

## CHAPTER 1

### *On the Ledge*

Aaron had never noticed how thin his shoelaces were. He was looking at them as he stood on the edge of the roof of Harbor Hospital. He was looking at his shoelaces. He had never noticed them before. He had been too busy living his life. Now, here he was, standing on the edge of the roof, his white jacket fluttering in the wind. *Aaron Stein, MD*, said the name tag on his jacket. He had been so proud to wear that name tag, so proud of what it represented. He was a medical doctor and a highly regarded fertility specialist. A lapsed Catholic and virulent hater of all religious beliefs, Aaron saw himself as superior to all, including God Himself. Patients flocked to him because of what they believed to be an extraordinary expertise and success rate, even in women who had given up the hope of ever bearing a child. But it was all an illusion (as was Aaron himself). Really, it was the extraordinary team of physicians, nurses, and physician assistants who made the Fertility Department at Harbor Hospital the "miracle haven" for which it had become so well known. Aaron was simply a face in the crowd, presented as "Harbor Hospital's most brilliant mind" simply because he was the nephew of the hospital's benefactor, the late philanthropist Dr. Richard Stein. It was beneficial to the hospital's image to attribute its success, particularly in the mysterious field of Artificial Reproduction, to someone with whom the patients, and the public, could identify. The hospital saw nothing unethical in their actions, because they were always careful to refer to "Dr. Aaron Stein, and his remarkable team" whenever they spoke of the Fertility Department. Aaron was so highly regarded that he often referred to himself in jest as "God's twin on Earth."

"God and I both create life," he would say. "I just do it better."

It instantly impressed people, and Aaron knew it. He was handsome and very successful. His was a glorious life.

Or at least it had been until three days ago. Now a woman lay in a coma, near death, and all because of him. All because of Aaron.

The woman in the coma had been his friend, or at least that was what she'd thought. Aaron knew what she'd really been. She'd been simply his latest victim. But he had played it too close to the edge this time. He had taken too many risks, and now he was going to be found out. He would be in a world of trouble.

The woman in the coma, the woman with tubes in her body, the woman whose gentle smile had unknowingly telegraphed to Aaron, "I am ready prey," was Luisa, a doctor in the very hospital where he, himself, worked. She was beautiful in a classic sort of way: the type of woman who saw no need to extend her wardrobe beyond pearls and a simple black dress. She had once been studying to become a

Missionary but had left, right before final vows, broken hearted and despondent, when she realized that she could not live for God alone. She needed the love of a man, an actual living breathing human being, someone who would wrap his strong arms around her and love her and cherish her, and protect her. She needed love from a human being, not a mystical Being, even if He was the Almighty. The metaphysical simply was not enough, and the realization, the terrible realization, shamed her and broke her heart. She had failed the Supreme Being. She had failed herself. She had failed the other Missionaries.

When, one otherwise ordinary day, she tentatively stepped back into the world, she left behind, deep within the walls of that ancient monastery, more than the simple white habit the Sisters had made for her. She left behind her youthful dreams, and her heart as well. She would miss God's Embrace. She would miss Him. Still, she knew she had to go, because to stay meant it had to be completely about Him, and that, given her need for human love, was now impossible. In the end, she chose medical school as a way to get over her broken heart. But the pain followed her and she was haunted by her decision, worried that she had turned her back on God not in search of human love but out of the fear of mystical love and the lure of the Great One. Was it simply easier to love a mortal man than to surrender to the love of God? Did she fear His Embrace as much as she had desired Him? Had she made a mistake? Often, in the middle of class, sometimes even during exams, she would think of God, much as any woman recalls a past love, and she would feel so terribly sad. Still she soldiered on.

It had been a curious transition, one Luisa had selected more because it had taken her mind off her heartache than because she'd wanted to be a doctor. She had, eventually, become a very good doctor, opting to enter research instead of private practice. Research afforded her the silence and order in her life that she craved. Thus, as a doctor, she pored over books in the name of science much as she would have pored over spiritual matters as a Missionary, in the name of God. In her heart of hearts, Luisa believed that, in spite of everything that had happened in her life, she still loved God more than anyone and more than anything. Then, one bitterly cold day, she met Aaron. Little did she know that the very feelings that had driven her away from God Himself would now steer her directly into the hands of evil.

It happened during a medical lecture at the hospital. Luisa had been fumbling with a sugar packet, stirring her coffee. As she walked back to her seat, she saw a man reading a paperback book. Tall and handsome, he looked like a little boy hiding from the teacher. He smiled, and Luisa felt a moment of pure terror, as if she should at that very moment run far away. *That is so silly,* she said to herself. *I am a grown woman, a medical doctor, and this very handsome man is smiling at me. What is there to be scared of?* Luisa went back to her seat. She was no longer listening to the lecture.

After the lecture, as she was about to leave, she saw the man walking toward her. His gait was odd: controlled, measured, and deliberate, like the prisoners she had seen during her time as a Missionary.

*No, she said to herself, that's not possible. He looks to be a doctor. Why am I thinking about the prison?*

He walked up to her and extended his hand, stooping slightly because she was so much shorter than he. "Hello," he said in a voice that was at once beautiful and hypnotic. There was a welcoming twinkle in his eyes.

But as Luisa responded, "Hello," her subconscious whispered, *it's like looking into the face of evil*. Luisa ignored her subconscious.

His name was Aaron, and he was married, yet Luisa felt instantly drawn to him. It was as if a magnet were pulling her toward him, and she could not break the connection. She stood there startled, looking at him, and he smiled again. She felt, suddenly, an immediate attraction at the most primitive level of human emotion, and it confused her. Luisa had been perfectly happy in her own world, a world of order and precision, a world devoid of passion and of love. Life, she had found, was more peaceful that way and so much easier than when taking risks. Now, here was a man whom she hardly knew, and he was making her skin tingle with anticipation and desire. It was all very unsettling.

Of course, she would never admit that to herself: not while they were getting to know each other, not when they decided to write a research paper together, and not even in the course of their relationship, when Aaron made it perfectly clear that he was in love with his wife, but wanted more from Luisa, much more.

*This is a completely professional relationship, she told herself time and again in the months to come. We are simply medical professionals writing a research paper together.*

Aaron made excellent use of their first encounter. He'd been sizing up his prey. Yes, his prey. Aaron enjoyed toying with women. It was a game he played. From the first hello, he knew the beginning, middle, and end of the story. He got to know each woman, gaining her trust and securing her confidence. He became her soul mate, yet, initially, made no overt demands of her. Each saw him as the perfect companion, and he honed that sense of perfection by becoming exactly what she wanted in a man, creating a mask to fit perfectly over his own self, a mask that assumed the identity of exactly what she wanted and everything she desired. He became her world, her rock, her foundation of trust and companionship. She looked at him with a trusting gaze, and he always smiled, knowing that soon she was to experience a huge surprise; the fun was to begin, the end in sight.

It was a cycle, a ruse, and a game that Aaron initiated again and again, plowing through the hearts of women under the guise of pretend friendships and nowhere business ventures. It was a game he played for his own sick amusement,

for control, and to satiate his sadistic need to have all the power. Aaron relished destroying women, especially beautiful, successful women. He always had to have all the power.

Every victim was chosen with care. Once selected, they were no longer women to him, but targets: targets to be scrutinized, observed, and analyzed, much as a hunter sought out the perfect kill in the wild, watching the various beautiful creatures in their natural habitat while deciding which one to destroy, which one would be the prize for his mantle.

Once selected, he watched and primed his victim carefully, so as to elicit the most pain when the relationship ended (and end it always did!), and to afford Aaron the most complete power over the woman. Aaron knew that, although ropes and gags were great fun for him, the real power lay in controlling a woman's *mind* and possessing not just her body but her heart and soul as well. That took some doing, but it was doable with the right amount of care and planning.

Aaron got to know his victim under the ruse of a new and flowering relationship—one he knew would never last—all in anticipation of discarding the woman, taking from her the very essence of her being, her sense of self-worth, essentially taking her soul.

As for Luisa, Aaron could tell early on in that first encounter that, beneath the prim, professional exterior, she was lovely and, it seemed, very sad. Her writing was brilliant, like a beam of light across the page. Yet as sophisticated as she seemed, Aaron could tell that Luisa was somewhat clumsy in social settings, as if she had been somewhere else for years and had only recently returned to the world. As he found out later, she had. Quietly one day, in the very early stages of their relationship, she had confided in him the secret of her past; she had nearly entered Religious life.

"In the end I just couldn't do it," she had whispered, looking at him with a face so full of goodness that he could barely contain his amusement. "I loved God, with all my heart. I still do. And I was willing and ready to give up everything. Everything. Except love. I knew I could not live without love. To be His, entirely, I had to give up the prospect of love for anyone else. I couldn't do it. I could not live without love. And so I left. I went to Medical School, and here I am."

Aaron smiled. *So you value love above all else?* he thought to himself. *I will turn your words against you and make a fool of you. You will be shattered, and inconsolable. But first, first I will have my fun!*

Luisa returned Aaron's smile (which she had been taken to be genuine) with a shy smile of her own. Aaron, catching her eyes, stared at her, hard, just for a moment, and winked. Instantly, she blushed furiously, and looked away from him. She began twirling a lock of her hair and she stammered, trying to change the subject. Her embarrassment piqued Aaron's interests. *The Monastery and then*

*Medical School? And now here she is? Wait a minute! No. It's just not possible. No one? Ever?* Aaron was amazed, amused, and fascinated all at once. Here he was in the idealize phase of one of his twisted "relationships" and he had found, by absolute chance, a perfectly innocent creature. It was like the hunter who aims his weapon skywards and shoots not just any winged creature but the white dove soaring peacefully across the sky.

Looking at Luisa, Aaron smiled again. He smiled his "you are safe with me smile", all the while thinking to himself *I want you, Luisa. I want every bit of you. I want to possess you, oh yes, but not in the manner that your innocent mind imagines. You see, my lovely one, your body, luscious as it is, doesn't especially interest me. I can find women to meet my carnal desires, but that is not what I desire from you. No. I want more than that from you. I want the very essence of you. I want to enter your soul. I want to toy with it, to play with your heart, and amuse myself until I grow bored. When it pleases me, I will throw you away, crushing you,* and in his gentlest and most comforting voice, he promised Luisa that her secret was safe with him. "No one will ever know that you've been somewhere else." Aaron whispered soothingly, and all at once Luisa forgot her embarrassment.

Aaron had been somewhere else, too, but no one at the hospital where he worked knew about it. He had spent a year in a juvenile detention center during his teen years. It had been a terrible tragedy, something that could never be undone. He'd never meant for it to happen, really he hadn't. He hadn't been the one responsible. It was the other boy and the drugs that boy had been taking—that's what the defense attorney had successfully argued, anyway.

Aaron was still haunted by what had happened, even years later. He had thought of it that very day, in fact. *It should have never happened,* he said to himself, and then he blinked.

*But it is all in the past,* he reminded himself. He had started his life over. He had a second chance. He was fortunate. His parents' influence and money had offered him the opportunity few would have had in such a situation: the chance to start over.

The transition from juvenile delinquent to medical doctor did not change Aaron. He was still who he was, and every one of his victims knew it. They didn't talk about it or about Aaron, because victims of such relationships hardly ever do. It was too shameful to admit that one was "had," and, for most of his victims, it was even more humiliating to admit (even to themselves) that, in spite of everything Aaron had done to them, they would give anything in the world if he would just come back, because they still missed him.

That was the sort of power Aaron held over his victims, even long into the future after he left them. Or, rather, after he threw them away, which was exactly

what this very handsome man did on a regular basis—with a smile, of course, because he was very much the perfect gentleman.

Aaron had a problem. He didn't consider it a problem, but that in itself was part of what made him who he was. Aaron was a psychopath. He liked to play a "little game" he called "The Method." It was a game of control, a game in which he had all the power over an unsuspecting victim, usually a beautiful woman whom he had chosen as his prey. He enjoyed controlling her and then psychologically and emotionally destroying her. He liked to watch her squirm and suffer. He liked to watch her think she was going mad. He delighted in it. She would still be physically alive when he was done with her, but otherwise she was destroyed and ruined.

Aaron's victims rotted away much as corpses did, only they felt the pain the dead were spared. One of his victims committed suicide and the rest were emotional cripples, distrustful of others. Those who could afford it went to counseling. Some developed eating disorders. All of them suffered terribly, with bouts of sadness and despair.

None of it, absolutely none of it, could justifiably be blamed on Aaron. Because Aaron had a very special way of dealing with all of it, of feeding his "problem": He thought of it as a game, a very special game.

He trolled for prey, selecting his victim with great care, knowing from the first hello that he was grooming her to be discarded and, in the process, emotionally and psychologically destroyed. But first, first he would have his fun. It was such fun to play! Such fun to get to know a beautiful woman, knowing the whole time, from the first conversation, that she was destined for destruction. Aaron especially loved to talk about the future with his victim, so that, once he had thrown her away, she would remember and think of what could have been.

Aaron selected his victims carefully. He looked for the sweet, innocent type: a woman who saw the good in others. He even learned how to hypnotize his victims so that he could play with women's emotions *and* minds. It became so easy to lure them, to entice them, to ease them gently into submission as they put their trust in him.

Aaron became an expert at "setting the stage for slaughter." When he was alone, he thought of his victim as if she were a small, wounded animal, and he enjoyed toying with her, watching her squirm, watching her become more and more confused. He had all sorts of tricks and techniques to make the experience more exciting for him and to gain his victim's trust.

"I can't believe I'm telling you all of this," Luisa had whispered so often as he bent his head closer to listen to her. "I've never told this to anyone. I don't know. I don't know you very well, and yet, somehow, I feel that I can trust you. It is as if we were soul mates."

Aaron would only smile. The Method was working with Luisa beautifully. Soon, the real fun would begin.

Aaron always knew, from the very first hello, exactly how the story would end: in glorious tears and sadness. And since he always knew the ending, it was a thrill to start with a new victim, as he had with Luisa. It was exhilarating to look into her beautiful face, so sweet, so trusting, and know that soon, very soon, he would confuse her into submission and destroy her.

As he gained a woman's confidence and gently pried out all of her secrets, her hopes, and her dreams, it was like picking at the bones of a corpse, and he probed until there was nothing left. And all the while, all the while, it was so very exciting to know what only he knew: that some day soon, in a few months at most, when the time was just right, when she was at her most vulnerable, when her hopes were highest, when she had committed herself to him heart and soul, he would suddenly and without any warning end it. He would do so calmly, like a gentleman, making certain to offer suggestions for where she could (and should) obtain psychological help.

Aaron liked to end things in a way that prevented his victim from being able to respond directly. He compared it, in his mind, to watching a woman, bound and gagged, shrieking from pain, but in silence. There was no hope of help. None.

Aaron would wait until his victim was away from home, and he would leave a message on her telephone in his cold, calm voice—not the warm, soothing voice he'd used to hypnotize her covertly or the gentle voice he'd used to pry every secret from her soul (even the ones she had never told herself!). Aaron always made sure the message was brief, just enough to jolt the woman to the core. "Hello. It's Aaron. Things just aren't working out," he would say calmly into the receiver. He would pause then, to confuse her, feeling her shudder at the suddenness of his departure. "I've given it some thought. I'm moving on." He would say nothing more. The abrupt end of the call was important. Aaron thought of it as a knife piercing his victim's soul.

Then Aaron would smile, thinking he had done it again, yes, he had. He had found the woman, made her his own, and tossed her away. It was delicious. It was fantastic. It was absolute power and total control over another person. He savored the experience and the victory. Then he would sit back, watching the clock, waiting for her desperate call, waiting for the mournful reaction. He wanted her to beg, to plead. Most of all he wanted her to blame herself, so that he could agree with her. Then he would mirror her actions one last time.

He would wait for her desperate, mournful phone call, the call begging him to reconsider, tearfully asking what she had done wrong. He would sit waiting for the sobs. He would sit, hungry for her pain, because it was her pain that made him feel alive. It was, for Aaron, better than any drug, better than any high, and it was

wonderfully, wonderfully addictive, which was why Aaron always made certain to have potential victims lined up in his mind while he was toying with the current one.

Aaron knew that his actions were deplorable. Sometimes he looked in the mirror and thought he saw a monster staring back at him. Other times he would look in the mirror and see a very handsome man—a man with beautiful blue eyes, a man whose charming smile, he knew, could lure and destroy any woman, leaving no trace of his actions.

So, the way a hunter surveyed the woods for an animal to shoot, so Aaron constantly perused his surroundings for perfect prey. He would size a woman up, sensing nuances in her behavior, the way she comported herself, the way she walked and, most importantly, the way she looked at him. Once he had determined that she was, in fact, potential prey, he would set the steps in motion, using *The Method*: a process perfected by him long ago. It always worked. It was untraceable, wonderfully untraceable. Aaron would simply play his game to the end and move on, leaving his victim mentally skinned alive, in a heap of despair.

It was almost as if he couldn't help himself, but not quite, because Aaron knew what he was doing. He just didn't care. He knew from the very first hello that he was prepping his victim for slaughter: not the kind of slaughter that causes physical death, no, a far more subtle one, hardly detectable to others, but just as evil. It was the slaughter of his victim's soul, the destruction of her sense of self. No one could prove anything. It was perfect. It was absolutely, wonderfully perfect.

Aaron had created *The Method* long ago. He had perfected it over a series of encounters, and in the process he had toyed with, and destroyed, the souls of many women, all with a smile and the gallantry of a gentleman. It was his secret. It was a ruse designed to exert absolute power and control over another person, and he was very good at it. There was the anticipation, the thrill of knowing from the first hello that he would gain her trust, become her world, and, in a few months at best, toss her way like yesterday's garbage. It was exquisitely glorious fun for Aaron.

*The Method* was simple and so enjoyable, like watching a play from the best seats in the audience, being its lead actor, and being the producer—all at the same time. In the end, when the curtain came down for the last time, and the female lead was crying her heart out, Aaron would simply walk off the stage and into a new play, his new female lead waiting in the wings of a different theater.

Aaron was very selective. He sized up his victims from a distance and figured them out. He had to know what made them tick before approaching them. Everyone had something that made them tick, that certain "whatever" that made them who they were. It was crucial to know that before the first hello. It was crucial to know what he was dealing with so that he could be prepared—the same way a serial killer chooses his weapons, only Aaron was the serial killer of souls.



There had to be a common thread, something that appeared to connect him with the woman. So in their first conversation he would ask her about music or books or anything that created the façade of mutual interest. He made sure it was a pleasant conversation, enjoyable for her and one in which he made her feel happy and content. Then he would ignore her, deliberately, for just enough time to make her wonder about that initial contact and crave it again. When the time was just right, he would casually approach her a second time. It was crucial at that point to make his victim feel safe and secure. By the end of the second conversation, she felt as if she had met her soul mate. Carefully woven into the second conversation were covert statements designed to penetrate her psyche. He was, even at that early point, prepping her for destruction.

The victim, flattered by all the attention, never noticed that, once he locked eyes with her (and that took some skill since most of Aaron's victims were the shy, reserved type), Aaron would begin to gesture with his hands. While it appeared to simply be an animated conversation between two people, it was, in actuality, far more evil than that. Aaron was hypnotizing his victim covertly. He would smile, lock eyes with his unsuspecting prey, and move his hands back and forth in front of her face.

Sometimes the victim would notice the hand gestures and say something. Luisa had noticed. "I've never seen you move your hands before when you speak," she once said.

That made Aaron realize he was being too obvious. He made a mental note to practice more in front of a mirror. He wouldn't let Luisa see his concern or his annoyance with himself. No. Aaron just smiled at her. He smiled his warm, enticing smile, and he could almost feel the chill running up and down her spine.

Luisa smiled and blushed and forgot all about Aaron's hand gestures. Her head started to feel fuzzy, and suddenly she was extremely relaxed. Strange, but that happened nearly every time she and Aaron talked.

Aaron smiled too. Because it was working. In just a few more conversations and after a few well-orchestrated events, she would be his: his to destroy.

Months later, she was lying in a coma in the intensive care unit of Harbor Hospital, and it was all his fault. Aaron stood at the ledge of the roof, staring at his shoes. There were two of them: two shoelaces, two Aarons. There was the sophisticated Aaron who was a successful fertility specialist at a prestigious hospital, the husband of Ruth, and the father of twin daughters Faith and Charity. That Aaron was kind, sensitive, and considerate. That Aaron belonged to literary clubs, country clubs, and loved sports cars and classical music. He played golf and had many friends. His only vices were good whiskey and the occasional cigarette, always imported and stored in a silver holder given to him many years ago by Sophia, his mother's friend, a woman who had been quite special in his life.

People adored him and wanted to be around him because he was so charming, so witty, so dashing, and so full of life. He was handsome, and he knew it. He had learned to play up his striking features by means of light-colored clothes—a beige cashmere coat, winter whites, and pale-colored shoes—the result being that he appeared to almost glow. His piercing blue eyes made him all the more handsome, and when he cast them down, it made him appear slightly vulnerable, like a little boy.

His alter ego, Secret Aaron, used those same beautiful blue eyes as beacons to peer into the hearts of his victims, to disarm them with flattery, and to gain access to their souls. He had gained access to Luisa's soul easily and effortlessly, because she was a kind, gentle woman with a trusting nature—the type of person who always saw the good in others. Sweet and lovely, she took Aaron at his word when he said he wanted to write a medical research paper with her. It never occurred to her that Aaron was an evil and deceptive man with sadistic intentions, because he was so handsome, so charming, so captivating, and so well known in his field. Naïvely believing him to be sincere, Luisa allowed herself to be made vulnerable, and that was just what Aaron wanted. That was how he got her soul. He lured it from her slowly and methodically, the way a snake approaches a mouse and devours it. He saw what he wanted, and he pounced.

Aaron, perched now on the edge of the roof, began to remember the course of his relationship with Luisa. That, in itself, was most unusual, because he rarely bothered to keep the specifics of his victims in his long-term memory. They became boring to him once they had been conquered, and then, after the discard, the glorious discard, he would simply move on to a new one.

Luisa was different. Even Aaron had seen that she was special. Although, of course, Aaron had felt nothing for her, because he had no real feelings, only pretend ones, he had still sensed that she was extraordinary. Her innocence was so intriguing! Because of that, Aaron had some difficulty moving forward with his cruel games during his relationship with her. In the end, his reticence had been his downfall, because on their last day together he had gone too far in his sadistic behavior, ostensibly to make up for his lack of cruelty to her early on. His behavior on that terrible day had been so negligent that both Dr. Aaron and Secret Aaron had battled each other, as they were doing now on the roof.

"*You* are the reason you are on this roof!" shouted Dr. Aaron. "You are the cause of it all."

Secret Aaron tried not to listen, but Dr. Aaron was indignant. "She ran away because she was humiliated. Of course she was. You tricked her into kissing you. That was cruel."

"It was marvelous," answered Secret Aaron. "She was mortified."

"Which is why she ran away. You let her go," said Dr. Aaron.

"She must have felt so foolish!" laughed Secret Aaron.

"She was very ill. She was bleeding!" shouted Dr. Aaron in a firm voice. "You let her run off, alone, even though you could see that something was terribly wrong."

Secret Aaron still laughed.

"I told you she needed medical attention!" yelled Dr. Aaron. "You wouldn't listen to me."

"I knew she was sick," replied Secret Aaron. "I just didn't care."

"If you had to do it again, would you do things differently? Would you let her run off in that condition?" asked Dr. Aaron.

"I still wouldn't care," replied Secret Aaron. "It was fun to watch her suffer."

"Is it fun now, on this roof? Tell me: Is it fun now?" asked Dr. Aaron.

There was no reply from Secret Aaron, and the real Aaron knew that he had put himself in a terrible mess. Soon, very soon, Luisa's tragedy would be traced back to him. When that happened, everyone would know what he really was and what he had done to her. Which was why he had gone to the roof. To jump. To escape. To protect Secret Aaron from being discovered.

*Constance*, thought Aaron, wishing he'd had the presence of mind to take his cell phone with him. He had gone to the roof in haste, and his cell phone was still on the table in the hospital cafeteria. There was no way to reach Constance.

Constance was Aaron's cousin, the daughter of Aaron's uncle and the uncle's almost-wife. Constance had been born the same day her parents had died in a car accident while on their way to their hastily planned wedding. On that terrible night, just shy of a month before Constance was due to arrive, her parents, who had been together for years but had never married, had gotten into a terrible fight. Her father was in love with someone else. Her mother, hugely pregnant and having just learned the terrible truth, was threatening to leave him and never return. In a last ditch attempt to make things right, her father, motivated by guilt and honor, not love, had suggested they get married that evening. And so, telling no one, they had set out in the middle of the night for the next town, where there was a justice of the peace. On the long drive, her father thought only of the other woman, the one he truly loved, and how he wished that something, anything, would step in and stop this marriage. It did. Just prior to reaching their destination, their vehicle was struck head on by a tractor trailer whose driver had collapsed at the wheel. Constance's father died instantly. The car was on fire so the rescue crew, seeing that he was dead, used what precious moments they had to pry the very pregnant bride from the wreckage. Moments later, the car exploded. Constance's father would later have to be identified through dental records. The ambulance, carrying both death and new life, rushed towards the hospital, its journey steered eerily towards both eternity and the terrestrial. It was a paradox that would mark Constance's entire life.

Constance, plucked from her mother's dying body, had been barely alive when her parents were wheeled to the morgue. Aaron's parents, totally oblivious to the goings on that had caused the midnight ride, had rushed to the hospital, where they were told she was in critical condition. After three harrowing weeks, during which time Constance had hovered somewhere between life and death, Aaron's parents had brought her to their home. It was only then that they realized they had barely cried for her parents, their energies having been so focused on keeping Constance alive. Such was the power of life and the will to live. So they named her Constance, because she'd had the strength to endure.

Constance was Aaron's favorite person in the family. She was the one he always turned to for help. She always looked after him, always protected him. He had never told her about Secret Aaron or the sick games he played with women's souls. She, in turn, had never told him that she always knew she was different from other people, and that sometimes, when she looked in the mirror, she thought she saw a monster staring back at her. Early on, Constance and Aaron had formed a lasting bond. There was a connection that transcended human emotion, a relationship forged by imagination, fantasy, guilt, and secrets.

Standing on the roof now, Aaron wanted to hear her voice. He wanted to hear that everything would be all right. If only he could speak to her. He wanted to know what to do. It was the first time Constance had not been there to protect him. He was alone, without hope, with no one to help him. It never occurred to him that his victims, when he discarded them, were similarly alone.

Aaron felt the wind on his face. He wondered what it would feel like to soar toward the pavement. Everyone, of course, would think it was an accident. He often went to the roof to smoke. It was the best place for a cigarette, even better than the exclusive country club he had joined. There, social protocol required conversation and a certain sense of decorum. Here on the roof, he could simply be himself, which was why it was his favorite place to escape for a smoke.

*They'll just assume I lost my balance,* thought Aaron.

He closed his eyes, readying himself. He had to do it. He had to protect Secret Aaron. This was it. He thought his final thoughts, thoughts of himself. Most people, at the moment of death, thought back on their life and those they had known and loved. Not Aaron. He thought only of himself, which was why, in an instant, he opened his eyes. "No," he said aloud, "there is another way."

Quietly he left the roof and took the elevator down to Luisa's room in the intensive care unit. He said nothing to Secret Aaron during the walk, but Aaron knew that He was there, lurking.