

THERE WAS A feeling Keith Whipple got every time he walked through the door of Rudy's Quik-Mart. It was the product of an array of sensations: the fragrance of strong, fresh-brewed coffee; the sweet aroma of expensive cigars; the pleased sparkle in Rudy's eyes when they met Keith's; the vaguely startling realization induced by this atmosphere that he was retired, without obligation. It made him feel fine, and since he was clear-headed and without serious ailment, it made him feel young again, too.

Rudy turned to the cheerful sound of the bells strung over the opening door. As usual Keith was his first customer.

"Herr Whipple—" he said.

"Stamp your feet," Keith said, dutifully complying. "I swear, Rudy, you need a new rap."

Hiding a grin, Rudy limped over to his percolators. His left leg was a monstrosity, the result of a mining accident thirty years ago, the skin from the knee down like that of an iguana, scaly, a cadaverous looking gray-brown. Keith had actually felt ill the first time Rudy showed it to him.

"Coffee?" Rudy said, already pouring.

"Black and nasty," Keith said, completing the ritual exchange. He joined Rudy at the soda shop-style counter, the only anomaly in the otherwise standard convenience store. Behind the counter exotic brews perked on a half-dozen hot plates and a selection of cigars stored securely under glass waited for the discerning patron. A small magazine rack featured only *Smoke* and *Cigar Aficionado*. It was a personal touch, a nod to bygone days, and

Keith felt right at home here. A creature of habit, he'd been coming into Rudy's every weekday morning since his daughter Kate was nine—fifteen years of coffee, conversation and good-natured gossip, Rudy a connoisseur of all three. The only tough part was keeping his mitts off those cigars. Kate had finally browbeaten him into quitting two years ago, after a suspicious opacity on a routine chest X-ray gave them both a scare. It turned out to be scar tissue, the remains of some benign infection he'd picked up as a kid swamping out the hen house on his parents' farm, but Kate had effectively stamped out his pack-a-day habit, including the cigar jones he'd picked up hanging around with Rudy. On the job he'd looked forward to those cigars, comfortable in his chair in the projection booth at the Grande Theater, Sudbury's oldest movie house, alone up there in a haze of flickering light and swirling smoke. When she was younger Kate had often joined him, complaining mildly about the smoke.

He shed his parka and draped it over one of the chrome and red leather stools. Rudy slid over a steaming cup of coffee. "Try this," he said, wiping his hands on his apron, "but be careful. It's a man's brew." He glanced over his shoulder at the tail end of a news break on the wall-mounted TV, an old black and white Zenith that was always turned on; Rudy had scotch-taped a length of plastic garland to the consul, his nod to the Yuletide.

Keith took a cautious sip. "Hot. Delicious."

"So what do you know that I don't?" Rudy said, facing Keith now, leaning his big hands on the counter to get the weight off his leg.

"Did I tell you Katie got accepted in the film school at UCLA?"

Rudy said, "Not counting the last twenty times?" and Keith grinned. "Gonna miss her, huh."

“Sure am,” Keith said. “But it’s long overdue. She’s a gifted writer. The script she just finished? Loved it. It’s a blend of crime, science fiction and black comedy that’s really got legs. But she needs maturing. Not to mention the exposure; her work needs to be seen. No way she’s gonna get all that up here in Sudbury. Besides, the last thing I want is to see her hanging around town just to keep her old man company.” *Brave words*, Keith thought, picturing life without her and not liking it much. Cancer had taken his wife when Kate was six, a protracted, painful death, and he and Kate had been pretty much inseparable ever since. They shared a duplex on Howey Drive, living modestly but in comfort, the last mortgage payment made three years ago. “She needs to be where the action is,” Keith said. “It’s the nature of that business.”

“I hear you,” Rudy said. “But look at the bright side. Come September you can party every night ’til she makes it big, then move down to California and sponge off her the rest of your life. Fraternize with the help.”

“There’s that,” Keith said, putting his cup down, a storm warning on the TV catching his attention. Rudy followed his gaze, saying, “More snow. Can you believe it?”

Keith glanced out the storefront window. “I don’t buy it,” he said. He’d walked to Rudy’s as he always did, the winter sun warm on his face, no hint from his joints about lousy weather. But in the Canadian north, you never could tell. He took another sip of his coffee, then got his reading glasses on and fished his wallet out of his parka, the weather forgotten. “Gotta check my numbers,” he said.

Rudy spoke to his back as he made his way to the lottery display. “You hear about Howie Tremblay’s kid?”

Keith said, “The mental defective?” and dug a sheath of tickets out of his wallet, checking them against the posted winning numbers.

“The very one. The coppers caught him up at Bell Junior High yesterday, poking his wares through the cyclone fence for the amusement of the teenyboppers. When the dopey bastard tried to run, his johnny froze to the fence like a wet tongue. Son of a bitch got a free circumcision...”

Rudy’s voice faded to a drone in Keith’s brain, every neuron suddenly focused on the apparent enigma that now appeared before his eyes. There were three sets of two-digit numbers on the ticket in his hand, six numbers in each set. The series in the first two sets were nowhere close to the winning numbers, no confusion there. But what utterly fouled Keith’s normal lines of perception was the fact that the third set matched the winners exactly.

The right numbers. The right order. The right lottery. The right date.

Keith realized he wasn’t breathing. He commanded his lungs to inflate, but in the same instant his gaze ticked to the dollar value attached to this draw and his throat sealed off completely.

*God in heaven*, he thought. *I’m gonna die before I can spend a dime*. Then Rudy’s voice came through—“Keith, you okay?”—and his lungs admitted a thin slip of air.

Rudy came around the counter in a hurry, certain his old friend was having a coronary; Keith’s usually placid face was beet red, the veins in his neck standing out like cables. But before Rudy had closed half the distance, Keith darted past him in the opposite direction, almost bowling him over.

“Jesus, Rudy, move your ass. I gotta call Katie.”

He grabbed the phone behind the counter and punched in the numbers, staring wide-eyed at Rudy as it rang, holding the ticket up for Rudy to see.

“Ten million bucks, old buddy,” Keith said. “Ten million *bucks*.”

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To avoid the congestion of the main streets Kate Whipple had mapped out an alternate route to head office. It took her through a maze of residential streets narrowed by snow banks and illegally parked cars, the big van barely squeaking through in places, but it suited her temperament better than the ill-mannered, bumper-to-bumper grind of morning traffic. She sometimes felt that all the really shitty drivers in the country had been secretly exiled to her home town, then encouraged to procreate.

Elvis doing “I’ll Be Home For Christmas” came on the radio, the King’s rich voice bringing a mist of tears to Kate’s eyes. “Bugger,” she said softly and laughed. She turned the radio up a notch and wiped her eyes.

Kate loved Christmas, everything about it. If there was magic in the world, she sometimes felt, it revealed itself during the Yuletide. At twenty-four, she still anticipated Christmas with the same excited yearning she had as a ten-year-old. This year especially she could hardly wait. She’d bought her dad a fancy new DVD player, blowing a big chunk of her tuition money but what the hell. He was going to flip.

As she turned onto the last street before the industrial stretch on Kelly Lake Road her cell phone rang. “Panther Courier,” she said into the handset. “Kate speaking.”

“Katie, it’s me.”

Kate felt a flicker of alarm. “Dad, you sound out of breath—”

“Honey, you’re not going to believe this.”

“Believe what?”

Keith told her and Kate felt her jaw come unhinged. She veered too sharply into a curve and the rear wheels slewed into the oncoming lane. Kate over-corrected and the van plowed nose-first into a snow bank, sending a huge plume of snow into the air. Unharmed, Kate simply sat there, staring out at the drift.

“Katie? You still there?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“If I’m lying I’ll do the Shing-a-ling naked on Paris Street.”

“Dad, that’s *incredible*.”

“Take the rest of your life off, kid.”

“What...?”

“Tell your boss you’re retiring. I’ll meet you at home in an hour. We’re going shopping.”

The line went dead.

Kate sat there stunned, the phone still clamped to her ear, until an old woman in a Volvo wagon pulled up behind her and leaned on the horn; the van was blocking her way. Kate gave the old gal a numb wave, then reversed out of the snow bank.

Her life had changed, just like that.

Like magic...

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Kate made it home before her dad. Mo, her boss, drove her there personally. It was remarkable how polite he became once she told him why she was quitting. Until that moment he’d never been more than casually rude to her. A big frog in a little pond. She was pretty sure she was going to enjoy being rich.

The duplex she shared with her father overlooked the now-frozen expanse of Ramsey Lake, a large in-city lake banked by some of the most sought after properties in town. They didn't have lake access—the Howey Drive side was separated from the water by a railway track and a steep hill—but the view from Kate's living-room window was no less spectacular. Keith owned the building and Kate paid him a modest rent for the upstairs half. When Kate was between sweethearts, which in the past couple of years had been pretty much a constant, she and her dad spent most evenings together, sharing meals and talking film, then curling up together in front of the entertainment center they'd set up in Keith's living room: a sixty-inch Mitsubishi TV and a full set of Paradigm speakers, an investment Keith sometimes joked he'd still be paying for when Kate was a grandmother. After that, usually between about eight and eleven, Kate sat in front of her computer and wrote. Not counting her earliest efforts, handwritten on yellow legal pads and buried in the back of her closet, she'd completed nine feature-length scripts, five she was still very proud of and one that had netted her a three-year option from a small indie company in L.A. which, unfortunately, had gone broke. Writing was her favorite thing in the world, slipping into that private space in her mind and watching it happen, then finding the words that would make others see it as clearly.

In her bedroom Kate picked up the envelope from UCLA, ragged from her excitement in tearing it open, and took out the single, neatly-folded sheet of white Bond. Opening it now, almost two weeks after plucking it from a stack of bills and flyers, she remembered the mix of emotions aroused by her first quick scan of those magic words: The School of Theater, Film and Television, UCLA, is pleased to inform you of your acceptance.... Joy, excitement, apprehension shading to fear...and an unexpected

regret. Stepping into the future meant leaving behind the familiar comforts of the present, everything she trusted and loved. But she'd put it off as long as she could, hoping against hope that she might strike it rich, draft just the right script and, somehow, get it into just the right hands. She'd done her share of fantasizing, reading about guys like Quentin Tarantino, the ultimate Cinderella story, and the others coming down the pipeline all the time, unknowns breaking through with spec scripts, earning millions. But these guys were the exception, not the rule; and they all lived in L.A., a city with one of the highest costs of living in the United States. And until now, even with a full-time job and four years of socking away every spare penny, money had been so tight she hadn't even been sure she could afford to finish out the first year, never mind the occasional trip home.

But now. God, now...

Kate squirmed out of her uniform, tossed it onto the unmade bed and pulled on a burgundy sweatshirt and a pair of faded Levis. She considered doing the litter of dishes in the kitchen and said to hell with it, leave it for the maid. The thought provoked an embarrassed chuckle. Thinking like a rich brat already.

She happened to be at the picture window overlooking the street when an all-white stretch limo pulled up to the curb in front of the house. The rear window powered open and her father's head popped out. He spotted Kate in the window and waved her down, grinning from ear to ear.

"Jesus, Dad," Kate said out loud, pulling on her ski jacket and boots. "What are you up to now?"

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Bernie, the limo driver, turned out to be a jovial, speed-talking guy in his fifties with curly red hair and a bandit's moustache. Bernie spent the ten minute drive to the downtown core giving the Whipples a tour guide's spiel so enthusiastic, Keith didn't have the heart to tell him they'd lived in Sudbury all their lives.

"As you folks might be aware," Bernie told them, "Sudbury is a mining town. Nickel and copper mostly." He pointed at the huge Inco smoke stack, visible from virtually every vantage in the city. "Right over there is your superstack, floats all that fallout down south where they don't know any better. Ain't she something? And over here is your Theater Center..."

The storm warnings continued on the limo radio, but the sky remained blue and clear. The only hint of foul weather was the wind, a gusting northerly that whipped up all of a sudden. When Bernie dropped them off in front of the City Center, Keith pulled up the hood on his parka and Kate tucked herself into his flank, using him as a windbreak.

"Give us 'til noon," Keith told the driver. "We'll meet you back here."

Bernie gave them a smiling salute and merged into traffic.

Arm in arm with his daughter, Keith Whipple swept through the shopping center doors on a wave of sheer excitement. To his renewed eyes everything seemed freshly minted, and he felt like shouting his good fortune to the high cathedral ceiling. Since the death of his wife—God, eighteen years—he'd lived from paycheck to paycheck, investing what little was left with the noble intention of handing a nest egg to Kate one day, something extra to get her life started with. But through one minor disaster and another, the kind of things life had a way of throwing at you when you least expected them, he'd been forced to chip away at that nest egg, diminishing it to the point of near extinction, a fact which, until

now, had caused him no end of frustration. As they entered the mall he kept stealing glances at Kate's beaming face—so much like her mother's, that smooth tan oval framed in fine blond hair—and thinking, *You're set, my angel. Set for life.*

Keith spent twenty minutes at the Royal Bank, waiting while the teller cleaned out his savings account—six-thousand-eight-hundred dollars and change—and handed it to him in a neat stack of hundreds. With his credit card, always up to date, that gave him eleven-thousand-eight-hundred dollars' worth of clout. And change. It felt strange stuffing his wallet with all that cash, but he'd never trusted those ATM machines, that whole technological shift where money was concerned. Even the credit card had taken him years to get around to and a couple more to actually use. Old-fashioned maybe, but he still preferred a human face to a machine spitting out money at him.

He caught up to Kate in Zellers, where she was busy choosing the fanciest Christmas tree baubles she could find.

"Okay sweetheart," he said. "let's tear this place *up*."

Kate's smile filled his heart. He'd often heard it said that money didn't bring happiness, but goddamn, he sure felt fine today.

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Bernie was waiting for them when they came out of the mall at noon, the limo idling next to him at the curb, Bernie hunched against the cold in his navy blue chauffeur's coat and thin leather gloves.

When he spotted them he hustled over and took Kate's load of parcels, the trunk of the big Lincoln popping open behind him as if by magic. Kate liked the little guy: that moustache, hinting at a shady past, the quick, mischievous smile it framed, the way the

street slipped into his way of talking when he relaxed. When they were underway again Kate suggested lunch and invited Bernie to join them. They agreed on a nearby Italian spot, *Pasta e Vino*, ordering salads and pasta from a pared-down lunch menu. The waiter was a plump, cheerful guy in a frilly white shirt and black dress pants who scribbled their selections onto a note pad.

When he was gone Bernie said, “Now that’s what I like to see, a waiter who writes down your order,” and Kate thought, *Uh-oh*.

“Exactly,” Keith said. “I don’t eat out often, but when I do I like to get what I ask for.”

Bernie said, “And so you should. Irritates the hell out of me, the way some of ’em come up to you, standing there with their hands dangling like, okay shoot, nothing escapes this iron-trap mind.”

“I’ll give you a classic example,” Keith said. “The other day I’m in Jimmy’s, I order a cheeseburger, lettuce and ketchup only, and a glass of ice water. The girl nods then goes to a table of six and does the same thing, nodding her head and not writing anything down. Twenty minutes later, by now I’m half starved, she comes back with a glass of Sprite and a burger—no cheese, no lettuce, the whole thing dripping with mustard—plunks it down in front of me and walks away. I hate mustard.”

Bernie said, “And I bet you’re too polite to say anything.”

Keith mumbled something and blushed, the sight of him sitting there red-faced making Kate laugh out loud. The waiter rescued him, bringing their drinks, a Sleeman in the bottle for Keith, white wine for Kate and a diet soft drink for Bernie. The food came a few minutes later, steamy hot and delicious looking. Bernie dug right in.

“So, if you don’t mind me asking,” he said around a mouthful of penne a la vodka, “what’s up with you folks? You from out of town or what?”

“No,” Keith said, “we’ve lived in Sudbury all our lives.”

Bernie rolled his eyes. “Shoot, and I gave you my whole out-of-towner spiel there this morning. Sorry about that. I don’t know why I thought you was from out of town.”

“That’s okay,” Kate said. “It was entertaining.”

“We’ve...come into some money,” Keith said.

“Say, that’s great. What happened, a rich aunt kick it or something?”

Keith said, “No, nothing like that,” and glanced at Kate, giving her a mildly dazed look. “We won the lottery.”

Bernie clacked his fork against his plate. “Not the six-four-nine.”

“The very one.”

“Ten million dollars?”

Keith chuckled. “Ain’t that a caution?”

“Je-sus Christ on a crutch...if you’ll pardon my French, ma’am, but that’s *phenomenal*. I feel like gettin’ your autograph or something. Ten million, goddam. I had a ticket on that baby myself.”

Keith said, “When those numbers matched up I thought I was gonna bust a blood vessel and die. I must’ve checked ’em a hundred times.” He looked at Kate. “Honey, did I check ’em a hundred times?”

“Two hundred,” Kate said, recalling their dizzy morning in the mall, Keith stopping every few minutes to compare his numbers to the winners, shaking his head each time. “You made *me* check them a hundred times.”

“I was gonna ask you how it feels,” Bernie said. “Dumb question.”

“Feels great.”

“So what’s the plan? You’re gonna need me a couple days, right? Motor you around in style? I got nothing booked now ’til

Christmas. That's five days." Bernie's eyes widened and Kate could almost see the idea crystallizing behind them. He said, "You gotta go to Toronto, right? To cash in your ticket?"

Keith said, "Yep. If the weather holds we thought we'd drive down later this afternoon. We usually spend Christmas at my sister's place in Toronto anyway. Lee's the only one with grandkids, nine of 'em, and we all like to be there for the kids. We thought we'd get some more gifts bought, you know, special things, then stay with them the few extra days."

"You're not gonna fly?"

Kate said, "Dad's got this...thing about flying."

"I heard that," Bernie said. "I watch those *Life Against Death* videos, *Caught on Camera*, you seen those?" The Whipples nodded in unison. "I'd sooner walk than get on a plane. Spam in a can." He looked at Keith. "What kind of car you got?"

"I don't drive, but Katie's got a nice little Honda Civic."

"And you think you're gonna get all that gear you bought to Toronto in a Civic? Listen, let me take you. On dry pavement it's a four hour drive, why not do it in comfort? It'll be fun. Roll up to that lottery office in style. I'll even cut you a deal." Bernie grinned. "Heck, you guys don't need a deal. I'll do it for twice my usual fee. How's that sound?"

Kate looked at her dad and smiled. "Why not?"

Keith raised his Sleeman. "My friend, you've got yourself a deal."

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They shopped some more after lunch, mostly for the kids, Keith zipping up and down the aisles at Wal-Mart with a push cart, picking out dolls, Transformers, laser guns and noise makers of

every description. By the time they got back to the limo the sky had darkened to an ominous gray, especially in the south. Keith barely noticed, but the sight of it struck a chord of alarm in Kate.

Her father's behavior since lunch had begun to concern her, too. His simple joy at winning had begun to shade over into a kind of low grade mania, a nervous energy that left Kate's face feeling cramped from the continual smile that no longer felt genuine. It was like something was winding him up from the inside, propelling him at a rate completely foreign to his character. Added to this was a growing paranoia about the ticket, about having it on his person. Suddenly, getting to Toronto was priority one. That's where the lottery office was and he was by-God determined to be standing on their doorstep when they opened for business the next morning at nine. With the frequent weather warnings—and now this threatening sky—Kate thought they should wait. But Keith was beside himself, convinced that if they didn't cash the damned thing in as soon as possible it would spontaneously combust or he'd have a stroke worrying about it or the earth would open up and swallow him whole. Kate had never seen him so keyed-up.

By four-thirty they were set to go, but at the last minute Keith remembered something his older brother Don had wanted since they were kids and re-routed Bernie back downtown. "Rodale's," he told him. "That fancy restaurant supplier. You know it?" Bernie said he did, and they wound up spending an hour there choosing an espresso machine.

It was dark before they finally got underway, the trunk stuffed with Christmas gifts—lavishly wrapped by a team of elderly women raising money for an MRI machine—the overflow, including a life-size Big Bird for Kate's favorite niece, ending up stacked around them in the passenger compartment. Though

they'd spent a bundle, the wallet inside Keith's spanking new overcoat was still so thick with hundreds he could barely fold it closed. He told Kate at Rodale's he felt like ole Saint Nick himself.

As predicted the storm hit hard, but for the better part of the trip it ran ahead of them, leaving the two-lane blacktop snow-packed and icy in places but otherwise passable. They ran into some weather about two hours out, an intermittent sleet carried on a flaring wind, and further on, an eerie crystalline frost that hung in the low spots like fog. It was the wind that concerned Kate most, bulldozing its way across the highway, side-swiping the limo; but the big Lincoln was sure-footed and solid and before long the tension she'd felt earlier had all but vanished.

To pass the time they played a movie trivia game they'd invented when Kate was in her teens, Kate throwing obscure bits of dialogue at Keith and, as always, failing to stump him. At one point she thought she had him: in a Chinese accent she said, "Boards...don't hit back," and Keith looked puzzled, fingering the cleft in his chin that never got properly shaved, repeating the quote a few times in a thoughtful whisper. Then he grinned that cocky grin of his, said, "Bruce Lee, *Enter The Dragon*, nineteen-seventy-three, Robert Clouse, director," and denied being even remotely perplexed. "Just letting you think you had the hook in me," he said and went back to fiddling with the limo phone.

Kate sipped champagne from the bottle she found in the limo fridge, the fizzy cool of it relaxing her. And in quiet moments, she pictured the future in ways she'd never imagined before. They could live together in California now, maybe even start their own production company. Her father knew more about the movie industry than anyone she'd ever met; it had been a life-long hobby of his, tying neatly into his job as a projectionist. He'd read almost everything written about the film business and still flipped

through the trade magazines every morning before breakfast. Kate could even imagine him directing, he had such a good eye. She'd write 'em and he'd direct 'em. They could be partners. She still wanted to go to school, though, take advantage of that opportunity.

She poured herself another glass of bubbly, feeling giddy now, the reality of the change that was coming finally sinking in. She offered some of the champagne to Keith, but he was having too much fun with the phone, spreading the news to everyone he could think of. He'd been trying since they left town to reach Aunt Lee, and had just now gotten through to her. Kate snuggled next to him with her coat off, pressing her ear close to his so she could listen in.

"No, Sis', it's true," Keith said into the handset. "I've got the ticket right here in my hand."

Lee said, "Oh my God, Keith, that's fantastic. How much did you win?"

"Are you sitting down? Ten million big ones. Can you believe it? I've been playing the same damn numbers for years."

Lee said, "God love us, I can't even imagine. Where are you now?"

"In a limo on our way to Toronto. I want to get this thing squared away before I wake up and find out I dreamt it."

Lee chuckled. "Where's Katie?"

Keith gave his daughter a ten million dollar smile. "Right here beside me. We'll be staying at the Royal York tonight—splurge a little—but we'll see you in the morning, soon as we're through at the lottery office."

"Okay, sweetheart. You tell that driver to take his time."

"Ten-four, kid. See you tomorrow."

Keith cradled the receiver, folded the ticket into his wallet and tucked the wallet back inside his new overcoat. “I think your aunt wet her pants,” he said to Kate.

“I still can’t believe it myself,” Kate said, her expression turning somber. “I wish Mom was. . .”

“Me too, sweetie. Me too.”

Before anything more could be said the glass partition hummed open and Bernie adjusted his rearview, allowing eye contact with Keith. “If you don’t mind me asking,” he said, “but winning the lottery—me and the boys at the garage, that’s practically all we talk about, what we’d do with a purse like that. You thought about it yet?”

Keith said, “I haven’t been able to think about anything else.”

“Any ideas?”

“Well, first thing, I’m going to buy my mother a condo in Florida. Right on the beach. Get her out of that seniors’ slum. She’s eighty-six, but still sharp as a tack. Then I’m going to look after my gang. I’ve got two brothers and a sister, worked hard all their lives. There’s more than enough for all of us.”

Bernie undid his seatbelt and shifted, glancing over his shoulder at Keith. “I hear you, but you’re missing my point. I’m talking about you. What are you gonna do for yourself? You know, with the big money?” He looked back at the road, easing the limo into a long curve.

Keith said, “Well, after Christmas, I thought I’d take my little girl here on a trip,” and winked at Kate. “Someplace warm.”

Kate gave a little squeal. “Oh, Dad, could we? I know just the place. I saw it on *Lifestyles* the other night. Harbor Island in the Bahamas. Tom Hanks vacations there sometimes. It’s a tiny island with a mile-long beach of pink sand, and a hotel—Tingum Village, I think it’s called—where a neat old gal named Ma Ruby makes

the best cheeseburgers in the world. According to Hanks. They showed him taking a huge bite out of one.”

Bernie said, “She write his order down?” and Keith laughed.

“Harbor Island it is, then,” Keith said.

Bernie said, “Okay, that’s short term, but I’m talking about the long haul.” He glanced back at them again. “What are you gonna do?”

Keith looked at Kate, and when he spoke it was more to her than to the driver. “My wife and I honeymooned in the South Pacific,” he said. “We both loved to fish, so we chartered a nice forty-footer and spent the entire two weeks on the water.” He gave Kate a warm smile. “It was heaven. So I think that’s what I’d like to do. Get a boat, maybe a cozy little beach house someplace—”

Kate’s shrieking voice cut off Keith’s words.

“Oh God—*look out.*”

An oncoming tandem oil tanker rose out of the December mist like a chrome behemoth, its star-sharp running lights seeming to fade back into the enormity of the thing. In that first instant, as Keith’s eyes fixed on the rig, he failed to comprehend Kate’s alarm. But with his next frantic eyeblink he saw what was coming.

The trailing tank materialized out of the swirling fog, jackknifing into the limo’s lane as it surged inevitably forward, propelling the tonnage ahead of it. The limo was close enough now for its occupants to make out the driver’s arms, frantically jockeying the wheel. Kate saw the glowing ember of a cigarette wobble at mouth-level for a beat, then shear away in a cascade of sparks.

“Black ice,” Bernie said, his voice as dead as he soon would be.

In his panic he tramped too hard on the brake pedal and the limo became weightless, spinning to its doom in a series of wild donuts. Kate heard her father scream, a sound somehow more

chilling than the impending collision, and she reached out for him in the strobing dark. Then a neatly wrapped gift—a steam iron for her aunt Lee—struck her on the forehead, mercifully stunning her.

The limo entered the closing jaws of the tanker trunk-first and bounced off one of its tires. It twirled once, went momentarily airborne, then plowed down the long slope of the ditch into a rock cut, staving in the front end and popping the trunk. Festive packages flew out and littered the ditch. Steam hissed from the crumpled radiator; it also issued from Bernie's skull where he lay face-down on the buckled hood.

The rig left the road on the opposite side and surged up the embankment, the cab turning turtle onto the tanker and becoming an instant inferno. The driver managed to open his door, but the liquid flames found him quickly, transforming him into a human torch. He hit the ditch on his back, rose briefly to his knees then tumbled face-first into the snow, which in the heat of the conflagration around him began to melt so quickly it boiled.

The night resumed its glacial stillness, marred only by the crackle of flames.