

# Prologue

November, 1996

*Great place to dump a body.*

The thought bubbled up to the surface of her consciousness like one of those burps of methane in the shallows of a lake. Martin had christened them “swamp bubbles”, random thoughts that came seemingly out of nowhere.

It wasn't the first time she'd had the thought, driving these back roads. She'd just turned onto Baker, one of a small network of side roads—some paved, most not—that meandered their way through the rocky wilderness northwest of town.

She hated these roads at night. In fact, they scared the shit out of her. They were bad enough during the day. It was amazing how you could be so close to a town or village and yet feel so isolated; that's what happened in a region where wilderness, rather than settlement, was the default landscape, where human presence was the exception rather than the rule. These secondary roads, two lanes of cracked and weathered blacktop that snaked their way over ancient rock and through primeval forest, offered few signs of human activity. Unlike the main highway with its road

signs promising food, shelter, and fuel for weary travellers, the back roads were marked only by occasional notices of properties for sale, wildlife crossings, or warnings to trespassers to keep out. On either side of the road, which rose and fell and swerved relentlessly, was a wall of impenetrable forest and occasional rock cut. During the day, the feeling she got while driving around here was one of sameness, boredom, and isolation. At night, especially a rainy November night like this, the feeling of isolation was hugely amplified. The near complete darkness was one thing: the knowledge that there was nothing out there but cold and gloom made everything that much worse.

The thought raised its nasty little head half-jokingly, the product of years of watching too many crime shows on late-night TV.

*A great place to dump a body: no one would ever find it out here.*

Obviously, some people lived out here. Doug and Irene, always ahead of the curve, bought a huge lot out this way, and built their dream home on a rocky hill among the pines and cedars. Their home was only a few minutes behind her now and already there was no sign of it. Their long, private driveway led off this road and climbed up and around a hill through thick forest, ultimately ending three kilometres farther on a man-made plateau where the house sat, facing westward. Even if Doug and Irene had every light on in the house, no one on this road could see it. And if there were other homes around here, the same could be said for them.

She forced herself to think happy thoughts. Dinner was lovely: sweet potato and pear soup, locally caught poached whitefish in a mushroom sauce, French green beans and wild rice, blueberry crumble and café au lait for dessert. Doug and Irene's house—with its open concept, vaulted ceiling, exposed beams, and panoramic west-facing windows—was fabulous of course, triggering, as it usually did, a small pang of envy. Conversation was for the most part light and bouncy, talk of food and travel and early plans for the holidays. She did, however, come away

a bit dissatisfied after she managed to corner Doug for some serious one-on-one hospital talk while Irene put the dishes away. It wasn't a trivial matter; it was dead serious, and she needed, demanded even, that as chief of medicine he take action on it. But Doug could be so wilfully blind and pigheaded at times. That had put her in a bit of a pissy mood and she left without saying much else; she just wanted to get home to her two guys.

A call from the Campbells' landline a few minutes before leaving had relaxed her a bit. According to Martin, Justin was sleeping peacefully after what had been a nasty little coughing fit earlier in the evening. After some children's aspirin and some flat ginger ale he'd asked for mommy, and fell asleep before his dad could even answer.

She'd spare her husband her frustration when she got home; he had enough on his plate with a sick two-year-old. No use unloading everything on him right now. Not yet anyway. It was lot to take in and it required strategic thinking and informed judgement. He was a smart man, but this would have him way out of his element. He'd want to take action right away, go to the authorities, call his brother for legal advice, and that risked everything coming out too soon. Plus she didn't feel she'd exhausted all avenues yet. The intrigue could simmer a little while longer.

She hated the helplessness of being in no man's land like this, out of cellphone range, for most of the twenty-five or so minutes it would take to get home, but she knew not to push it. The road was dark and wet and the last thing she needed was to find herself stuck in a ditch in the middle of nowhere because her mind wasn't completely on her driving. Stay calm, turn on the stereo—if she could find something other than paranoid right-wing talk radio—or better yet play a CD. In the darkness, under the glow of the dash and the intermittent squeak of her wipers,

a smoky voice reflecting on the brilliant flash of young desire, long since extinguished.

Swinging around a curve on a slight incline, she slowed: hazard lights blinking and rear reflectors of a vehicle ahead, pulled over on the side of the road. Shitty time and place for your ride to break down. She approached at a crawl. Her headlights caught movement on the driver's side, then the door opened and a figure stepped out. A man waved his arms above his head, imploring her to stop.

"Shit," she said to herself. "What is he doing here?"

In her heart there was an element of annoyance and some unease, but not fear. Not yet. She couldn't see his eyes as he approached—his hand was raised to shield them from her headlights—but as she lowered her power window, she saw the joyless grin and heard the false cordiality in his voice.

"Fancy meeting you out here, Doctor."

*Someday, and that day may never come, you'll find  
you're the only person in the room who's right.*

—my dad



# PART 1

# 1

They found Mom's car two weeks after she disappeared.

The police said nothing looked suspicious, beyond the fact that she had abandoned a perfectly functioning Toyota Rav4 with almost a full tank of gas on what amounted to a glorified game trail on a wet November night. The discovery breathed new life into an already sputtering search effort, brief wind in sagging sails that lasted as long as the good weather did.

No further trace of her was ever found. Dad later said it was as if she'd fallen through a seam in the universe that immediately closed itself up. That image always stuck with me somehow, as did the fact that the last CD she'd been listening to in her car was by Billie Holiday. That sounds like Mom.

It took a lot longer for my dad to give up on Mom than it did for the police or the rest of the community. Every chance he got he would drive around the back roads, interrogating strangers, posting his MISSING signs on every community noticeboard and hydro pole within a hundred and fifty kilometres. He took me along, a silent toddler in a car seat. This continued for years: some of my earliest memories are of riding in the car with my dad, a big

roll of tape, an industrial stapler, and box of photocopied posters on my lap. The soundtrack to those memories is Billie Holiday.

Eventually, as our forays through the region with the stacks of posters ground to a halt, Dad stopped listening to jazz. He even took down the Billie Holiday poster that Mom kept in her study. Soon after that he stopped listening to music altogether, in the car and in the house, and got me a set of headphones.

After that, Dad changed. As the years went by and the mystery of my mom's disappearance remained just that, he became like one of his once-colourful paisley shirts that had gone through the wash too many times. Dad, the wannabe flower child, the misplaced hippie born half a generation too late, began to seal up his past into boxes: he packed away his vinyl collection, cut his hair short, let the hole in his left earlobe close up, donated all his embroidered denim clothing, and started wearing khakis and tweed. He didn't smile or joke as much, and while it wouldn't be fair to say he ignored me—it's hard to ignore someone who needs so little attention—he would spend long stretches of time in his office, usually with the door shut. Other times he'd zone out completely. We could be in the middle of a conversation and he'd just trail off to nothing, staring off into the distance, his eyes suggesting he was trying to resolve some difficult equation. In a way, I'm sure that's not far from the truth.

For the better part of ten years Dad and I lived in a kind of homeostasis, a waking hibernation where nothing much changed, each passing day, month, year the same as the one that preceded it. That was, until the summer of 2006 when I was twelve. It was the summer of my first and only encounter with what I came to think of as The Big Weird, that fuzzy area between reality as we know it and what current physics are not quite advanced yet to understand. It's when the mystery of what happened to my mom was resolved, at least for the most part—the last piece of that puzzle only fell into place a few days ago. It was, for all intents and purposes, the summer my childhood ended, and as I never had much of an



adolescence to speak of, I'm not sure how to describe what came after. It was also the summer when my dad started to come back to me, as close to his real self as he'd been in a decade. And, finally, it was the summer I met the strange little girl who loomed at the fringe of it all, who drew back a curtain no one knew existed and revealed to me—for a brief moment—the unimaginable.

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A few notes about my hometown.

Ferguston, Ontario—population 8,078—is a hole. That's not just some gratuitous epithet flung from a distance by a disgruntled former resident: it's an empirical, geographical fact. You can check it out in any atlas. Ferguston languishes like a cold sore on the eastern edge of Lake LeClair in the north-central part of the province, at the bottom of a basin bordered on three sides by a steep ridge. The highest point is Morin Hill at the north end of town—Moron Hill to locals, just because—which is crowned by the Ferguston water tower, one of the old-fashioned types from the 1950s that looks like a gigantic steel jellyfish. When I was a kid, there had long been talk of replacing it, but when push came to shove and the dollars were counted, town council contented itself with a new paint job. It went from a tired industrial green to a gleaming fish-belly white, which somehow made it worse. To this day, it glares down upon Ferguston like a conquering tripod from *The War of the Worlds*.

Ferguston's lowest point, geographically as well as socially, is The Pit, the most notorious bar in town, located downstairs from Shenanigans restaurant. For generations it was the unofficial hub of organized crime in the region, a headquarters for bikers, drug dealers, corrupt public officials, and the rest of Ferguston's most desperate and marginal citizens. It wasn't so much a place to hide as it was a sanctuary you sought if you didn't want to be bothered: the establishment's celebrated bouncers, gentlemen who looked

like late cuts from the Pittsburgh Steelers defensive line, saw to that. If nothing else, it was always a good place to find an on-duty cop or a paramedic.

What I came to fully realize, that summer when I was twelve, was that in Ferguston there is something that is just . . . off. If the communities of Northern Ontario were a family, Ferguston would be that one relative you didn't like to talk about: the drunk uncle or crazy cousin, the one who, perhaps as a result of some unfortunate birth defect or long-forgotten childhood trauma, had ended up perpetually angry, paranoid, or not quite right in the head.

My dad was more succinct. He said that Ferguston should replace its current coat of arms—with its moose, beaver, ship, and locomotive—with a far more simplified and representative symbol: an upraised middle finger.