

LOST
MEMORY
of SKIN

RUSSELL BANKS



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CHAPTER ONE

IT ISN'T LIKE THE KID IS LOCALLY FAMOUS for doing a good or a bad thing and even if people knew his real name it wouldn't change how they treat him unless they looked it up online which is not something he wants to encourage. He himself like most of the men living under the Causeway is legally prohibited from going online but nonetheless one afternoon biking back from work at the Mirador he strolls into the branch library down on Regis Road like he has every legal right to be there.

The Kid isn't sure how to get this done. He's never been inside a library before. The librarian is a fizzy lady—ginger-colored hair glowing around her head like a bug light, pink lipstick, freckles—wearing a floral print blouse and khaki slacks. She's a few inches taller than the Kid, a small person above the waist but wide in the hips like she'd be hard to tip over. The sign on the counter in front of her says REFERENCE LIBRARIAN, GLORIA . . . something—the Kid is too nervous to register her last name. She smiles without showing her teeth and asks if she can help him.

Yeah. I mean, I guess so. I dunno, actually.

What are you looking for?

You're like the reference lady, right?

Right. Do you need to look up something in particular?

The air-conditioning is cranked and the place feels about ten degrees

cooler now than it did when the Kid came through the door and he suddenly realizes he's shivering. But the Kid's not cold, he's scared. He's pretty sure he shouldn't be inside a public library even though he can't remember there being any rules specifically against entering one as long as he's not loitering and it's not a school library and there's no playground or school nearby. At least none that he's aware of. You can never be sure though. Playgrounds and schools are pretty much lurking everywhere. And children and teenagers probably come in here all the time this late in the day to pretend they're doing homework or just to hang out.

He looks around the large fluorescent-lit room, scans the long rows of floor-to-ceiling book-lined shelves—it's like a huge supermarket with nothing on the shelves but books. It smells like paper and glue, a little moldy and damp. Except for a geeky-looking black guy with glasses and a huge Adam's apple and big wind-catching ears sitting at a table with half-a-dozen thick books and no pictures opened in front of him like he's trying to look up his ancestors there's no other customers in the library.

A customer—that's what he is. He's not here to ask this lady for a job or looking to rent an apartment from her and he's not pan-handling her and he's for sure not going to hit on her—she's way too old, probably forty or fifty at least and pretty low on the hotness scale. No, the Kid's a legitimate legal customer who's strolled into the library to get some information because libraries are where the information is.

So why is he shaking and his arms all covered with goose bumps like he's standing naked inside a meat locker? It's not just because he's never actually been inside a library before even when he was in high school and it was sort of required. He's shivering because he's afraid of the answer to the question that drove him here even though he already knows it.

Listen, can I ask you something? It's kinda personal, I guess.

Of course.

Well, see, I live out in the north end and the people in my neighborhood, my neighbors, they're all like telling me that there might be like a convicted sex offender living there. In the neighborhood. And they tell me that you can just go online to this site that tells you where he's living and all and they asked me if I'd check it out for them. For the neighborhood. Is it true?

Is what true?

You know, that you can just like go online and it'll tell you where the sex offender lives even if you don't know his name or anything.

*Well, let's go see, she says like he asked her what's the capital of Vermont and leads the Kid across the room to a long table where six computers are lined up side by side and no one is using them. She sits down in front of one and does a quick Google search under convicted sex offenders and up pops the National Sex Offender Registry which links straight to www.familywatchdog.us. The Kid stands at a forward tilt behind her shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He thinks he should run now, get out of here fast before she clicks again but something he can't resist, something he knows is coming that is both scary and familiar keeps him staring over the librarian's shoulder at the screen the same way he used to get held to the screen when cruising pornography sites. The librarian clicks *find offenders* and then on the new menu hits *by location* and another menu jumps up and asks for the address.*

You're from Calusa, right? What's your neighborhood's zip code?

It's . . . ah . . . 33135.

Any particular street you want to look up?

He gives her the name of the street where his mother lives and he used to live and she types it in and hits *search*. A pale green map of his street and the surrounding twenty or so blocks appears on the screen. Small red, green, and orange squares are scattered across the neighborhood like bits of confetti.

Any particular block?

The Kid reaches down to the screen and touches the map on the block where he lived his entire life until he enlisted in the army and

where he lived again after he was discharged. A red piece of confetti covers his mother's bungalow and the backyard where he pitched his tent and built Iggy the iguana's outdoor cage.

The librarian clicks onto the tiny square and suddenly the Kid is looking at his mug shot—his forlorn bewildered face—and he feels all over again the shame and humiliation of the night he was booked. There's his full name, first, last, and middle, date of birth, height, weight, his race, color of his eyes and hair, and the details of his crime and conviction.

Slowly the librarian turns in her chair and looks up at the Kid's real face, then back at the computerized version.

That's . . . you. Isn't it?

I gotta go, he whispers. *I gotta leave*. He backs away from the woman who appears both stunned and saddened but not at all afraid which surprises him and for a few seconds he considers trying to explain how his face and his description and criminal record got there on the computer screen. But there's no way he can explain it to someone like her, a normal person, a lady reference librarian who helps people look up the whereabouts and crimes of people like him.

Wait. Don't leave.

I gotta go. I'm sorry. No kidding, I'm really sorry.

Don't be sorry.

No, I'm prob'ly not even supposed to be here, he says. *In the library, I mean*. He turns and walks stiff-legged away and then as he nears the door he breaks into a run and the Kid doesn't stop running until he's back up on his bike heading for the Causeway.

LIKE EVERYONE OVER A CERTAIN AGE THE KID has a name naturally but none of his neighbors under the Causeway knows it and he has no intention of giving it out unless the alternative is getting beat up or cut by one of the more occasionally violent wing-nuts living down there—although violence is not really their thing or why they're down there. Or unless he's required by law to

give his full legal name which happens often enough to make the Kid stash his ID in his right sneaker where he can snatch and deliver it quickly if he needs to prove his age to buy booze or cigarettes or if a cop or an officer of the court or a social worker calls for it. Everyone else—the men who live alongside him under the Causeway and the waiters and waitresses and the other busboys he works with at the Mirador and even his boss Dario who because he hands out the paychecks actually does know his real name—everyone else calls him Kid and refers to him in his absence as the Kid.

I've been meaning to ask, what's he doing down here? Has the fellow a name?

"Meanin' to ask." That's funny. What're you doin down here? "Fellow."

Same as you, I assume.

Who the fuck you talkin 'bout anyhow?

The little white guy with the bike. Lives in the tent with the lizard.

Ask him yourself.

Most of the people he knew when he was a boy and in high school know the Kid by his real name and the guys he went through basic training with and his mother of course and some of her friends, they know it. But he hasn't spoken to any of them not even his mother in over a year and whenever he accidentally on the street spots somebody he once knew slightly from school or from hanging out at the mall in the old days or his job at the light store before he enlisted in the army which happens every now and then even though he never visits his old neighborhood anymore he stares straight ahead and keeps pedaling or if on foot cuts across the street or just turns on his heels and walks the other way.

No one he knew before wants to meet up with him anyhow so when they recognize him they do the same thing—turn around and walk the other way or check out the shoes in a Payless window or if there's no other way to avoid eye contact cover their face with a cap brim or sunglasses or even with their hands. In that sense things

aren't much different now than they've always been. The way he sees it people have been avoiding him all his life except for the people he's become acquainted with in the past year. Not counting those who work for the state and have read his file as part of their job the men under the Causeway are in a sense the Kid's new and true friends and know nothing whatsoever about his private or public past and therefore do not noticeably avoid him and are okay with calling him Kid. It's superficial but it's what he's always preferred and maybe needs—strictly enforced surface relations with people—and with his buzz cut and thin pointed nose and nub of a chin and his big ears and being short and skinny as a jockey although pretty muscular if he says so himself it's what he looks like anyhow: a kid.

So what's your name, kid?

Dude, that is what it is. Thankyouverymuch. Good-bye.

What, like the Sundance Kid? Captain Kydd? The Cisco Kid? Billy the Kid?

Yeah, sure, all those guys. Who the fuck're you?

The Kid turns away and locks his bike to the concrete pillar next to his pup tent. The bike is an old dented Raleigh three-speed that he spotted unlocked in an alley between Rafer and Island Drive on his way to work one day and when he came back that evening it was still there. The bike was dark green and had a wire basket in front and a wide rack over the rear fender and no lock. He figured it was a rental abandoned by a drunk tourist who forgot where he left it or a throwaway or maybe a Chinese food delivery bike the delivery guy was too lazy to lock. He grabbed it and rode it back to the Causeway and later took it apart and spray painted it black just in case and bought a black carbon steel cable-lock for it.

Leashed to a cinder block by a somewhat longer link-chain is the Kid's iguana. Its name is Iggy which the Kid now thinks is sort of dumb but he was only ten when his mother presented him with the iguana and the singer Iggy Pop for some reason was the first thing that came into his head and eventually the iguana and its name

became one the way he and his name Kid have become one and it was too late by then to change it. When it was a baby it was only eight or ten inches long and quick and bright green and cute. Almost decorative. Twelve years later it's the length and weight of a full-grown alligator—six feet long head to tail and twenty-seven pounds—and no longer cute. Definitely not decorative. Its thick muscular body is covered with dark gray scales. A raised jagged dorsal fin runs from its head along its back and down the long tail. It's a beast straight from the age of dinosaurs but to the Kid its appearance is as normal as his mother's. Dewlaps drape in soft fans from its boney jaw and there are thin fringes of flesh on its clawed toes that stiffen and rise as if saluting him when the Kid approaches. It wears its eardrums on the outside of its head behind and below the eyes. On top of its head is a primitive third eye—a gray waferlike lens that keeps a lookout for overhead predators which are large birds mainly. According to some experts the third eye tracks the sun and functions as a guidance system. Early on the Kid made a systematic online study of iguanas. He learned everything he could about the creature's body, its needs and desires, habits, fears, strengths and weaknesses. In school he never got a grade higher than a C- but if iguana had been a subject he would have received an A+. Iggy was the only creature other than himself that he had ever been obliged to care for and he decided to do it the way he wished someone had cared for him—as if the iguana were a human child and he were its parent.

He fed it a strictly vegetarian diet—bell peppers, okra, squash, and plenty of leafy greens and tropical fruits like papaya, mangoes, and melons—taking care to avoid vegetables known to be toxic to iguanas like potatoes and tomatoes and fruits with pits like plums and apricots. In the beginning he talked to it in his few words of junior high school Spanish because it was originally from Mexico but after a while when he got nowhere with Spanish he switched to English and still got nowhere. Eventually he stopped talking to the iguana altogether because he came to enjoy and trust the silence

between them as if the two of them were buddies in an old-time silent movie. Mostly they spent a lot of time just staring at each other and making faces.

At first he kept it in his bedroom in a forty-gallon glass aquarium furnished with mossy rocks and coconut fiber and gravel. But iguanas grow fast and as it grew he had to buy bigger and bigger aquariums. Before long there were no pet store aquariums large enough. Also iguanas are arboreal and are happiest when they think they're in a tree. So after about two years when Iggy was a teenager the Kid pushed all the furniture in his room to one side and built a floor-to-ceiling chicken-wire cage that filled the other half of the room. He covered the floor of the cage with crushed bark and installed the trunk and leafless branches of a dead lemon tree he found at a construction site. He kept the temperature constant with a heat lamp and controlled the humidity with a small humidifier. It was Iggy's own private jungle.

Lawrence. Larry.

Larry what?

Somerset.

Larry Somerset. Lawrence Somerset. Rings a bell. You must've been famous once. Like in the news.

I had my fifteen minutes.

Yeah, tell me about it sometime. I got to feed my man here.

The Kid ducks into his tent and rummages through a plastic tub for the bag of wilted spinach and the overripe cantaloupe he foraged yesterday from the Dumpster behind the Whole Foods store on Bayfront Street. He wonders about this new guy. Except for the wrinkled pale gray suit and stained dress shirt he looks like another of the two dozen or so middle-aged and older homeless weirdos who've come to a final stop under the Causeway and like the others he acts as if everyone down here belongs to the same club and thinks the Kid in spite of his youth is a member too. He'll learn differently before long. The Kid is not a member of any club. At

least not willingly. Other people can put him in this category or that and say he's one of those or these but in the Kid's mind he's a one-and-only one of a kind. A loner. That's what kind he is. And even among loners he's unique. Singular. Solo-fucking-mee-o.

The man named Larry Somerset is a little taller than the rest and soft in the face and belly like he's spent his life sitting in a padded chair signing official documents and giving orders to underlings. He wears a plain gold wedding ring. The Kid notices it at first glance because a wedding ring is unusual down here and the guy has a black brush of a goatee that looks dyed and long graying hair combed straight back to where it curls over the dirty collar of his shirt. The Kid is sure he's never met him before but something about the guy is familiar especially the name like he maybe read it in the *Calusa Times-Union*.

It's obvious even with his floppy wide-cuffed trousers that the guy's got a TrackerPAL GPS clamped to his right ankle. The Kid wonders if it's the same as his or if it's one of those cool new units he's heard about with the built-in cell phone that's connected to a monitoring center 24/7 and even pokes your caseworker's beeper if you forget to recharge your battery so the caseworker can phone in to make sure you haven't died. It's like being followed around by a CIA drone with a heat-seeking missile ready to fire. The new style TrackerPAL with the cell phone attachment intrigues the Kid simply because he's into the technology of surveillance but no way he wants an upgrade. The Kid's anklet is more like a simple antitheft tracking device for a stolen car that at least lets him piss in privacy.

The Kid sits down on his folding canvas camp-chair in front of his tent and lights his first cigarette since leaving work and right on schedule up under the Causeway the motor for the generator gasps and coughs and after a few seconds settles into a clattering diesel chug. Plato the Greek owns the generator and buys the fuel for it and runs it every evening from seven till nine and sometimes later depending on business. He has it wired to a twelve-outlet surge protector and

the residents pay him a dollar each to recharge their cell phone if they have one and their ankle battery. Which they are required to do every forty-eight hours or more depending on the model or else in an office somewhere on the mainland a beeper will go off and in a few hours you'll see someone's caseworker or parole officer prowling through the camp looking for a guy he calls his client but who in actuality is his legal electronic prisoner and is probably only in his squat sleeping off a drunk or nodding off without having remembered to charge his now very dead battery. Sometimes though it's only a resident who has fallen into despair from living down here—a man with no job who's become a scavenger supporting himself by wandering the city with a shopping cart collecting and redeeming cans and bottles—and after months and even years of it opts for three hots and a cot because if you refuse to charge the battery that powers your electronic ankle you violate a key term of your parole and back you go to prison. Voluntary incarceration.

Outside the tent Larry Somerset takes a few cautious steps closer to the iguana and gives it a once-over. He says that he's not seen an iguana this large before and has to admire the Kid's use of it to guard his home and property. *Better than a pit bull*, he says. *Certainly uglier than a pit bull*.

Iggy's chain-link leash is long enough to let him lie in the front entry of the tent but still able to scramble around to the back if someone tries sneaking in that way. The iguana looks lethargic and slow but they're often seen streaking across golf course fairways and putting greens at astonishing speed—low to the ground on short legs but fast as a greyhound. The eyes of the iguana are round and large as marbles and watchful and like its scales dry and cold. It stares motionless at Larry—eyelids sliding slowly up and down like thin scrim. Every few seconds its forked tongue slips from between its jaws and flicks the air as if tasting it for flavor, passes quickly in front of its nostrils to read the odor of the air and withdraws. When the iguana swallows, its dewlaps loosely flap.