

Preview Edwin's Reflection by Ray Deeg



Prologue

There can be no more wretched a soul than one so filled with resentment that a biological reaction occurs within the body's very tissue, precipitating the fundamental desire to watch the world burn. But on the grand stage of life, even the most loathsome soul can play a useful part. Just ask and any decent chess player will tell you that each piece on the board, when tactically traded, can swing a game's outcome. Case in point: Randall Evans, a well-trained and highly intelligent man—yet a particularly nasty strain of resentment had become firmly rooted in his mind. He'd been so full of resentment for so long that it had become common to ostracize himself to that dark abyss where people go to dole out self-punishment—to examine the laundry list of their failures, to bask in the sea of their own flaws, and to stew about the general unfairness of this rotten place. He'd been fidgeting since he woke up, wondering about the type of life that might make him happy. That was nothing new, especially in the last few months—years, if we're being honest, and he was.

Randall gazed down into Federal Plaza from his twenty-third-floor office window, his forehead pressed against the glass. Not a white puff in the sky, just light blue turning darker until it was nearly black in the west. The glass felt cool on his forehead, and he pondered a notion that had been ricocheting around in his mind for some time. As he stood watching the bridge-and-tunnel ant farm scurry around below, a thought that had been more shapeless and uncertain finally completed its metamorphosis and tore through its cocoon: He was miserable. He'd been that way for the majority of his life.

Randall's childhood and adolescence had been terrific, truly the bee's knees. Around his midtwenties, however, Randall's life began changing. He hadn't known it then, but that teeny thorn under his skin was born of his own sharp opinions. You know the ones: about what's good and bad, about what's right and wrong, about how things *should* be rather than simply what they are because of physics, inertia, gravity, distributed equity, human nature, and the rest. His disillusionment became irritation, frustration, and then intolerance; anger and rage followed. Now there wasn't any youth left to mask all that ugliness. His former gusto was drained. Working full-time, like a hamster on a wheel, can do that if you allow it—and he had. All those tiny moments that had led him to the present were gone, and most hadn't been all that spectacular in the first place, if he was being honest—and he was. All those forks in the road to all those other paths of possibility were gone, and he hadn't taken any of them. *I've squandered my life*, he thought.

He'd spent so long waiting for that *one special thing* so that his life could finally start. But that thing had never happened, so he'd ignored the truth, shut down from knowing or sharing his authentic self. He didn't listen and was seldom heard. He was strange now, absent and angry, and he was jealous most of his waking hours. Most of his energy was allocated to hiding the damage from himself by projecting his own worst qualities onto everyone else. He'd spent years stewing in that dark abyss, doing his penance, and turning in circles. How many times had he shaken off the obsession and begun the process of removing the blinders, only to become pathological all over again? The obsession—about his destiny, that secret thing in his head—had lodged itself in his psyche when he was a boy, but destiny isn't what it used to be. His cloud's silver lining had faded and cracked, and what remained was a visible mass of liquid droplets suspended in the atmosphere blocking the sun and casting a dark shadow everywhere he moved.

Having worked for the FBI for most of his adult life, Randall Evans had been drained of his creativity, his dreams, and, most of all, his goodwill. What little he did have had been gradually leached out by ignorance, by the physics and economics of life, and the rest by the mind-numbing injustice and unchained bureaucracy of his soulless government job. Soon after joining the FBI, a much younger and more vibrant Randall Evans had quickly noticed the sharp contrast between the deviant criminal deeds he was fighting against and the fluorescent-lit, caffeine-fueled analytical methodologies that are the bedrock of the bureau's operations. Living in that divide became his life. For a short time, it was exciting and kept him on track. He stayed out of the abyss for many years, hardly ever fidgeting or allowing resentment to form rot in his mind. But soon the work became routine, the colors faded, the corners turned up and cracked, and he realized his place—just another replaceable cog staring at his youth in the rearview mirror.

The idea of becoming an agent had come from his grandfather, Walter Evans, one of the very first agents recruited to serve in J. Edgar Hoover's Bureau of Investigation way back in 1926. Randall and his grandfather had spent endless summer afternoons on the front porch of their Ridgewood, New Jersey, home where Randall spent his childhood and where Walter spent his final years. Randall adored listening to his grandfather's soothing voice, punctuated by the creak of that old porch glider. It was the only time his mind felt still. He'd listen for hours as Walter spun grandiose tales of federal agents tracking the world's most brilliant scientists in a bid to control the greatest secret of the universe. Walter's stories captured Randall's imagination, filling him with jubilation. And Walter did a hell of a good job filling the void for Randall's absent father.

But at age eighty-seven, as all men do, Walter passed away. Randall was eleven and soon went back to killing bees and torturing small lawn

creatures. But by then Walter's stories had taken up permanent residence, deeply rooting themselves in the most fertile patch of Randall's psyche. A day never passed when Randall didn't lose himself for just a moment to marvel at Walter's stories and the secrets his grandfather had confided. As an adult, those stories were Randall's only solace. He'd even find himself smiling, just occasionally, at the possibility that even one of Walter's tales could be real. And he never forgot about his destiny.

"Oh, you'll finish what I could not," Walter would say. "You'll help find a way out of this maze, yes sir. It's your destiny, boy, and it will be your legacy to the world!"

Randall didn't understand all the things Walter said, but the love he felt for his *mofa*, his mother's father, was profound—unlike anything Randall had known before or since. Walter had conjured pure imagination in the boy, awakening him and transforming him into an imaginative critical thinker, an energetic new life brimming with possibility. It helped drive a twenty-five-year-old Randall to push his physical and mental boundaries, to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, and to successfully navigate the bureau's rigorous training program.

Never forgetting Walter's tales about scientists in covert laboratories, government agents and cover-ups, the secrets of the universe, and his destiny, Randall became resolute, concealing his obsession in the back of his mind. He was methodical after graduating and becoming an agent and never told a soul about his grandfather being a bureau agent. Less than a year after graduation, Randall was authorized to access the bureau's most sensitive case files. He searched with the patience and discipline of a cat burglar, but he only found ancillary references to the fact that an agent named Walter Evans had once served in the Bureau of Investigation—the precursor to today's Federal Bureau of Investigation, which officially began in 1935. The last reference he found was dated in June of 1943,

but there was a strange absence of retrievable references, few details about the cases Walter had worked on, and only one original case number. *Case number seventy-four.* That number became an obsession. Each time Randall queried it, no matter what terminal, the bureau's case management system returned the same message: *No Matches Found.*

Life went on, and that feeling of youthful freedom, of warm sun shining on his skin as he swung on the porch glider listening to Walter's stories, faded to a blurred daydream. He thought about it for so many years that he wondered if the memory was real or if he'd made the whole damn thing up. But the mind shifts much like the Earth's tectonic plates, surfaces change and evolve, and things long forgotten emerge to see daylight once again. And so it was, one Thursday morning, that the most fertile patch of Randall's psyche unearthed a detail.

Everett Lemily—that was the name of the kid from the secret laboratory.
Everett Lemily.

Randall entered the name on the closest terminal, but the screen returned the now-familiar message: *No Matches Found.* He tried Everett Hemily, Everett Tenily, Edward Femily, Edmond Benderly, and dozens more, but nothing came back a relevant match. Of course, he knew that most of the bureau's paper cases dating before the 1950s had yet to be digitized and simply weren't accessible through the case-file database. Still other cases had been intentionally misplaced by bureaucrats worried about saving their own hides or protecting the status quo. *And I may just have remembered it wrong. I was just a dumb kid.*

As the years passed, Walter's stories never found a window into Randall's new reality. All those secrets, those amazing tales—Randall's so-called destiny—were replaced with a wife named Cheryl and three daughters: Sofia, Amelia, and Liv. He was subjected to a daily regimen of soul-

depleting torture running on the FBI's criminal hamster wheel. He was forty-two years old, his forehead pressed against his office window while he stared down into Federal Plaza observing the world from an unknown station wondering whether the whole thing was a purgatory-like nightmare in his mind. He was barely holding on, and he didn't care who knew. He wasn't even pretending anymore. He was bitter. He wanted to exert his power over others, wanted to punish them for going about their happy lives while he was left behind. He wanted the destiny Walter had promised. But destiny, like evolution, moves intentionally and purposefully on its quest to become. It can be detoured, even stalled temporarily, but finding a way back onto its original path is inevitable.

Chapter One

The old man's eyes followed the record label around as it spun. His hair was gray and matted, and the skin on his face and arms was scaly and dotted with liver spots. He hadn't showered in some time, but there wasn't anyone else around—and the thing was, he really didn't give a damn. Using a yellowed fingernail, he lifted the tonearm and gently lowered the needle. After a light thud and some crackles, Mozart's Requiem Mass slowly permeated the opulent, wood-paneled library. The gentle pulse of the bassoon, in between bursts of violin and trumpet, crept through the house. It was a composition he'd known all his life, and he listened intently, as if the sound contained life's very meaning, connecting him with the people he'd loved and lost and who were now hidden between the notes and chords.

The slow rhythm of the composition was dark but matched the hopelessness that had grown in the old man's mind at about the same rate the cancer had spread through his body. *There is no stage five.* He'd made mistakes in his life and had more than his share of regrets. He'd learned to hate himself for allowing the thing to come between him and any sense of normalcy this life could have offered. It's a terrible thing being old and full of regrets, but his illusions about life had long ago been shattered. He had still been a child when he was afforded a glimpse of a powerful truth most souls never see or even hope to comprehend. *I might have a couple months left here.* As he pondered the bleakness of his situation, a feeling of nostalgia, followed by a glimmer of hope, washed over him. *I have nothing left to lose,* he realized. *I might as well put my remaining chips on red.*

The man gazed at a bulky object in the center of the library, covered by a thick, yellow tarp. He began dragging furniture to one side of the room, clearing a space around the thing. He flipped up the tarp, and a thick cloud of dust spread through the air revealing an ominous mechanical device about the size of a grand piano but not nearly as safe. He allowed his hands to brush along the machine, feeling the cold metal surface with his fingers, fiddling with the wires, dials, and knobs. The thing's copper pipes, tubes, and valves suggested an uneasy cross between the fantastic and the mundane. It wasn't a cappuccino maker, a pipe organ, or a printing press, but its strange metal appendages hinted at something in between. A series of golden tubes protruded like a futuristic exhaust pipe or perhaps a robotic poinsettia. The man ran his fingers over the pipes, making certain they were solid. He grabbed a toolbox and removed thin strands of silver wire, which he coiled around four bulky vacuum tubes.

This will either work, or it won't. Either way, my time is up. He thought this would be like one last spin at the roulette wheel—all or nothing. He turned his eyes toward his magnificent tray ceiling and spoke out loud: “*Spiritus nunquam moritur.*” He referenced a tattered blueprint littered with hand-scribbled notes, so long that even with his arms spread out, the schematic drooped in the middle like a clumsy length of paper towel. *Over and over and over*, he thought. *Like a purgatory.* The glow from the fireplace illuminated the blueprint with a warm shade of orange that flickered pleasantly. The crackling fireplace could be heard just under the music, and, for a moment, there was peace in the man's eyes. The lifelong inventor realized the intricate maze of electrical wires had been connected properly.

He shook his head, pressing his chapped lips together, and flicked the blueprint in a nod to his own ingenuity. Mozart's composition lifted the man's spirits, and his hands and arms woke up just in time to conduct an

invisible orchestra. He danced as he moved, following a thick cable lying on the floor. He spun toward the back of the room and then opened a sliding door to the backyard and the warm night air. The cable ran through the estate's enormous backyard to a transmission tower carrying high-voltage lines at the back of the man's property. He connected the large cable to a receiver he'd bootstrapped to the transmission tower—without proper permits, but never was the old man one to worry about rules. He'd known a truth far more powerful than man's silly laws and had no patience for stop signs or speed limits. A warm August wind crept toward the man's property, propelling leaves into tiny orbits. They descended around him as if he were a magnet. The wind pushed his gray hair back, freezing him in his tracks. He stopped and raised his weathered face to the starry night sky, feeling a surge of energy deep in the marrow of his bones like the energy of a chemical reaction in its nascent state. *It's here. It knows. Oh God, it knows.*

He ran to a large patio table and flipped it over. Summoning all his strength, he tore the round metal top from the base. Afterward he checked his pulse with his finger; it was still there. Now sweating, he rolled the tabletop back into the archaic library and locked the door behind him. With the sharp end of a Cleveland hatchet, he punched four holes in the tabletop and began speaking out loud again. "In lieu of flowers, the decedent's attorneys ask that you make a generous donation to their firm." He laughed—the laugh of a madman with nothing to lose, no more parts to play, and no remaining stake in this place. He fastened the four coiled vacuum tubes into the holes he'd punched and connected them to the thing's main framework with a wireless router. The machine's appearance could only be described as an art deco fire hazard. The strange copper alien thing appeared dangerously unreliable, a modern hodgepodge of welds and duct tape, repairs and patches, over something much older, nearly ancient. With all the power he could muster, he set the tabletop

vertically into the groove formed at the machine's base. But the tabletop was thinner than the wide groove, and his face reflected the dilemma. Being the machinist he was, he quickly fashioned two metal brackets and fixed them to either side in order to stabilize the tabletop. Lifting the schematic blueprint again, the man checked and rechecked his work, comparing the device to the blueprint. *Power, primary, magnetic, coolant, reflectors, sequencer, wheel, oscillators, and the corona should come to about here. And if I get burned, well, so be it.* "I won't be coming back for the body," the old man quipped out loud.

He pulled a large flap on the end of the machine's base and pumped the lever that appeared until a spark was triggered. *Why is there a universe, why is there matter, why is there anything at all?* he thought with a devilish grin. But he already knew the answer. The machine began to hum. The noise grew louder as the machine gathered momentum, drowning out the music. A deep rattle shook the books, clocks, and photos. The faces in the pictures stood like witnesses to the madness unfolding, but they could only stare helplessly at the old man's insanity from the distance of their shelves and cabinets. The tabletop began rotating inside the machine's base, slowly at first, like a miniature Ferris wheel. The man's eyes lit up like fireworks at a fairground, and he laughed hysterically until he became winded and his laugh decayed into a pitiful cry; he'd been in so much pain. He dragged a heavy armchair across the floor, leaving large gouges in the parquet, and positioned it directly in front of the spinning tabletop.

He spoke to his friend in the ceiling again. "The important thing to remember is that this simulation is a good one. It's believable. Things are solid, it's tactile, and you can move your mass of molecules from one place to another; and when you finally realize what you've experienced, everything ordinary becomes too beautiful to bear." The rattle grew louder until all at once the room fell nearly silent; the tabletop had reached a

smooth, blistering speed. From a black clamshell case, he removed a small copper disc or large coin, which he held above a slot in the machine. He let it go, and it fell into place, clanging its way through the thing's internal workings. It rolled and clicked around inside. Machinery groaned, gears clasped and connected, and a white-blue glow began to emanate from the spinning wheel. And then the old man caught the scent. He'd been just a kid when he'd smelled it last, but he recognized the arid, metallic taste in the fleshy part of his throat like momma's bread.

He sat in the chair and quickly became stoic. *I'm ready*, he thought. *It's time*. He reached into his trouser pocket, retrieved a straight razor, and unfolded the shiny silver blade with teary eyes and a whimpering jaw. Without much sentiment, using a surgeon's deliberate slice, the man opened the veins on his left wrist and then—with some difficulty—his right. Blood flowed generously off the chair onto the parquet floor. He was a bleeder. He watched the dark, sticky stuff flow and stared again at the photos of his life. Still, the faces he'd known could only stare back, unmoved at the bizarre scene. The machine's energy enveloped the room, and something changed. Loose papers began to float as if in water. The room became less solid, more fluid, and he pushed out a sigh of relief, resigning himself to this place. *It's corona time!* He relaxed every muscle, falling deeper into the chair, and allowed himself to be taken. Given this crisis point in our evolution, most men would have held back, trembled in its presence, pushed their mothers or children to get out of its way, but not him. He would let himself go in a perfect act of abandon, in spite of the fear gripping his physical being. It was an act of faith inspired by what he'd learned those many years ago. It was real, and it was waiting for him to return.

The humming noise was even, accelerating smoothly, but as he began to drift, he heard a clicking noise. His eyelids fluttered, redirecting him back

to now. The base of the machine sparked, causing a terrible grinding noise. The blue light wavered, and horror washed across the man's face, fear blazing in his eyes. Thick yellow smoke billowed from the machine. He watched in disbelief but was too weak to react. Fluidity turned solid, and floating papers fell back to the floor. The tattered blueprint settled on the top of a large bookshelf. Metal fragments shot across the room, breaking windows and shattering a glass cabinet door. The spinning tabletop broke free of the machine's base and plowed across the room, embedding itself into the far wall with a fantastic force. The humming noise wound down. The old man was silent while the remaining sticky stuff drained from his body. The record was over, and the tonearm skipped the needle in the center, repeating an unsettling rhythm: *bump scratch scratch, bump scratch scratch.* A tear ran down the man's cheek. *I have failed.* He felt his consciousness being tugged from somewhere behind his eyes; he couldn't travel now. He accepted that only a small part of the thing he was might become rejoined. He couldn't go back or make any changes, either, so the loop would continue. *My life is over.* He braced for the inevitable. He felt his consciousness slipping. His vision went narrow, and stillness surrounded him. It was all nothingness until everything went black.

Chief of Police Ian Heckie raised his hand to shield his eyes: the bright bursts from the photographer's camera were irritating. "What's that ghastly smell?" Heckie asked in his Scottish accent. "Open the damn windows, for Christ's sake." Heckie was in his midforties, a well-built, rosy-faced man with piercing blue eyes. He surveyed the library and its bizarre scene, reminding himself not to make assumptions. He spotted a framed photo on the floor. "Did you get this?" he asked, swirling his finger at the picture.

"Yup, go ahead," the photographer replied.

Heckie picked up the frame with a gloved hand and examined the old snapshot. A young boy holding a broom stood in front of three older men in what appeared to be a 1930s-era science lab, his excited smile captured for the ages. With a silent kindness, Heckie placed the picture back on the table, next to an exquisite Tiffany lamp.

Two uniformed cops walked around the chaotic room, coming to a stop near the chair where the old man's pale white body sat surprisingly upright. His eyes were wide open, staring into infinity—or at least past the foggy bridge that separates this world and the Gulf. His eyes were so wide they looked like two blueberries stuck in a muffin. Heckie stared, the hair on his neck beginning to rise. The blood, the strange machine now fragmented into sections on the floor, the tabletop lodged in the wall, *and, my God—that smell!* He felt disoriented, hot, and uncomfortable. “By all that’s holy, what on earth happened here?” Heckie asked as he inspected a golden tube.

“Maid was away for the weekend,” a young cop replied. “She found him this morning. She doesn’t know anything. He was pretty much a recluse; no one knew much about him. My wife saw him now and again at the grocery store. She spoke to him a few times, I think. He didn’t have anyone. His family and friends are long gone, never had any children...” The young cop trailed off. “Anyway, the doors were locked from the inside. Clearly, this is a suicide—bizarre and creepy, but a suicide.”

Heckie peered into the man’s hollow eyes. “Gives me the heebie-jeebies,” he said. “What’s his name?”

“At first we thought it was Frank Ward,” the cop answered, handing Heckie the driver’s license he’d retrieved from the man’s wallet. “But when I ran his prints through FIS, they came back with the name Everett Lemily, born in 1920.”

"Jesus Christ, he was ancient," Heckie replied. "Anything come up on the name Lemily?"

"No arrests or warrants. Not even a parking ticket. But there was a reference from the FBI. I tried to access the file, but it's sealed in their system."

"Who was this guy hiding from?" Heckie stared into the lifeless eyes once more. *What terrible things have you done, fella?* Heckie walked through the opulent house, admiring photos, art, and furniture all from an era long gone. He stopped at a wooden desk and opened a few drawers. He spotted a fancy watch, which he paused to admire. He looked up to see if anyone was in the room with him but reconsidered his old ways and closed the drawer. He already had a nice watch. In a lower drawer he found a chess set and some keys partially obscuring a large stack of torn-open envelopes, golden yellow with a red stripe running across the bottom and a clear plastic window up front. *Hundreds of yellow envelopes.* He jotted the sender's address in his notepad: *J. P. Morgan Trust and Fiduciary Services, 270 Park Avenue, New York, New York.*

The police wrapped up their work, and Heckie watched as the old man's body was zipped into a bag, hefted onto a stretcher, and loaded into an ambulance emblazoned with the town's name: *The Village of New Hope, Pennsylvania.*

Chapter Two

Destiny was finding a way back onto its path when it materialized for a moment, appearing as a smoky—almost powdery—apparition only the spirits can see. It took flight into the night sky, embarking on its quest for the coming of light. *What is this light?* men might ask the stars, not recognizing their own desires and higher aspirations. *It is the light of your own imagination, intellect, and will,* the stars might answer back. The apparition rose steadily, drifting above the streets and finding its altitude somewhere just below the spires perched atop New York's concrete-and-steel leviathans. And up there, amid the gargoyles, eagle's nests, and closed-circuit television cameras, destiny found its target and moved steadily through the air and into the branches of a rather voluptuous tulip tree. A glorious specimen by any dendrologist's standards, this particular tree was different from others. It grew in a large wooden planter fifty-eight floors above Madison Avenue, on the deck of Tom Hartger's penthouse apartment.

Tonight, its branches swayed back and forth in the light of the nearly full moon, casting long, angular shadows across the bedroom ceiling like a distorted movie reel. Tom opened his eyes, disturbed by the flickering light. He couldn't sleep tonight. There was a tightness in his mind, a deep-down restlessness he'd never experienced before. The tulip tree's branches swept back and forth like a metronome, and Tom wondered how much time he'd spent staring at ceilings. He considered the many beds in the many rooms he'd occupied throughout his life. *It must be months of staring at ceilings—years, even.*

Unlike many of the ceilings he'd slept under, this ceiling was in tip-top shape. Its ornate crown molding was perfectly shaped, finished with a

clear lacquer that reflected the silver moonlight perfectly. The molding, the lacquer, the recessed lighting—all a far contrast from the ceiling of his childhood bedroom. He wondered if every ceiling he stared at for the rest of his life would be compared to that first. He could still recall the patch that had loomed over his childhood bed for so many years. The spot wasn't uniform like the rest of the ceiling, and he remembered large indentations. *Likely because of age, or shoddy workmanship, or both. It's 1:37 a.m. Why can't I sleep? Empty your mind; the day is over,* he pleaded with himself like two people haggling over price. He'd always had a voice in his head, and it simply wouldn't shut up. He turned his pillow over, searching for the cool side, but he couldn't find it. The restlessness in his mind seemed louder now. *Shoddy workmanship. Right. But that was the ceiling we could afford back then. They did the best they could with what they had.* That old patch of ceiling had an uneven popcorn finish, and the caulk had coagulated in the corners where the ceiling met the window jamb and wall. *What's with all the nostalgia tonight?*

All at once, a precise memory flashed in his mind. He could see the light coming in from the hallway, forming shapes on the ceiling of that childhood bedroom—a perfect vision from decades ago, nearly another life. The light was thin at the door's opening but became wider as it moved into his room. And without an inch more on either side, the beam from the hallway aligned perfectly with that strange patch of ceiling, forming new shapes each time he looked. His young mind could easily untangle the messages hidden inside those shapes. He knew he was special because he could decipher the message, penetrate past the surface. He discovered castles, pyramids, and dinosaurs imprisoned in that patch of wall and ceiling, and he set them free. He released them using a power he alone could summon. All those magical things were hiding, waiting until the coast was clear before allowing themselves to be seen—but only by him.

He was seven then, and it was in the stark silence of that small bedroom that he had realized for the first time that he was alive and thought about what that meant. To be alive, inside a body, to be aware and conscious. To sit up in bed and listen to the ringing in your ear. *What is this place?* But the question wasn't about his room or his house or even his neighborhood, but about this plane, this body, this mind—everything he could see, feel, and touch. *What is this place?*

When Tom was eight, he woke from an afternoon nap realizing he was being carried by the man with the funny face and the missing arm. As Tom came to, he realized that he was being carried down the steps into the basement. Tom knew it was his grandfather by the way he was being held, a distinctive, backward-leaning posture that allowed more of Tom's weight to fall on Phillip Hartger's chest. Phillip didn't look like other people. Tom's grandfather had suffered a strange burn when he was eleven years old, and one side of the man's face was gone—it just wasn't there. Between his disfigured face and that missing arm, Phillip Hartger had for most of his life been a social pariah. As a teen, Phillip endured stares, teasing, and looks of disgust. Wherever Phillip went, mothers turned their children's faces and covered their eyes. Phillip became a hermit, rarely venturing outdoors unless necessity precluded all other options, and then only leaving his house late at night when the twenty-four-hour stores were empty. One night, a drunk picked a fight with Phillip. He followed him out of a bar and beat him up pretty good. It's tough to fight back when you only have one arm, but you only need one arm to light a match. When Phillip recovered, he burned the man's house down.

As Phillip walked down the steps with him, Tom woke from his dreamlike state. As his view cleared the basement ceiling, he saw something he'd never seen before in the darkness of that dingy basement. He blinked, thinking he might still be dreaming. His grandfather moved his head back

to take a gander at the paralyzing awe gripping Tom's face. Tom knew right away that he was receiving a gift. Phillip beamed while Tom's eyes grew wider, neither of them able to contain his excitement. Sitting on the far side of the basement was an incredibly elaborate model train. The train sat motionless on a track that circled a detailed landscape—a whole town, a little train station, even a nearby farm. There were trees and grass and a mountain with a tunnel where the train entered one end and came out the other. It was a whole world, perfectly miniaturized and sitting right there in Tom's basement.

The track made a perfect circle around the square, six-by-six-foot wooden base. The monster model looked nothing like a toy; it was enormous, detailed in every way. It was so spectacular that even the most fervent disciples of model training would be green with envy. Tom still remembered the pronounced grin on his grandfather's half face. It was especially memorable because he'd never seen him laugh. Then again, he'd only seen the man a few times in the seven years he'd been alive. Phillip wasn't involved in their lives. He was a successful businessman—a millionaire—but he hadn't given them a damn thing except for the massive model train.

Tom's pleasure at the gift was short-lived. His father quickly came down the stairs, and the argument that ensued was one of Tom's last memories of his grandfather. Phillip Hartger died a few months later. He remembered watching his father sprinkle Phillip's ashes into the Long Island Sound, crying as they dissolved into the dark water. That was also the day Tom's father had cleared up a question Tom had always been afraid to ask. Phillip had paid a woman to bear his son: Tom's father had never known his mother. Tom could understand how Phillip's physical appearance had cursed him to live a life few others could bear, yet he had never seemed resentful. He had been so filled with the energy of life.

Now, contemplating the grandiosity of his penthouse ceiling, Tom rather missed the shoddy workmanship of his childhood home. Visions from his childhood were coming back more vividly than ever tonight. He could smell the familiar stink of the old house in Greenwich, Connecticut. He still owned it but hadn't been back in over a year. Tom thought about his model train, about his grandfather, and about his own father's bizarre tale. A real train's horn erupted far off in the distance, perhaps on the other side of the Hudson. It echoed off the tops of the buildings before the faint sound traveled in between the tulip branches and penetrated the window glass. He allowed himself to be taken by it. *Finally*, he thought. He closed his eyes and felt his breath flow calmly. His muscles relaxed as he put on his engineer's cap and that ole red bandana. *All aboard*. He'd received a message tonight, an invisible nudge delivered by an apparition pushing destiny back onto its path. It was telling him the time was coming to till those long-forgotten stretches of field and sow the seeds for a new kind of harvest.

Chapter Three

On the twenty-third floor of Federal Plaza, in downtown New York City, Sentinel's bank of servers purred away diligently. Developed by Lockheed Martin, Sentinel was the case-management system and hub connecting the FBI's network of departments, its servers constantly combing far-flung databases around the world. Today, for no particular reason, one of Sentinel's servers was crawling a local police database in Pennsylvania when it found a match to a legacy case file. The data sped its way through a network of circuit boards, processors, and hard-disk arrays, following a fiber-optic cable into a cubicle where it was delivered to a computer terminal used by FBI special agent Jolanda Kulish, a trainee of nearly two years. Her screen flashed, and the adjacent printer produced a single sheet of paper. She appraised the alert but was neither shocked nor impressed by its contents. *Everyone dies*, she thought.

Alert in hand, she navigated the maze of cubicles, reflecting that those great stretches of bureaucracy demonstrated scarce evidence of the genuine human caring or goodness that had originally been intended. She saw only row upon row of machines, whose heartless surveillance stripped clean the humanity of their operators—just as it stripped the dignity and constitutional rights of anyone unfortunate enough to land in its sight. Listen as one may, one would hear no voices of concern for anything or anyone here. Any righteousness that was to be distributed from this place of justice had long ago been trodden down by the soldier feet of empty minds marching to the orders of fearful bureaucrats and candidates seeking reelection. As Jolanda moved through row after row, she hardly lifted her head. Her instincts told her this place and the people here were not the pillar of good they claimed. Each person there had been cleansed of empathy through the training process, and the organization

had long ago lost its grip on the magnetic chain of humanity. There were a few genuinely good people, but they were quickly whitewashed of their empathy—or fired. This place could not be sympathetic or gentle. It operated not on empathy but on bloodless law, and therefore it had no right to share in men's secrets. Its operators looked on the population as the unpredictable subjects of its experiments, Jolanda reflected bleakly, turning man and woman into citizen puppets, pulling, tangling, and often cutting their wires when the mess got too complicated.

As Jolanda approached her destination, she heard music. The door was cracked just a hair, so she peered in. Her mentor, veteran agent Randall Evans, had been distracted lately and for the most part had been ignoring her. He hadn't lifted a finger to fulfill his obligations as her supervisor in the last few months. She could tell his heart hadn't been in the game for some time, probably since long before she'd arrived some twenty months earlier. Now, his head was raised to heaven, and his eyes were closed as if in deep meditation. He sensed Jolanda's presence and spoke without turning or even opening his eyes. "Has someone blown something up again, Jojo?"

"Nothing that exciting," she replied as she stepped in. "Just another stiff I'm deleting from the central watch list—as if we were actually watching him."

Randall opened his eyes but didn't turn to face her. "Terrorist, child molester, or bank robber?" he asked, offering only a fraction of his attention.

"None of the above," she replied. "This is the guy you asked me to set an alert on, jeez, way back when you first started training me. Everett Lemily. Nothing surfaced before today, but Sentinel got the hit, and bingo—he's dead."

Randall continued humming for another moment and then frowned. “Wait—who’s dead?” he asked. He turned around and saw his trainee smiling with joyful annoyance.

Jolanda batted her eyelashes sarcastically; it was something her mother did too. “Hello, thanks for joining us today,” she said. “The name, the one you asked me to set an alert on a while back, Everett Lemily. He’s dead—as in lifeless, deceased, extinct, stiff, departed, in oblivion, defunct, no more. Sentinel got the hit from a local police report in the Village of New Hope, Pennsylvania. Sounds quaint, doesn’t it?”

All at once the gravity of Kulish’s words registered. Randall clicked the music volume lower. “Everett Lemily,” he said out loud, keeping the scale of his growing excitement hidden.

“Mm-hmm,” Kulish confirmed for the third time.

“Everett Lemily,” Randall repeated. “Yes, I remember now. I was showing you how to set up alerts in Sentinel, of course.”

“A suicide, apparently,” she said, reading from the sheet. “Decedent’s body discovered in his residence by housekeeper, blah blah blah, deep gaping incised wound present on both left and right inner wrists. Let’s see here...cut over the ventral aspect of the left wrist, length is 25.5 cm, and maximum width of the wound was 5 cm in the center; depth of wound is 9 cm near the left angle, blah blah blah. Cause of death is exsanguination.”

“I got it,” Randall said, feeling his heart rate rising. “He slit his wrists.”

“And get this,” Kulish continued. “He was the last living person listed in this file. All the other people listed in this case died decades ago. And the case has labels dating back to, Jesus, 1926. The original case wasn’t even input into Sentinel until seven months ago, when they began digitizing the old paper archives.” Jolanda wiggled the paper so it dangled

like a snake from her fingertips. “This, my friend, is ancient. What’s the 411 on this guy?”

“What’s the case number and password?” Evans asked, remaining as calm as possible.

Kulish referenced the sheet. “One six four, seven two nine. The password is AMN—Alpha Martin Nancy—seven one.”

Randall did the math in his head. “One six four sounds like a new case prefix.”

“It is new, but the prefix is designated for old paper cases. And the original case number—are you ready for this? Seventy-four. Can that even be right?”

Randall had keyed in the numbers before she finished speaking. *Seventy four.* His mind was racing and his heart pumping buckets. His screen lit up, and he began browsing dozens of documents and a sea of photos. *My destiny.* “Agent Kulish,” Randall said in a supervisory tone, “did you create a work order or log entry on this? Have you mentioned this to anyone?” He’d become serious, and she could sense he’d become excited.

“No, you told me not to,” she replied.

“I did. Good, good,” Evans said out loud.

“What’s the deal on this case?” she asked again.

Randall turned toward her. “I’m not exactly sure yet, and I don’t want to say anything out of turn, but I need you to remove any alerts or logs on this and keep this between us. I’m dead serious, Jojo.”

“What’s the big secret?” she asked.

Randall peered at her, his stare as serious as he could muster. “In time, Jojo, but this has to be between us for now, OK?”

She recognized the stare and backed down. “Wouldn’t be the first secret I’ve kept around here,” she said to no one in particular.

“Listen, thanks for the alert, but I’m slammed,” he said.

“I can tell by your music recital,” she said, rolling her eyes. But she acknowledged Randall’s not-so-subtle hint and sauntered out, leaving the alert behind.

With newfound purpose, Randall pulled himself closer to his desk. He sat more erect now. *This is Walter’s case—the stories he told me, my legacy.* Photos of prominent scientists and strange devices from the 1920s and ‘30s flashed across Randall’s screen. With each passing frame, he became keenly aware that the images, notes, and letters matched his grandfather’s mesmerizing stories exactly. And as he devoured the contents, the details he saw were strangely familiar. And the name, Everett Lemily, the only name he could remember—it was real. It had paid off. He found himself wandering through his memories as he waded through the case file. He scoured dozens of briefings from the Department of War and handwritten notes from bureau agents written back in the days when they were called G-men. The people referenced were gone now, and so were most of the government departments—they’d closed decades ago.

Suddenly the image of his grandfather, a vibrant young Walter Evans, appeared on his screen. *Walter!* He was inside a laboratory holding a ruler and kneeling down to examine a series of tubes protruding from a device. Alongside Walter, other agents smiled for the camera. There were dozens of photos. *Grandpa, I’ve waited years for this to happen.* The hairs on Randall’s arms stood on end as he took in the details of every photo.

Images from the case file flashed on the screen and reflected in his eyes while he devoured the content. *Interference patterns, reflectors, microtubules, the stock market crash, thought manipulation, a semipermeable membrane.*

-----END PREVIEW-----

