind a movie set; the place appeared to have been gutted to the studs, its original architecture replaced by the neutral textures of a modern office building: gray carpeting, institutional lighting, acoustic-tile drop ceilings. He might have been in a dentist's office or the high-rise off the freeway where he met his accountant once a year to do his taxes. They stopped at the front desk, where Richards asked him to turn over his handheld and his weapon, which he passed to the guard, a kid in camos, who tagged them. There was an elevator, but Richards walked past it and led Wolgast down a narrow hallway to a heavy metal door that opened on a flight of stairs. They ascended to the second floor and made their way down another nondescript hallway to Sykes's office.

Sykes rose from behind his desk as they entered: a tall, well-built man in uniform, his chest spangled with the various bars and little bits of color that Wolgast had never understood. His office was neat as a pin, its arrangement of objects, right down to the framed photos on his desk, giv-

ing the impression of having been placed for maximum efficiency. Resting in the center of the desk was a single manila folder, fat with paper. Wolgast knew it was almost certainly his personnel file, or some version of it.

They shook hands and Sykes offered him coffee, which Wolgast accepted. He wasn't drowsy but the caffeine, he knew, would help the headache.

"Sorry about the bullshit with the van," Sykes said, and waved him to a chair. "That's just how we do things."

A soldier brought in the coffee, a plastic carafe and two china cups on a tray. Richards remained standing behind Sykes's desk, his back to the broad windows that looked out on the woodlands that ringed the compound. Sykes explained what he wanted Wolgast to do. It was all quite straightforward, he said, and by now Wolgast knew the basics. The Army needed between ten and twenty death row inmates to serve in the third-stage trials of an experimental drug therapy, code-named "PROJECT NOAH." In exchange for their consent, the inmates would have their sentences commuted to life without parole. It would be Wolgast's job to obtain the signatures of these men, nothing more. Everything had been legally vetted, but because the project was a matter of national security, all of these men would be declared legally dead. Thereafter, they would spend the rest of their lives in the care of the federal penal system in a white-collar prison camp, under assumed identities. The men would be chosen based upon a number of factors, but all would be men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five with no living first-degree relatives. Wolgast would report directly to Sykes; he'd have no other contact, though he'd remain, technically, in the employment of the Bureau.

"Do I have to pick them?" Wolgast asked.

Sykes shook his head. "That's our job. You'll receive your orders from me. All you have to do is get their consent. Once they're signed on, the Army will take it from there. They'll be moved to the nearest federal lockup, then we'll transport them here."

Wolgast thought a moment. "Colonel, I have to ask—"

"What we're doing?" He seemed, at that moment, to permit himself an almost human-looking smile.

Wolgast nodded. "I understand I can't be very specific. But I'm going to be asking them to sign over their whole lives. I have to tell them something."

Sykes exchanged a look with Richards, who shrugged. "I'll leave you now," Richards said, and nodded at Wolgast. "Agent."

When Richards had left, Sykes leaned back in his chair. "I'm not a biochemist, Agent. You'll have to be satisfied with the layman's version.

Here's the background, at least the part I can tell you. About ten years ago, the CDC got a call from a doctor in La Paz. He had four patients, all Americans, who had come down with what looked like hantavirus—high fever, vomiting, muscle pain, headache, hypoxemia. The four of them had been part of an ecotour, deep in the jungle. They claimed that they were part of a group of fourteen but had gotten separated from the others and had been wandering in the jungle for weeks. It was sheer luck that they'd stumbled onto a remote trading post run by a bunch of Franciscan friars, who'd arranged their transport to La Paz. Now, hanta isn't the common cold, but it's not exactly rare, either, so none of this would have been more than a blip on the CDC's radar if not for one thing: all of them were terminal cancer patients. The tour was organized by an outfit called Last Wish. You've heard of them?"

Wolgast nodded. "I thought they just took people skydiving, things like that."

"That's what I thought, too. But apparently not. Of the four, one had an inoperable brain tumor, two had acute lymphocytic leukemia, and the fourth had ovarian cancer. And every single one of them became well. Not just the hanta, or whatever it was. No cancer. Not a trace."

Wolgast felt lost. "I don't get it."

Sykes sipped his coffee. "Well, neither did anyone at the CDC. But something had happened, some interaction between their immune systems and something, most likely viral, that they'd been exposed to in the jungle. Something they ate? The water they drank? No one could figure it out. They couldn't even say exactly where they'd been." He leaned forward over his desk. "Do you know what the thymus gland is?"

Wolgast shook his head.

Sykes pointed at his chest, just above the breastbone. "Little thing in here, between the sternum and the trachea, about the size of an acorn. In most people, it's atrophied completely by puberty, and you could go your whole life not knowing you had one, unless it was diseased. Nobody really knows what it does, or at least they didn't, until they ran scans on these four patients. The thymus had somehow turned itself back on. More than back on: it had enlarged to three times its usual size. It looked like a malignancy but it wasn't. And their immune systems had gone into overdrive. A hugely accelerated rate of cellular regeneration. And there were other benefits. Remember these were cancer patients, all over fifty. It was like they were teenagers again: smell, hearing, vision, skin tone, lung volume, physical strength and endurance, even sexual function. One of the men actually grew back a full head of hair."

"A virus did this?"

Sykes nodded. "Like I said, this is the layman's version. But I've got people downstairs who think that's exactly what happened. Some of them have degrees in subjects I can't even spell. They talk to me like I'm a child, and they're not wrong."

"What happened to them? The four patients."

Sykes leaned back in his chair, his face darkening a little. "Well, this isn't the happiest part of the story, I'm afraid. They're all dead. The longest any of them survived was eighty-six days. Cerebral aneurysm, heart attack, stroke. Their bodies just kind of blew a fuse."

"What about the others?"

"No one knows. Disappeared without a trace, including the tour operator, who turned out to be a pretty shady character. It's likely he was actually working as a drug mule, using these tours as a cover." Sykes gave a shrug. "I've probably said too much. But I think this will help you put things in perspective. We're not talking about curing one disease, Agent. We're talking about curing *everything.* How long would a human being live if there were no cancer, no heart disease, no diabetes, no Alzheimer's? And we've reached the point where we need, absolutely require, human test subjects. Not a nice term, but there really is no other. And that's where you come in. I need you to get me these men."

"Why not the marshals? Isn't this more up their alley?"

Sykes shook his head dismissively. "Glorified corrections officers, if you'll excuse my saying so. Believe me, we started there. If I had a sofa I needed carried up the stairs, they'd be the first guys I'd call. But for this, no."

Sykes opened the file on his desk and began to read. "Bradford Joseph Wolgast, born Ashland, Oregon, September 29, 1974. BS in criminal justice 1996, SUNY Buffalo, high honors, recruited by the Bureau but declines, accepts a graduate fellowship at Stony Brook for a PhD in political science but leaves after two years to join the Bureau. After training at Quantico sent to—" He raised his eyebrows at Wolgast. "—Dayton?"

Wolgast shrugged. "It wasn't very exciting."

"Well, we all do our time. Two years in the sticks, a little of this, a little of that, mostly piddly shit but good ratings all around. After 9/11 asks to transfer to counterterrorism, back to Quantico for eighteen months, assigned to the Denver field office September '04 as liaison to the Treasury, tracking funds moved through U.S. banks by Russian nationals, i.e. the Russian Mafia, though we don't call them that. On the personal side: no political affiliations, no memberships, doesn't even subscribe to the newspaper. Parents deceased. Dates a little but no steady girlfriends. Marries Lila Kyle, an orthopedic surgeon. Divorced four years later." He closed the

file and lifted his eyes to Wolgast. "What we need, Agent, is somebody who, to be perfectly candid, has a certain polish. Good negotiation skills, not just with the prisoners but with the prison authorities. Somebody who knows how to tread lightly, won't leave a large impression. What we're doing here is perfectly legal—hell, it may be the most important piece of medical research in the history of mankind. But it could be easily misunderstood. I'm telling you as much as I am because I think it will help if you understand the stakes, how high they are."

Wolgast guessed Sykes was telling him maybe ten percent of the story—a persuasive ten percent, but even so. "Is it safe?"

Sykes shrugged. "There's safe and then there's safe. I won't lie to you. There are risks. But we'll do everything we can to minimize them. A bad outcome isn't in anybody's interest here. And I remind you that these are death row inmates. Not the nicest men you'd ever care to meet, and they don't exactly have a lot of options. We're giving them a chance to live out their lives, and maybe make a significant contribution to medical science at the same time. It's not a bad deal, not by a long shot. Everybody's on the side of the angels here."

Wolgast took a last moment to think. It was all a little hard to take in. "I guess I don't see why the military is involved."

At this, Sykes stiffened; he seemed almost offended. "Don't you? Think about it, Agent. Let's say a soldier on the ground in Khorramabad or Grozny takes a piece of shrapnel. A roadside bomb, say, a bunch of C-4 in a lead pipe full of deck screws. Maybe it's a piece of black-market Russian ordnance. Believe me, I've seen firsthand what these things can do. We have to dust him out of there, maybe en route he bleeds to death, but if he's lucky he gets to the field hospital, where a trauma surgeon, two medics, and three nurses patch him up as best they can before evacuating him to Germany or Saud. It's painful, it's awful, it's his rotten luck, and he's probably out of the war. He's a broken asset. All the money we've spent on his training is a total loss. And it gets worse. He comes home depressed, angry, maybe missing a limb or something worse, with nothing good to say about anyone or anything. Down at the corner tavern he tells his buddies, I lost my leg, I'm pissing into a bag for the rest of my life, and for what?" Sykes leaned back in his chair, letting the story sink in. "We've been at war for fifteen years, Agent. By the looks of things, we'll be in it for fifteen more if we're *lucky.* I won't kid you. The single biggest challenge the military faces, has always faced, is keeping soldiers on the field. So, let's say the same GI takes the same piece of shrapnel but within half a day his body's healed itself and he's back in his unit, fighting for God and country. You think the military wouldn't be interested in something like that?"

Wolgast felt chastened. "I see your point."

"Good, because you should." Sykes's expression softened; the lecture was over. "So maybe it's the military who's picking up the check. I say let them, because frankly, what we've spent so far would make your eyes pop out. I don't know about you, but I'd like to live to meet my great-great-great-grandchildren. Hell, I'd like to hit a golf ball three hundred yards on my hundredth birthday and then go home to make love to my wife until she walks funny for a week. Who wouldn't?" He looked at Wolgast searchingly. "The side of the angels, Agent. Nothing more or less. Do we have a deal?"

They shook, and Sykes walked him to the door. Richards was waiting to take him back to the van. "One last question," Wolgast asked. "Why 'NOAH'? What's it stand for?"

Sykes glanced quickly at Richards. In that moment, Wolgast felt the balance of power shifting in the room; Sykes might have been technically in charge, but in some way, Wolgast felt certain, he also reported to Richards, who was probably the link between the military and whoever was really running the show: USAMRIID, Homeland, maybe NSA.

Sykes turned back to Wolgast. "It doesn't stand for anything. Let's put it this way. You ever read the Bible?"

"Some." Wolgast looked at the both of them. "When I was a kid. My mother was a Methodist."

Sykes allowed himself a second, final smile. "Go look it up. The story of Noah and the ark. See how long he lived. That's all I'll say."

That night, back in his Denver apartment, Wolgast did as Sykes had said. He didn't own a Bible, probably hadn't laid eyes on one since his wedding day. But he found a concordance online.

And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.

It was then that he realized what the missing piece was, the thing Sykes hadn't said. It would be in his file, of course. It was the reason, of all the federal agents they might have chosen, that they'd picked him.

They'd chosen him because of Eva, because he'd had to watch his daughter die.

In the morning, he awoke to the chirp of his handheld; he was dreaming, and in the dream it was Lila, calling him back to tell him the baby had been born—not hers and David's baby, but their own. For a moment Wolgast felt happy, but then his mind cleared and he realized where he was—Huntsville, the motel—and his hand found the phone on the nightstand and punched the Receive button without his even looking at the screen to

see who it was. He heard the static of the encryption and then the opening line.

"All set," Sykes told him. "Everything should be in hand. Just get Carter to sign. And don't pack your bags quite yet. We may have another errand for you to run."

He looked at the clock: 6:58. Doyle was in the shower. Wolgast heard the faucet shut off with a groan, then the blast of a hair dryer. He had a vague memory of hearing Doyle returning from the bar—a rush of street noise from the open door, a muttered apology, and then the sound of water running—and looking at the clock and seeing it was a little after two A.M.

Doyle stepped into the room, a towel wrapped at his waist. Steam moistened the air around him. "Good, you're up." His eyes were bright, his skin flushed from the heat of the shower. How the guy could stay out half the night drinking and still look like he was ready to run a marathon was beyond Wolgast's comprehension.

Wolgast cleared his throat. "How's the fiber-optic business?"

Doyle dropped onto the opposite bed and ran a hand through his damp hair. "You'd be surprised, how interesting a business that is. People underestimate it, I think."

"Let me guess. The one with the pants?"

Doyle grinned, giving his eyebrows a playful wag. "They all had pants, boss." He tipped his head at Wolgast. "What happened to you? You look like you got dragged from a car."

Wolgast looked down at himself to discover he'd slept the night in his clothes. This was becoming something of a habit; ever since he'd gotten the email from Lila, he'd spent most nights on the sofa of his apartment, watching television until he fell asleep, as if going to bed like a normal person was something he was no longer qualified to do.

"Forget about it," he said. "Must have been a boring game." He rose and stretched. "We heard from Sykes. Let's get this over with."

They ate breakfast at a Denny's and drove back to Polunsky. The warden was waiting for them in his office. Was it just the mood of the morning, Wolgast thought, or did he look like he hadn't slept very well, either?

"Don't bother to sit," the warden said, and handed them an envelope.

Wolgast examined the contents. It was all pretty much as he expected: a writ of commutation from the governor's office and a court order transferring Carter to their custody as a federal prisoner. Assuming Carter signed, they could have him in transit to the federal lockup at El Reno by dinner. From there, he'd be moved to three other federal facilities, his trail growing fainter each time, until somewhere around two weeks or three or

a month at most, a black van would pull into the compound, and a man now known simply as Number Twelve would step out, blinking at the Colorado sunshine.

The last items in the envelope were Carter's death certificate and a medical examiner's report, both dated March 23. On the morning of the twenty-third, three days hence, Anthony Lloyd Carter would die in his cell from a cerebral aneurysm.

Wolgast returned the documents to the envelope and put it in his pocket, a chill snaking through him. How easy it was to make a human being disappear, just like that. "Thank you, Warden. We appreciate your cooperation."

The warden looked at each of them in turn, his jaw set. "I'm also instructed to say I never heard of you guys."

Wolgast did his best to smile. "Is there a problem with that?"

"I'm supposing if there were, one of those ME reports would show up with my name on it. I've got *kids,* Agent." He picked up his phone and punched a number. "Have two COs bring Anthony Carter to the cages, then come to my office." He hung up and looked at Wolgast. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to wait outside. I look at you any longer, I'm going to have a hard time forgetting about all this. Good day, gentlemen."

Ten minutes later, a pair of guards stepped into the outer office. The older one had the benevolent, overfed look of a shopping mall Santa, but the other guard, who couldn't have been more than twenty, was wearing a snarl on his face that Wolgast didn't like. There was always one guard who liked the job for the wrong reasons, and this was the one.

"You the guys looking for Carter?"

Wolgast nodded and showed his credentials. "That's right. Special Agents Wolgast and Doyle."

"Don't matter who you are," the heavy one said. "The warden says to take you, we'll take you."

They led Wolgast and Doyle down to the visiting area. Carter was sitting on the other side of the glass, the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder. He was small, just as Doyle had said, and his jumpsuit fit him loosely, like the clothing on a Ken doll. There were many ways to look condemned, Wolgast had learned, and Carter's look wasn't scared or angry but simply resigned, like the world had been taking slow bites of him his whole life.

Wolgast gestured at the shackles, turning toward the two COs. "Take those off, please."

The older one shook his head. "That's standard."

"I don't care what it is. Take them off." Wolgast lifted the phone from

its cradle on the wall. "Anthony Carter? I'm Special Agent Wolgast. This is Special Agent Doyle. We're from the FBI. These men are going to come around and remove those shackles. I asked them to do that. You'll cooperate with them, won't you?"

Carter gave a tight nod. His voice on the other end of the phone was quiet. "Yessir."

"Anything else you need to make you comfortable?"

Carter looked at him quizzically. How long since anybody had asked him a question like that?

"I's all right," he said.

Wolgast turned to face the guards. "Well? How about it? Am I talking to myself here, or am I going to have to call the warden?"

A moment passed as the guards looked at each other, deciding what to do. Then the one named Dennis stepped from the room and reappeared a moment later on the far side of the glass. Wolgast stood and watched, keeping his eyes fixed on the guard while he removed the shackles.

"That it?" said the heavy guard.

"That's it. We'll want to be left alone for a while. We'll tell the OD when we're done."

"Suit yourself," the guard said and walked out, closing the door behind him.

There was only one chair in the room, a folding metal seat, like something from a high school auditorium. Wolgast took it and positioned himself squarely to the glass, while Doyle remained standing behind him. The talking was Wolgast's to do. He picked up the phone again.

"Better?"

Carter hesitated a moment, appraising him, then nodded. "Yessir. Thank you. Pincher always does 'em too tight."

Pincher. Wolgast made a mental note of this. "You hungry? They give you breakfast in there?"

"Pancakes." Carter shrugged. "That was five hours ago, though."

Wolgast swiveled to look at Doyle, raising his eyebrows. Doyle nodded and left the room. For a few minutes, Wolgast just waited. Despite the large No Smoking sign, the edge of the counter was rutted with brown burn marks.

"You said you from the FBI?"

"That's right, Anthony."

A trace of a smile flicked across Carter's face. "Like on that show?"

Wolgast didn't know what Carter was talking about, but that was fine; it would give Carter something to explain.

"What show's that, Anthony?"

"The one with the woman. The one with the aliens."

Wolgast thought a moment, then remembered. Of course: *The X-Files.* It had been off the air for what, twenty years? Carter had probably seen it as a kid, in reruns. Wolgast couldn't remember very much about it, just the idea of it—alien abductions, some kind of conspiracy to hush the thing up. That was Carter's impression of the FBI.

"I liked that show too. You getting on in here all right?"

Carter squared his shoulders. "You came here to ask me that?"

"You're a smart guy, Anthony. No, that's not the reason."

"What the reason then?"

Wolgast leaned closer to the glass; he found Carter's eyes and held them with his own.

"I know about this place, Anthony. Terrell Unit. I know what goes on in here. I'm just making sure you're being treated properly."

Carter eyed him skeptically. "Does tolerable, I guess."

"The guards okay with you?"

"Pincher's tight with the cuffs, but he's all right most of the time." Carter lifted his bony shoulders in a shrug. "Dennis ain't no friend of mine. Some of the others, too."

The door opened behind Carter and Doyle entered, bearing a yellow tray from the commissary. He placed the tray on the counter in front of Carter: a cheeseburger and fries, gleaming with grease, resting on waxed paper in a little plastic basket. Beside it sat a carton of chocolate milk.

"Go on, Anthony," Wolgast said, and gestured toward the tray. "We can talk when you're done."

Carter placed the receiver on the counter and lifted the cheeseburger to his mouth. Three bites and the thing was half gone. Carter wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and got to work on the fries while Wolgast watched. Carter's concentration was total. It was like watching a dog eat, Wolgast thought.

Doyle had returned to Wolgast's side of the glass. "Damn," he said quietly, "that guy sure was hungry."

"They got anything for dessert down there?"

"Bunch of dried-up looking pies. Some éclairs looked like dog turds."

Wolgast thought a moment. "On second thought, skip dessert. Get him a glass of iced tea. Make it nice, too, if you can. Dress it up a little."

Doyle frowned. "He's got the milk. I don't know if they even *have* iced tea down there. It's like a barnyard."

"This is Texas, Phil." Wolgast suppressed the impatience in his voice. "Trust me, they have tea. Just go find it."

Doyle shrugged and left again. When Carter had finished his meal, he

licked the salt off his fingers, one by one, and sighed deeply. When he picked up the receiver, Wolgast did the same.

"How's that, Anthony? Feeling better?"

Through the receiver, Wolgast could hear the watery heaviness of Carter's breathing; his eyes were slack and glazed with pleasure. All those calories, all those protein molecules, all those complex carbohydrates hitting his system like a hammer. Wolgast might just as well have given him a fifth of whiskey.

"Yessir. Thank you."

"A man's got to eat. A man can't live on pancakes."

A silent moment passed. Carter licked his lips with a slow tongue. His voice, when he spoke, was almost a whisper. "What you want from me?"

"You've got it backward, Anthony," Wolgast said, nodding. "It's me who's here to find out what *I* can do for *you*."

Carter dropped his eyes to the counter, the grease-stained wreckage of his meal. "He sent you, didn't he."

"Who's that, Anthony?"

"Woman's husband." Carter frowned at the memory. "Mr. Wood. He come here once. Told me he found Jesus."

Wolgast remembered what Doyle had told him in the car. Two years ago, and it was still on Carter's mind.

"No, he didn't send me, Anthony. You have my word."

"Told him I was sorry," Carter insisted, his voice cracking. "Told everybody. Ain't gonna say it no more."

"No one's saying you have to, Anthony. I know you're sorry. That's why I came all this way to see you."

"All what way?"

"A long way, Anthony." Wolgast nodded slowly. "A very, very long way."

Wolgast paused, searching Carter's face. There was something about him, different from the others. He felt the moment opening, like a door.

"Anthony, what would you say if I told you I could get you out of this place?"

Behind the glass, Carter eyed him cautiously. "How you mean?"

"Just like I said. Right now. Today. You could leave Terrell and never come back."

Carter's eyes floated with incomprehension; the idea was too much to process. "I'd say now I know you's fooling with me."

"No lie, Anthony. That's why we came all this way. You may not know it, but you're a special man. You could say you're one of a kind."

"You talk about me leaving here?" Carter frowned bitterly. "Ain't

make no sense. Not after all this time. Ain't got no appeal. Lawyer said so in a letter."

"Not an appeal, Anthony. Better than that. Just you, getting out of here. How does that sound to you?"

"It *sound* great." Carter sat back and crossed his arms over his chest with a defiant laugh. "It *sound* too good to be true. This *Terrell."*

It always amazed Wolgast how much accepting the idea of commutation resembled the five stages of grief. Right now, Carter was in denial. The idea was just too much to take in.

"I know where you are. I know this place. It's the death house, Anthony. It's not the place where you belong. That's why I'm here. And not for just anyone. Not these other men. For you, Anthony."

Carter's posture relaxed. "I ain't nobody special. I knows that."

"But you are. You may not know it, but you are. You see, I need a favor from you, Anthony. This deal's a two-way street. I can get you out of here, but there's something I need for you to do for me in return."

"A favor?"

"The people I work for, Anthony, they saw what was going to happen to you in here. They know what's going to happen in June, and they don't think it's right. They don't think it's right the way you've been treated, that your lawyer has up and left you here like this. And they realized they could do something about it, and that they had a job they needed you to do instead."

Carter frowned in confusion. "Cuttin', you mean? Like that lady's lawn?"

Jesus, Wolgast thought. He actually thought he wanted him to cut the grass. "No, Anthony. Nothing like that. Something much more important." Wolgast lowered his voice again. "You see, that's the thing. What I need you to do is so important, I can't tell you what it is. Because I don't even know myself."

"How you know it's so important you don't know what it is?"

"You're a smart man, Anthony, and you're right to ask that. But you're going to have to trust me. I can get you out of here, right now. All you have to do is say you want to."

That was when Wolgast pulled the warden's envelope from his pocket and opened it. He always felt like a magician at this moment, lifting his hat to show a rabbit. With his free hand, he flattened the document against the glass for Carter to see.

"Do you know what this is? This is a writ of commutation, Anthony, signed by Governor Jenna Bush. It's dated today, right there at the bottom. You know what that means, a commutation?"

Carter was squinting at the paper. "I don't go to the needle?"

"That's right, Anthony. Not in June, not ever."

Wolgast returned the paper to his jacket pocket. Now it was bait, something to want. The other document, the one Carter would have to sign—which he *would* sign, Wolgast felt certain, when all the hemming and hawing was over; the one in which Anthony Lloyd Carter, Texas inmate 999642, handed one hundred percent of his earthly person, past, present, and future, to Project Noah—was tucked against it. By the time this second piece of paper saw daylight, the whole point was not to read it.

Carter gave a slow nod. "Always liked her. Liked her when she was first lady."

Wolgast let the error pass. "She's just one of the people I work for, Anthony. There are others. You might recognize some of the names if I told you, but I can't. And they asked me to come and see you, and tell you how much they need you."

"So I do this thing for you, and you get me out? But you can't tell me what it is?"

"That's pretty much the deal, Anthony. Say no, and I'll move on. Say yes, and you can leave Terrell tonight. It's that simple."

The door into the cage opened once more; Doyle stepped through, holding the tea. He'd done as Wolgast had asked, balancing the glass on a saucer with a long spoon beside it and a wedge of lemon and packets of sugar. He placed it all on the counter in front of Carter. Carter looked at the glass, his face gone slack. That was when Wolgast thought it. Anthony Carter wasn't guilty, at least not in the way the court had spun it. With the others, it was always clear right off what Wolgast was dealing with, that the story was the story. But not in this case. Something had happened that day in the yard; the woman had died. But there was more to it, maybe a lot more. Looking at Carter, this was the space into which Wolgast felt his mind moving, like a dark room with no windows and one locked door. This, he knew, was the place where he would find Anthony Carter—he'd find him in the dark—and when he did, Carter would show him the key that would open the door.

He spoke with his eyes locked on the glass. "I jes' want . . ." he began.

Wolgast waited for him to finish. When he didn't, Wolgast spoke again. "What do you want, Anthony? Tell me."

Carter lifted his free hand to the side of the glass and brushed the tips of his fingers against it. The glass was cool, and sweating with moisture; Carter drew his hand away and rubbed the beads of water between his thumb and fingers, slowly, his eyes focused on this gesture with complete attention. So intense was his concentration that Wolgast could feel the

man's whole mind opening up to it, taking it in. It was as if the sensation of cool water on his fingertips was the key to every mystery of his life. He raised his eyes to Wolgast's.

"I need the time . . . to figure it," he said softly. "The thing that happened. With the lady."

And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years . . .

"I can give you that time, Anthony," Wolgast said. "All the time in the world. An ocean of time."

Another moment passed. Then Carter nodded.

"What I got to do?"

Wolgast and Doyle got to George Bush Intercontinental a little after seven; the traffic was murderous, but they still arrived with ninety minutes to spare. They dumped the rental and rode the shuttle to the Continental terminal, showed their credentials to bypass security, and made their way through the crowds to the gate at the far end of the concourse.

Doyle excused himself to find something to eat; Wolgast wasn't hungry, though he knew he'd probably regret this decision later on, especially if their flight got hung up. He checked his handheld. Still nothing from Sykes. He was glad. All he wanted to do was get the hell out of Texas. Just a few other passengers were waiting at the gate; a couple of families, some students plugged into Blu-rays or iPods, a handful of men in suits talking on cell phones or tapping on laptops. Wolgast checked his watch: seven twenty-five. By now, he thought, Anthony Carter would be in the back of a van well on his way to El Reno, leaving in his wake a flurry of shredded records and a fading memory that he had ever existed at all. By the end of the day, even his federal ID number would be purged; the man named Anthony Carter would be nothing but a rumor, a vague disturbance no bigger than a ripple on the surface of the world.

Wolgast leaned back in his chair and realized how exhausted he was. It always came upon him like this, like the sudden unclenching of a fist. These trips left him physically and emotionally hollowed out, and with a nagging conscience he always had to apply some effort to squash. He was just too damn good at this, too good at finding the one gesture, the one right thing to say. A man sat in a concrete box long enough, thinking about his own death, and he boiled down to milky dust like water in a teapot forgotten on a stove; to understand him, you had to figure out what that dust was made of, what was left of him after the rest of his life, past and future, had turned to vapor. Usually it was something simple—anger or sadness or shame, or simply the need for forgiveness. A few wanted

nothing at all; all that remained was a dumb animal rage at the world and all its systems. Anthony was different: it had taken Wolgast a while to figure this out. Anthony was like a human question mark, a living, breathing expression of pure puzzlement. He actually didn't know *why* he was in Terrell. Not that he didn't understand his sentence; that was clear, and he had accepted it—as nearly all of them did, because they had to. All you had to do was read the last words of condemned men to know that. "Tell everyone I love them. I'm sorry. Okay, Warden, let's do this." Always words to that effect, and chilling to read, as Wolgast had done by the pageful. But some piece of the puzzle was still missing for Anthony Carter. Wolgast had seen it when Carter touched the side of the glass—before then, even, when he'd asked about Rachel Wood's husband and said he was sorry without saying it. Whether Carter couldn't remember what had happened that day in the Woods' yard or couldn't make his actions add up to the man he thought he was, Wolgast couldn't be certain. Either way, Anthony Carter needed to find this piece of himself before he died.

From his seat, Wolgast had a good view of the airfield through the terminal windows; the sun was going down, its last rays angling sharply off the fuselages of parked aircraft. The flight home always did him good; a few hours in the air, chasing the sunset, and he'd feel like himself again. He never drank or read or slept, just sat perfectly still, breathing the plane's bottled air and fixing his eyes out the window as the ground below him slipped into darkness. Once, on a flight back from Tallahassee, Wolgast's plane had flown around a storm front so huge it looked like an airborne mountain range, its roiling interior lit like a crèche with jags of lightning. A night in September: they were somewhere over Oklahoma, he thought, or Kansas, someplace flat and empty. It could have been farther west. The cabin was dark; nearly everyone on the plane was sleeping, including Doyle, seated beside him with a pillow tucked against his stubbled cheek. For twenty full minutes the plane had ridden the edge of the storm without so much as a jostle. In all his life, Wolgast had never seen anything like it, had never felt himself so completely in the presence of nature's immensity, its planet-sized power. The air inside the storm was a cataclysm of pure atmospheric voltage, yet here he was, sealed in silence, hurtling along with nothing but thirty thousand feet of empty air below him, watching it all as if it were a movie on a screen, a movie without sound. He waited for the pilot's drawling voice to crackle over the intercom and say something about the weather, to let the other passengers in on the show, but this never happened, and when they landed in Denver, forty minutes late, Wolgast never mentioned it, not even to Doyle.

He thought, now, that he'd like to call Lila and tell her about it. The

feeling was so strong, so clear in his mind, that it took a moment for him to realize how crazy this was, that it was just the time machine talking. The time machine: that's the name the counselor had given it. She was a friend of Lila's from the hospital whom they had visited just a couple of times, a woman in her thirties with long hair, prematurely gray, and large eyes, permanently damp with sympathy. She liked to take her shoes off at the start of each visit and sit with her legs folded under her, like a camp counselor about to lead them in song, and she spoke so quietly that Wolgast had to lean forward from the sofa to hear her. From time to time, she explained in her tiny voice, their minds would play tricks on them. It wasn't a warning, the way she said it; she was simply stating a fact. He and Lila might do something or see something and have a strong feeling from the past. They might, for instance, find themselves standing in the checkout line of the grocery with a packet of diapers in their cart, or tiptoeing past Eva's room, as if she were asleep. Those would be the hardest moments, the woman explained, because they'd have to relive their loss all over again; but as the months passed, she assured them, this would happen less and less.

The thing was, these moments weren't hard for Wolgast. They still happened to him every now and then, even three years after the fact, and when they did, he didn't mind at all: far from it. They were unexpected presents his mind could give him. But it was different for Lila, he knew.

"Agent Wolgast?"

He turned in his chair. The simple gray suit, the inexpensive but comfortable oxford shoes, the blandly forgettable tie: Wolgast might have been looking in a mirror. But the face was new to him.

He rose and reached into his pocket to show his ID. "That's me."

"Special Agent Williams, Houston field office." They shook. "I'm afraid you won't be taking this flight after all. I've got a car outside for you."

"Is there a message?"

Williams drew an envelope from his pocket. "I think this is probably what you're looking for."

Wolgast accepted the envelope. Inside was a fax. He sat and read, then read it again. He was still reading when Doyle returned, sipping from a straw and carrying a bag from Taco Bell.

Wolgast lifted his gaze to Williams. "Give us a second, will you?"

Williams moved off down the concourse.

"What is it?" Doyle said quietly. "What's wrong?"

Wolgast shook his head. He passed the fax to Doyle.

"Sweet Jesus, Phil. It's a civilian."