

VAN
RIPPLEWINK
YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

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Van Ripplewink: You Can't Go Home Again

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After forty-eight years in a coma, Van wakes in a brave new world.

CHAPTER ONE

**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a December
evening in the year 2015...**

THE PEACE HAD BEEN SO deep and lasting that Van had never thought of waking. Then the noises started—deep rumblings in the earth and a distant roaring, like an angry beast. The awful noise had grown louder, and now he heard the soft sigh of a steady wind moving overhead. A plethora of smells tickled his nose: car exhaust, the fecund mold of fallen leaves, the faint but still-sharp stink of dog feces.

“Wake up!” a voice like a wisp of wind whispered insistently. “Wake up and go do that which awaits you.”

The command angered Van. He did not want to wake. Why should he? To wake was to struggle and suffer, while the long sleep had been as effortless as falling through air. He relaxed his muscles and tried to sink back down again into the warm, womb-like embrace of the soft, satiny, fabric-covered cushions.

A memory intruded like cold water wicking into one’s bedclothes—he was running on Peninsula Avenue, his heart pounding as his shoes slapped the asphalt. He had to warn them! A voice tinged with terror shouted out his name, and something struck him violently, tossing him upward. He tumbled down through the air like a kid jerked about on a carny ride. Then nothing...



The backhoe operator sat in the quiet of the dimly lit cab. It was almost eight in the evening. He looked past his reflection in the windshield at the development, which was barely illuminated by a solitary streetlamp. Rectangular shadows in orderly rows outlined the foundations of the lots. In front of them, debris had been heaped up into mounds to be scooped and loaded into the dump trucks that would soon arrive. The development was enclosed by a rented chain link fence.

He raised the warm paper cup of coffee to his lips and sipped. He hated working second shift; his body hadn't adjusted, and he still wasn't sleeping well. But the economy had been in the toilet for the last three years, and he'd been barely scraping by. Then he'd heard about this project: a big government stimulus job on a fast track. They had only fourteen months to complete it before the money spigot was turned off. There was a time-and-a-half differential. Hell, after sitting on his ass in the union hall for the last six months, he'd work the graveyard shift in a graveyard if they asked him.

"Eight o'clock," a tiny voice said. He looked at the glow of his watch as the alarm repeated the time twice more. Another four hours till quitting time, and already he was fighting to keep his eyes open. Draining his coffee, he threw the cup to the floor of the cab and turned the key. The diesel started with a roar. He put it in drive and guided the backhoe as it lumbered across the field toward a dump truck. He lowered the scoop and scraped up a mound of rubble; he heard a metallic screech and felt a jolt. He got out and looked. A slab of either concrete or stone lay up against a shiny box that looked like a gold-painted refrigerator.

"What the hell?" he muttered.



Van heard the angry roar again, but it was still distant. He dove back down into sleep like a seagull plummeting out of a storm-

tossed sky to the calmer winds below. Quiet. Peace. Then a thought came to him: his dad would kill him for missing curfew again! His pulse spiked up. He'd already been late coming home twice, and his dad had warned him that the next time, he'd find the door locked. Shit! What would he do then?

The vibrations returned, drawing close. His pulse increased.

"Wake up!" The voice came again. "Go do that which awaits you."

"What's that?" Van cried out, his voice a croak.

The vibrations and rumbling drew closer.

"Tell them!"

Van struggled to hear over the noise. "Tell them what?"

"Tell them that we're..."

An awful roar erupted, drowning out the voice. Something struck Van violently, and he threw up his hands reflexively. The earth shook again, and the roar withdrew into the distance. Slowly, it grew quiet again.

It was cold. Cool wind wafted over and past him, just out of touch. He coughed, detecting an acrid smell—diesel fumes. He was lying on his back, looking up at the thin striations of cloud running past the moon. He wondered what had made all the noise. He sat up stiffly and looked about. In the distance, a string of streetlights beckoned. His head and body ached like he'd been in a fight, and he was sitting in some kind of box lined with cushions. What was going on? He had been drinking the night before—had somebody played a trick on him?

He fixed his eyes on the light of the nearest streetlamp and climbed out. As he carefully walked between the heaped-up mounds of earth and concrete chunks, he felt stiff and weak, unsteady on his feet. He came to a chain link fence, found a gap, and squeezed through. As he walked, his body slowly came alive. He tried to remember where he'd been last night. Oh! That's right. With Eddie and Wayne and the two new girls that rented that apartment on

Sycamore Street. What a party! He'd drunk so much that he'd gotten sick. Then he'd left alone. As he walked down Sycamore that big, dark car had pulled up ahead and stopped. Somebody inside, his face hidden in the dim light, had called out to him: "You better not get involved with those free freaks if you know what's good for you!" Then they'd raced off, burning rubber. Later, when he was walking down Peninsula Avenue, he'd noticed something about to happen across the street; he couldn't remember what it had been. He'd started running across when somebody shouted out his name. He'd turned and—bam! Something hit him hard from behind. That was all he could remember.



Back at the housing development, the backhoe operator sat in the passenger seat of his foreman's truck as they drove past the dim outlines of the house foundations.

"Where?" said the foreman.

"Over there. By the fence."

They drove off the road, coming to the rectangular box, now tilted onto its side. They got out. The operator saw the sheen of quilted fabric in the headlights. Half of the box was open, like the top half of a refrigerator/freezer.

"Jesus Christ," said the foreman. "It's a damn coffin."

"Shit," said the operator. "Who the hell opened it up? It wasn't opened when I left here."

"Hell if I know. Maybe one of the other crew saw it and took a look inside. Anyway, they were all supposed to have been moved out long ago."

"You mean there's a graveyard here?" The operator was going to protest further but let it go, knowing he would have taken the job even if he'd known that. He really needed the money.

"*Was* a graveyard," said the foreman.

“Nobody told me that. Shit. Well, what do we do with that thing now?”



As Van headed toward the first streetlight, he paused to look at his watch—ten after two. That couldn't be right. Was it a.m.? Anyway, it was dark; his mom would be worried about him, despite the fact that he was seventeen. That was just the way she was. He'd better get home. His throat hurt, and when he cursed, the sound came out in a croak. He could hardly talk. He started down Woodland Avenue. There seemed to be more traffic than usual, but that was not what intrigued him. Most of the cars he saw seemed to have shrunk! And the big chrome bumpers were gone, as were the colorful whale-like fins. These cars were all boxy and barely distinguishable from one another. Van wondered if there was some kind of foreign car show nearby.

Van was drawn to the glow of the neon lights in the windows of the stores. He looked at his watch again; it hadn't moved. He held it closer to his face. The crystal was broken, most of it gone. No matter. He continued walking. As he walked his hand swiped his pants; he noticed for the first time that they were badly frayed. He ran his hand over them; they were worn through in several places. He glanced into the window of a fabric store and stopped at the sight of his reflection. His jacket was worn and frayed and so were his pants; he could see his skin in a few places through the holes. But that wasn't the most shocking thing. Bringing his hand up to his face, he explored the beard that now covered his lip, cheeks and chin. He looked like one of the Smith Brothers on the cough drops box. What the hell had happened to him? He tugged the hair on his chin, feeling his skin move. It was real. What was wrong with him? Had he come down with some kind of rare disease? Looking around, he was glad of the dimness and the fact that there were not many people on the avenue. Then he noticed that most of the stores

were different. Katz's Pharmacy had a new name in strange lettering on the sign: Trahn Noc. He passed a little nail salon that he had never seen before, an African and Caribbean food store, the Sahara Restaurant where Wong's Chinese restaurant had been. What the hell had happened? Something was awfully wrong. He'd better get home and make sure Mom and Dad were okay.

He quickened his pace and saw a group of people a half block away. He hoped none of them would be people he knew; he looked like a bum. When he drew close, he saw they were colored people dressed in strange, colorful clothing—the women wearing long, flowered dresses and colorful scarves around their heads, the men dressed in three-quarter-length, shirtlike coats of bright green, red, or white. He crossed the street and hurried on.

As Van neared 66th Street, he saw another group of colored people, probably up from 75th Street for some shopping. They were mostly young and colorfully dressed, but more American looking. They chatted loudly as they strolled along, occasionally glancing in the windows. Van saw something that amazed him: One of the young men had something in his hand about the size of a paperback book, only a little thinner and smaller. It emitted a bright cloud of white light. It was alien, something he'd never seen before. The man touched his finger to it and the light went out; he put the object in his pocket. As they walked past, one of the men said to another, "You see that white dude?" A loud laugh ensued. "He look like that dude in the zombie movie." Several turned their heads to look at Van, and he walked on as their laughter faded into the night.

He came to Shelman's Shoes and looked in. It wasn't Shelman's Shoes anymore. The store was filled with tables on which sat dozens of little white plastic heads wearing wigs of various styles and colors. An Asian man gave him a quick, furtive look, and inside, half a dozen customers, colored and Asian, looked at the wigs. When had Shelman's gone out of business? He hadn't heard about it. He had a realization... he hadn't seen one white person since he'd awakened

in that field. He felt disoriented and lost, and he quickly walked on toward 66th Street.

As he started across the 66th Street Bridge over the railroad tracks, he spotted a group of people on the other side congregating in the dim circle of light cast by a street lamp. He came up to them. A young Asian man was sitting on a motor scooter, his helmet in his hands as he talked excitedly with four other young Asian men. Van couldn't understand a word they were saying, and they stared at him with curiosity as he walked past. Two more blocks, and he would be home. Then Mom and Dad could explain what the hell had happened. Up ahead at the corner of 66th and Allman Street, he spotted another group of people huddled in the glow of a street lamp; they were colored people.



The five young black men talked and joked in a tight group under the haze of orange light from a sodium-vapor streetlamp. Some smoked as they looked around languidly; others had their hands in their pockets; some occasionally spat on the sidewalk.

“My lil bro got benched for hitting his teach down at Bartram yesterday.”

“Why he do that?”

“The motherfucker tried to take his cell.”

“Shit! I’d kill any white motherfucker try that shit!”

“The motherfucker wasn’t white... was some niggah substitute.”

“Shit. I’d kill that motherfucker too.”

Somebody chuckled low. “Real talk.”

“I din’ think they still had whites teachin’ at Bartram. Din’ think they be comin’ in here.”

“Shit. They might go into Bartram, but they don’t dare come anywhere round here. They know what they get if they do.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Word.”

They fell momentarily silent as they appreciated this fact. Their relatives, the uncles and aunts and grannies, had told them stories of black folks' mistreatment at the hands of whites. They'd seen *Amistad*, *The Butler*, and other movies about slavery, when whites could kill blacks like they were dogs, without any consequences. And they'd all experienced going places and getting looks from the whites—dislike, apprehension, fear, and prejudice. The ever-present white cops and mall guards didn't attempt to hide their true feelings either as they stealthily watched them. The whites had all the power, all the territory, all the control. They let the Vietnamese in, giving them government money to open businesses, trying to crowd the blacks out. Then they brought in the Africans, who got government money too and opened their stores—then, to add insult to injury, they would watch the neighborhood people suspiciously whenever they came in their stores. The African kids showed up in their schools with their odd accents, acting smart and showing off. It wasn't fair. It was racism. But they had stayed strong and The Avenues, the 'hood, was still theirs and theirs alone.

"So, what yo mamma gonna do to him?"

"Shit... what can she..."

"Shut the fuck up! You see what I see comin' down here?"

"Motherfuckin' white devil!"

They all turned as one to look, muscles taut with excitement.

"Shit!"

"What the fuck he be doin' here?"

"Maybe he a zombie comin' from the cemetery."

"Shit."

"Shit, zombie or not... he goin' down tonight."

Laughter.

"Shit. That motherfucker be drunk or high on some shit."

"Word!"

Into this simmering stew of territoriality, testosterone, and antagonism toward whites walked Van Ripplewink: young, innocent of any racial discrimination or hate, and ignorant of the black side of the story of prejudice in America. What was about to happen

was just dumb luck and a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, as the saying went. Or, maybe, if there really were such things as gods or fates, maybe they were setting him up, wanting a little excitement after having grown bored with sitting around their sylvan ponds and sniffing chamomile and marigolds.



“What the fuck you doing here, whitey?” someone said as Van approached the group. The others moved across the sidewalk, blocking his path.

Van’s pulse picked up. Who were these people? What the heck was going on? “I live here,” he said.

They broke out into uproarious laughter. “The fuck you do!” The voice was incredulous and angry and belonged to a tall fellow, obviously the one in charge, as the others continued to laugh. “Ain’t nobody but niggahs and gooks live round here.”

Van’s face reddened. He had only used the term a couple times while in the company of the delinquents that hung around Cheney’s Corner Market down by the airport. He’d never felt good about that because he knew his parents wouldn’t like it. He’d never, ever heard the word used in his house. But when he’d been at Cheney’s, he’d wanted to fit in, and that was how they talked.

“What’s a gook?” Van said nervously as he judged the distance to his house. He was maybe half a block away.

Someone laughed. “Heh-heh. He knows what a niggah is, now don’t he?”

“Fucking Vietnamese,” said the tall youth. “You didn’t know that?” The youth glared angrily as he moved closer to Van, too close.

“Look,” said Van, “I don’t know anything about that. I gotta get home. My folks will be worried about me.”

Van attempted to step between the two in front of him.

“Shit!” somebody muttered, and then everything started moving.

Charles Davis, an Atlantic Gas Works pipeline engineer, put the

padlock back on the meter and stood. His handsome but slightly chubby, middle-aged, brown, African-American face wore a solemn look. A report of the smell of gas had brought him to The Avenues, a neighborhood that he didn't especially care to go to. Full of thousands of tiny row houses, most owned by absentee landlords, it had once been a working-class Irish and Anglo enclave. But the neighborhood had changed and begun attracting the poorest and most desperate of Philly's black population. That had caused racial tension. Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the government had resettled thousands of Vietnamese boat people refugees there as well. That ratcheted feelings up, and the area had become a hot zone of violently bloody racial assaults and counterassaults. Still another big influx of immigrants had followed in the 1990s, this time from Africa, stirring the racial pot even further. Lately, things had died down to a manageable but hateful truce. But Charles knew that unrest could flare up at any time.

In the dim light of the overhead street lamp, he turned off the sniffer and grabbed his toolbox. He walked out of the alley and toward the company car, a Prius. He opened the trunk and started putting his things away. Down the block, he saw the same group of black thugs that had been there when he'd driven up almost an hour earlier. Despite the distance, he could hear them laughing and carrying on. He frowned. They were young men, probably in their midteens to early twenties. It was after nine on a weeknight—a school night. Thirty or forty years ago, black kids would have been in their rooms, staring at a book, getting ready for school the next day. But not these days. Going to school and trying to learn something was “actin' white.” Even the recent immigrants from Africa were accused of acting white because of the premium they put on education and hard work.

Charles subconsciously shook his head. He had heard the same bullshit back in his own high school days from a lot of the blacks that went to Bartram, the local public high school. But his old man

had made sure he would be different. First off, Dad didn't put him in public school. He'd sent him instead to Resurrection Catholic High School for Boys, or Rez, as they called it. "You have to be better than them," his father would say, meaning the whites. It was pretty much his standard lecture—repeat often and add the strap as necessary.

Charles smiled. That lecture and an occasional whipping had kept him on the straight and narrow enough to get him through Rez with good grades and win a scholarship to Drexel University and finally a degree in engineering. The formula hadn't worked, however, for his younger brother, Randy. In fact, it seemed to have had the opposite effect. Fortunately, Dad had lived long enough to see Charles graduate. That had made him and Mother really proud.

Looking back, Charles had recently come to the conclusion that his dad had fought off death for the last year of his cancer just to be at that graduation. He had passed away two months later, somewhat peacefully. Nowadays, fathers like him were sadly lacking in the black community.

A hoot and holler came from down the block. Charles looked over the lid of the trunk. These kids hated and despised the dominant white culture. In reaction, they embraced the ghetto rap culture. They believed that you could get more money on welfare and the occasional strong-arm robbery, dope deal, or break-in than you ever could working at McDonald's. That meant they would never amount to anything and would never, ever get out of this rat hole. Only a strong father could break that mind-set and cycle. When some teen used that "actin' white" excuse, a good father would already be slipping the belt out of his pants to give him a whipping.

A bottle crashed to the pavement. Charles looked down the block and then shut the trunk and got in the car. He watched the teens warily as they stood around, smoking and laughing. It didn't matter how many politicians—first the white ones, and now the

black ones—got up before a crowd in their tailored suits and said that all these teens needed was more education, more basketball courts, more child care benefits for their unmarried mothers, whatever. It was wrong; it was a lie! More programs were not the answer; they'd run their course, as far as he was concerned. The overarching popular black culture was the problem. It was ignorant and hateful, a pathetic sinkhole of denial, idleness, shirked responsibility, and violence, much of it fueled by drugs, liquor, and rap garbage, and Ferguson was just the latest result. Charles knew he was one of the lucky ones; he'd had a father that loved him enough to shepherd him safely past all of that.

Charles took out his iPhone. His face rounded in a smile as he texted Mignon: *Hope this doesn't wake you, sweetheart. I'm on my way. Be there in an hour.*

Charles looked down and put the key in the ignition of the Prius, marveling at the fact that the engine did not immediately come on. When he looked up, he saw something unbelievable. A white kid, unmistakable with his long hair and a slight beard, like some kind of lost hippie, was turning the corner down the block, headed right for that gang of black thugs. Where the hell had *he* come from? White people didn't come in here... unless they were cops and loaded for bear! Good God Almighty! And black people didn't come in here either, unless, like Charles, their jobs brought them here.

Charles watched as the kid walked up to the gang. Didn't he know the danger? Was he high on something? Sure enough, it didn't take long before they closed in, surrounding him. Then they started swinging... every last one of them.

Charles cursed as he took the emergency light from the glove compartment and slapped it on the dash. Bright amber light flashed in his eyes as he raced down the block, bouncing up onto the curb with his two right wheels, beeping the horn sharply and repeatedly.

Most of the punks scattered as he pulled up; only one lingered

long enough to give the white kid a last punch upside the head, knocking him down. The punk ran off. Charles leaned over to the passenger window as the kid got shakily to his feet. "Get in!" he commanded.

When the door shut, Charles stepped down hard on the accelerator. "You okay?" he asked the kid as he whipped a turn onto 65th Street.

The kid nodded. "Yes, sir."

Charles tried to size him up. He was tall, maybe an inch taller than Charles's five feet eleven inches, and skinny; he looked like he hadn't eaten in years. His clothes were ragged as hell. He was probably some kind of speed freak.

"I think they hit me pretty hard in the ear," said the kid. "It's ringing, and it stings."

Charles nodded as he turned onto Chester Avenue, again putting the pedal to the floor. The digital speedometer quickly rolled to fifty, which was fifteen over the limit, but he didn't think anyone would pull him over in his Atlantic Gas Works ride.

"What kind of car is this, sir?" said the kid.

Charles looked at him with curiosity. "Toyota Prius. You never rode in one?"

"No. And I never heard of one either. Who makes it? GM? Ford? American Motors or Chrysler?"

"Toyota."

"Never heard of them."

Charles turned to look at the kid. He must've gotten hit pretty hard in the head. What American teen didn't know what a Toyota was? A trickle of blood was coursing from the kid's ear and down his neck. Charles raised his eyebrows. He pulled into the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot. "Let's stop in here. You better go into the restroom and wash that cut on the side of your head."

Inside, Charles sat at one of the tables close to the window as he waited for the kid to come out of the restroom. From the other side

of the counter, Mabel gave him a quizzical look. “Two coffees and two glazed,” he said. She nodded and moved off. A moment later, the kid came out and sat down across from Charles. Charles looked across the table at him. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“And you never heard of Toyota?”

The kid smiled. “No, sir.”

Charles chuckled. “Don’t call me ‘sir,’ okay? Call me Charles.”

“Okay, Charles.”

“Now,” said Charles, “where were you going when I picked you up?”

“Home.”

“Where’s that?”

“Right up Allman Street from where you picked me up: 6541 Allman. And thanks for helping me back there.”

The waitress brought over the coffees and donuts and set them before the two men, giving the check to Charles. “Thanks, Mabel,” he said. He looked back at the kid. “What’s your name?”

“Van Ripplewink.”

Charles frowned. “What kind of name is that?”

The kid winced. “It’s Dutch.”

Charles took a sip of his coffee and nodded. “Yeah, it sounds kind of Dutch or German. Well, why are you bullshitting me about where you live? Ain’t no white people lived in that neighborhood for the last fifteen years. When did you move in there?”

“My parents bought the house when I was in the fifth grade; that would have been around 1959, I think. And we’ve been living in there ever since.”

“Fifth grade, huh? What school did you go to?”

“Good Shepherd.”

“Yeah, well, that’s right around the corner. But it’s shut down now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So, tell me again when you moved in there? What year?”

Van's brow furrowed. "1959."

"And what high school did you go to?"

"Resurrection. Rez."

Charles nodded. "So did I. And you lived up there"—Charles nodded in the direction of Allman Street—"ever since?"

Van nodded.

"Okay." Charles took out his pen and scribbled on his napkin. "Let's see, you were, what, ten years old in fifth grade?"

Van nodded as he sipped his coffee.

Charles continued writing on the napkin. "Ten in '59. And now it's 2015... that would make you about sixty-six years old. You're in pretty good shape for an old man."

Van laughed. "Well, I'm seventeen, that's for sure. Why did you say it was 2015?"

"Cause that's the date, dude. It's September 9, 2015."

Van nervously laughed again.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm sorry, sir... Charles. I'm sorry, but I feel like you're joking with me or something."

Charles shook his head. His look grew serious and a little sad. "Well, I'm not. You better eat your donut. I gotta get home soon myself. Maybe I could drop you off somewhere."

Van ate the donut hungrily and washed it down with the coffee. Mabel called over to Charles: "How's your niece doing?"

Charles smiled. "Good. She's in her second year of junior college now."

Mabel nodded. "She's pretty." She moved away to see to another customer.

Charles's face slowly resumed its soft smile. His cell phone rang out the signature bass riff from MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This." He took it out of his pocket and took the call. It was Mignon. "What's up, sweetheart?"

"You should have been home an hour ago."

He laughed. "Yeah. I know. I'm running a little late. I'm

bringing someone home with me. He'll be staying in the carriage house, okay? Love you."

"Okay, Uncle. Love you too."

Van pointed at the phone. "What is that?" he said.

"iPhone 6."

"Oh," said Van. "Wow!"

Charles smiled as he put the phone back in his pocket. The kid's eyes were as big as quarters, like he'd never seen one before. Kids and phones!

"Okay," said Charles, signaling that they should go. They got up from the table and walked out to the car. Charles opened the door as Van looked across the parkway at the dark trees.

"You ain't thinking of going back up there to Allman Street, are you?"

"Yeah," said Van. "Maybe a little later."

"What?" said Charles. "I don't want to be hearing about you on the local news. Why don't you wait till tomorrow?"

"Maybe I will," said Van. "I'll just hang out here till maybe seven or something. They're open all night."

Charles studied the kid in the bright neon. Maybe he was high on something. Or maybe that blow to the head had stunned him temporarily. He wasn't a thug, though, that was for sure. And despite his crazy story, he didn't seem wildly irrational or dangerous. In fact, he was polite as hell. "Look," he said, "I have a little carriage house out back. You can stay there for the night, and I'll drop you off back here in the morning on my way to work."

"Ah, I don't know," said Van. "I don't want to put you out."

"No problem. You'll have it all to yourself."

Van looked at the plate glass windows of the Dunkin' Donuts and then at the blackness of the park, his eyes hooding over in thought.

Charles smiled, realizing what the kid's reluctance meant. "Shit." He laughed. "You think I'm gay, don't you?"

"What do you mean, gay?" said Van.

Charles studied Van for a moment and shook his head. “Shit. You don’t know about that either? Maybe you really are from 1966 or something. Anyway, never mind. Just get in the car.”

As the Prius rolled quietly down Cobbs Creek Parkway, Charles turned to Van. “There’s a couch in the carriage house that’s pretty comfortable. The door locks, so you’ll have some privacy. In the morning, I’ll take you back to Dunkin’ Donuts; I always have my coffee there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“It’s Charles, remember?”

“Right, Charles. Thanks for your kindness.”

They drove in silence for ten minutes, and then Charles turned into a driveway, colonnaded on one side, and pulled up to a two-story stone house. They got out to the sound of crickets. Charles pointed to the darkness behind the house. “There’s a half bath in the carriage house too. Don’t be wandering around in the yard or anything, okay? I don’t want my neighbors waking up and seeing a stranger on the property. It might scare them.”

Van nodded.

“Let’s go through the house, and I’ll get you some bedding.”

Despite his unease, Van was in awe of the house as they entered the large living room. Ahead, a grand staircase, like the one in the movie *Gone with the Wind*, led up to the second floor.

Van stood looking around as Charles opened a closet door. He took out a sheet, blanket, and pillow. “C’mon,” said Charles. “We’ll go out through the kitchen.”

Van heard a noise from above and looked up; a young woman dressed in a nightgown was looking down at them. Her skin was bronze, her eyes big and slightly almond shaped. She was beautiful.

Charles turned and saw Van looking up at her.

“Oh, Mignon,” Charles called up to her, “sorry to wake you. This is Van. He’s just staying the night in the carriage house, and I’ll be giving him a lift in the morning.”

The girl gave Van another close look and then went into one

of the bedrooms. When the door closed, he and Charles looked at each other.

“Let’s go,” said Charles. They exited the back door of the kitchen, and Charles unlocked the door to the little carriage house and turned on the light. He set the bedding on the couch. “There’s an alarm clock on the desk over there. I get up at six. I usually take about forty-five minutes to get ready.”

“Okay,” said Van. “I’ll be up and ready.”

Charles nodded. “We can have coffee at Dunkin’ Donuts, and then you’re on your own.”

“Thanks, Charles. I appreciate it.”

Charles nodded. “See you in the morning.”

After Charles left, Van looked around the place. It was small, and there was no back door. There was a deadbolt, so no one could enter even if they had a key. Van wasn’t worried, however. Instead, he was thinking about the exotically beautiful young woman standing on the balcony, looking down at him.



Van awoke a little after six. He washed his hands and face and folded up the linen and blanket that Charles had given him. Not long after that, he heard a knock at the door. It was Charles. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” said Van.

They rode most of the way to Dunkin’ Donuts in silence. Going inside, Charles ordered two coffees and two glazed donuts. They sat, and a few moments later, a waitress brought them their order. She looked at Charles. “That’ll be \$4.76.”

As Charles reached for his wallet, Van said, “Thanks, Charles.” Charles nodded as he poured sugar into his coffee and started stirring it. Van grew pensive looking. “I don’t have any money now, but I’ll pay you back for all of this when I figure things out.”

Charles waved any further words away. “Don’t worry about it. When you get your act together, you can find me here most mornings.”

Van nodded. "Your daughter's really pretty."

Charles laughed. "You noticed that, huh? She's not my daughter. She's my brother's kid."

"You have any children?"

"No."

"Does your brother live with you?" said Van. "That house is huge."

Charles shook his head. "No. It's just me and Mignon."

Van didn't say anything, figuring that Charles would go on. He waited.

"My little brother, Randy, Mignon's father, got into drugs big time."

"Wow!" said Van, his voice conveying concern.

Charles seemed not to mind talking about his brother as he took a sip of his coffee and then a large bite of his donut. "Randy married a Vietnamese woman; she was part of that first wave of Vietnamese boat people."

Van frowned, not knowing what he was talking about.

Charles nodded his head in the direction of Van's street. "There's still some Vietnamese livin' up there in The Avenues, you know."

Van nodded.

"She was a good mother in the beginning," continued Charles, "but... instead of her bringing Randy up to her level, he brought her down to his. He turned her into a bigger crack addict than he was."

"Crack?" said Van.

Charles gave Van a curious look. "Dope. Cocaine... you know, the kind you smoke. Anyway, he got her hooked."

"Where is he?" asked Van.

"He's dead now," said Charles.

"Sorry," said Van.

Charles shrugged. "That was twelve years ago. Mignon and I are over it now."

“What about Mignon’s mother?”

Charles shook his head as he raised his coffee cup to his lips and sipped. “She’s out there somewhere. Could be up there in The Avenues right now, selling dope.”

“That’s a shame,” said Van.

Charles shrugged again. He took another sip of his coffee and a bite of his donut. “Yeah. So I had to get legal custody of Mignon, or the courts would have placed her in foster care, or worse.”

Van nodded. “You married?”

Charles shook his head. “Was, about twenty years ago, but I got divorced. And that complicated things. I had to bring my cousin up from Atlanta to live with us for several years to take care of Mignon while I went to work.”

“Oh,” said Van.

Charles popped the last piece of donut in his mouth. “I got a long-term, steady lady friend now that I get together with on a regular basis.”

Van nodded and turned to look out the plate glass windows at the people driving by on their way to work.

“Well,” said Charles as he began sliding across the bench seat. “I have get to work, guy.” He got to his feet.

Van slid out and stood to shake Charles’s hand.