

PART ONE

SMOKE



JUNE 11, 1995
BELLEVILLE, DELAWARE

It's the sunburned shoulders that get him. Pink, peeling. The burn is two days old, he gauges. Earned on Friday, painful to the touch yesterday, today an itchy soreness that's hard not to keep fingering, probing, as she's doing right now in an absentminded way. The skin has started sloughing off, soon those narrow shoulders won't be so tender. Why would a redhead well into her thirties make such a rookie mistake?

And why is she *here*, sitting on a barstool, forty-five miles inland, in a town where strangers seldom stop on a Sunday evening? Belleville is the kind of place where people are supposed to pass through and soon they won't even do that. They're building a big bypass so the beach traffic won't have to slow for the speed trap on the old Main Street. He saw the construction vehicles, idle on Sunday, on his way in. Places like this bar-slash-restaurant, the High-Ho, are probably going to lose what little business they have.

High-Ho. A misprint? Was it supposed to be Heigh-Ho? And if so, was it for the seven dwarfs, heading home from the mines at day's end, or for the Lone Ranger, riding off into the sunset? Neither

one makes much sense for this place.

Nothing about this makes sense.

Her shoulders are thin, pointy, hunched up so close to her ears that they make him think of wings. The front of her pink-and-yellow sundress is quite a contrast, full and round. She carries herself as if she doesn't want to attract any male attention, at least not tonight. On the front, he can't help noticing as he slides on a barstool she's not so pink. The little strip of skin showing above the relatively high-necked dress has only the faintest hint of color. Ditto, her cheeks. It is early June, with a breeze that makes it easy to forget how strong the sun is already. Clearly a modest type, she wears a one-piece, so there's probably a deep U of red to go with those shoulders. Yesterday, fingerprints would have left white marks if pressed on the flesh there.

He wonders if she's meeting someone here, someone who will rub cream into the places she can't reach. He would be surprised if she is. More surprised if she's up for leaving with a stranger, not shocked by either scenario. Sure, she gives off a prim vibe, but those are the ones you have to watch out for.

One thing's for sure: She's up to *something*. His instincts for this stuff can't be denied.

He doesn't go in hard. He's not that way. Doesn't have to be, if that doesn't sound too vain. It's just a fact: he's a Ken doll kind of guy, if Ken had a great year-round tan. Tall and muscular with even features, pale eyes, dark hair. Women always assume that Ken wants a Barbie, but he prefers his women thin and a little skittish. In his downtime, he likes to hunt deer. Bow and arrow. He goes to the woods of western Maryland, where he can spend an entire day sitting in a tree, waiting, and he loves it. Tom Petty was wrong about that. The waiting's not the hardest part. Waiting can be beautiful,

lush, full of possibility. When he was a kid, growing up in the Bay Area, his ahead-of-the-curve hippie parents—more beatniks than hippies, although the household was orderly, normal seeming to him—put him in this study at Stanford where he was asked to sit in a room with a marshmallow for fifteen minutes. He would get two if he didn't eat the one while he waited. He had asked, *How long do I have to sit here for three?* They laughed.

He didn't learn until he was in his twenties that he was part of some study that was trying to determine if there's a correlation between success and a kid's ability to manage the desire for instant gratification. He still thinks it was unfair that the experiment wasn't organized in a way that allowed a kid to get three marshmallows for sitting twice as long as anyone else.

He has left two stools between them, not wanting to crowd her, but he makes sure she hears when he orders a glass of wine. That catches her attention, asking for wine instead of beer in a place like this. That was the idea, catching her attention. She doesn't speak, but glances sideways when he asks the blonde behind the bar what kind of wine they serve. He doesn't break balls over the selection, which is red and white. Literally: "We have red and we have white." He doesn't bat an eyelash when they serve him the red cold. Not a sommelier-ordained-sixty-degree cold, but straight-from-the-fridge cold. He takes a sip, summons the barmaid back, and says, oh so politely, "You know what? I'm happy to pay for this, but it's not to my taste. May I have a beer?" He glances at the taps. "Goose Island?"

Another quick sideways flick of her eyes, then back to her own drink—amber, rocks. Wherever she's going tonight, it's not far from here. He looks into his own drink and says out loud, as if to himself: "What kind of an asshole orders red wine in a tavern in Belleville, Delaware?"

“I don’t know,” she says, not looking at him. “What kind of an asshole are you?”

“Garden variety.” Or so his exes—one wife for a span of five years, maybe seven, eight girlfriends, which strikes him as a respectable number for a thirty-eight-year-old man—always told him. “You from around here?”

“Define *from*.” She’s not playing, she’s retreating.

“Do you live here?”

“I do now.”

“That sunburn—I just assumed you were someone who got a day or two of beach, was headed back to Baltimore or D.C.”

“No. I’m living here.”

He sees a flicker of surprise on the barmaid’s face.

“As of when?”

“Now.”

A joke, he thinks. A person doesn’t just stop for a drink in a strange town and decide to live there. Not this town. It’s not like she’s rolled into Tuscany or Oaxaca, two places he knows well and can imagine a person saying, *Yes, here, this is where I’m going to plant myself*. She’s in Belleville, Delaware, with its saggy, sad Main Street, a town of not even two thousand people surrounded by cornfields and chicken farms. Does she have connections here? The barmaid sure doesn’t treat her like a local, even a potential one. To the barmaid, blond and busty with a carefully nurtured tan, the redhead is furniture. The barmaid is interested in him, however, trying to figure out whether he’s passing through tonight or hanging around.

Which has not yet been determined.

“Let me know if you want someone to give you the skinny on this place,” the barmaid says to him with a wink. “It would take all of five minutes.”

Barmaids and waitresses who flirt this overtly make him a little nervous. Bringing a man food or beer is intimate enough.

He lets both women alone, drinks his beer, watches the inevitable Orioles games on the inevitable TV with the inevitable shimmy in its reception. The team is good again, or, at least, better. As the redhead's third drink reaches its last quarter inch, he settles up, leaves without saying good-bye to anyone, goes to his truck in the gravel parking lot, and sits in the dark. Not hiding because there's no better way to be found than to try to hide.

Ten minutes later, the redhead comes out. She crosses the highway, heads to the old-fashioned motel on the other side, the kind they call a motor court. This one is named Valley View, although there's no valley and no view. The High-Ho, the Valley View, Main Street—it's like this whole town was put together from some other town's leftovers.

He waits fifteen minutes, then enters the little office at the end, and inquires if there's a room, despite the big red VACANCY sign filling the window.

"How many nights?" the clerk, a pencil-necked guy in his thirties, asks.

"Open-ended. I can give you a credit card, if you like."

"Funny. You're the second person today to ask for an open-ended stay."

He doesn't have to ask who the first one was. He makes a note to himself that the chatty clerk will be chatty about him, too.

"You need my credit card?"

"Cash is fine, too. If you commit to a week, we can give you the room for two hundred fifty. We don't get many people Monday through Friday. But, you know, there's no kitchenette, no refrigerator. You gotta eat your meals out or bring stuff in that won't spoil."

He adds, "If the maid sees stuff sitting out, she'll tell me. I don't want ants or roaches."

"Can I keep a cooler in the room?"

"As long as it doesn't leak."

He hands the credit card over.

"I can give you a better rate if you pay cash," the guy says, clearing his throat. "Two hundred twenty dollars."

Guy's got some sort of scam going, must be skimming the cash payments, but what does he care? He can last a long time in a place that's \$200 a week, even if there's no refrigerator or stove.

He wonders how long she can last.

She steps out of room 5 into a bright, hot morning, unseasonably hot, just as the weekend at the beach had been, but at least there the breeze from the ocean took the edge off. People said how lucky it was, getting such a hot day in early June, when the water is too cold for anyone but the kids. School not even out yet, lines at the most popular restaurants were manageable. *Lucky*, people kept saying, as if to convince themselves. *Lucky. So lucky.*

Is there anything sadder than losers trying to convince themselves that they're fortunate? She used to be that way, but not anymore. She calls things the way they are, starting with herself.

When Gregg had started talking about a week at the beach, she had assumed a rental house in Rehoboth or Dewey. Maybe not on the beach proper, but at least on the east side of the highway.

Well, they had been close to the beach. But it was Fenwick, on the bayside, and it was a two-story cinder block with four small apartments that were basically studios. One big rectangular room for them and Jani, a galley kitchen, a bathroom with only a shower, no tub. And ants. Wavy black lines of ants everywhere.

“It’s what was available, last minute,” Gregg said. She amended in her head. *It’s what was available, last minute, if you’re cheap.* There had to be a better place to stay along the Delaware shore, even last minute.

Jani couldn’t sleep unless the room was in complete blackout. So they kept her up late, to nine or ten, because the alternative was to go to bed together at eight, and lie there in the dark without touching. The first night, about two, Gregg made a move. Maybe a year or two ago, it would have been sexy, trying to go at it silently in the dark. But it had been a long time since she found anything about Gregg sexy.

“No, no, no, she’ll wake up.”

“We could give her a little Benadryl.”

That had given her pause, made her wonder if she should change her plans, but no, she had to go ahead. The next day, she did ask him if he would really do that, give Jani a Benadryl. He insisted he was joking. She decided to believe him. If she didn’t believe him, she would have to stay. And there was no way she could stay.

That was Saturday. She put a gauzy white shirt over her bathing suit, but even that irritated her shoulders. She huddled under the umbrella, shivering as if cold. A bad sunburn can do that, give you chills. Gregg played in the surf with Jani. He was good with her. She wasn’t just telling herself that. He was good, good enough, as good as she needed him to be.

They went to the boardwalk, the smaller one up at Rehoboth, which was better for little kids like Jani than the one in Ocean City. Gregg tried to win Jani the biggest stuffed panda he could, but he never got above the second-tier prize. *Do the math*, she wanted to tell him. For the \$20 he was spending, shooting water guns at little targets, tossing rings, he could buy her something much better.

On Sunday, she watched them build a sand castle. About 11 A.M., she said she had had too much sun, she was going back to the house. House, huh. *Place*. The highway was busy, it seemed to take forever to get across. She changed into her sundress, packed a bag, the duffel, which had wheels, and wrote one note to go with the one she had brought with her. She worried what would happen if she didn't leave a note. The notes were more for Jani than Gregg, anyway.

She bounced the duffel down the steps and onto the shoulder of the highway, followed it almost a quarter mile to the state line, where she planned to take the local bus to the Greyhound station in Ocean City. She would then head to Baltimore, although she couldn't stay there long. She was too easy to find there, she would fall back into certain routines.

An older man in a Cadillac offered her a ride to D.C., and she figured why not. Then he got pervy, his sad old fingers sneaking toward her knees like some arthritic spider, and she said, "Put me out here." It was Belleville. *One of the ten best small towns in America*, according to a shiny, newish sign.

Now, seeing Belleville in the bright morning light, she wonders what the other nine are.

She doesn't have much of a head start. Gregg would have seen the note at noon or so, when they came back for lunch. He was probably more upset that she hadn't made them any sandwiches or set the table. He didn't love her and she didn't love him. He had one foot out the door. He'd leave her, get an apartment. He'd never pay child support, not without endless nagging. She'd have to get a job. So why not go ahead and get a job, but let him have Jani, see what it's like to be a full-time parent? He wasn't going to trap her.

When you've been in jail even a short time, you don't like feeling confined.

What next? She's thought a lot of things out, but she hasn't thought everything out. She has to earn some money, enough to head west by fall. She had assumed she'd do that in D.C., but maybe it's easier to do it here.

Certainly, she'll be harder to find.

She walks into the town proper, down the main street. Which is called Main Street. There is a deli, a grocery store called Langley's, a Purple Heart thrift store, a florist. But a lot of the shops are empty, long vacant by the looks of them.

She doubles back to the motel, the bar she had chosen last night when she made her ride pull over. The High-Ho. Certainly it should be Heigh-Ho?

The guy in the bar last night was awfully good-looking, kind of her type, not that she was interested. Still, she was surprised, even a little insulted, that he gave up so easy.

A car seems to come out of nowhere and she jumps, skittish. But it's too early for anyone to be looking for her and, anyway, it isn't against the law, leaving your family at the beach. She's surprised more women don't do it. She got the idea from a book she read two months ago. Well, she didn't actually read it and she had been planning her own escape for a while. But everybody was talking about it, like it was a fantasy. *If only you knew*, she wanted to tell her neighbors along Kentucky Avenue. *If only you knew what it means to walk away from something, what it takes.*

Money. She has some. She needs more.

The guy last night—he liked her, she was sure. But she doesn't want to make that mistake anymore. She has enough money to go two, three weeks. Summer is coming, there are probably some sea-

sonal jobs still open. She wonders when Gregg will check the accounts, see how much money she moved out of their joint savings in that final week before their “vacation.” Half, which is what she was entitled to.

The money will make him even madder than the fact that she left. *At least Jani is a pretty easy kid*, she wants to tell him. Imagine it otherwise. He can't. Gregg can't imagine anything. Life unspools as Gregg expects. Even the surprises—Jani, their marriage—don't surprise him. She used to be that kind of person. But she's not going to be, not anymore.

Back at the motel, she sees the guy from the bar leaning against the doorjamb of room 3. Could be a coincidence. Everyone has a life, everyone has something going on. Don't make the mistake of thinking everything is all about you, all the time.

“Hi,” he says. He's the kind of guy who can get away with just that one word. *Hi*. He's good-looking in a bland way, and he probably thinks that's enough. Probably has been enough with most women. She wiggles her fingers in a kind of greeting, but keeps her hand by her side, like he's not worth the effort of bending an elbow.

He says, “How long you staying over?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Every man in town, I'm guessing.”

So predictable. And not even true. She has a version of herself that catches men's eyes, but she's turned that off for now, maybe forever. The only thing it ever got her was trouble.

“I'm Adam Bosk,” he says. “Like the pear, only with a ‘k’ instead of a ‘c.’”

“I'm the Pink Lady,” she says. “Like the apple.”

“Think we can still be friends, me a pear, you an apple?”

“I thought it was apples and oranges that can't be compared.”

She walks past him and into her room.

She doesn't come out again until the sun goes down, which means it's almost 8:30 before she emerges. Maybe some people would go crazy, sitting in a motel room, nothing to eat but a pack of peanut butter and cheese crackers she found in her purse. Mom food. Gregg is going to have to learn tricks like that now. Jani's an easy kid unless she gets hungry, then all bets are off. She enjoys the silence, the novelty of no one needing her, no voices calling, nothing to be cleaned or cooked or washed. She doesn't even put the television on, just lies back on the bed, steeping herself in silence.

When she crosses the street, the sun huge and red as it sinks over the cornfields, she has a hunch he'll be there, Mr. Pear. He is. She makes sure there's a stool between them.

"What are you having?" he asks.

"How much money do you have?"

He laughs. They always think she's joking. Gregg did, that's for sure. She wishes she could say, *Pay attention. I haven't even told you my name yet, but I'm telling you who I am, what I care about.*

As if privy to her thoughts, he asks, "What's your name, Pink Lady? Not that you'll be pink for long. There's a nice shade of brown under that burn. I didn't know redheads could tan like that."

What is her name? Which one should she use?

"Polly Costello," she says.

Jani wakes up crying for her mother. She's only three years old. She can't understand what's happening. Gregg barely understands. She asks Gregg to read the note again, as if it might change since he read it last night and yesterday at lunch and yesterday morning and the night before that. The note *does* change. He adds a little to it with each reading. An additional, "I love you, Jani." Then, the next time: "I love you more than anything, Jani." Later, he thinks it might be a good idea to include: "Be good to Daddy. This is going to be even harder on him."

Pauline's been gone only two days, and the note is already creased and worn. Jani holds it against her face, pressed between her cheek and her stuffed cat, when she goes to sleep. She goes to sleep crying, she wakes up crying. In between, she has nightmares that make her cry and mutter and moan, yet don't wake her. They wake Gregg, though.

What kind of woman walks out on her family? Gregg knows. The kind of woman he picked up in a bar four years ago precisely because she had that kind of wildcat energy. Pauline was supposed

to be a good time, nothing more. She scratched, she bit, she was up for anything, anywhere, any time.

Then, in the middle of their summer fling, she peed on a stick and a plus sign formed in the circle, but it might as well have been a cross and he was up on it. Because it turned out she was a good girl all along. Good enough that she wouldn't think of having an abortion. Did not see that one coming. Plus, she was thirty-one and she figured this might be her last chance to have a kid. Maybe it was a sign? A destiny thing?

They got married fast. It wasn't so bad at first. So much was happening. She said she didn't want a wedding because she had no people, it would just make her sad, her side of the church so empty, so they got married at the courthouse and used the money that would have gone to a wedding to honeymoon in Jamaica, one of those resorts where everything was included. It was cheap because it was the last week of October, the tail end of hurricane season.

They had to find a house big enough for what was going to be the three of them and they lucked out on a bargain up near Herring Run Park, a snug little brick place, very respectable, all the old woodwork and leaded windows still intact. Jani arrived. A first for both of them, but Pauline was calm while he was a mess. Now that he thinks about it, maybe that was the first sign that she wasn't right. Should any woman be that calm, taking care of her first baby? At the time, he thought it meant she was a natural mom, but maybe this was proof that she was the opposite. She is detached, removed, a caretaker, not a parent.

The sex slowed after Jani was born and it was still good enough that it made him angry that they didn't have more of it. She said that if he wanted more attention from her, he needed to help around the house. He wasn't raised to be that way. Gregg had grown up without

a father, and his mother had worked overtime, in and out of the house, to make sure he knew what was his due as a man. Pauline didn't even have a job. Why was *she* so tired?

By the time Jani turned two, Pauline was still tired and the newness had worn off everything—marriage, house, baby, her. There was nothing left to distract them from the fact that they just didn't *like* each other that much. Yet the sex was still good. Looking back, he thinks she treated the sex like *that* was her job, a job she enjoyed. Listening to his friends at work, he felt smug at first because it wasn't that way with them. But now he knew, that was another sign that she was unnatural. Once a woman became a mother, she wasn't supposed to be like that. Pauline was a dirty, dirty girl. She wasn't cut out to be a mother, a wife. How had he missed it?

Then, Pauline had—it was hard to admit, even to himself—Pauline had started hitting him. *During*. It had started with him spanking her a little, not hard, just for fun, a way to spice things up. She had howled all out of proportion to the pain, tried to scratch him with her nails.

But when she calmed down, she asked if he wanted to see what it felt like. He didn't, but he didn't want to look as if he wasn't as bold as she was. She slapped his cheek. It hurt, but he didn't want to say how much because he couldn't let her be tougher than he was. Of course, he had reined himself in, didn't use his full strength because that would be wrong, whereas she wasn't holding anything back. It stung. It was painful. It was exciting.

Then, somehow, about two months ago, the acrid fights of their day-to-day life spilled over into the sex and even sex wasn't fun anymore. He had a coworker, Mandy, who went to lunch with him, listened and sympathized. He started staying out late, claiming he was working overtime. They were doing a lot of refi's at work, so it

was credible. Then he went home to Pauline, overflowing with this mysterious anger.

He started dropping by the bar where he met Pauline and, yes, sometimes, he took another girl out to the parking lot. The sex was never quite as good as what he had with Pauline, in their early days, but it was better than what he had now, which was pretty much nothing.

He had proposed this beach vacation as one last family get-together, to see if they could find their way back. He spun the one-room studio rental as a part of the plan—real togetherness, one big happy. But, in the back of his mind, he was already thinking about moving out. His mom would take him in, he could always count on his mom.

Now *she's* moved out, leaving him with the kid. There had been a separate note just to him, one that he had hidden from Jani. This note was cool and businesslike. A typed note at that, which means she had written it before they ever got here. Probably pecked it out at the library, where they had word processors.

I will let you know of my plans as soon as possible. I know you want a divorce, so let's make it quick and painless. For now, it's best if Jani remain with you, in the house and routine she knows. I will call after I'm settled.

And now it's Tuesday, their last day of "vacation." He has trudged through the past forty-eight hours as if the end of this getaway was some sort of finish line. He cannot believe how hard it is to care for a child 24/7, although he told himself that's because they're not at their house, with all their stuff. Now, packing up to return home, he sees that life is just going to keep going, that he will have even more problems once he gets home. What will he do for child care? He loves Jani, but, Christ, he cannot be a single dad.

There's a \$125 penalty if you stay one minute past 11 A.M. on the last day of your rental, even on a Tuesday. Jani wanted one more morning at the beach, but Gregg can't get them packed up and have the place clean enough to get his deposit back if they do that. Jani whines every second of the morning and shows a real talent for creating a mess wherever he has just cleaned—stepping in dust piles, leaving sticky prints on appliances, tables, walls. They get away with only minutes to spare, 10:57 on the dashboard clock.

When he turns to check his sights as he backs the car out of the driveway, he sees Jani in her car seat, clutching that damn note to her cheek. Those dark curls, olive skin, light eyes—she looks nothing like her mother. If he hadn't been at the hospital when Jani was born, if he hadn't been there for the pregnancy, he'd wonder if a woman could somehow fake having a kid. Jani has looked exactly like him since Day One. "That's evolution at work," Pauline told him. "If babies didn't look like their fathers, they'd reject them. She'll look more like both of us as time goes on." Well, it's three years later and the little girl in the car seat still looks like a female version of him. Put their childhood photos next to each other and you'd think they were fraternal twins. There's not a trace of her mother in her face.

Pauline's not going to dump this kid on him. He'll find her, make her do right. He's the one who's supposed to be moving out, moving on.

"Whore," he mutters.

"What, Daddy?"

"Nothing."

Two miles up the highway, he takes the left turn onto State Highway 26 too fast and the boogie board he roped to the roof goes sliding off. Horns honk around him, as if he planned this fiasco.

He'd leave the board on the roadside if he could, but that would make him no better than *her*. He pulls over and puts everything to rights, then fights for his way back into the westbound traffic, surprisingly thick for a Tuesday in June. Oh God, there's a funeral, apparently for the most popular guy in Bethany Beach, the line of cars twenty, thirty deep. He adds this mishap to the growing list of everything that's her fault. She has ruined his life. Or tried to. He'll find her, make her fulfill her obligations, make her pay.

He remembers the first slap, after he gave her permission, so hard it almost brought tears to his eyes. It was as if she had been waiting to hit him for a very long time.