

CHAPTER

1

“NIFTY LITTLE TALK, MR. AUSTIN.”

The kid’s eyes mocked me from the recesses of a hooded gray sweatshirt. I’d used the word earlier to describe a research app that had proved helpful to me. The kid was throwing the word back in my face. I chose to let it go and focus on the larger insult.

“Speech. It was a speech,” I corrected him. He was playing to his buddies a few feet away.

The kid smirked. “And that prize thing . . . like, wow!”

“It’s the Pulitzer, son, not some whistle ring you pull out of a box of Cracker Jacks.”

“Yeah, whatever . . .”

I walked the open hallway. Ten years separated me from my graduation. This wasn’t my high school anymore. The buildings were the same, but the occupants had changed. Everywhere I looked there were hooded sweatshirts. Since when had my alma mater become a school for Unabomber groupies?

Swept along in a river of adolescent angst—an endless stream of tattoos, piercings, colorful swatches of hair, studded leather chokers, and black lipstick—I tracked the smart-mouthed kid as he passed.

He joined his pod of friends, casting himself as the hero who'd gotten under the skin of some old geezer. They looked my way and laughed.

What is it about high school that brings out the worst in the human species? All my teenage insecurities, like faithful old dogs, were waiting for me when I stepped on campus, and had been nipping at my heels all morning.

I had an overwhelming urge to grab the kid by the scruff of his neck and take him on, to teach him a thing or two about respect.

Instead, I told myself I wasn't going to sink to his level. What difference did it make if some identity-challenged adolescent didn't appreciate the magnitude of my literary achievement? I told myself to let it go. I was the mature one here.

Breaking eye contact with him, I turned forward and walked smack into a metal pole.

A pair of coeds, one plump and one rail thin, gasped. Their hands flew to their mouths, at first in shock, but then to hide their giggles.

A wiry-haired boy with a serious acne problem laughed openly. "Ouch! That's gotta hurt!"

He was just glad it wasn't him.

"Are you all right, sir?" the plump coed asked.

"Do you want us to take you to the nurse's station?"

I cringed as the image flashed in my mind. Me, with a coed under each arm, being assisted out of the fast lane.

I assured the girls I was fine. I struck a fine pose—more than fine, robust, virile—and continued on my way, eager to put them, the pole, and the incident behind me.

A buzzer sounded. The corridor cleared rapidly as students disappeared into open doorways like water pouring down drains.

With the hallway to myself, I rubbed my forehead and wondered if the pole had left a mark. A familiar spring breeze swirled past me. And without the distraction of students, my thoughts turned nostalgic.

The outdoor stucco walls were the same mud-brown color I remembered, the doors aqua-blue. The open central corridor still stretched the length of the campus, with alternating wings of classrooms and grassy lawns on each side.

Approaching one of my former classrooms, I peered inside. A small, redheaded woman with a hairstyle that predated my lifetime stood in front of the classroom. She wielded a wooden pointer like it was a broadsword. Behind her was a map of Gettysburg with red and blue arrows indicating troop movements.

“Reminiscing?”

I turned toward the voice behind me to find a smiling, horse-shoe-bald Hispanic man with a thick, black mustache. He held a sheaf of papers in one hand. Extending his other hand, he introduced himself. “Carlos Ruiz Mendoza.” His smile widened, revealing a gold tooth.

“Grant—”

“Austin. Yeah, I know. The assembly. Congratulations, by the way. The Pulitzer. Quite an achievement.”

I shrugged modestly but didn’t disagree. “Are you a teacher?” I asked.

“Remedial reading.” He said it like he was apologizing. “The way I see it, if I do my job, by the time my students complete the course they’ll actually be able to read your book. They won’t, of course.”

We both laughed.

“It’s not exactly *Game of Thrones*,” I admitted.

Mendoza motioned toward the classroom. “Do you know Rose?”

Inside the classroom the teacher, Rose, had leveled her broadsword at a sandy-haired student who slumped in his chair and stared at her defiantly.

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” I said. “This was Coach Walker’s room when I was here.”

“Walker . . . quite a character from what I hear,” Mendoza said.

“He passed on two years before I arrived. Stories still circulate, though.”

I laughed. “Believe them. Walker knew only one way of doing things—as a football lineman coach. History, football, it was all the same to him.”

“Were you on the team?”

“Football? No. Tennis was my sport. But Walker coached it too. The man didn’t know a foot fault from a double fault, but he had us in great shape. We were the only team in the district doing bear crawls on the courts.”

Mendoza laughed.

“But I learned some valuable life lessons from him,” I added. “If nothing else, Coach taught us to hustle. I learned that hustle can beat superior talent; not always, but often enough.”

“Good lesson.”

“Got me where I am today.”

By silent agreement, we continued down the corridor.

“I didn’t have the smarts for scholarships,” I explained. “Worked my way through college throwing baggage around at the local airport and pinching pennies.”

“Ah, the Cup o’ Noodles degree,” Mendoza said.

I grinned. “You too?”

“Midnight shift at a 24-hour convenience store.”

I liked this man.

With matching strides, we walked in silence for a moment, then he said, “You’ve come a long way since your microwave soup days, Austin. The Oval Office. Air Force One. The G-8 Summit in Paris. Few men get to see the things you’ve seen.”

“I’m glad someone was listening to my speech.”

Mendoza gave me a sideways glance. “Was school assembly behavior all that different when you attended?”

“I guess not,” I admitted. “In one the music teacher stopped his

orchestra mid-concert because we started batting a beach ball in the stands.”

Mendoza nodded. “Some are better than others. Last month we had a band . . . a rhythm group, actually. They beat on trash cans, banged lids, swished brooms, that sort of thing. They were good. The students loved them.”

“So you’re saying if I want to make a hit with teenagers, I need to bang trash can lids together.”

“Of course not,” Mendoza scoffed. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, “But it wouldn’t hurt.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“Seriously, Grant—long after the din of trash can lids fades away, what you have done will be remembered and revered. The Pulitzer Prize, son! They don’t hand those out in Cracker Jack boxes!”

“Seems I’ve heard that somewhere before.”

“You are, without doubt, the most famous alumnus this school has produced.”

I thanked him as humbly as I could. But, truth was, I’d traveled the width of the country to hear those words. If only Myles Shepherd had heard them, my day would have been complete.

“Coming back here,” Mendoza continued, “after all the exotic places you’ve been, all the famous people you’ve met, this must seem rather mundane to you.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Singing Hills High will always be a part of who I am.”

Mendoza pulled up in front of a door labeled faculty. He offered his hand again. “I’m glad I had this chance to chat with you, Mr. Austin. Something to tell my grandchildren someday.”

Before he disappeared through the door, I said, “One thing more, Mr. Mendoza, where is Myles Shepherd’s classroom?”

“Shepherd? Sure. First room on the last wing.”

I thanked him and continued down the corridor, my spirits much

improved. There's something satisfying about hearing a teacher call you "Mister." I made a mental note to send Mendoza a signed copy of my book.

Upon reaching the last wing, I peered through the louvered windows and caught my own reflection. I was grinning like a man about to burst at the seams. And why not? I'd waited a decade for this day to arrive, and I wanted to savor every second of it.

This morning, as I dressed for the assembly, I told myself I wasn't going to gloat, that I was going to take the high road. But now that I was here, all I had were low-road thoughts.

I peered into the room. It was empty. In the front right, a door stood open. The teacher's office. A light spilled out from inside.

Shepherd was in there.

I was almost surprised. It would have been just like him to deprive me of my moment of triumph.

The door was unlocked. I let myself in.

The threshold proved to be a time portal. As I walked between the rows of desks, I was seventeen again with books under my arm and worries that I'd forgotten to do my homework swirling in my head. I trod the same scuffed, green-tile floor that I'd stared at while straining to remember answers to test questions. Even the assignment on the chalkboard could have been one I'd copied down years ago—

Chapters 45–47 for Thursday
TERM PAPERS DUE IN TWO WEEKS!

I ran my fingertips across the top of a desk. Suddenly, the past gave way to a sobering thought.

Mundane.

Mendoza had pegged it, hadn't he? The room. The studies. The students. The repetitious routine. All of it was ordinary. Common-place. Mundane.

I couldn't believe that for years I had allowed myself to be haunted by Myles Shepherd's teaching success. For what? For this? Look at it! Shepherd's grand kingdom consisted of nothing more than row after row of graffiti-marred desks with chewing gum stuck to the undersides.

"Grant? Is that you?"

I approached the office door of my old nemesis and poked my head inside. My first impression? Cramped. Books defined the decor. Books squeezed vertically and horizontally into every inch of shelf space. Books stacked on top of shelves, on chairs, on the floor, on other books. In the center of the room, a gray metal desk dominated the floor space. Binders and folders of every color formed what looked like a New York city block of towers. On the working side of the desk was a small stack of papers, which were being graded. The top sheet was heavily slashed with red marks.

"Grant! Welcome to my snugery!" Myles Shepherd half rose from his chair. He extended his hand across the desk. His grip had no more warmth than that of a car salesman.

"Sit! Sit!" he cried. "Just move those books anywhere."

He motioned to two student chairs with identical three-ring binder towers. I managed to relocate one of them to the floor without toppling it or setting off an avalanche.

I situated the chair in front of the desk and sat. The chair was smaller than it looked. I felt like Papa Bear sitting in Baby Bear's chair.

Looking down on me, Shepherd made no attempt to hide his amusement. I didn't care. There was only one Pulitzer Prize winning author in this room and it wasn't him.

"So, you took the time to stop by," Shepherd said. "I wasn't sure you would, now that you're famous."

"And miss this opportunity to see you? I've been looking forward to it." And that was the truth. "You're looking good, Myles."

It was an understatement. He looked great. Tanned. Fit. Not only had he not lost any hair, but his neatly trimmed style looked fuller and thicker than it had in high school.

He still had that killer combination of pale blue eyes and dimpled smile that turned women's knees to butter. The cleft in his chin sealed the deal. He looked more like a movie celebrity than a high school teacher. He was one of those guys who looked better in person than in his publicity pictures.

A tweed sports coat was draped over the back of his chair. Blue oxford sleeves rolled midway up muscular forearms. His collar was unbuttoned and his red tie loose.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," he said.

He swiveled around so that the back of his chair was facing me. I could hear three-ring binders toppling. When he swiveled back, he was holding a thick book which he plopped onto his desk. I recognized it instantly.

Lionheart: The R. Lloyd Douglas Story by Grant Austin.

Instinctively I reached to autograph it, then stopped myself. I settled back into my undersized chair.

Let him ask.

"Have you read it?"

Shepherd replied by picking up the book and thumbing through it. He took his time, pausing at every chapter.

He took so long my attention wandered to the display on the wall behind him. He'd hung his master's degree from Yale along with three framed news clippings—

**Myles Shepherd Turns Down Yale Offer
to Teach at Local High School**

**Myles Shepherd:
California Teacher of the Year**

PARADE MAGAZINE

**Trendy Teacher Inspires Teens:
Myles Shepherd, Role Model Extraordinaire**

Something familiar caught my attention. Prominently displayed on top of a mustard yellow file cabinet was a tennis trophy—Most Valuable Player.

On the night of the award ceremony, Coach Walker confided in me that his decision to give the award to Myles had been a coin toss. Myles had edged me out. That's the way it had always been between us.

I couldn't help but wonder if the trophy normally resided atop the file cabinet or if Myles had placed it there in anticipation of my visit.

As I continued to look around, I sensed there was something odd about the room. At first I couldn't put my finger on it. Then I did.

Conspicuously absent was any kind of student homage to Shepherd. For an award-winning teacher, that struck me as odd. There were no pictures of Shepherd surrounded by laughing students. No nostalgic teacher plaques or knickknacks, the kind gift stores sell by the case at graduation time. In fact, there were no apple-for-the-teacher mementos of any kind.

"Your book is certainly getting you a lot of attention," Shepherd said, breaking into my thoughts. "The New York Times bestseller list, for what? Three weeks now?"

"Thirteen weeks."

"Thirteen! Are you sure?"

"Thirteen. Trust me. An author knows. And you still haven't answered my question. Have you read it?"

Shepherd paused in his page thumbing. He silently read a sentence or two and grinned. "It's pedantic," he said, "but adequate for our purposes."

"Pedantic?" I blurted, louder than intended.

“Unimaginative, pedestrian, bookish—”

“I know what ‘pedantic’ means.”

“Sorry. Teacher’s habit.”

But he wasn’t sorry. He’d baited me and I’d bit.

Shepherd slapped shut the cover and tossed the book onto the desk, this time back cover up. I found myself staring at myself and wincing. I’m one of those guys who doesn’t look as good as his publicity picture.

“What exactly about the book do you find pedantic?”

Shepherd smiled that smug, insufferable smile of his. “Jana looked good at the assembly this morning, don’t you think?” he said.

The change of topic blindsided me. “Jana? Jana was here?”

“You didn’t see her?” Shepherd sniffed. “Given your past involvement, I would have thought she’d get an exclusive interview.”

“Last I heard she was in Chicago.”

“KTSD. For about a year now.”

Local station. That would explain it. “The White House staff handles all media arrangements,” I said. “They give preference to the national networks.”

“So much for old friends, huh?”

I ignored the cheap shot. My thoughts were on Jana. The last time I saw her was the day she walked out on me. I was a cad. She cried. The worse part was that she left me for Myles.

Shepherd slapped my book with the flat of his hand. “You know what amazes me about historians?” he said, changing the subject again. “The way they interpret events to suit their own purposes. Doesn’t that strike you as dishonest?”

I didn’t hear him. I was still wading in waters of regret, the romantic kind.

“Of course,” Shepherd pressed, “you could make a case for the argument that all recorded history is essentially a collection of legends, half-truths, and lies.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m sure you did the best you could, given your limited access and understanding of the forces at work.”

I’d had enough of this.

“Sour grapes, Myles?” I snapped. “It’s beneath you. You know fully well that for a project of this scope I had to be granted complete access both to records and to people. My research was extensive. I’ve logged hundreds of hours interviewing the president, his family, his staff, and world leaders. My work is meticulously documented.”

Shepherd chuckled. “Don’t get defensive, old boy. I’m sure you dutifully read the documents that were set before you and recorded everything they wanted you to record. It’s not your fault it’s all a lie.”

That did it. Even if he asked for my autograph, he wasn’t going to get it.

“Give me one example of a lie,” I demanded.

Shepherd gazed at something in the distance as though he hadn’t heard me. “Actually,” he said, “we’re quite pleased with the finished product, and with you. You’ve done exactly what we’ve expected of you.”

I was on the edge of my seat, spoiling for a fight, if only Shepherd would settle on a topic long enough for me to take a swing. “That’s the second time you’ve implied you had something to do with the publication of my book.”

Shepherd smiled.

His smile had a history, one that jangled my giblets. It wasn’t your garden-variety grin, more like the smile of a gladiator looking down on his vanquished opponent as he is about to deliver the *coup de grace*.

I associate his smile with our sophomore year. The school was going through a chess craze. Guys carried miniature boards with magnetic pieces around in their pockets. We’d play chess before school, after school, and at lunch. When we thought we could get

away with it, we played during class, passing the game back and forth across the aisle like lovesick girls passing notes. I remember one time seeing two guys standing in the showers after gym finishing a game.

On three occasions I sat across a chessboard from Myles Shepherd. The thing I remember most about our games—other than the fact that I lost all three—was the moment I knew I was going to lose. I'd taken my hand from a piece after making a move. Myles would lean over the board and say, "Maybe you see something I don't . . ."

Then, he would smile that smile.

That smile was a torpedo with my name on it. Had I been a ship, rats would have been jumping overboard.

But things were different now, I told myself. We were no longer sophomores, and this wasn't a chess game. And maybe Myles thought he knew something I didn't, but I wasn't about to concede anything.

"Nice try, Myles," I said. "I suppose you're also going to take credit for my Pulitzer Prize."

His grin widened. "More than you know," he replied.

"Sorry, old boy, but that dog won't hunt. You can sit behind your desk and cast all the aspersions you want—"

"However, we're not finished with you," he said, talking over me. "We need you to write one final chapter."

". . . and maybe you can convince some of your less intelligent students that you're the man behind the author, but we both know—"

"We need you to write the chapter of R. Lloyd Douglas's assassination."

". . . that you had nothing to do with—what did you say?"

Reclining in his chair, Shepherd did the steeple thing with his fingers. "Your task will be to secure R. Lloyd Douglas's legacy alongside that of Lincoln and Kennedy."

"Myles . . . if this is a joke, it's not funny."

“Have you read William Manchester’s *Death of a President*? Of course you have. We want something similar.”

With difficulty I climbed out of my chair. “Look, Myles,” I said. “Joke or not, I have to report this conversation. You know that, don’t you?”

Shepherd stared at me long and hard, and I could have sworn that at that moment the lights dimmed. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t try,” he said.

“Whatever game you’re playing, Myles, this time you’ve overplayed your hand. All I have to do is grab my smartphone and—”

“He won’t take your call. Ingraham, that is. That’s who you were going to call, isn’t it? Chief of Staff Ingraham? He won’t take your call.”

His comment knocked me off balance. How did he know I was thinking of Chief of Staff Ingraham?

“I’m . . . I’m sure you won’t mind if I don’t take your word for it,” I stammered.

“And that cell phone number the president gave you at Camp David? Disconnected.”

“How . . . how . . . do you know about that? No one knows about that, not even Ingraham.”

“The president knows.”

Pushing back his chair, Shepherd rose to full height. He looked every inch the self-satisfied prig I’d loathed for years.

“And that cute little number,” he continued, “what’s her name? Chrissy? No, Christina. Ingraham’s aide. Despite your little dalliance, she won’t take your calls either. You’re cut off, Grant.”

Shepherd’s matter-of-factness unnerved me. At this point I had but a single thought—get away from him. Alarms were going off inside of me, warning me to get out now. I took a step backward toward the door.

“Besides,” Shepherd said, easing around his desk, “informing the president about an attempt on his life would be a waste of time.”

I took another step.

“Do you want to know why?” He smiled his gladiator smile. “Because he already knows about it. In fact, he’s the one who’s planning it. Ingenious, no? A president who plots his own assassination.”

A cold chill poured over me like ice water. Shepherd’s little bombshell was one of those statements that are so outrageous, so unbelievable, so farfetched that you want to dismiss them as frivolous, but in your gut you know they’re true.

Shepherd rubbed his hands together in a that-settles-that manner. “Now, let’s talk about the literary style of the assassination chapter. You’ll want to avoid the tedious tone you used in the first five chapters.”

My knees went weak. Only with effort did I take another step back.

“Don’t go, Grant. We’re not finished.”

My feet stopped moving. I didn’t stop them.

“Poor Grant,” Shepherd said. “You’ve been in over your head from the beginning.”

I tried to move. Couldn’t. “Oh yeah?” My voice quivered as I tried to break free. “Well, I’ll find a way to stop you . . . somehow. Count on it.”

I began to panic. Maybe I was overreacting, but losing control of the ability to move my legs has that effect on me. “I . . . I . . . don’t . . . know what you’ve gotten yourself mixed up with, Shepherd . . . but I’ll expose you. . . . I’ll alert the Secret Service . . . phone the media . . . I’ll . . . I’ll . . . I’ll tell the principal!”

I’ve never been good at trash-talking. It always comes out sounding like a two-year-old’s tantrum.

Shepherd chuckled. It was a deep, throaty rumble that made the

cinder-block walls shudder and the picture frames rattle. “You can’t stop us,” he said. “We’ve been doing this for millennia.”

About now I was wishing I’d taken the high road and left immediately following the assembly. I didn’t know how Myles Shepherd was doing this, but I was obviously no match for it. I kept throwing verbal jabs, hoping one of them would land.

“We . . . you keep saying *we*,” I said. “I suppose now you’re going to tell me you’re part of some ancient brotherhood, like the Knights Templar, or the Illuminati, or some other puerile organization of losers with secret handshakes, blood-drinking initiations, and decoder rings. Do you know how perverted that is, Myles? Most of us grew out of that stuff in junior high.”

Shepherd’s smile faded. As it did, the room grew darker, which was odd because it was nearly noon. Behind me, the sun streamed into the classroom, but it stopped at the office threshold, as though it was afraid to come in.

A movement caught my eye. High in the corner, above the file cabinet, wedged between ceiling and wall, grotesque figures took shape. Three-dimensional shadows with sunken eyes leered at me like medieval castle gargoyles. One of them dropped silently onto the top of the cabinet and clutched the tennis trophy like it was a doll.

I blinked and they were gone.

“Something wrong, Grant?” Shepherd asked. “Where’s that smug superiority you brought with you into the room?”

I swallowed hard. Every instinct within me screamed for me to run. My heart banged against my chest, desperate to get out of the room, with or without me.

“I suppose you should feel honored, Grant,” Shepherd said. “We’ve been grooming you for this task most of your miserable, pathetic life. You’ve been the perfect pawn. Predictable to a fault.”

The shadow gargoyles reappeared. There were more of them this time, clustered in the corner, shoulders pressed against greasy

shoulders. They glared at me with intense, hungry eyes, straining to get at me like hounds on a leash.

Clouds of darkness billowed across the ceiling while the fluorescents continued humming happily. Standing beside his desk, Myles Shepherd appeared to have grown a foot taller and twice as handsome—with a radiant glow.

I found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. I stood transfixed, my eyes locked on Shepherd. I couldn't turn my head aside, nor could I close my eyes. Myles Shepherd wanted me to see something, and I wasn't sure I wanted to see it.

"What's happening to me?" I cried.

Shepherd laughed. It was a laugh not of this world, sounding like a thousand wind chimes of such clarity and tone it brought tears to my eyes; a laugh that spawned laughter, bubbling in my gut, rushing to the surface in an explosion of guffaws. I couldn't stop it. I laughed like a madman. I laughed so hard I thought my belly would burst.

My ability to speak—the only weapon I had left—was being swallowed by convulsive spasms of mirth. I had to fight it. Somehow, I had to force myself to speak.

"This . . . is . . . about . . . the tennis . . . trophy . . . isn't it?" I managed to say.

"What?" Shepherd snapped.

I'd landed a blow. The satisfaction was exhilarating. It spurred me on. Two can play the taunting game, Mr. Shepherd.

"The trophy," I stammered. "We all . . . knew . . . you cheated . . . to win . . . it. We laughed . . . at . . . you . . . behind . . . your back . . . for . . . selling . . . your soul . . . for a cheap . . . plastic . . . trophy."

Shepherd's jaw clenched.

The floor trembled. The desk shook. Towers of papers and notebooks toppled over. From the corner, the shadow creatures screamed silently at me.

Scared out of my skin, if I'd had any sense I would have stopped

goaded him. “And the . . . chess . . . matches?” I continued. “We . . . let . . . you . . . win. . . . Everyone . . . knew . . . you were . . . a sucker . . . for the . . . Sicilian . . . defense.”

The quaking intensified. Books rained down from shelves. My feet still firmly fixed to the floor, I couldn’t move to avoid them.

Shepherd roared. “You insignificant worm! You cannot begin to know the nauseating torment I endure simply by being in your presence!”

“Whining, Myles? How unattractive.”

The floor undulated like the sea.

I pressed on. “As . . . for . . . Jana? It’s . . . a . . . shame . . . you . . . weren’t . . . man enough . . . to . . . keep . . . her. After . . . she dumped . . . you, she . . . told . . . me . . . kissing . . . you . . . was like . . . kissing . . . a . . . trashcan. Ever . . . hear of . . . breath mints, Myles?”

The lights went out. The room was pitch-black while behind me the classroom remained flooded with sunlight. I could hear books falling all around me.

A ray of light shot past me.

Then another.

And another.

They came from Shepherd. Originating from inside him, they shot through his clothing, which took fire but wasn’t consumed. The fabric transformed to . . . to what? The folds and seams remained intact, but it looked like no cloth I’d ever seen. They appeared to be folds of pure color. We’re talking laundry-detergent-commercial special effects here—the reddest reds and bluest blues I’d ever seen.

The intensity of the colors vied for supremacy, growing ever brighter until something had to give. They began to chase each other, swirling around the shape that had once been Myles Shepherd, slowly at first, then faster, and faster, blending with each other until they became a dazzling white, a hurricane of radiance.

What was happening here? Was I hallucinating? I hoped I was, because the alternative was that Myles Shepherd, my constant rival, was not of this world. The idea that I'd gone to high school for four years with ET and never knew it was hard to admit to myself.

Overhead, the gargoyle shadow creatures—now looking mossy green and solid—stared at Shepherd with expressions of awe and adoration and painful longing.

I knew exactly how they felt. I felt the same way. Whoever, whatever stood before me was mesmerizing.

Think of a perfect starlit night when you're lost in your lover's eyes, a moment suspended in time and bliss. Multiply that euphoria ten thousand times and only then will you begin to grasp the beauty that lay just beyond my reach.

The attraction was so intense I had to grab a bookshelf to keep from dropping to my knees and worshipping it.

Here was an elegance that was wondrously strange. All-consuming, I wanted it to go on forever. Tears tracked my cheeks. I mumbled incoherently. I dared not blink lest I lose a moment of this marvel.

But then the light reversed itself. Blasts shot past me a second time as the glorious hurricane became a swirling accretion that began feeding on the colors in the room. Instead of giving off light, it was swallowing it, gulping it greedily.

How do I describe what I saw?

It was a vortex. A black hole. All at once wondrous and comical.

The red slashes on the graded exams lifted off the paper and, like snakes, slithered their way toward the vortex and were swallowed up. So, too, rivers of Times Roman font lifted from the papers, streamed to the vortex, and disappeared. Titles from books followed, peeled from the spines of the volumes on the shelves.

The file cabinet was stripped of its yellow color, reduced to a pale ghostly white. Even the blue of my tie was sucked off, and the color lifted from my class ring, leaving the ruby crystal clear.

The colors made the vortex—formerly Myles Shepherd, though he no longer bore any resemblance to a man—pulse with nightmarish power.

For not only was the room stripped of all color, it was stripped of every pleasure, every good feeling, leaving me bereft, emotionally bankrupt, despairing of hope and life. I was abhorrent to myself. Spasms of depression racked me. I craved annihilation, nonexistence, confident that my death would make the world a better place. I sobbed uncontrollably.

That's when he loosed the hounds.

The shadow gargoyles fell upon me with a vengeance, tearing through my clothing, penetrating my flesh, plunging into the inner depths of my being. They fed on me, occupied me with contentious voices.

My mouth contorted into a scream, but whatever sound I produced was instantly swallowed by the vortex.

I reached out to what had once been Myles Shepherd, begging him to make quick work of me. To unborn me, if that were possible. All I knew was that I was desperate to no longer be.

The last thing I remember were his words filling the room, sounding like a chorus of a thousand voices.

“I AM SEMYAZA. TREMBLE BEFORE ME.”

My awaking sensation was cold tile against my cheek and the pungent odor of industrial floor detergent. It took several painful blinks before my eyes focused. I heard a moan. I think it came from me.

Memories like lost hitchhikers came straggling back. The high school assembly. The classroom. Myles Shepherd seated behind his desk, then morphing into a whirlwind. The shadow creatures, straining to get at me, clawing onto me.

I cried out and raised an arm to defend myself. But there was

nothing in the corner. My hand flew to my chest. They weren't there either. I was alone in the room.

Moving slowly, I worked my way into a sitting position. My head swam with the effort. I glanced around. Everything was in its place. The towers of books. Stacks of papers. The trophy. The file cabinet was yellow. All the books had their titles.

I turned toward the doorway. The classroom was as dark as the office. It was night.

Somehow I managed to get to my knees, then to my feet. I had to steady myself on the edge of the desk.

When I felt I could trust my legs again, I navigated the short distance to the office door. My hand brushed my coat and tie. It hit something unexpected. I looked down.

Pinned to my tie was a square piece of pink notepad paper. I removed the pin. There wasn't enough light to read it, so I found the light switch and flipped it on. Fluorescents flickered, then burst to life. Light poked me rudely in the eyes. After several moments I gave the note another try—

Grant,

Let yourself out. Don't forget to lock up.

M.S.

Staggering between rows of chairs, I made my way out and stumbled into the night air.

The world smelled disgusting. Rancid. Like a pair of dirty gym socks. Wrinkling my nose, I glanced around. The spring grass was muddy green. The stars were depressingly dim. The air tasted greasy. It was all I could do to keep from retching.

An annoying *squeak, squeak, squeak* pricked my ears as a potbellied janitor appeared pushing a mop pail. When he saw me, he started.

"Hey! What's goin' on here?" he cried.

HIDEOUS BEAUTY

He looked repulsive. Flesh hung from his jowls and arms like algae on a shipwreck. His voice was a parrot's squawk.

"It's all right," I croaked, my throat as dry as parchment. "I was here earlier. Just came back for my car." I motioned feebly toward the parking lot.

"Are you drunk?"

Without answering him, I started toward the parking lot.

The janitor watched my unsteady progress with a suspicious squint.

I was relieved to find my rental car still in the lot. As I unlocked the door I pacified myself with the thought that while Myles Shepherd may have won the battle, I had landed the last blow.

I didn't lock up.

CHAPTER 2

THE GRASS CRUNCHED LIKE SOUR MILK CARTONS BENEATH MY feet. Imagine traversing a landfill where everything you touch is filthy with a slimy film to it, and you have an idea of what it was like for me to get to my car.

Climbing into the rental—a luxury-edition sedan with barely thirty-seven miles on the odometer—was like crawling into a garbage dumpster. Windows up. Windows down. It didn't matter. The odors were suffocating.

I contributed to the stench. My flesh reeked. Not from lack of hygiene, mind you. I shower daily. My body had the odor of a carnivore. My skin was permeated with the stench of the dead flesh I'd consumed earlier—prime rib the night before, sausage for breakfast. Every time my hands came close to my face I winced. Each nauseating waft of decayed meat reminded me how pure, clear, and clean was the radiant presence in Shepherd's office.

But I couldn't think of that now. I had to warn the president about whatever or whoever attacked me in that office. Though I still hadn't figured out what I was going to say, I felt an urgency to warn him. Whatever that was in the office, the power was incredible.

Another word to describe it came to mind. I didn't want to use it. It wasn't a word you used around educated folk, the kind who walked the halls of Washington, DC. But something *supernatural* had taken place in that office. Whether I wanted to admit it or not.

2:00 a.m. Sitting in the car I made my first call to Chief of Staff Harold Ingraham's direct line. With the three-hour time difference, it was five o'clock in Washington. Ingraham should have answered. He didn't.

It didn't make sense. I knew he was there. The man was always in his office at five. He was proverbially punctual. The joke on the Hill was that the Naval Observatory set their atomic clocks by him.

3:00 a.m. After an hour of failed attempts to reach Ingraham, I called Christina. As I waited for her to answer, I could see her in my mind's eye, frantically pulling on clothes and shoes while juggling her cell phone and working her way to the front door of her apartment.

Frantic. It's the only mode Christina knows. Here is a woman who was born multitasking. She places phone calls between bites of breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She doesn't sleep, she catnaps. And if rapid eye movement beneath closed lids is any clue, even then she's planning, arranging, prioritizing.

Christina's leave-a-message recording kicked in. I left a voicemail.

At 3:10 a.m. I initiated a second round of calls with identical results. Ingraham, no answer. Christina, left another voicemail and a text. This cycle continued every ten minutes.

At 4:00 a.m. I decided it was time for the big gun.

I scrolled down FAVORITES looking for the number the president gave me at Camp David. He told me it was his family cell phone number. Fewer than a dozen people in the world had it. I was the only nonrelative.

How does one store the personal cell phone number of the President of the United States? I'd been hesitant to add it to my list of

contacts. Smartphones get lost and misplaced. I had visions of an insurance salesman finding my phone on an airplane and trying to sell the president a whole life policy. I needed a code name.

My first thought was HH, for Head Honcho, but I'd settled on Doogie. It had been the president's nickname in elementary school. There were only a handful of people who knew that.

My thumb paused over the name on the touch pad.

What was I going to say when he answered?

I gave it a practice run.

"Ummm . . . Mr. President? Grant Austin here. Sorry to bother you, but I'm out in California, and I was chatting with a former high school buddy . . . well, he's not exactly a buddy, more like a rival . . . but anyway, he happened to mention that there was going to be an attempt to assassinate you and . . . well . . . sir . . . he says you know about it. Do you?"

For several indecisive moments I stared at Doogie on the touchpad, trying desperately to think of nonlunatic phrases.

A moment of clarity dawned. This wasn't about me. Coming across as a lunatic wasn't a concern. At least it shouldn't be. The issue here was national security, alerting the president to a threat on his life.

Immersed in a wave of patriotic duty, I pressed the touchpad. The connection was made. I heard ringing at the other end of the line without knowing where the other end of the line was. The residence? The Oval Office? Air Force One? Poolside for the president's morning swim?

Keep it simple and straightforward, I told myself. Alert the president to the facts. Save the details—the X-Files details—for the Secret Service to laugh at.

Three sharp tones sounded. An automated message kicked in informing me that the number had been disconnected or was no longer in service.

Myles Shepherd's voice haunted me. "And that cell phone number the president gave you at Camp David? Disconnected."

How had he known?

7:00 a.m. The first students began arriving at the high school. Through tired eyes I watched as they drove into the senior parking lot. I recognized their kind. Overachievers. I could see it in their stride. School couldn't start early enough for them. A new day was another chance to shine, another day to add more flowery kudos to their already burgeoning bouquet. They were the student government leaders, the newspaper editors, the club presidents. The elite.

I never counted myself among them, though I associated with them. Even now I continue to work with them. Washington, DC is populated by a national roll call of valedictorians, every one of them determined to prove themselves.

Christina is one of them. Graduated top of her class at Midland High in Odessa, Texas, with a repeat performance at the University of Texas as a political science major.

Why hadn't she returned my calls or texts?

I tried again, having lost track of the number of voicemails and texts I'd left her.

"You've reached the desk of Christina Kraft, aide to Chief of Staff Ingraham. Leave a brief message and a number where you can be reached. I'll return your call at the earliest opportunity."

Straining to keep the frustration from my voice I left another message. "Christina . . . Grant. What's going on? I can't stress how urgent it is I talk to you. This isn't a personal call. Call me back . . . please."

A motorcycle blasted past me with an earsplitting roar, drowning out the last of my message. I repeated it.

As the sun broke over the mountains, I squinted against its glare. The flow of arriving students was increasing. I watched as broods of them—looking like Eloi marching blandly to their doom—filtered

between rows of cars heading for their homerooms. That is, if they still had homerooms.

A breeze swept through the car. It didn't stink. I was acclimating to the odor of this world. In exchange, the memory of my brush with glory was dimming.

What hadn't dimmed was the terror I felt when I was curled up on the floor.

I am Semyaza. Tremble before me.

Reaching for the door latch, I got out of the car. Like it or not, I had to face the fear. I had to go back to that classroom. I had to know if what I'd experienced was real.

I waited ten minutes after the buzzer for the hallways to clear, wanting to avoid a repeat performance from the previous day. There was also the matter of enhanced odors with that many bodies bunched together. I didn't want to risk retching in front of the entire student body. The close encounter of a painful kind with the pole was enough embarrassment for one visit.

Passing open classroom doors, I heard the familiar sounds of another school day—attendance-taking, calls for reports and homework assignments to be passed to the front of the room, chatter across the aisles.

The door to Myles Shepherd's classroom was closed. I risked peeking inside the window.

At the front of the class, a middle-aged woman with premature streaks of gray clutched her hands and attempted to get the students' attention. She looked like someone's mother.

"Class? Class?"

Her voice had a cartoon quality to it, not quite Marge Simpson, but similar. It was obvious she didn't make her living teaching high school students.

“Class? If I could have your attention, please . . . please, your attention. . . . Your teacher, Mr. Shepherd, has been delayed. Due to an accident on the freeway, traffic is backed up. Many teachers have called in. They’ll get here as soon as they can. In the meantime, I’ve been instructed to tell you that you are to read the next chapter in your—”

None of the students was listening to her. As soon as they heard Shepherd was delayed, the room exploded with conversation.

High school classrooms are jungles. Survival depends on strength, cunning, speed, and wit. This poor woman had none of these qualities. They were eating her alive.

Leaving her to her fate, I made my way toward the administration building. The backed-up line out the door resembled a morning commute. Most of the kids clutched blue slips of paper, but not all of them.

“You don’t have a blue slip?” I heard one of them say. “You have to have a blue slip to get back into class, dude. They won’t let you back into class without a blue slip.”

Cutting through the line, I stepped inside.

A squat man in gray slacks, a white short-sleeved shirt, and with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair spied an unauthorized movement out of the corner of his eye. His head snapped up to challenge me.

I remembered him from yesterday. Vice Principal Benton, or Benson. It took him a moment to recognize me. When he did, his scowl transformed into a public relations grin.

“Austin! Didn’t expect to see you again so soon! To what do we owe the honor of this encore appearance?”

“Actually, I was just in Myles Shepherd’s room and—”

“Ah yes! Come in! Come in!”

He took me by the arm and led me through a swinging gate into the restricted area of administration central, presumably so the students in line wouldn’t overhear our conversation.

My long-dormant student senses tingled wildly. I'd seen students taken by the arm by the vice principal into the administration inner sanctum. Some of them were never heard from again.

"Several of our teachers are running late," Benton or Benson said in a hushed tone. "Big accident on I-8. Traffic is backed up for miles."

As though I needed proof, he led me to a portable TV sitting on top of a row of file cabinets. A square-jawed reporter wearing headphones was describing the situation from high overhead in a news helicopter. At the bottom of the screen a banner announced this was BREAKING NEWS.

The reporter was shouting into his microphone in order to be heard over the noise of the chopper, ". . . *backed up all the way to the Grossmont Summit. As you can see, all four lanes are blocked. East-bound traffic is at a complete standstill.*"

While the reporter described every commuter's worst nightmare, the camera panned, providing a jittery view of three long lines of cars. At the front of the line, a lone vehicle was engulfed in flames. The inferno generated a column of black smoke that stretched to the heavens.

". . . battling the fire. The flames have been so intense, the firefighters have had to back away. All they can do now is let it burn itself out. As you can see, a second crew is just arriving . . ."

A fire truck's flashing red lights could be seen inching up the emergency lane, slowed by onlookers who had gotten out of their cars to get a glimpse of the cause of the delay.

"When we first arrived at the scene, we witnessed several bystanders attempting to fight the flames with handheld fire extinguishers in a valiant attempt to rescue the driver. The intense heat drove them back. (Ronny, see if you can zoom in on the men standing beside the black truck.)"

The picture on the screen bounced crazily, then zoomed toward

three men staring helplessly at the inferno. Their shoulders were hunched.

“As you can see, they’re still holding the spent extinguishers in their hands.”

Zooming in closer, the camera swung toward the vehicle. Flames feasted hungrily on the car’s interior.

“Poor devil . . . never had a chance,” Benton or Benson commented beside me.

Behind us a large woman in a floral print blouse gasped loudly, then again, as though she was trying to catch her breath. Her hand flew to her mouth as she stared with disbelief at the television.

“Oh . . . oh . . . oh!”

A coworker rushed to her side. “Roberta, what is it?”

Like a fish out of water the distraught woman gasped repeatedly. “The . . . the . . . plates!” she cried. “Look . . . look . . . at the . . . license plates!”

All eyes in the room squinted at the television screen, trying to see what Roberta saw. Gasps and wounded cries exploded across the room.

“One of your teachers?” I asked Benton or Benson.

The vice principal stood motionless. Tears ran down his cheeks, which was just downright scary. Vice principals don’t cry, they make people cry.

The woman who had assisted Roberta now turned her attention to him. “Mr. Benson? Maybe you’d better sit down.”

Stone monuments aren’t easily moved. It appeared Benson hadn’t heard her. He stood with his jaw slightly askew as though its hinge was broken.

I glanced again at the television to see what would have this kind of effect on him. Centered on the screen was the blackened license plate of the burning car. Even though it was charred, the raised letters were readable.

JACK CAVANAUGH

CA TCHR

Benson was weeping openly now, and it was painful to watch. “The Kiwanis gave him that license plate when he was voted teacher of the year,” he said to me.

I felt a chill.

“Who?” I asked.

I already knew, but I had to hear it.

“Shepherd,” Benson said. “Myles Shepherd.”