

STEEL WATERS

by

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(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

This is the story of the Waters family, and how it drifted apart. It is a story about being haunted by the past, and the struggle to let go of it. It is a story about facing fear.

INDEX WORDS: Steel, Rachel, Brian, Evelyn, John, Waters, Family, Domestic, Blue, Fire, Ice, Judgment

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B.A., University of Georgia, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005

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December 2005

DEDICATION

For Heather King, and the wish that we could have been closer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks go out to: God, for seeing me through; Mom and Dad, for showing me a better way; my creative writing mentors Reginald McKnight, Philip Lee Williams, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Adam Davies for all their support, encouragement, and (in some cases!) boundless patience over the last four years; Jim and Diane Hargreaves for taking in a stray kid and never giving up on him; Steven and Keith Mlynarski for their ironclad friendship through times good and bad; Rani Crosby for her love and understanding both together and apart; my aunts Penny Adams and Debbie Carter, for sheltering us from the wind; Mr. Bartz, for the theatrical reading; Rita Loadholt and the entire 1994-97 Roswell First Baptist Church Orchestra for coming to my rescue; Joyce Whaley, Ann Lancaster, and the Stinson and Hesse families for showing me a way out; the entire serving and cook staff at the Roswell International House of Pancakes Restaurant for keeping me awake and nourished morning and night; the Department of English at the University of Georgia; Linda Munson and Dr. Michael Tierce of Kennesaw State University; Ellen Liming of Roswell High School (I've never forgotten you); and all the other friends and teachers I met along the way who believed in me.

The following organizations provided invaluable information during the writing of this thesis: the Department of Family and Children Services, the Brain Injury Association of America, the National Women's Health Information Center, the Worldwide Cluster Headache Support Group, Walter Ingram of the Grady Hospital Burn Unit, and MARTA.

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Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favour fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

—Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice”

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. (2 Peter 3:10, KJV)

There's a slow, slow train comin' up around the bend.

—Bob Dylan, “Slow Train”

CHAPTER 1

CLARITY

The house slept. Rachel Waters stood in the darkness with one ear to the door, listening. From her parents' bedroom across the hall, she heard only the drone of the fan and the complaint of old bedsprings as a body turned. Further down the hall, from the kitchen, the refrigerator's low hum, the flickering buzz of the fluorescent light over the kitchen sink. From Brian's room, brooding silence.

The soft breeze through the open window urged her, bringing with it the smells of waning summer: damp earth and rotting wood, pine needle and honeysuckle, freshly-mown grass and creek water. Crickets chirped in frenzied chorus, and the muddy creek behind the house murmured in its winding journey over rock and under sewage pipe, bearing soda cans and broken glass to larger, more forgiving waters.

She had planned this carefully. They would hear for sure if she tried to leave through the heavy front door and the squeaky screen beyond it. She moved with careful deliberation. It would not do to be caught now. She slung the worn, hunter green Jansport backpack containing some clothes and a hairbrush over her shoulder and closed the window almost all the way, leaving a small space for the strip of cardboard she had placed there. She doubted she would be back for her things, but it never hurt to plan ahead. Only to be here.

The skin still screamed along her arms, shoulders, back, and thighs. She touched one hand to her left eye, where an angry blotch of purple bloomed, then pulled it back with a wince. She ran her other hand through the brown ringlets of her errant curls and gathered them in a bunch at the back of her neck, taming them with a red rubber band. She put the crooked glasses on. Cracks marched over the left lens in marauding lines, but that was all right. She could see well enough. On the right side at least, it was clear.

Inhaling deeply of the night air, Rachel looked overhead at the glitter of stars high above the towering pines that guarded the house. A thin sliver of moon had just started the last half of its journey across the cloudless western sky. The Timex Indiglo watch at her wrist announced one-fifteen. Through the trees she caught the green flicker of fireflies: *Go*.

She started walking. As she emerged from the darkness at the side of the house, a muffled curse escaped her as she nearly tripped over the gardening rake Brian had left half-hidden in the bushes. Its prongs were freshly blackened from the asphalt. He was getting careless. At least it was the last time she'd have to trip over *that* damn thing.

Round islands of orange light from the arc sodium streetlamps floated in the dark ahead of her, lighting her way down Argonne Walk. On the pavement of the cul-de-sac, she could faintly make out the bizarre network of sweeping white lines that Brian had made a few hours before. If he kept it up, judging by how visible the marks were even in this light, he'd be dealing with John Waters, who shared his wife's almost fanatical desire to keep under the landlord's radar. And this time, Rachel wouldn't be there to cover for her little brother. She shook her head in an effort to banish everything but the task in front

of her, pausing to adjust her pack straps so they wouldn't run down the long red avenues of pain on her shoulders. She stole a deep breath and set out.

At the corner, she turned right onto the busier main road that ran alongside her subdivision, Argonne Forest. The way now was wider and better lit, but there was greater risk of some dutiful cop driving past and stopping her. He would ask questions. He might try to take her back. It would not do to go back there and face that. She kept to the edges of neighboring front yards when she could, off the sidewalk but close enough to see by. She had worn dark clothes to blend easier with the shadows. It never hurt to plan ahead.

The city slept. No cars came. The only thing that followed her was the pale claw of the moon overhead. She walked purposefully, but with a certain, barely-contained urgency. Only one place left to go now.

The only thing that comforted her in her flight was her new age, which had been hers for only the last two weeks. She tested it aloud, the three syllables rolling off her tongue with a cadence that was almost incantatory: "Seventeen." The word hummed with power in the air before her.

Why don't you just leave, Rachel? Ashley had whispered in third-period Algebra the week before, when Rachel had confided that she'd begun to hide some of her \$5.15 an hour earnings under her mattress. *At seventeen, your parents can't declare you a runaway.*

She hadn't answered, but looked away, up at the blackboard where arcane numbers and formulae floated like plankton in a sea of mystery. Because she had been afraid, was why. She'd never been away from home for more than a few days, away from her family. The prospect had always been tempting, bearing the possibility that things

could be different. But questions always rose up all about her like walls. What would she do with no money? Who would take her in? Her nearest relatives were half a state away, and had their own problems. And who would look after Brian?

But three hours ago, those questions had fallen silent, and her courage had come unbidden to her at last, suddenly there in that room beside her like an old, forgotten friend. It had come slowly at first, as she struggled to get away from Evelyn's vise-like hands, as she heard the thin hiss of leather through belt loop that always meant pain would soon follow, a sound that she could hear even in her dreams. But it grew stronger as she kicked and pushed in vain at her father as he grimly rained down blows on her exposed skin with the brown leather belt engraved with white seagulls. They had ignored her screams, her pleas for them to stop, that she hadn't done anything, that she'd only been trying to save a little money.

She had fought Evelyn with every ounce of strength she had, and managed to slip free from her sweaty grip a few times, but Evelyn outweighed Rachel by nearly two hundred pounds. Part of her had said to lie down and wait it out, that it would be over soon, and she could go back to her room, to her books and her clarinet, and life could go on. But as her father screamed at her mother to *hold* her for Chrissakes, hold her down, and as her left lens cracked under the hammer of her mother's backhand and the impact swam in blue sparks before her eyes, as the belt of white seagulls set her skin afire, another part of her spoke up just then, a part of her alien and frightening, familiar but menacing, a voice that had somehow always been there but never before spoken. That voice told her to put her trust in it, to let it take things from here.

It ordered her to make her body go limp, to cease struggling, but it made her eyes a weapon, hardened them into a raptor's gaze of steel will.

Rachel looked her mother in the eyes then, and for a moment those vise-grip hands had gone slack. Evelyn had actually recoiled, and something had flickered momentarily in her eyes then. Fear. And beneath that: recognition.

“Let go of me, mother,” Rachel said quietly. And Evelyn had pulled her hands back quickly, as though they'd been burned. Then Rachel had looked at her father, turning the full terrible force of her gaze on him, and he had froze, his right arm poised above her in mid-strike, the belt hanging in the air like a snake with all the fight gone out of it. “Don't hit me anymore, Daddy.” He had stared at her then, mouth agape, and the room had seemed suddenly to grow colder, the fight to have fled. Time hung suspended between the three of them. Her father's eyes flickered uncertainly to Evelyn, and she must have given him some silent signal, because he'd released a gusting sigh, his broad former college football shoulders had slumped, and once more the belt slid through the loops like a dismissed servant.

“Don't disobey your mother again, girl,” was all he could muster. But she had heard no conviction in his voice.

“We're a family, Rachel,” said Evelyn soberly. “We have to work together. You know that, don't you? Your money helps this family. Don't be so selfish.” She'd appraised her daughter's face then, and for a moment Rachel thought she saw something like remorse flicker in Evelyn's eyes. She dismissed it as a trick of the light. “Get some ice on that,” she'd said quietly. “No school tomorrow. We'll see about new ones. Now get out of my sight.”

Rachel could have made a hundred retorts: was Evelyn losing her talent for hitting without leaving a mark? What if she went to school anyway? What would her teachers think? Her guidance counselor? Or, if she'd been really mental, what would DFACS think? Should she run down to the closest pay phone and give them a call? But she wasn't crazy, not yet, and she wasn't stupid. If talking did any good, she reasoned, they'd have stopped hitting her years ago. The time for talking was over. It was time to act.

She'd fled to her room then, closing the door behind her softly. It was still there, in her mind. *Good girl*, it said. *But what are you going to do now?*

I don't know. From her broken left lens, half the world had seemed cracked. In the mirror had been a girl she didn't recognize. The girl turned to one side and surveyed critically the long red marks along her back and shoulders, then looked up at Rachel, staring back with an accusing bruise already darkening under her left eye. The girl's features had a grim set. Rachel thought she had seen on that face in the mirror something she'd never seen before. It came to her now, as she walked down the dark street just beyond reach of the weak orange light. It had been the look of resolve.

From its battered, blue velvet-lined case she had taken out her clarinet and set her lips to the reed, giving it no life from her lungs but instead letting it fill her mind with images of ancient trees and silver streams and clear, lilting music, music beyond her skill to make but letting her fingers imagine the notes nonetheless. It was the Rachel Waters relaxation technique: three minutes to inner clarity or your money back. The deep, regulated breathing calmed her nerves and steeled her will for what she realized she must now do.

She waited for the routine sounds from across the hall: the rattle of blood pressure and sleep apnea pills at her father's nightstand, the click of the bedside lamp and the rustle of bed sheets, the whirring motor of the fan they slept to, then waited another half hour until sleep finally settled over the house. She had packed two tee-shirts, an extra pair of jeans, some undergarments, and a hair brush. Then she had crept softly to Brian's room, which was next to hers, to say goodbye. She wished she could have taken him with her. He needed someone to push him, to remind him of his worth. She sighed. He would just have to find his own way without her. Some things had to be left to God.

Rachel looked up to discover she was already nearly at her destination, five miles away from Argonne Forest. Rising up out of the subdued orange glow ahead of her, she could see the black lettering of Chris's apartment complex: Shadows Glen. The gray rooftops of those tightly clustered buildings had never looked so inviting. She wore a grim face, but held her head high. She passed the clubhouse, where the sliver of moonlight wavered on the black surface of the pool, walked far back from the main road into the gloom of Shadows Glen, until she came to building forty-two. At apartment B she stopped and took a moment to collect herself.

She removed her glasses and inspected them with a critical eye. The world became a dark haze of only the suggestions of shapes. She would definitely need new ones, and only one crumpled ten dollar bill in her jeans pocket. She gave a long, tired sigh, and it seemed that with that sigh she almost expelled the memories of the last five miles. Then, somewhere far back in her mind, that gently crooning voice, which had been silent until now, regained some of its old strength: *You don't really want to do this, do you Rachel? Look at how silly you're being, standing before the door of a boy you hardly*

know. You're being a silly little girl. Go back home now. Everything will be better. They only do that because they love you, and because you're a selfish, willful little girl. You know that, don't you?

But that other voice overwhelmed the former like a tidal wave. You know it will never be better, Rachel. If you go back there, you're dead already. Dead at seventeen. You go back now, they win. Because you'll never leave again. She'll cry and she'll beg and she'll bargain, but you know it isn't real. Maybe not tomorrow, or next week, or next month, but eventually, Rachel, you'll be under that belt again. And you'll have more than bruises and broken glasses to deal with. She'll slowly bleed the life from you, until one day you'll wake up and you'll be forty and wondering where the hell your life went. Do it, Rachel. Knock on the door.

Slowly, she raised her hand to the door of apartment 42-B and knocked timidly. There was no sound from within. This was foolish. She made to turn around. She shook her head to clear it, but the voices didn't leave. What was she doing? Was she really ready to leave her family, right here and now, at the door of this boy she'd only been dating a few months? But there was no one else. Her school counselor, the church, neither had been any help. They had tried to talk to her parents, gotten a financial advisor to talk to them free of charge, had even gotten them to go to family counseling, and they'd been all smiles and nods, and for a while things had even looked like they might get better, but every week Rachel still gave over her entire paycheck to Evelyn, for The Good of the Family, she said. And even though Chris hadn't minded paying for their dates, Rachel had minded. With every paycheck that went to her mother, a part of Rachel went with it, a part of her that had sweated over pots of frying grease and heat lamps,

smiled disingenuously at customers, mopped floors and hauled out trash. A part of her she had tried to keep alive in a white envelope under her mattress. A part of her that had been trying for two years, since she'd been old enough to get a work permit, to feel more than worthless, but always seemed to come back to it on the first and third Fridays of every month.

Okay. So: she wasn't much good at Algebra, she dropped her baton more than twirled it at majorette practice, her clarinet playing sounded more like an agitated goose than music, and she had only a crumpled-up ten dollar bill to her name. But she'd been told she had a lovely singing voice, and she was *seventeen*. And worth something. Her whole life was in front of her. She could go back to the familiar and cower, or face the unknown and stare it down.

In that instant, as if blue lighting had split the clouds in her mind and showed her the way through a dark landscape, she saw everything with perfect clarity.

She knocked again, louder this time: three sharp raps. And waited. A minute later, she heard an approach from within. Light appeared under the door: a warm, yellow, inviting light that flooded forth as the door swung open into a spartan but well-kept apartment. A young man with sleep-tossed hair and smelling faintly of Comet and axle grease stood illuminated in its glow. Chris.

Rachel collapsed into his arms, sobbing.

CHAPTER 2

FRICTION

Night crept over Argonne Forest. The sun had retired an hour ago, stealing under a blanket of red and orange coals that glimmered like a smith's forge at the end of a long workday. Brian raked the asphalt in front of the house in broad, dramatic circles and figure eights. His brown hair clung in sweat-matted clumps to his forehead. Long blue comet tails of sparks trailed the blackened red prongs of the rake. It made a ghastly scraping noise that left claw marks on the pavement and probably set the whole neighborhood's teeth on edge, but it made the grandest nighttime show he'd ever seen. The only thing that came close was the sparkler he'd held on New Year's Eve two years ago, when he'd waved it about in blue and yellow parabolas of fire, until his father had caught him. He'd forbidden Brian to ever light another sparkler as long as he lived under his roof.

Sure, dad. But why? They're not dangerous. They don't explode or anything. They just burn steady, like a candle.

Not dangerous? John Waters had considered a moment, holding some private debate with himself. *I guess I never told you how this happened.*

He'd removed his work shirt then, and Brian's eyes had widened as they'd roved over his father's exposed chest, really noticing for the first time the rippling patchwork of

pink scar tissue over most of his left side, beginning at his left nipple and running down to his left love handle.

This was from a sparkler, son. On New Year's. When I was ten. Now don't let me catch you with one again.

After that, Brian became aware for the first time how strangely his father acted around fire. The following winter, when Brian's family had house-sat for two weeks at a coworker's lakeside cabin two hours' drive north, a bored Brian had set the massive living room fireplace to a roaring blaze with a pair of bellows. His father had pulled him back from the fire more forcefully than was probably necessary, and given him a healthy swat on the bottom for good measure. He could not recall a time when his father had been more furious with him. As the flames slowly died down to a safer height, Brian's father had screamed at him for five minutes about the dangers of fire, about third-degree burns and unimaginable suffering, until he was finally able to bring himself, like the flames, under control. Then he had gone to sit down in the next room, and Brian had stolen sidelong glances at him from the book he'd been reading on the couch, and what he had seen had shaken him badly. His father had been rubbing his left side in long sweeps of his right hand that reminded Brian of someone applying a lotion, or a salve. And he wore a distant expression that Brian had never seen before, one that would trouble him for many years after. His eyes had been fixed on a point far away, concentrating intensely on something only he could see. His mouth had been twitching to one side, as if caught on a fishhook, and his breathing had been shallow and carefully controlled. He had the intense, slightly crazed look of a man engaged in some private ritual, an exercise of

consuming importance. It was not until later that Brian realized that the look on his father's face had been one of a man reliving some terrible, long-buried memory.

He'd fretted for awhile after that, because he wasn't used to seeing his father afraid of anything. John Waters might have been short and squat and resembled an old bullfrog with his usually impassive face, thick bifocals and large Adam's apple that bobbed up and down when he was agitated, but he was powerfully built and had a keen intellect and a fondness for wise sayings, and, when his head wasn't splitting under the axe of the cluster headaches he sometimes got, the patience of stone, endeavoring to answer with seriousness even Brian's most outlandish questions about the world and the nature of life. It was hard to imagine that his father might actually beincible.

Nevertheless, Brian continued to nurture, privately, his fascination with fire. Only a few weeks before had Brian discovered the glorious and deadly beauty of friction, the applying of one force against another to create energy in the form of heat. He exulted in the result of his eleven-year-old's force pushed against the ground, which answered back with its own secret force. It was immensely gratifying to have something so large and eternal as the earth itself respond with such spectacular earnestness and beauty to a little boy. It was a relationship he had grown not only to love, but also to respect. He had seen how fire could be beautiful, but also how it could be deadly. He knew the limits to which it could be pushed. It was a relationship he had as yet been unable to find with another living thing. He suspected he never would. Human beings lived and died so quickly, to his mind, springing up like grass only to be mown down at their height. Brian wanted to reach higher and higher, to burn with a fierceness and intensity as hot as the enormous fire he had conjured forth at the cabin last year with his own two little boy's hands. He

had commanded those flames like a pyromancer in one of his stories, just as he commanded the pavement at his feet now. The intensity of those fire trails emanating from the rake's teeth like dragon's breath depended solely upon the amount of force he exerted. An equal and opposite reaction.

Something about the idea resonated strangely in him, and stirred faint, broken images of a recurring dream that he'd been having as far back as he could remember. Dark images of flickering blue fire and the approach of something huge and threatening, something made of steel. But always he would wake before it reached him. Some nights when the dream was particularly vivid, he'd awake clutching the sides of his bed, his heart thundering as the rumble and the throbbing hum slowly died, a light sheen of cold sweat on his naked skin.

But he never told anyone about the dreams, not even Rachel. It was something private, like his nighttime sessions raking the street. If it stayed inside him, it could not be used against him. His father's fear of fire had taught him this. Because he knew John Waters feared fire, it was something that might be used against him, to hurt him. He suspected this fear was not merely physical, but much deeper. He thought it might be something wild and irrational, more like outright terror. But the knowledge of this he kept to himself, like the knowledge of what his mother feared most. It was like the world he made in his notebooks. Private. Untouchable. His own.

Sometimes he told Rachel some of the stories he had written down in his notebooks, stories about magic and wizards and dragons, about deeds good and evil, but that was not the same thing. The stories he made could not be used to hurt him. They were make-believe, with made-up characters, and they were beautiful, because they had

begun as nothingness and been forged by his will into something good. Not only that, but it made him *feel* good to tell them to Rachel. His stories gave her joy, made her smile and laugh, and there was no harm in that. She smiled so rarely, and she had such a beautiful smile, one that was mirrored in eyes the same rich brown as her wild curls. And they made her forget for a time that she was a slave. They never discussed this openly, but he suspected she knew it already. It was something like the air they breathed, never acknowledged but there between them nonetheless, a constant companion.

Rachel came out on the porch then as if she could hear his thoughts. With a distinctly unRachel-like grimace, she steeled her ears against the scrape of rake against asphalt.

“Come inside now and wash up. Mom and Dad called and they’re on their way home.”

“So?” *SCRAAAAAAAAAPE.*

“Must you do that? You know you’re tearing up the street and dad’ll make those marks on the street look like nothing next to the ones on your ass.”

“But I like it.”

“Dad whooping your ass?”

“No. The sparks it makes.”

“Well you’ve made enough for ten Fourth of Julys. Come in now and wash off that grime.”

“I like the grime.”

“Do you like chicken more?”

Pause. “Why didn’t you say so the first time?”

“I like to torture you. It’s my stocking trade.”

“Your *stock in trade*.”

“Whatever you say.”

He went in then and the water from the old pipes gurgled reluctantly into the rusted throat of the shower head. Within minutes, he had filled the bathroom with a cloud of steam so thick he could not see himself in the mirror. Just the way he liked it. He did not like to stare into the gray eyes that swam behind his fishbowl glasses, or dwell on how much the acne-ravaged face in the mirror resembled the surface of a volcanic planet, or how the coarse brown wave of his hair refused to be tamed by any comb, hanging stubbornly in his eyes like a curtain. When he emerged from the cloud of shower steam, the smell of Kentucky Fried Chicken greeted him. His stomach growled.

He ate three drumsticks, a breast, and two biscuits, which he slathered in honey and butter. He washed it all down with two glasses of sweetened tea. Rachel somehow heroically managed two whole drumsticks, then retired to her room and her clarinet. Given Rachel’s tendency to miss high notes, it was a good thing he’d asked Mom to buy some earplugs the week before. He was eager to get back to his room and learn the outcome of the Battle of the Pelennor Fields.

He lost himself in the story, and was roused some time later from the pages by loud voices from down the hall. The clock on his bedside table informed him that two hours had passed.

“I know you worked more hours than that.”

“No, mother. That’s all of it.”

“Am I going to have to start going to the bank with you?”

“No, mother. That’s not necessary.”

“It’s necessary if you’re holding back from me. You know this is for—”

“Yes, mother. The Good of the Family.”

“Don’t be flippant with me, girl.” *Flippant* was a word Evelyn Waters had lately been employing often. “I want to see your pay stub.”

“I threw it away.”

“I’m sure you did.” Pause. “That leaves only one thing.”

Warily: “And what’s that, mother?”

There was the sound of Rachel’s door hitting the wall as Evelyn forced her way into the room. Brian’s heart suddenly leaped into a gallop, and a wave of nausea broke over him. His stomach gave a sickening lurch, bringing the taste of chicken to the back of his throat. It was happening again, what he could not put into words for Rachel but which he understood intuitively in his own mind as the one true constant in the Waters family: friction. Fire and scar. Rake and street. A rushing noise began in his ears, distant at first like the ocean from a shell, then becoming a roar. *You can’t stop it Rachel*, he willed to her. *So just get out of the way. Before you get hurt.*

For a moment it seemed she could hear him. She made her voice calm, reasonable. “There’s nothing in here, mother. I gave you everything.”

“We’ll see.”

Drawers being opened. Rummaging.

“You’re making a mess.”

“Of you if you’re holding out on this family.”

Don’t, he warned. But she stepped in the path anyway. “Are you threatening me?”

Brian clutched the book against his chest. He knew it did no good to pray, but he did it anyway. He'd never counted on God for anything and did not expect any help now. For as long as he could remember, he'd never relied on anyone but himself. He wanted to put himself in front of Rachel, protect her, the way the heroes in his stories warded blows and dragonfire with shields of enchanted steel. But he could not move, or even speak. Fear constricted his throat and twisted his bowels into a painful knot. He wanted to be anywhere else than here. The walls were suddenly too thin. Paper. That was all that stood between them. Not steel. Shame flooded through him, and now he could taste only salt and (*trestle*) hot metal. This was no story.

His mother's voice: "You don't know what threatening is." More rummaging. Pause. "What's this?"

"A Sony Walkman, mother."

"It wasn't here last week."

"Chris bought it for me."

A grunt. "Chris. You don't spend enough time with this family."

"Doing what, Mom? Working for you?" That earned her a backhand. *What are you doing?* his mind screamed to her.

"Ah ha!" Evelyn crowed triumphantly. "What's this?"

"Nothing."

"I'm surprised at you, Rachel. Holding out on your family like this. John!" A pause. "JOHN!" A muffled reply. "Rachel's been holding out again. There's . . ." Pause. "Forty dollars in this little white envelope. What were you planning on using this for, Rachel? Trip to the Bahamas, maybe?"

Don't say it, Rachel. He willed the thought to penetrate the wall between them.

“Trip away from this family.”

Brian sighed. He, apparently, was not the only one who knew Evelyn Waters' worst fear.

The next few minutes were interminable. Evelyn dragged a struggling Rachel into the bedroom across the hall. The door slammed behind them, and the sound it made was forbidding, final, like the clang of a dungeon cell. Then it started. Brian could only sit on his bed, stricken with a paralysis born of fear, cradling the book to his chest and rocking back and forth. He cursed his mother and father, and his own weakness. Galvanion Steelwarden wouldn't be sitting on his bed while his sister was being flailed in the next room. He would have the will to act, swiftly and decisively. But whatever will Brian had left was evaporating under the sound of the belt on Rachel's skin, under the sound of Rachel's screams.

He hurled the book at his bedroom door. It struck the surface with a loud bang that went unnoticed, and fell open on the floor. He no longer cared how the Battle of the Pelennor Fields turned out. The only thought in his mind was how the one in the room down the hall would.

* * * * *

She came to him later, as he knew she would. He had been drifting in and out of the dream. There was no knock, only the hinges' pensive squeak as she opened his door. The roar in his ears subsided and he opened his eyes.

From the instant she began to stealthily cross the room to his bed, he knew there was something different about her. Immediately and inexplicably, he understood that Rachel the slave had gone into the room down the hall and emerged as someone else. There was a jailbreak urgency to her movements, to her measured breathing. This was an escape. There was a hint of it in the surety of her stride, in the purposeful way she knelt at his bedside that spoke of a matter of great importance. He remembered the chill that had passed through him when the violence two hours before had ceased abruptly, from screaming and the crack of leather on skin to the low murmur of voices. It had been the chill of the unknown. This side of his sister he had never seen.

His back was to her. She shook him gently, though she knew already: “You’re awake.”

“Yes.”

“You heard everything.”

“Most of it.”

“I’m leaving, little brother. For good.”

He turned then to look at her. She’d left her glasses in the other room, and he could clearly see the nasty bruise that purpled her left eye. There was a hard set to her fair features, a drawn, careworn look that didn’t belong on the face of a seventeen-year-old girl. Her mouth was a straight line. All around her crackled (*blue fire*) a resolute air. He reached up and swept one errant brown curl back from her forehead. “I know.” This time, he did.

“You keep writing your stories, Brian.” He knew it was an order. “They’ll keep you safe.”

He did not need to ask what she meant. “I will,” he promised her. It was the most solemn oath he would ever give. “You keep playing your clarinet.”

A shadow passed over her face then, and she looked away, her eyes haunted.

“Maybe,” she said.

“Will I ever see you again?”

She looked back, the line of her mouth curving upward slightly. “You will. That’s a promise.” She paused, faltering. “I wish you could . . .”

“It’s okay.” His hand found hers and gave it a soft squeeze. The look she gave him was gratitude.

But then she hesitated, her eyes distant again, searching. “Brian—”

“I know,” he said. “I’ve always known that.”

She threw her arms around him then, and when she released him there was a moistness in her eyes. She turned away, veiling her face in darkness. Brian silently willed her what strength he could give. Without knowing why, he thought suddenly of his father, and how he had pulled Brian away from the fire last winter. It was out of a desire to protect his son from getting burned; of that Brian had no doubt. But the memory of him rubbing his left side in those long, applying strokes and staring out at some fixed point in his past with that far-away, alien sheen to his eyes had shown Brian another, much darker, side of John Waters. For reasons he could never have expressed then, Brian clung fiercely to that image as he watched Rachel cross the room to the open door. There she half-turned to him, and in the faint, unearthly cast of the fluorescent strip from above the kitchen sink down the hall, he could see twin trails of silver gleaming softly.

“Goodbye,” she whispered, and softly closed the door.

Before he sank back down into darkness and fitful dreams of blue fire and steel and terror racing inexorably towards him, he heard the faint whisper of Rachel's bedroom window as she lowered it down gently and slipped away like a thought into the night.

CHAPTER 3

EVELYN'S WORST FEAR

Evelyn Waters checked the rearview mirror to make sure the mask was on as she pulled into the drop-off / pick-up area of the rail station. It was. She scanned the moving crowd for her last fare of the evening. He spotted her first and waved her over, the very image of workaholic: a tall, thin, thirty-something in a blue suit, jet-lagged and five-o'clock-shadowed, dark hair combed back from a pale forehead, a cigarette smoked nearly down to the filter protruding from his lips, a black leather briefcase in his right hand and a suitcase on a travel dolly in his left. A gold watch gleamed on his left wrist. Probably Rolex. Stock broker, she guessed. Or corporate executive. In one swift, businesslike gesture, he crushed the cigarette underfoot and walked over to where she stopped at the curb. As he opened the door and slid into the backseat, she could hear the roar of the subway below as it rushed away, packed full of rush-hour commuters. On the radio, Alan Jackson crooned about the muddy waters of the Chattahoochee, about being young, about not having a plan and just living for the minute. She turned down the volume and half-turned to regard Tall Thirty-something. He made to tip a hat that wasn't there in a gesture so absurdly chivalric it made her smile. She nodded back. "Where to?"

"Tower Marriott," he said, lighting another cigarette. He cracked the window as she pulled away, and took three long, thoughtful drags before speaking again. "You doing all right?" he asked, politely but in the half-interested way strangers do when they expect

only “Fine, thanks” and nothing more. Nothing of how little sleep she’d been getting, of how when her worries didn’t keep her awake it was the dreams that haunted her of DFACS coming to take her children away and boiling red agony pouring through her head. Nothing of how much her ankles had been bothering her and how the doctor had said if she didn’t lose weight she’d wear her knees out and have to use a wheelchair to get around. Nothing of how much back money she owed Lacy for letting her have the cab for personal use because the battered Chrysler New Yorker needed twelve hundred dollars in transmission work. Nothing of how much back rent she owed Mr. Warren, of how she had begged for more time at the first of the month, of how close they were to eviction. Nothing of how every month was an eggshell dance just to placate the bill collectors enough so they’d leave her family with hot water and electricity. Nothing of John’s frustration that more money seemed to be going to Lacy than to the rent, or that almost every grocery store for ten miles had a black-and-white closed-circuit camera image of her with the words “Do not accept checks from this woman” underneath. Nothing about how all their credit cards were maxed out and their score was so abysmal it would take an act of God for another renter to even breathe in their direction. Nothing of how she was losing her children even without the intervention of DFACS, of how much her own daughter hated her because Evelyn had to take most of what little she earned at the McDonald’s every two weeks and use it for groceries and bills. Nothing of how much her son was withdrawing further into himself every day, into his room and his notebooks writing who knew what, of how much time he spent alone. *You just have to have faith that everything will turn out all right*, she told herself. *You just have to leave everything*

to God. She gathered a breath and let it go, glanced at the figurine on the meter, made sure the mask was still on.

“Little hot but at least the a/c works,” she said, smiling at him in the rearview through the mask that invited her passengers to talk of their problems but forbade her from speaking of her own. No one wanted to hear her problems, anyway. It was just the way things were. That was the strange appeal of the job: if she listened to others’ problems, her own would sometimes shut up for awhile. It was an unwritten rule: if the fare wanted to talk, you listened, offering a well-placed nod or an encouraging word here and there. Nothing more. But Tall Thirty-something wasn’t the chatty type; he was watching the skyline with penetrating gray eyes that reminded her suddenly, uncannily, of Brian. They had that same observant awareness, that same perceptive, see-through-you look. It scared her a little.

“Yeah, little humid for my taste,” he agreed absently, and was silent again.

Evelyn released a small sigh, letting habit take the wheel. At least the calls to the house had stopped. It was a little hard when your phone was disconnected. She allowed herself a small smile.

Bad luck, that was all. There was a recession going on, and the job market was horrible right now. And she couldn’t do waiting tables anymore. How could anyone expect her to be on her feet all day? She weighed almost three hundred pounds. Her ankles felt like hot lead when she was on them for more than an hour or two. And with all the bills piling up, it was no wonder she couldn’t get her teeth fixed so that she could get another teaching job. She missed teaching, even if it was only Special Ed. At least *they* didn’t snicker and jeer at how big she’d gotten, or at how scatterbrained she knew she

could appear sometimes, jumping from one subject to the next without warning or preamble. So much had changed since her head had burst. She had not been the same after that, and she didn't need the looks John and the kids sometimes gave her to know it. At the end of the day, the only comfort she had was that her children, at least, were healthy and strong. She thanked the good Lord for that.

The silence was suddenly too thick. "So you're not from around here?" She tried to shake the feeling that she was being studied, though her fare's eyes were on the passing city.

"Chicago." A thin streamer of smoke left the corner of Tall Thirty-something's mouth, to join the rest of the city's polluted air. "I'm here on business." His brevity was a thing she knew well. She could imagine the weary undercurrent of his thoughts: how he had to endure enough small talk at business lunches and airport terminals, that all he wanted now was to smoke, get out of his thousand dollar suit, collapse on the hotel bed and let the ESPN wash over him. She could understand that. Some nights when her legs hurt so bad that four Advil wouldn't touch it and sleep was out of the question, she'd stay up to watch old *Bonanza* and *Highway to Heaven* reruns, or Robert Tilton Ministries, or paid programming announcing the latest weight loss miracle or get-rich-quick idea, with only her sewing and Sara Lee for company.

But as she pulled into the Hotel Marriott ten minutes later, he surprised her.

"I noticed your angel, Mrs. Waters," he said, directing his eyes first to her cab driver's permit, then to the porcelain figurine super-glued to the meter, then to her solitary wedding band. Her diamond engagement ring was sitting behind the counter of

the local pawn shop, and would be sold if she didn't make a payment soon. "My mother had one just like it."

"She collects angels, too?"

"She used to. She doesn't anymore."

"Did she lose her faith?" Almost immediately she winced inwardly, wishing she could snatch the question out of the air and back into her traitorous mouth. Sometimes her evangelism made her speak before thinking. Too much late-night Robert Tilton.

But Tall Thirty-something didn't seem offended. "She died three years ago. Stroke."

She suddenly wished she could just drive away with her foot in her mouth for the rest of the night. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's okay." The fare was \$7.80. He handed her a fifty, then closed her fingers around the change she tried to give him. She stammered a protest. He waved it aside. If she hadn't needed it so badly, she'd have been more vehement. "It's to keep you safe."

She stared at him suddenly, the sound of waves crashing all around her, and the memory of dark waters reaching out to her, pulling her under.

He looked alarmed. "Did I say something?"

She shook her head, and drew in a deep, gasping breath, suddenly needing air. "It was a gift," she told him as he collected his things.

He gave her one last worried look as he climbed out of the backseat with his briefcase and luggage. "Every day is," he answered back, and shut the door without waiting for a reply.

Evening deepened and traffic thinned. On her way to pick up John from work, she remembered it was Tuesday, and stopped by the Quick Trip to play her lotto numbers: each of their birth months and her wedding anniversary for the first five, and the date her head had burst as the Power Ball. Only this last had ever come up, but it was a start. A way out. She quelled the voice in the back of her mind that spoke up just then as she walked back to her cab. It was a harmless bit of fun, she snapped at it. She never let herself get carried away. Was she not allowed to dream?

She made one more stop at the KFC to get the chicken for that night's dinner. As she drove up the exit ramp and thought of the crisp fifty-dollar bill he'd given her that she'd already broken, it occurred to her suddenly that (*It's to keep you safe*) she'd let her mask slip, just for a moment. Or that Tall Thirty-something had seen right through it and all the way back to a seven-year-old memory with those eyes of his. Brian's eyes.

* * * * *

She lay awake in the darkness. Beside her, John slept with his back to her, his breathing irregular as it always was: at times the deep breaths of restful sleep, at others the shallow gasps of a drowning man. Before the treatment, he used to jolt awake five, ten times a night gasping for air, and never remembered doing so. Thank God their insurance had covered the cost of the clinic. If his sleep apnea had gone undiagnosed for much longer, she might have lost him. He might have run off the road in the old New Yorker that now sat useless in their driveway and been killed, or fallen asleep at work and been fired. And their uncertain financial footing would have slipped altogether. Not

to mention they'd have lost the insurance, and then they wouldn't be able to afford the medication for her hypertension, for his sleep apnea and cluster headaches. More than ever, she needed to be strong for him, as he had always been for her.

The muscles in her forearms still ached from holding Rachel down, and her right hand still throbbed from the slap she'd given her, the one that had broken her glasses. Evelyn had regretted that immediately, not only because she knew the blow had really hurt Rachel, but because it would leave a mark that would lead to questions if she went to school the next day. Evelyn would have to rise early and make sure she stayed home. The last thing she wanted was for DFACS to come knocking again.

That was a nightmare she'd been fighting for seven years to avoid reliving: Rachel standing on the front lawn of their home in Thompson on a bright Saturday morning, her small ten-year-old's fists balled at her sides, screaming her head off, neighbors watching from their porches, the police cruiser pulling into the driveway. She remembered how the officer had peered through the crack in the front door, how his face had darkened when he'd seen the interior of the house, the cold look he'd worn as his searchlight gaze swept the living room, surveying the collection of Evelyn's yard sale relics and basement excavations, the stacks of boxes on every wall of the things she just hadn't gotten around to sorting: old bank statements and loan rejection letters, collections notices and unbalanced checkbooks, Elvis Presley and Billy Holiday records, half-begun novels and unfinished to-do lists, finger-paintings and math quizzes and PTA meeting minutes, faded photographs and letters, yellowing newspapers and *Reader's Digests*, the piles of clothes she hadn't gotten around to sewing. The inside of her house had never been anyone else's business. Besides, it was hard to keep things organized when both she

and John worked sixty-hour weeks just to keep up with the mortgage, just to stay afloat. But the officer knew nothing of that, knew nothing whatsoever about the Waters family. He was looking into their lives from the outside. He knew nothing about how willful and uncontrollable Rachel could be, about how she was always looking for attention. He was just doing his job, he had kept telling her in an even, neutral voice, just responding to a domestic disturbance call. Evelyn had tried to explain to him that Rachel had simply thrown a tantrum when she'd forbidden her from taking a hiking trip to the Blue Ridge mountains with her friends because they'd needed her to look after Brian. It had been like talking to a brick wall. He'd just kept repeating that mantra over and over: "I'm just doing my job, ma'am. Just doing my job."

He had looked long and hard at Brian and Rachel, asked them had mom and dad ever hit them. And now, *now* Rachel understood just how serious a business screaming bloody murder on the front lawn was. The rigid, wide-eyed look on her face as she shook her head had been one of cold fear. And Brian had looked up at Rachel and asked was mommy in trouble, and Evelyn had assured him that everything was going to be fine. It was just a mistake. But she had really been assuring herself.

The officer had told her he'd have to file a report with Social Services. She remembered the chill those words had sent through her, remembered how her heart had started pounding and how the blood had suddenly rushed to her head, filling her ears with a roaring sound, how she'd wept and pleaded with the officer not to take her children away. But he was already heading out the door, telling her it wasn't up to him, that he was mandated by the county to file a report in any domestic disturbance involving children. He had only repeated that same infuriating mantra over and over, that he was

just doing his job, that he couldn't bend the law, only enforce it. The police cruiser backed out of her driveway, turned the corner, and disappeared. It would not be the last.

Evelyn forced herself to take deep breaths. Slowly, her blood pressure had come down and the roar in her ears had subsided. She had resisted the urge to put Brian and Rachel in the car right then and check them into a motel on the edge of town. She had assured herself everything would be fine, trying not to imagine what she might do if they came back for her children.

Three hours later, a dark blue Dodge minivan had pulled into the driveway, and a tall, lean young woman in her late-twenties had emerged. Evelyn had gone out on the doorstep to meet her, the foremost thought in her mind that this woman must not see the inside of her house. The woman had been casually attired in Reeboks and Levis, a white Thompson 10k Classic tee-shirt tucked at her narrow waist, and she wore her long black hair bound behind her in a ponytail. Only the briefcase in her right hand and the cellular phone at her left hip indicated that she was anything more than a neighbor coming over to discuss last night's PTA meeting or the latest zoning board resolution or how fast the kids were growing.

The DFACS case manager had met Evelyn's dour glare with a smooth evenness, ascending the narrow walkway in lithe, athletic strides. Evelyn studied her expression, trying to shake off the mental image of two wolves circling each other. She could see no challenge in the young woman's calmly appraising, unassuming gaze, but her officious bearing underscored a self-awareness that she wielded the power to sunder whole families.

Yet there had been something else about her that Evelyn recognized and understood almost immediately, a kind of primitive kinship the two of them shared, one that carried a deadly potential like the ozone in the air just before a storm. This woman did not strike her as the typical drunk-with-power bureaucrat she was accustomed to dealing with, whose level of brain activity, in her estimation, could not have supplied the current for a night light. She thought this one's motives might be entirely different. It was evident in the worry lines on her forehead, in the suggestions of dark circles under her eyes, in the expressionless line of a mouth that was as void of sensuality as her vehicle and dress were of pretension. It was in the on-the-go economy of her movements, in her lack of makeup and jewelry except for the modest engagement ring and white gold wedding band around her left ring finger, a no-nonsense austerity that spoke of one too busy for such adornments. Evelyn confirmed it with a glance at the minivan, at the empty car seat on the passenger side. This woman was a mother herself. Then, on the heels of that: this woman was very dangerous.

She had produced a wallet from her back jeans pocket and presented to Evelyn her state-issued ID in the offhanded manner of one used to formalities, a gesture that confirmed what Evelyn already suspected, that there was no way she could keep this woman out of her house without a legal bloodbath.

The case manager had not been entirely able to hide her shock, or withhold the icy timbre from her voice that Evelyn had come to identify with unerring accuracy whenever she heard it in the years that followed, long after her children had grown up and gone off to raise families of their own. Judgment. She remembered the way the words had rolled off her tongue and hung ringing in the air, that Brian and Rachel were at "imminent risk."

Then had come the most terrifying moment in Evelyn Waters' life. The events that followed had blurred together in one long nightmare chain of memory. She remembered that the case manager had kept repeating that she only wanted what was "best for the children," remembered how she'd asked for Evelyn's cooperation, that refusal would only make things worse. Evelyn remembered how she'd not so politely asked the woman to leave, remembered the infuriatingly calm way in which the case manager told her she was going to have to call the juvenile court judge and get a verbal Emergency Removal Order. She remembered the way John had gripped her elbow warningly, remembered shaking it off and telling the case manager to go get her removal order, and that until then she would sooner see her burning in hell than anywhere near her children.

She had grossly misjudged the legal sway of DFACS. It was a mistake she would never make again. The case manager had gone out to her car and parked across the street, and through the window Evelyn had watched her talking animatedly on her cellular phone. A cold fear had passed through her then. Her heart felt plunged into icy water, a sensation with which she would become all too familiar.

The westering sun had begun to throw the first long shadows of dusk over the front of the house when, true to her word, the case manager had come baring the teeth of the law. For the second time that day a police cruiser pulled into her driveway, and a different officer had emerged, taller and grimmer than Officer Just-doing-my-job. And for the second time that day the case manager had come up the walkway to the doorstep of the Waters home and through the front door in those long, scissoring strides, shadowed by her silent escort. Evelyn had moved protectively to the foot of the stairs, and John

must have seen something half-crazed in her eyes, because he was there suddenly at her side, whispering words of forbearance in her ear, to choose her battles, that now was not the time. But the expression she leveled against the case manager must have been murderous, because the young woman had withdrawn to a safer distance, closer to her police escort, and Evelyn had called Brian and Rachel to come downstairs, that she needed to talk to them.

Under her police escort's watchful eye, the case worker had led them away to the blue Dodge minivan with Evelyn's assurances that it would only be for a short time, that they'd fix up the house and have them back before they knew it. She remembered how helpless she had been as she watched the car drive away with Rachel facing forward and Brian looking back with fear and confusion in his eerily intelligent, storm-gray, four-year-old's eyes, a look that had broken her heart. The look of one betrayed.

Suddenly the roaring filled her ears again, becoming louder and louder, the sound of waves crashing. She remembered the distant urgency of John's voice, something about her blood pressure, that she had to calm down, to breathe. Her vision narrowed to a long, dark tunnel, and blue sparks danced before her. She was losing a battle to remain conscious. Cool dark water came over her, and she struggled, gasping, to the surface. She had clutched the front of John's shirt, balling it into her fists. She had needed to tell him something, something of tremendous importance, but there had come a wet pop like a cork pulled from a wine bottle, and suddenly a bright blue thunderclap of the most horrific pain she had ever known had boomed inside her head, flooding it with the sensation of boiling water. Then the world had darkened to a rust-colored monochrome, and she'd clung to her husband like driftwood on a sea of red agony.

The last things in her mind before darkness pulled her under had been John's deep, panicked voice, calling out her name from across a vast, black gulf, and his smell: the Niagara starch in his shirt, his Old Spice deodorant, the Lectric Shave on his face. A deep dismay filled her as the immensely important instruction she'd meant to give him sank down with her into that cool, dark water, lost forever: *Keep them safe.*

* * * * *

A cerebral hemorrhage. That's what the doctors had told her. What they had not told her, but which she learned from John and the library computer many months later, was that she should not have lived through it, and that often in surviving cases there had been permanent brain damage. That had shaken her badly, but who didn't have a boxful of Day Minders and memo pads these days? And who had never in their life forgotten to send in a payment or set the emergency break, or lost a train of thought in mid-sentence?

When she came awake from the anesthesia, John had been there, looking drawn and pale, dark circles under his eyes and two day's growth of beard on his face. She remembered the first two words out of her mouth. They had been questions. "Brian? Rachel?" She had tried to raise herself up, and been rewarded with a brilliant blue bolt of pain lancing through her skull. John pushed her back down to the pillow.

"I wouldn't try that again," he'd advised, taming her wildly searching look with his calm, level one, a look that had carried her through a turbulent courtship that had cost John any honored place in his family, through fifteen years of marriage, a filing for bankruptcy, the death of her father, and four miscarriages, before the final attempt that

had given her Brian. It was a look that told her everything was going to be all right. He'd sat down next to her and directed his gaze to the floor, thinking, absently rubbing the left side of his chest. In memory.

“She brought them by. You were sleeping.” Evelyn didn't need to ask who she was. “We'll get them back. Just trust me, okay?”

“Okay.” And then she had reached up experimentally, testing the bandage that covered the entire surface area of her head. They had shaved her bald. All her long, dark hair that John had always told her was so beautiful. It was gone. “My hair . . .”

“It'll come back.” He squeezed her hand gently.

Brian and Rachel were all right, he assured her. They were in a foster home. During the day, John had stayed with her, asking the doctors questions and seeing to her meals, helping her to the bathroom and turning her bed. At night, as she drowsed at the gray borders of medicated sleep, he'd made sure she was comfortable, then driven back to the house. There, she later learned, he'd worked alone into the hours of early morning, hauling to the city dump in the U-Haul he'd rented most of the treasures she'd gathered magpie-like over the years, the loss of which were nothing to her two most precious ones, who were being held in a cinderblock fortress somewhere in the next county. In the morning, he was always back in her hospital room, sleeping on the fold-out next to her bed, his clothing and skin smelling of Clorox and Lysol and Comet.

The case manager had graciously allowed them thirty days to get the house “habitable.” Within eight, Brian and Rachel had come running into the room with an enormous bouquet of gardenias, Brian exclaiming in wonder at her shaved head and Rachel sobbing an apology at her shoulder. Evelyn had stroked the dark, lustrous curls

that so resembled the ones she had just lost and told her what John's eyes had promised, that everything was going to be all right. She'd never imagined then that her war with DFACS would be far from over.

That was when she'd started collecting the angels. After her surgery when she'd been moved to the recovery floor, John had bought her first one from the gift shop downstairs and set it on her bedside table, the same angel that now stood watchfully on her fare meter. She remembered her amazement at the extraordinary level of detail in its soft, eternally patient expression, in the waves of its shoulder-length auburn hair, in the folds of its billowy white robe, in every feather of its protectively outspread wings. Over the next seven years she would acquire an impressive collection from yard sales, catalogues, and the Home Shopping Network. John would often joke that he had difficulty making iron at the forge with all those angels watching. And she would laugh and wrap her arms around his bull neck and pull him down with her, murmuring something about tempering his steel.

Afterwards, she would trace with her fingertips the scarring along his chest, grateful for the hair, thinner now, that had grown back to cover her own.

* * * * *

She drifted in a gray, half-sleeping state, mentally replaying the scene hours before. John had dispensed the punishment as he always had, without relish, with a grudging understanding of how necessary it was, how crucial to keeping the family held together. When she had first gotten her work permit, they had agreed that Rachel could

keep fifty percent. But Lacy and Mr. Warren had since begun to lean on her a little more. Both had long since stopped accepting her checks, demanding either cash or a money order, and more and more pictures of her were going up in grocery stores all over town like she was on the Most Wanted list. Rachel didn't make much, but it helped buy food and had often meant the difference between hot and cold showers. John always took cold showers, even in the winter, but that was an idiosyncrasy the rest of them would never share.

They'd lost the phone last month, but a phone wasn't necessary for survival, she reasoned. Trouble was that now the bill collectors were starting to call John at work and now Lacy as well, which only made him lean on her for the cab payment even more. The financial advisor the church had sent hadn't understood that. They couldn't afford the transmission work on the New Yorker, and no one would sell them a reliable car, not on their credit. And the church wouldn't give them any more money. Lacy at least knew her, knew her work ethic, knew she was trying her best. And he knew that at any time he could take it from her. Evelyn had agreed to pay him fifty dollars a day. He'd told her he couldn't afford to let her drive it for personal use for any less. At the time, she'd told herself it was only a temporary solution. She'd tried not to imagine the money sink it would become, tried to shake the feeling of walking into a financial trap. What choice had she had? They couldn't survive without a car.

Her thoughts came back to Rachel. Until now she had allowed her a measure of dignity, trusting her to go to the bank by herself rather than endorse the check over to her, even cosigning on a savings account that hadn't been at minimum balance in months. If

she was holding back, they'd be struggling even more, and things were already stretched thin as it was.

So it had been necessary for her to convey just how important it was that Rachel surrender her earnings. It was only temporary; when they found surer footing, she'd dole out a little for band camp and movies. It wasn't forever; just until she could get things under control.

Then why did she feel so terrible? That look. It had been that look in Rachel's eyes when she'd asked . . . no, *ordered*, Evelyn to let her go, and suddenly it felt as if she held not a seventeen-year-old girl but a rattlesnake, and she'd done just that. It had been a look of cold certainty, and something else . . .

She remembered sneaking out to the clubhouse pool to see a boy one humid night in late August thirty years before, remembered her father finding out and the fire in her scalp when he gripped her hair in one powerful fist and dragged her home by it. Times had been different then. In the town she grew up, neighbors slept with their front doors unlocked, and minding one's own business came second nature. It had been Family Business. She had not thought of it in years, what she had done afterward. She knew that look. She had seen it before. In Rachel's eyes, Evelyn had seen herself.

What had she become?

She came fully awake, swimming up through the layers of awareness and breaking the surface with the unshakable intuition that something was wrong. It was just before dawn. She sat up and stole a deep, shuddering breath, rubbing her eyes in an attempt to dispel the lingering images. Her hands found her glasses, and the room swam

into focus in that particular gray color scheme found only in suburban bedrooms in the hour just before sunrise. John slept on heedlessly next to her.

The dreams again. Then, on the heels of that thought: Rachel. Her pulse quickened suddenly, and she threw off the covers. She opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the hallway, her head cocked to one side, listening. All was quiet. She went to Rachel's door and held her breath. There was no sound from within. She flung it open, and a cry of dismay escaped her. Her eyes went immediately to the strip of cardboard between the window frame and the sill. The clarinet lay on the unslept-in bed like an offering.

She started at a sound behind her. Brian stood in the doorway, an apparition in the gray predawn light, watching her.

"You scared me, baby," she breathed. "Where's Rachel?"

"Gone."

She tried to keep her voice level. "To school?"

"Away." His finality frightened her.

"Where did she go?" She watched his eyes.

"I don't know." Blank. Unreadable. His father's face.

"Well." She tried to make her voice confident, in control. "When she comes back, there's going to be hell to pay."

"No." He appraised her with those too gray, see-through-you eyes, eyes that made her remember her unnervingly perceptive (*It's to keep you safe*) passenger from the day before. She had to remind herself that masks didn't work on this boy. "There won't."

A chill ran through her then, like the one she'd felt when she first heard the two words she had come to dread most, words from seven years before. "What do you mean, baby?" Her voice rose slightly on the end, like a plea. She couldn't keep it out.

Brian's came slowly, explaining patiently, as if to a child: "She's not coming back, mom." Then in the question that followed, she heard in his voice that icy timbre with which she'd become so bitterly familiar, that dull, flatly proclaiming coldness she never thought she'd hear her own son employ against her: "Would you?"

The reality struck her then like a blow. The room swam in her vision. Her knees were suddenly too weak. She sank down to the bed, where the black lacquered finish of the clarinet gleamed faintly in the gray light that drifted like a phantom through Rachel's bedroom window. What was the use? Her own daughter hated her. The harder she tried to maintain control, the more it slipped away from her. It was all happening again. Her worst fear. And something else, too: the cold realization of who she had become. In her hands she held her head, the fingertips in her scalp tracing the thin white line of the scar. She seized upon a thought suddenly, speaking into her hands.

"You'd never leave me, Brian. Would you?"

But when she looked up, he was no longer in the doorway.

Alone on her daughter's bed, in the gray ghostlight of a cloud-covered dawn, Evelyn Waters wept. She heard a voice from the night before, a voice of deadly calm (*Let go of me, mother*), and shame like a blast of hot wind came over her as she realized who it was she had become, the one person she'd sworn she never would, the person she hated most: her father.

CHAPTER 4

PLAYING WITH FIRE

A sparkler burns six times hotter than a pan of cooking oil. It was an agony that John Waters had been reliving in his dreams night after night for the past thirty-seven years: the writhing blue torment of that demonfire melting his skin to a bubbling, candle-wax ruin as it crawled over his chest with an evil hunger.

He hadn't wanted to take the medication, knowing he'd be helpless to the nightmares as they pulled him down with their shadow hands, but there had been no other choice. He couldn't have kept it up for much longer: the stumbling to the bathroom at six-thirty every morning, surveying in the mirror the deep pockets of exhaustion under his eyes, the nodding at the wheel and his desk as he pored over memorandums and office furniture catalogues, the visits to the break room for the Maxwell House he shouldn't have been drinking, the memory lapses.

Sleep apnea. Son of a bitch. And there was no telling how long it had been going on. Several years at least. He'd almost come to accept being exhausted all the time as just a fact of life. Something else to worry about, along with the clusters and the backaches and the cold numbness creeping slowly through his fingers and into his hands like an early frost. It was getting harder to fasten his shirt buttons, buckle his belt, even pull his zipper up for Chrissakes, but he'd be damned if he had to ask Evelyn for help with *that*. There had to be a line somewhere.

Evelyn had still lain wakeful beside him as he drifted off, probably deep in worry over the kids or their worsening financial situation, as she almost always was lately. The last wakeful thought in John's mind was a mental note to himself to have a talk with Brian in the morning about the peculiar white claw marks on the street outside.

The hands were eager, reaching, pulling him under, the pale, play-callused hands of a little boy. Abruptly they began to move up and down in long, sweeping strokes, as if applying (*Sulfanylon*) an unguent of some kind. A room swam into focus, a room wallpapered with National Geographic maps and Time Magazine clippings of Albert Einstein, Dwight Eisenhower, and Jonas Salk, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of plans for the construction of a fallout shelter and what to do in the event of a nuclear attack. A pale gray, January gloom filtered through the drawn blinds of a single, narrow window.

Ten-year-old John Waters sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing the burn ointment over his lean, bare chest. His eyes were fixed on some distant point, glazed over with the nightmare sheen of a very recent and terrible memory, a memory of lying motionless in a bed, alone in a sterile white room, terrified to even breathe. His mouth jerked to one side in fishhook twitches as he concentrated fiercely on keeping his breaths shallow and carefully controlled. He had never imagined the simple act of breathing could be such agony. Each one he'd taken had pulled taut the burn-damaged tissue over the entire left half of his chest and brought with it a searing torment that would haunt him, like the scars, for the rest of his life.

They hadn't even given him anything for the pain. In 1956, burn clinics had still been in their infancy, and the only treatments were sterile bandages and the mafenide acetate salve he was now rubbing gingerly into the slowly-healing ruin along his left side,

wincing with each long, sweeping stroke. He had promised his mother and father he could do it himself, a promise to which they'd given in with a grudging reluctance. In his father's eyes had been a haunted guilt. It wasn't out of any sort of wounded spite that John hadn't let them touch him. It was just that he had come to know the pain with a level of intimacy he would never reach with any human being as long as he lived; he knew the exact amount of friction he could tolerate, and trusted no hands but his own to apply the healing ointment.

He remembered that gloomy New Year's Day weeks before, lying in that cold white room helplessly, reliving the party of the previous night and the way the traitorous gust had sent the jubilant radiance of the sparkler he'd held aloft racing up the rolled left sleeve of his woolen sweater, swallowing him in flickering blue anguish. He remembered the way his father had stripped off his imported leather jacket, throwing it over him and wrestling him to the ground, remembered the suffering that had raged over his chest like a fiery judgment as he rode in the backseat of his father's car to the emergency room.

It was a morning ritual he endured for long after, even in his dreams, an exercise whose painful tediousness no other trial he ever faced would begin to approach: the slow, measured breathing, the intense concentration on that single fixed point, the thin line he walked to endure only the minimal amount of friction as his hands moved in those long, slowly healing strokes.

No matter how many cold showers he took every morning thereafter, even in winter, the icy water against his skin could never completely banish the memory of that purgatorial suffering. He suddenly needed air, but just as the first gray clouds of wakefulness shrouded the edges of his mind, the medication flared like a warning beacon,

deepening his breathing and pulling him deeper down into cool, dark water. The memory abated grudgingly, and his thoughts wandered again.

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The mystery of the white claw marks on the street had eluded him for weeks. What sort of lawn care contraption or childish game would leave marks like that? Even as a kid, the colored chalks his classmates had used for hopscotch during recess had always washed away after a rain. The broad sweeps and circles on the street out front were not only permanent, but damaging, and it was only a matter of time before Mr. Warren asked him about it. At first, they'd been barely noticeable, a mere curiosity that John had arrived home to one night three weeks before. Now they were a bizarre network of parabolic arcs and elaborate circles and arcane cursive loops. On any other canvas it might have been art, but somehow he didn't think Robert Warren would see it quite that way.

Even stranger, there was no way they could have been made by rocks. The alignment of the marks was too symmetrical, too evenly-spaced apart. Only sharp metal would leave that signature. John had checked the garden shed out back, but in the cobwebbed shadows there had been only bags of fertilizer that Evelyn would never use, the coiled green serpent of the water hose, the rusted gardening shears and hoe, and the asthmatic lawnmower with which he'd cut the grass days before.

Who in the hell would amuse himself with that kind of wanton disregard? In the last few days he'd begun to think it was some sneaky little bastard belonging to one of

the neighbors, the Chalmers boy maybe, or the pockmarked Wilson kid. But now as the dreams and the cool, dark water came over him, he remembered mowing the area around the mailbox three days before and the way the blade had struck the concrete curb when he'd gone too close to the edge, remembered the loud report and the sudden whine of the motor . . . and the shower of sparks that had resulted.

Abruptly a much older memory surfaced, and he suddenly remembered (*bellows*) a roaring blaze in the fireplace of Hutchinson's cabin the winter before, and the (*fascination*) disturbing look he'd witnessed in his then ten-year-old son's eyes as the flames leaped dangerously high into the flickering shadows of the chimney. He remembered pulling, almost *throwing*, Brian back from the fire, the hard swat he'd given his son on the behind, the wounded look. He remembered his fury as he'd lectured Brian on the dangers of fire and third-degree burns and searing agony he could not even begin to imagine. But most of all he remembered the way the boy had regarded him, the cautious appraisal in his eyes, the troubling question that lurked there: *Who are you?*

He had gone into the next room then and sat down to ponder the answer, breathing those shallow, carefully rationed breaths, wondering why in thirty-six years he had not been able to let go of the pain of that terrible memory, wondering if he would ever be able to. Wondering what might be the source of his son's dangerous obsession with fire.

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Hutchinson had been wearing a worried look earlier that morning when he'd seen John spill the coffee.

"Something wrong with your hands, John?"

"They're fine." He'd thrown him his most disarming smile. "Just need to wake up, I guess."

"I know the feeling," said Hutchinson, assuming John had meant his brain. "So. Cookout Friday. Bringing the kids?"

"They'd leave me if I didn't. They love their barbecue."

Hutchinson had laughed as he poured himself a cup of coffee, which, like John, he took black. "Mine too, my friend."

It had started three months before as a mild trembling in his hands. John told himself it was just too much coffee and too much worry. Then, just in the last three weeks, the numbness had crept in through his fingertips like the first tingle of mild frostbite. Just four days ago, John had not been able to slip the buttons through the holes in his shirt, and he had struggled with his belt and tie as well. As Evelyn helped him, he'd tamed her worried look with the calm, level one he'd always used with her, explaining it away as probably just a mild side effect of the medication.

It wasn't as if there weren't enough to worry about. Between the stress from the mysterious numbness in his hands, Evelyn's boss, their landlord, the mounting debt, and the way the kids were growing more distant every day, the clusters had been coming with increasing frequency. It had been six months since the last episode, and a year had passed

since the one before that. They never occurred over a period of less than four weeks at a time. Six years ago, he'd had an episode that lasted two months. With only rare exceptions, they always rendered him completely helpless, so that all he could do was lie in the dark on his back with one hand over his left eye, enduring the bright blue, ice pick stabs of misery as they slowly climbed to a crescendo of blazing torment. These bouts lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours. Only the panic from the flames of the sparkler was worse than that which gripped him whenever his left eye began to suddenly tear up, or to redden balefully, for those were the signs of an impending attack.

Sixty-nine cases in a hundred thousand, and he had to be one of them. Thank God they had mostly tended to occur around the same time, between nine and ten o'clock at night, or else he might have lost his job years ago. That interval of time he always looked to with dread. When it passed without incident, he would climb into bed and drift off feeling the relief only one who has lived with a lifetime of pain can ever know. But occasionally, and always within two hours of falling asleep, an attack would come roaring up out of deep slumber like a freight train, and when that happened he'd come gasping awake clutching the blankets in balled-up fists, in a panic born of fear that he'd woken not to morning but blue holocaust. Those attacks were usually brief, lasting only ten or fifteen minutes, after which he would drift off again to the troubled half-sleep of wary vigilance.

They'd tried almost everything: breathing treatments of ergotamine, oxygen, and methoxyflurane, lidocaine nasal sprays, injections of dihydroergotamine and prednisone. He was adamantly opposed to lithium, but thankfully they hadn't had to resort to that. Yet. Problem was that none of these ever prevented the headaches, since they occurred so

randomly that the drugs could mostly be taken only during an actual attack, and all of them, almost without exception, seemed to work by simply knocking him out. It was a vicious, never-ending conundrum, one that left him always at the whim of the pain.

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He drifted deeper. There had been no attack tonight, and that was a mercy. He was beyond exhausted. He never relished handing out discipline, but Rachel was not only willful but strong, and had always been able to overpower Evelyn, as she had that night at Charter, when Evelyn had tried to have her committed and Rachel had bloodied her nose.

How had things gotten so out of hand? He didn't know. When he wasn't on his back from the pain or letting the primetime lineup wash over him, he was working. Over the years he had watched with an almost clinical detachment as their finances spiraled out of control, but he had never been able to determine for sure just how many balls Evelyn ever had in the air at one time, how much money she'd doled out to appease the bill collectors who were all but beating down their front door. Once he'd intercepted from his wife a power bill with a past due balance of nearly three hundred dollars, and had paid it off in full. That night there had been a colossal screaming match between John and his wife, one that ended as such encounters always did, with John slamming the bedroom door in frustration, struggling to hold onto the self-mastery forged by a lifetime of pain as he lay in the dark, fearing an attack, and Evelyn weeping quietly in the darkness of the living room under the flickering blue glow of the television. He had never hit his wife in

twenty-four years of marriage, and did not intend to start now, no matter how precarious their financial position.

He quelled the voice in his mind that asked just then if that same idea had ever applied to Rachel. That had not been hitting. That had been discipline, and it had been out of tough love, and to get Evelyn off his back. He loved his wife, and they'd been through times a lot worse than this, but it was bad enough that every time he or the kids tried to get her to throw anything anyway it always ended in tearful accusations about "her things" and that they were all she had, resulting in even more piles a week later from the sleepless nights of aching legs and Ben Gay, of old reruns and sewing and Sara Lee pound cake, bad enough that every intervention only made her packrat behavior even worse. It was bad enough that she had to drive him to work every morning and pick him up every afternoon in a taxi, bad enough that he had to endure the pitying looks with which he knew his coworkers regarded him when they thought he wasn't looking.

He wanted to scream at them that they didn't know everything, didn't know about lying in a cold white room afraid to move, to even breathe. Didn't know about third-degree burns from two-thousand-degree hellfire, about carefully controlled breathing. Didn't know about watching your kids being taken away in a dark blue Dodge minivan while your wife lay dying at your feet. Didn't know about sitting next to her hospital bed wondering if she was ever going to wake up. Didn't know about sleepless nights and horrific back pain from carrying one falling-apart box after another to the bed of a U-Haul moving van and driving to the city dump, over and over, night after night until daybreak. Didn't know about false rumors of your fiancé's moral turpitude, about family ostracism, about miscarriages and bankruptcy. Didn't know the sensation of being

stabbed in the left eye with an ice pick, of lying medicated and helpless in the dark. Didn't know a thing about real suffering.

But what good would that have done? They would never know his life. Like everyone else who wasn't a member of the Waters family, they'd always be looking in from the outside. And that was just one of the reasons he would never leave Evelyn. She at least knew, if not understood, the man he was. The life he'd led. The scars he carried.

He woke from blue fire to gray dawn, to frost in his fingers and an open door and the sound of his wife across the hall, weeping.

CHAPTER 5

THE THIRD RAIL

Brian's hands, a little larger now, paused above the keys, his face pale but resolved in the blue glow of the computer screen. The Saturday afternoon was unseasonably warm, and through the open window came a softly urging, mid-November breeze bearing the melancholy smells of old leaves and wood smoke he'd lovingly come to associate with autumn. The house was quiet. Mike was working and his parents had been out shopping since early that morning. The only sound was the sentinel sway of the trees from the woods behind the house and the refrigerator's low hum from the kitchen down the hall.

On the kitchen table that morning had been a piece of paper with three names. That piece of paper now lay at his right hand on the desk. He stared at the line he'd just written, wondering what to say next, remembering the events that had led to this moment: an altogether different piece of paper on the front door of their Woodhaven apartment six months before, an empty savings account, his mother in tears as he carried all but the notebooks of his *(They'll keep you safe)* stories to the Woodhaven dumpster, the thin red line at his wrist, the driveway battle that had taken place just outside, the wide-eyed disbelief that had been on Evelyn Waters' face, the look of betrayal. He gathered a deep breath.

I am writing to ask for your help.

* * * * *

Over the last five years, it had slowly been getting closer.

He walked alone down the winding black subway tunnel, the only light a baleful blood-glow from the distant EXIT signs off to his left, which hung down from the ceiling by rusted chains. They loomed above the mouths of dark passageways that led away from the tunnel to places unknown to him.

The sides were poured concrete, worn smooth by time and the passage of something enormous. They were too high to climb up to the boarding platform above. He had tried until his fingers bled. He sometimes thought he could see dark red handprints here and there along the walls, some too large to be his own, as he walked along the steel trestles that gave off a sullen heat beneath him. He followed the pale white pipeline that ran down the track along the tunnel's right wall, a line he had come to call the third rail.

With the same intuition with which he had discovered the secret of friction as he raked the street outside 818 Argonne Walk five years before, a practice to which his father had put an end with the same stern warning he'd given when he'd caught him with the sparkler, he knew it was the source of the strange blue fire.

He walked and walked in the blood-toned darkness along the trestles until his legs became leaden and his feet blistered. At last, when he felt he could go no further, he stopped to rest in the middle of the track and pondered the third rail, which gleamed like a prehistoric fossil of indeterminate length as it stretched away, down, down the dark tunnel into black uncertainty.

Then came the vibrations. They started as a low but steady throb in the trestles and set to smoldering in him the first embers of panic. He started walking again, trying with limited success to coax his aching legs into a slow jog, periodically looking back over his shoulder, back down the dark tunnel from the direction he'd come. After several stumbling minutes, the throb became a dull rumble, and beneath him there came the sound of a teacup clinking repeatedly against fine china: the first faint bone-rattle of a deadly approach. He picked up his pace then, trying to ignore the protests from his legs and feet. Checking behind him again, around the bend, he saw only impenetrable darkness.

When he wasn't looking over his shoulder, he was looking straight ahead down the tunnel, hoping to see a light, another human being, *anything*. But there was only darkness ahead and that sanguine glow to his left, the curtain of sweat-matted hair in his eyes and the wet cling of his shirt at his back.

Then suddenly came the pungent odor of ozone, and all around him the air began to crackle, the hair on his head and along his arms and neck to stand on end. Abruptly to his right the third rail flared to life, emitting a loud *hum* that made his eardrums ache. From its surface there arose the ghostly flicker of blue lightning, dancing in rippling coils over the ivory-colored safety cover that guarded (*750 volts*) a source of tremendous electrical power. From beneath him there began a laborious groan as from the very bones of the earth, the groan of something enormous and ancient rousing itself to wakefulness.

Out of the darkness behind him came a sudden blast of cold air like an exhalation, freezing the sweat on his back and the blood in his veins, and the groan at his feet became the echoing bellow of something gigantic suddenly set loose. The bone-rattle of the

trestle rose to a deafening jackhammer, and around the bend over his shoulder there flashed out of the blackness a pair of blazing amber beams like the gaze of a steel colossus.

He forced himself into a dead run, struggling to lift his leaden feet, the muscles in his legs screaming like overstrained cables. He fled down the tunnel in blind terror, following the blue St. Elmo's Fire that flickered along the third rail, trying not to envision what work of infernal engineering behind him that light powered. But the tunnel only became more endless, the *hum* louder, the trestles beneath him hotter. He tripped over one of them and fell to his knees, and behind him twin searchlights swept over his prone form. Massive engines roared in triumph. He struggled, too agonizingly slow, to his feet, and looked over his shoulder to see a nightmare face of cold blue steel, its gunmetal grille bared in a grin as it bore relentlessly down on him.

* * * * *

The sound of the bell had come as a shock, not a relief as it usually was. He remembered looking up at the clock to discover he'd been writing for almost an hour, then looking down at the words he'd scrawled in blue ink on the seven pages of notebook paper. He remembered thinking he could not possibly hand those pages in. Written on them was a part of him he'd kept secret all his life, a part of him that was private. Untouchable. His own. It could be used against him, to hurt him. It wasn't the fiction with which he filled his notebooks, of good and evil, of warlocks and dragons and heroes bearing shields of enchanted steel. This was real.

But did Mr. Donovan have to know that? The half-page, in-class writing assignment had been to describe a childhood fear. His teacher had never specified that it had to be *his* childhood fear. He still wasn't sure why that had made so much sense. He had quickly scanned the pages for any mention of his name. Nothing. It could have been any Everykid who was just afraid of the dark or of fire or of being run over.

He wondered where this new daring had come from, ignored the troubling voice that had spoken up then that there might have been another reason for his sudden need to unburden himself of the secret he'd carried for so many years. On his way out the door Brian handed Mr. Donovan the seven stapled pages, his eyes lowered, trying not to notice the unnervingly perceptive look behind his English teacher's fishbowl glasses and the knowing half-smile the thick brown beard had not entirely been able to conceal.

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He had been dumbfounded the next day when Mr. Donovan asked if he would read it to the class. A jolt of fear had set his heart to racing, and his palms had become suddenly clammy. Cold panic flooded through him, and he'd shaken his head furiously.

"Sir, there's no way I could read this."

"Brian." Mr. Donovan fixed him with a suddenly serious look, a look underscored by something else that Brian would not identify until later. "This is terrific."

"Thanks. But I can't read it."

"Then let me?"

So he'd nodded numbly and taken his seat, folded his hands on his desk, not trusting them to remain still. Suddenly he was very tired, and he breathed a deep sigh of (*relief?*) weary resignation. The secret was out now. He tried to still his thundering heart by telling himself that it would be all right, that the writing would never betray him, that the real Brian Waters could hide forever in the shadowy anonymity of fiction. The rest of the class had filed slowly in, among them Tiffany Eubanks, the red-headed beauty on whom he'd had a two-year crush, and David Wilcox, the long-armed, broad-shouldered captain of the swim team, who had grabbed the twin mounds of flab at his chest and shoved him into his locker three days before.

When they were all seated Mr. Donovan announced that he'd like to read them something, a short story called "The Third Rail." Brian had not titled it thus, but decided it was as good as any. Mr. Donovan was graciously going to begin without naming the author, but Susan Alldeman, who had always been unusually bold, asked the question Brian had been dreading. He met the inquiring flicker of his teacher's eyes and gave a small, barely perceptible nod.

As if on the hinges of a great door of scrutiny, every pair of eyes in the room swiveled to him. He lifted his own briefly to see mingled stares of wondering appraisal, condemning judgment, and cold hatred. This last came from David Wilcox. He lowered his eyes again, suddenly finding the apocryphal pencil-scratch of colorful obscenities on his desk very interesting.

Mr. Donovan read "The Third Rail" with a Shakespearean cadence bred of a ten-year stretch of community theater he'd done in his youth and of which he often spoke. He had carefully enunciated every word, even deepened his voice to a bass rumble when he

arrived at the part of the train's approach. At first Brian had felt only the hot weight of mortified embarrassment, but gradually, a great hush had fallen over the room, and even Jordan Thomas, who usually slept through sixth period, had listened with uncanny attentiveness.

When he came to the end, Mr. Donovan's baritone had hung ringing in the air, and over the vast gulf of the pause that followed there came no sound. Then a roar of applause had filled the room, and from his desk in the back row David Wilcox had whispered "You're all right, Waters," and Tiffany Eubanks had given Brian a peculiar glance from under half-lidded brown eyes.

Mr. Donovan handed back the rest of the graded papers then and let them go, and as Brian made his way to the door, the last one out as always, he quelled the voice that rose suddenly in warning and turned back to his teacher, who was erasing announcements from the board. Rolled up tightly in his trembling left hand were the seven pages, and to his lips rose suddenly the question he'd been longing to ask all his life.

"What does it mean?"

Mr. Donovan had given him that same knowing look as the day before. "I was hoping you could tell me that, Brian. You're the author."

"I don't know."

His teacher had looked away, rubbing his beard absently, holding some private debate with himself. Finally he looked at Brian with a seriousness that sent a chill through him, and in an intoning voice that was completely void of the theatricality with which he'd read "The Third Rail," Mr. Donovan quoted, "The secret which the king hath

demanded cannot the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers, show unto the king.” Then he had looked away, back to the board he was erasing.

“Sir?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to look that one up, Brian.”

* * * * *

The search engine from the library computer he consulted before running to catch his bus returned Daniel 2:26. That night, a warmth both strange and familiar began in his chest and flooded outward to his limbs as he read the rest in a wondering voice: “Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, ‘But there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets and maketh known which shall be in the latter days.’”

Brian suddenly knew what the look had been under Mr. Donovan’s knowing smile as he’d handed him the seven pages the day before: pride.

* * * * *

He paused again over the keys, remembering coming home months before on that gray Monday afternoon from World Changers, the youth ministry event where he’d gone to Arkansas to help build houses for the poor. He remembered passing the taxicab and the blue plastic covering under which the Woodhaven property owners had demanded she keep it, remembered walking up the breezeway to see the eviction notice on the front

door. He had woken his mother, who he later learned had worked a sixteen-hour shift the night before. His father had been away at a business conference in Washington, D.C.

When Brian handed her the eviction notice she had set it down on the bedside table with hardly a glance, and there had been something unsettling about the way she'd been sitting on the bed holding her head in that gray, storm-herald light coming through the (*strip of cardboard*) window, something that reminded him of a (*clarinet*) much older memory. His mother had been sitting in that same exact way five years before, on the edge of the bed, holding her head in her hands, her fingertips absently rubbing her scalp as if scratching some insistent itch. He remembered the way she'd looked up sharply when he'd asked what he already knew, what would happen the next morning, as if hearing something (*Would you?*) she didn't like in his voice. He was suddenly ashamed as he remembered how she'd struck him across the face when he asked where her angels were now.

There had followed a battle the like of which only the one fought in the driveway of Mike's home six months later would approach. He had gone to his room with a box of Glad disposal bags and begun throwing in clothes, books, posters torn from his walls, everything but his (*You keep writing your stories*) notebooks, thinking only of (*fire and scar*) the alternative of digging through them later by the side of the (*rake and street*) road at the front of the apartment complex. He had made it out the front door with the first two bags, which he hurled into the Woodhaven dumpster. But when he went back to get the rest Evelyn Waters had come out of her room and asked him what he thought he was doing, why was he throwing everything he owned away, this was the sort of thing only someone about to (*EXIT*) kill himself would do. She had snatched the two Glad bags

away from him and retreated to her room, slamming the door behind her. Through the (*paper*) walls he could hear her faintly singing in a cracked, wavering alto a hymn, one he thought he recognized: “Then Came the Morning.”