

Chapter 1

Ever see that old beer commercial: “Life doesn’t get any better than this”?

That’s what I’m afraid of.

If I wasn’t feeling bleak *before* entering Gauthier’s Shop ‘n Go, I am certainly getting the job done by the time I arrive at the Buddee’s Hot Dog Flavored Potato Chips display and double back toward the Build-It-Ur-Self Nacho Station. Gauthier’s is one of those discount food marts seemingly designed for one purpose only: to crush the human soul. There is not a single item on the shelves that a self-respecting, mentally healthy individual—not that I fit into either of those categories—would consume at gunpoint.

So why do I venture into Gauthier’s two or three times a week, hoping to be dazzled by some sensational new dinner-for-one option? Answer that one, my friend, and I suspect you answer many other questions about me.

Cereal it is. I grab a box of off-brand Reese’s Puffs, pay the sullen cashier with the nose pimple big enough to be mapped by Hubble, and make for the exit, flushing like a shoplifter.

Cold cereal, dinner of champions.

After scoring some off-season lager to pair with my naturally-and-artificially flavored corn balls, I cruise past the tire and exhaust shops of south Wentworth and park in front of my tired and exhausted old house. Well, my *parents'* tired and exhausted old house, actually; the place I grew up in. Legally it is mine now—I inherited it when Mom died last year and have been living alone there ever since—but it is still my parents' house in every way. I've done nothing to claim it as my own.

May I just say, nothing makes a thirty-eight-year-old feel more chipper about his life management skills than going to sleep every night in the same bedroom where he deflowered his first Victoria's Secret catalog.

I am, in case you haven't picked up on it, battling depression.

Well... *battling* is a strong word. The truth is, the fight went out of me ages ago. That's what most people who've never been depressed don't realize: the fight is the first thing to go.

I sit curbside in my vintage Hyundai, staring at the peach-colored, vinyl-sided bungalow and its twenty years of deferred maintenance; waiting, I guess, for it to transform into a sparkling seaside villa in France. When that doesn't happen, I step out of the car and let my feet start their programmed death-march toward the sagging front steps.

"Hey, asshole," says Clyde Gilchrist, my optimistically muscle-shirt-wearing neighbor, approaching me from his side of our scraggly dividing hedge. The man has a gift for crafting a conversation opener. "Can you do me a favor? Next time you decide to throw a bag of empties in my back yard, can you at least aim for the—?"

I cut him off with a flip of the hand. I've never, in fact, thrown *anything* into his yard—except disdain—but I'm not in the mood for Clyde Gilchrist this fine evening. I jam my key in the door and slip inside. The stale smell of last night's Kung Pao Shrimp assails my nostrils as—

A hard object—feels like a flesh-covered pipe—collides with my Adam's apple. My cereal box leaps from my hand as my bottled beer and car keys crash to the floor. My feet try valiantly to continue their forward march as my neck is jerked backwards with a sickening crack of cartilage.

The hard object, I realize, is a forearm. A muscled humanoid has me in a chokehold from behind. I can feel his biceps twitching and his hot breath in my hair.

My unseen assailant whips my body around in a smooth one-eighty and drags me backwards through the house, face up. I cannot breathe, and my eyes feel as if they're about to pop their sockets. My feet flail wildly, trying to gain purchase on the bare floor as my brain scrambles to make sense of the moment.

What the hell is happening here? Why?

I'm a second-rate computer game artist. I don't own anything worth stealing—a casual glance around the house would tell you that—and I've masterfully engineered my life so as to be of no real consequence to anyone. Ergo, I don't merit this kind of attention. Ergo, whoever this guy is, he has the wrong person. The wrong house. The wrong information.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. On every count.

I hope I can convince *him* of that. Whoever he is.

If only I could pull some air into my lungs.

As he jerks my body into the kitchen, I note, absurdly, that the ceiling is covered with black cobwebs. I haven't looked up in years, I realize.

The man's gym-forged arm forces me down into a kitchen chair, which has been set up in the middle of the floor, directly below the ceiling light, interrogation style. He releases the pressure on my neck just enough for me to gulp some air.

Standing in front of my parents' ancient Kenmore electric is a second man, smallish in stature, maybe five-seven or so. He's wearing a Star Wars storm trooper mask. The jaw section has been cut away to expose his real mouth. Perhaps so he can speak and be heard more clearly? I note a well-trimmed reddish beard rimming a set of small, even teeth.

The man wears latex surgical gloves and holds in his hands—almost comically, it seems at first—a branch cutting tool, the type landscapers use, with two long handles and a short, curved blade-apparatus.

The pipe-hard arm maintains its lock grip as Storm Trooper addresses me in a soft, precise, and rather high-pitched voice that comes off as *almost*—but not quite—prissy. “This tool,” he says, holding up the instrument for me to see, “is called a lopper. Did you know that? Most people don't. This particular model is a long-handled Corona High-Torque Bypass lopper. It can snip an inch-thick branch off a green tree as easily as slicing cake.”

Storm Trooper lays the lopper on the kitchen table and picks up an iPad that's resting there. He holds the tablet device about a foot from my face, waits till my freaked-out eyes focus on it, and then taps it awake with a latex-covered finger.

On the viewing screen is a video, cued up and ready to roll. Its frozen image is that of a fifty-year-old man strapped into a metal garden chair, his arms and wrists duct-taped to the chair's tubular arms. Only the man's hands have been left free to move.

Storm Trooper taps the Play icon.

Trooper's own recorded voice issues from the iPad's speaker. He seems to be standing just off screen in the video. “I'll ask this question once and once only,” Troop's high voice says to the taped-up man in the video. “Who knows about this besides the woman?”

Video-guy in the chair replies, “I haven't said a word to—”

Before he can finish his sentence, the open blades of the lopper lunge in from off screen like the jaws of a snapping turtle. They hook the man's left pinkie and ring finger into their curved bite and lop them off cleanly. A plastic bag is snapped around the man's hand to catch the blood. He lets out a keening *eeeeee-eeeeee-eeeeee* of pure agony, as blood streams into the bag and sweat pours from his face. He shouts in the voice of a man whose balls are on fire, "Clarence Woodcock! Clarence Woodcock! Clarence Woodcock! Clarence Woodcock!"

My stomach clenches and I feel a violent urge to retch. Storm Trooper shuts off the video, puts down the iPad, and picks up the lopper once again.

"I hope that video was instructive," he says in his almost-but-not-quite-prissy manner. "The way we work is this: I give orders, you follow them without a moment's hesitation. Thus you avoid the lopper. Are we abundantly clear on that?"

I nod. Yes. Abundantly.

"My partner is going to release your neck now. You are to remain seated while he straps you into the chair. Clear?"

Again I nod. My list of alternatives does not stretch from sea to shining sea.

I feel Chokehold-man wordlessly pat me down and pull my cell phone from my pants pocket. He then wraps a band of rubbery, self-sticking fabric, eight inches wide or so, around my chest and upper arms several times, fastening me to the chair-back. He does the same to bind my ass and thighs to the seat.

The material feels elastic but tough, and I sense they've chosen it so as to avoid leaving binding-marks on my skin. They don't want me to look manhandled. I cling to this idea with a desperate thread of hope. Maybe the lopper is going to be used only for... emphasis.

Or as a last resort.

“Before we begin,” Trooper says—begin *what?*—“let me explain something that I hope will put this situation in perspective and enlist your cooperation.” Trooper Dan has my undiluted attention. “If you’ve seen many crime thrillers on TV, you may be thinking that because I am wearing this mask, I do not wish for you to see my face. Which, in turn, you might assume means that you have a chance of sauntering away from this encounter under your own power.”

I do not want to hear whatever comes out of his mouth next.

“That, I’m afraid, is a faulty assumption. I wear the mask only out of an excess of caution. You *are* going to die today, Mr. Carroll. I get no joy out of telling you that, but I don’t define the job parameters.”

Adrenaline rips through every synapse of my nervous system. Not only does this guy know my name—my hopes of this being a case of mistaken identity have fizzled like spilt champagne—but also he intends to kill me. And apparently there isn’t Thing One I can do about it. My heart and lungs pump in double-time. I stifle the urge to wriggle and scream.

“To employ a tired cliché,” says the masked man with the lopper, “we can do this two ways...”

He pauses. At this moment I become aware of a detail I failed to take in before. The kitchen floor is covered with a sheet of clear plastic, *Dexter*-style. Not a hopeful sign for the protagonist, as a rule of thumb.

“Option A—cooperation—is better for all concerned, believe me when I say that, but we will revert to option B without qualm. Option B, needless to say, brings the lopper into play. A testicle sliced in half is a memorable experience, I’m told.” His high, even voice has an almost hypnotic quality. “So... choose an option, Mr. Carroll.”

Does he actually expect me to choose aloud? Apparently he does.

“Option A,” I say flatly.

“The only choice, really,” he says. “Still, it’s surprising how often we have to go to option B. Let’s begin.”

He lays the lopper down again and reaches into a paper grocery bag on the table. His latex-gloved hands emerge holding three items: a plastic bottle of Svedka vodka—my brand, yippee—and two brown plastic prescription vials.

“This is a process I understand you’re familiar with from past experience,” he says. How could he possibly know I OD’d on vodka and pills half a year ago? “As you know, it’s a no muss/no fuss procedure. Pleasant, almost. Though when you tried it last time, you didn’t take enough of the pills to get the job done, did you? Today we’re going to bypass the ‘cry for help’ stage and go straight for DOA.”

He hands me one of the vials. “Your instructions are to take all the pills in both containers, wash them down with the vodka, and then continue drinking the vodka until you are rendered... non-functional. Then, bim-bam-bom, it’s all over and we leave you to rest in peace.”

I stare at the vial in my hand, knowing I have no choice but to obey the man, but trying to prolong the moment before my fate is sealed. In that brief moment, as I study the pill bottle, I become aware of another detail my conscious mind has failed to register till now: the soft *clack-clack* of my computer keyboard from the adjacent den—my “office.” Chokehold guy hasn’t left the kitchen, so that means there is a third member of this rogue Jehovah’s Witness splinter cell.

What have I, Finnian Carroll, low-level computer artist and general life failure, done to merit a three-man criminal operation?

And what do they think they’re going to find on my computer? The missing Snowden files? Yet, absurdly, a sense of violated privacy wells up within me.

“You’re not going to find anything useful there,” I shout toward the den.

“Oh, we know exactly what’s on your computer, Mr. Carroll,” says Troop. “Trust me. Come on, swallow the pills.”

I turn the safety (ha) cap of vial number one and pour its contents into my palm. Cute little rounded rectangles with triple score-lines across them. Xanax. Close to a hundred twenty of them. My own prescription, as confirmed by the name “Finnian Carroll” on the label. I filled it just two days ago.

With my hand brimming with pills and about two seconds of grace time before the lopper is summoned into play, I review my survival options. One tactic might be to fling the pills, scatter them across two rooms. Buy myself some time to devise a better plan. Would that result in lopper discipline? Probably not. If these guys are going to all this effort to stage my death as a suicide, then the lopper is probably a bluff.

Probably.

Wasn’t a bluff for the guy in the video, though.

“The pills, Mr. Carroll.” Trooper-man eyes me through the mask, waits precisely two seconds, then turns and reaches for the lopper.

“I’m doing it!”

My hand, filled with pills, flies to my mouth. (Chokehold has left my forearms free to do the deed.) A few pills miss their target; most of them score a direct hit. Trooper hands me the bottle of vodka. “Drink.”

I take an obedient swig, working the pills down my throat. I swig again. Storm Trooper takes the vodka from me and hands me the second vial of pills. These I recognize too. Diazepam—generic Valium. A script I filled but never used. I dump all of them into my hand. I

believe there are ninety of the blue pills, a three-month supply. Ten-milligrammers. I cram about half of them into my mouth. Troop hands me the vodka to wash them down. I glug away.

I eat the other half of the pills and wash them down too.

Now it's just a matter of waiting for the results to come in. So to speak.

Well, this is what I wanted, right?

Fuck, what have I just done?

