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Lisey's Story

Stephen King

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PART 1
BOOL HUNT

'If I were the moon, I know where I would fall down.'
—D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*

CHAPTER ONE

LISEY AND AMANDA (EVERYTHING THE SAME)

1

To the public eye, the spouses of well-known writers are all but invisible, and no one knew it better than Lisey Landon. Her husband had won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, but Lisey had given only one interview in her life. This was for the well-known women's magazine that publishes the column 'Yes, I'm Married to *Him*!' She spent roughly half of its five-hundred-word length explaining that her nickname rhymed with 'CeeCee'. Most of the other half had to do with her recipe for slow-cooked roast beef. Lisey's sister Amanda said that the picture accompanying the interview made Lisey look fat.

None of Lisey's sisters was immune to the pleasures of setting the cat among the pigeons ('stirring up a stink' had been their father's phrase for it), or having a good natter about someone else's dirty laundry, but the only one Lisey had a hard time liking was this same Amanda. Eldest (and oddest) of the onetime Debusher girls of Lisbon Falls, Amanda currently lived alone, in a house which Lisey had provided, a small, weather-tight place not too far from Castle View where Lisey, Darla and Cantata could keep an eye on her. Lisey had bought it for her seven years ago, five before Scott died. Died Young. Died Before His Time, as the saying was. Lisey still had trouble believing he'd been gone for two years. It seemed both longer and the blink of an eye.

When Lisey finally got around to making a start at cleaning out his office suite, a long and beautifully lit series of rooms that had once been no more than the loft above a country barn, Amanda had shown up on the third day, after Lisey had finished her inventory of all the foreign editions (there were hundreds) but before she could do more than start listing the furniture, with little stars next to the pieces she thought she ought to keep. She waited for Amanda to ask her why she wasn't moving *faster*, for heaven's sake, but Amanda asked no questions.

While Lisey moved to a listless consideration of the cardboard boxes of correspondence stacked in the main closet, Amanda's focus seemed to remain on the impressive stacks and piles of memorabilia which ran the length of the study's south wall. She worked her way along this snakelike accretion, jotting frequently in a little notebook she kept near to hand.

What Lisey didn't say was *What are you looking for?* As Scott had pointed out on more than one occasion, Lisey had what was surely among the rarest of human talents: she was a business-minder who did not mind too much if you didn't mind yours. As long as you weren't making explosives to throw at someone, that was, and in Amanda's case, explosives were always a possibility. She was the sort of woman who couldn't help prying, the sort of woman who *would* open her mouth sooner or later.

Her husband had headed south from Rumford, where they had been living ('like a couple of wolverines caught in a drainpipe,' Scott said after an afternoon visit he vowed never to repeat) in 1985. Her one child, named Intermezzo and called Metzie for short, had gone north to Canada (with a long-haul trucker for a beau) in 1989. 'One flew north, one flew south, one couldn't shut her everlasting mouth.' That had been their father's rhyme when they were kids, and the one of Dandy Dave Debusher's girls who could never shut her everlasting mouth was surely Manda, dumped first by her husband and then by her own daughter.

Hard to like as Amanda sometimes was, Lisey hadn't wanted her down there in Rumford on her own; didn't trust her on her own, if it came to that, and although they'd never said so aloud, Lisey was sure Darla and Cantata felt the same. So she'd had a talk with Scott, and found the little Cape Cod, which could be had for ninety-seven thousand dollars, cash on the nail. Amanda had moved up within easy checking range soon after.

Now Scott was dead and Lisey had finally gotten around to the business of cleaning out his writing quarters. Halfway through the fourth day, the foreign editions were boxed up, the correspondence was marked and in some sort of order, and she had a good idea of what furniture was going and what was staying. So why did it feel that she had done so little? She'd known from the outset that this was a job which couldn't be hurried. Never mind all the importuning letters and phone calls she'd gotten since Scott's death (and more than a few visits, too). She supposed that in the end, the people who were interested in Scott's unpublished writing would get what they wanted, but not until she was ready to give it to them. They hadn't been clear on that at first; they weren't *down with it*, as the saying was. Now she thought most of them were.

There were lots of words for the stuff Scott had left behind. The only one she completely understood was *memorabilia*, but there was another one, a funny one, that sounded like *incuncabilla*. That was what the impatient people wanted, the wheedlers, and the angry ones – Scott's *incuncabilla*. Lisey began to think of them as Incunks.

2

What she felt most of all, especially after Amanda showed up, was discouraged, as if she'd either underestimated the task itself or overestimated (wildly) her ability to see it through to its inevitable conclusion – the saved furniture stored in

the barn below, the rugs rolled up and taped shut, the yellow Ryder van in the driveway, throwing its shadow on the board fence between her yard and the Galloways' next door.

Oh, and don't forget the sad heart of this place, the three desktop computers (there had been four, but the one in the 'memory nook' was now gone, thanks to Lisey herself). Each was newer and lighter than the last, but even the newest was a big desktop model and all of them still worked. They were password-protected, too, and she didn't know what the passwords were. She'd never asked, and had no idea what kind of electro-litter might be sleeping on the computers' hard drives. Grocery lists? Poems? Erotica? She was sure he'd been connected to the internet, but had no idea where he visited when he was there. Amazon? Drudge? Hank Williams Lives? Madam Cruella's Golden Showers & Tower of Power? She tended to think not anything like that last, to think she would have seen the bills (or at least divots in the monthly house-money account), except of course that was really bullshit. If Scott had wanted to hide a thousand a month from her, he could have done so. And the passwords? The joke was, he might have told her. She forgot stuff like that, that was all. She reminded herself to try her own name. Maybe after Amanda had taken herself home for the day. Which didn't look like happening anytime soon.

Lisey sat back and blew hair off her forehead. *I won't get to the manuscripts until July, at this rate*, she thought. *The Incunks would go nuts if they saw the way I'm crawling along. Especially that last one.*

The last one – five months ago, this had been – had managed not to blow up, had managed to keep a very civil tongue about him until she'd begun to think he might be different. Lisey told him that Scott's writing suite had been sitting empty for almost a year and a half at that time, but she'd almost mustered the energy and resolve to go up there and start the work of cleaning the rooms and setting the place to rights.

Her visitor's name had been Professor Joseph Woodbody, of the University of Pittsburgh English Department. Pitt was Scott's alma mater, and Woodbody's Scott Landon and the American Myth lecture class was extremely popular and extremely large. He also had four graduate students doing Scott Landon theses this year, and so it was probably inevitable that the Incunk warrior should come to the fore when Lisey spoke in such vague terms as *sooner rather than later* and *almost certainly sometime this summer*. But it wasn't until she assured him that she would give him a call 'when the dust settles' that Woodbody really began to give way.

He said the fact that she had shared a great American writer's bed did not qualify her to serve as his literary executor. That, he said, was a job for an expert, and he understood that Mrs Landon had no college degree at all. He reminded her of the time already gone since Scott Landon's death, and of the rumors that continued to grow. Supposedly there were piles of unpublished Landon fiction – short stories, even novels. Could she not let him into the study for even a little while? Let him prospect a bit in the file cabinets and desk drawers, if only to set the most outrageous rumors to rest? She could stay with him the whole time, of course – that went without saying.

'No,' she'd said, showing Professor Woodbody to the door. 'I'm not ready just yet.' Overlooking the man's lower blows – trying to, at least – because he was obviously as crazy as the rest of them. He'd just hidden it better, and for a little longer. 'And when I am, I'll want to look at everything, not just the manuscripts.'

'But—'

She had nodded seriously to him. 'Everything the same.'

'I don't understand what you mean by that.'

Of course he didn't. It had been a part of her marriage's inner language. How many times had Scott come breezing in, calling 'Hey, Lisey, I'm home – everything the same?' Meaning *is everything all right, is everything cool*. But like most

phrases of power (Scott had explained this once to her, but Lisey had already known it), it had an inside meaning. A man like Woodbody could never grasp the inside meaning of *everything the same*. Lisey could explain it all day and he still wouldn't get it. Why? Because he was an Incunk, and when it came to Scott Landon only one thing interested the Incunks.

'It doesn't matter,' was what she'd said to Professor Woodbody on that day five months ago. '*Scott* would have understood.'

3

If Amanda had asked Lisey where Scott's 'memory nook' things had been stored – the awards and plaques, stuff like that – Lisey would have lied (a thing she did tolerably well for one who did it seldom) and said 'a U-Store-It in Mechanic Falls'. Amanda did not ask, however. She just paged ever more ostentatiously through her little notebook, surely trying to get her younger sister to broach the subject with the proper question, but Lisey did not ask. She was thinking of how empty this corner was, how empty and *uninteresting*, with so many of Scott's mementos gone. Either destroyed (like the computer monitor) or too badly scratched and dented to be shown; such an exhibit would raise more questions than it could ever answer.

At last Amanda gave in and opened her notebook. 'Look at this,' she said. 'Just look.'

Manda was holding out the first page. Written on the blue lines, crammed in from the little wire loops on the left to the edge of the sheet on the right (*like a coded message from one of those street-crazies you're always running into in New York because there's not enough money for the publicly funded mental institutions anymore*, Lisey thought wearily), were numbers. Most had been circled. A very few had been enclosed in squares. Manda turned the page and now here were *two* pages filled with more of the same. On the following page,

the numbers stopped halfway down. The final one appeared to be 846.

Amanda gave her the sidelong, red-cheeked, and somehow hilarious expression of hauteur that had meant, when she was twelve and little Lisey only two, that Manda had gone and Taken Something On Herself; tears for someone would follow. Amanda herself, more often than not. Lisey found herself waiting with some interest (and a touch of dread) to see what that expression might mean this time. Amanda had been acting nutty ever since turning up. Maybe it was just the sullen, sultry weather. More likely it had to do with the sudden absence of her longtime boyfriend. If Manda was headed for another spell of stormy emotional weather because Charlie Corriveau had jilted her, then Lisey supposed she had better buckle up herself. She had never liked or trusted Corriveau, banker or not. How could you trust a man after overhearing, at the spring library bake sale, that the guys down at The Mellow Tiger called him Shootin' Beans? What kind of nickname was that for a banker? What did it even *mean*? And surely he had to know that Manda had had mental problems in the past—

'Lisey?' Amanda asked. Her brow was deeply furrowed.

'I'm sorry,' Lisey said, 'I just kind of . . . went off there for a second.'

'You often do,' Amanda said. 'I think you got it from Scott. Pay attention, Lisey. I made a little number on each of his magazines and journals and scholarly *things*. The ones piled over there against the wall.'

Lisey nodded as if she understood where this was going.

'I made the numbers in pencil, just light,' Amanda went on. 'Always when your back was turned or you were somewhere else, because I thought if you saw, you might have told me to stop.'

'I wouldn't've.' She took the little notebook, which was limp with its owner's sweat. 'Eight hundred and forty-six! That many!' And she knew the publications running along

the wall weren't the sort she herself might read and have in the house, ones like *O* and *Good Housekeeping* and *Ms*, but rather *Sewanee Review* and *Glimmer Train* and *Open City* and things with incomprehensible names like *Piskya*.

'Quite a few more than that,' Amanda said, and cocked a thumb at the piles of books and journals. When Lisey really looked at them, she saw that her sister was right. Many more than eight hundred and forty-some. Had to be. 'Almost three thousand in all, and where you'll put them or who'd want them I'm sure I can't say. No, eight hundred and forty-six is just the number that have pictures of you.'

This was so awkwardly stated that Lisey at first didn't understand it. When she did, she was delighted. The idea that there might be such an unexpected photo-resource – such a hidden record of her time with Scott – had never crossed her mind. But when she thought about it, it made perfect sense. They had been married over twenty-five years at the time of his death, and Scott had been an inveterate, restless traveler during those years, reading, lecturing, crisscrossing the country with hardly a pause when he was between books, visiting as many as ninety campuses a year and never losing a beat in his seemingly endless stream of short stories. And on most of those rambles she was with him. In how many motels had she taken the little Swedish steamer to one of his suits while the TV muttered talk-show psalms on her side of the room and on his the portable typewriter clacked (early in the marriage) or the laptop clicked quietly (late) as he sat looking down at it with a comma of hair falling on his brow?

Manda was looking at her sourly, clearly not liking her reaction so far. 'The ones that are circled – over six hundred of them – are ones where you've been treated discourteously in the photo caption.'

'Is that so?' Lisey was mystified.

'I'll show you.' Amanda studied the notebook, went over to the slumbering, wall-length stack, consulted again, and selected two items. One was an expensive-looking hardcover

biannual from the University of Kentucky at Bowling Green. The other, a digest-sized magazine that looked like a student effort, was called *Push-Pelt*: one of those names designed by English majors to be charming and mean absolutely nothing.

'Open them, open them!' Amanda commanded, and as she shoved them into her hands, Lisey smelled the wild and acrid bouquet of her sister's sweat. 'The pages are marked with little scrids of paper, see?'

Scrids. Their mother's word for scraps. Lisey opened the biannual first, turning to the marked page. The picture of her and Scott in that one was very good, very smoothly printed. Scott was approaching a podium while she stood behind him, clapping. The audience stood below, also clapping. The picture of them in *Push-Pelt* was nowhere near as smooth; the dots in the dot-matrix looked as big as the points of pencils with mooshed leads and there were hunks of wood floating in the pulp paper, but she looked at it and felt like crying. Scott was entering some dark cellarful of noise. There was a big old Scott grin on his face that said oh yeah, this be the place. She was a step or two behind him, her own smile visible in the back-kick of what must have been a mighty flash. She could even make out the blouse she was wearing, that blue Anne Klein with the funny single red stripe down the left side. What she had on below was lost in shadow, and she couldn't remember this particular evening at all, but she knew it had been jeans. When she went out late, she always put on a pair of faded jeans. The caption read: *Living Legend Scott Landon (Accompanied By Gal Pal) Makes An Appearance At The University Of Vermont Stalag 17 Club Last Month. Landon Stayed Until Last Call, Reading, Dancing, Partying. Man Knows How To Get Down.*

Yes. Man had known how to get down. She could testify.

She looked at all the other periodicals, was suddenly overwhelmed by the riches she might find in them, and realized Amanda had hurt her after all, had gored her a wound that might bleed a long time. Was he the only one who had

known about the dark places? The dirty dark ones where you were so alone and wretchedly voiceless? Maybe she didn't know all that he had, but she knew enough. Certainly she knew he had been haunted, and would never look into a mirror – any reflective surface, if he could help it – after the sun went down. And she had loved him in spite of all that. Because the man had known how to get down.

But no more. Now the man *was* down. The man had *passed on*, as the saying was; her life had moved on to a new phase, a solo phase, and it was too late to turn back now.

The phrase gave her a shudder and made her think of things

(the purple, the thing with the piebald side)

best not thought of, and so she turned her mind away from them.

'I'm glad you found these pictures,' she told Amanda warmly. 'You're a pretty good big sister, you know it?'

And, as Lisey had hoped (but not really dared expect), Manda was startled right out of her haughty, skittish little dance. She looked uncertainly at Lisey, seeming to hunt for insincerity and finding none. Little by little, she relaxed into a biddable, easier-to-cope-with Amanda. She took back the notebook and looked at it with a frown, as if not entirely sure where it had come from. Lisey thought, considering the obsessive nature of the numbers, that this might be a big step in a good direction.

Then Manda nodded as people do when they recall something that should not have been lost to mind in the first place. 'In the ones not circled, you're at least *named* – Lisa Landon, an actual person. Last of all, but hardly least – considering what we've always called you, that's almost a pun, isn't it? – you'll see that a few of the numbers have squares around them. Those are pictures of you *alone!*' She gave Lisey an impressive, almost forbidding look. 'You'll want to have a look at *them*.'

'I'm sure.' Trying to sound thrilled out of her underpants

when she was unable to think why she'd have any slightest interest in pictures of herself alone during those all-too-brief years when she'd had a man – a good man, a non-Incunk who knew how to *strap it on* – with whom to share her days and nights. She raised her eyes to the untidy heaps and foothills of periodicals, which came in every size and shape, imagining what it would be like to go through them stack by stack and one by one, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the memory nook (where else), hunting out those images of her and Scott. And in the ones that had made Amanda so angry she would always find herself walking a little behind him, looking up at him. If others were applauding, she would be applauding, too. Her face would be smooth, giving away little, showing nothing but polite attention. Her face said *He does not bore me*. Her face said *He does not exalt me*. Her face said *I do not set myself on fire for him, nor he for me* (the lie, the lie, the lie). Her face said *Everything the same*.

Amanda hated these pictures. She looked and saw her sister playing salt for the sirloin, setting for the stone. She saw her sister sometimes identified as *Mrs. Landon*, sometimes as *Mrs Scott Landon*, and sometimes – oh, this was bitter – not identified at all. Demoted all the way to *Gal Pal*. To Amanda it must seem like a kind of murder.

'Mandy-oh?'

Amanda looked at her. The light was cruel, and Lisey remembered with a real and total sense of shock that Manda would be sixty in the fall. Sixty! In that moment Lisey found herself thinking about the thing that had haunted her husband on so many sleepless nights – the thing the Woodbodys of the world would never know about, not if she had her way. Something with an endless mottled side, something seen best by cancer patients looking into tumblers from which all the painkiller had been emptied; there will be no more until morning.

It's very close, honey. I can't see it, but I hear it taking its meal.

Shut up, Scott, I don't know what you're talking about.

'Lisey?' Amanda asked. 'Did you say something?'

'Just muttering under my breath.' She tried to smile.

'Were you talking to Scott?'

Lisey gave up trying to smile. 'Yes, I guess I was. Sometimes I still do. Crazy, huh?'

'I don't think so. Not if it works. I think crazy is what doesn't work. And I ought to know. I've had some experience. Right?'

'Manda—'

But Amanda had turned to look at the heaps of journals and annuals and student magazines. When she returned her gaze to Lisey, she was smiling uncertainly. 'Did I do right, Lisey? I only wanted to do my part . . .'

Lisey took one of Amanda's hands and squeezed it lightly. 'You did. What do you say we get out of here? I'll flip you for the first shower.'

4

I was lost in the dark and you found me. I was hot – so hot – and you gave me ice.

Scott's voice.

Lisey opened her eyes, thinking she had drifted away from some daytime task or moment and had had a brief but amazingly detailed dream in which Scott was dead and she was engaged in the Herculean job of cleaning out his writing stables. With them open she immediately understood that Scott indeed *was* dead; she was asleep in her own bed after delivering Manda home, and this was her dream.

She seemed to be floating in moonlight. She could smell exotic flowers. A fine-grained summer wind combed her hair back from her temples, the kind of wind that blows long after midnight in some secret place far from home. Yet it *was* home, *had* to be home, because ahead of her was the barn which housed Scott's writing suite, object of so much Incunk interest. And now, thanks to Amanda, she knew it held all those

pictures of her and her late husband. All that buried treasure, that emotional loot.

It might be better not to look at those pictures, the wind whispered in her ears.

Oh, of that she had no doubt. But she *would* look. Was helpless not to, now that she knew they were there.

She was delighted to see she was floating on a vast, moon-gilded piece of cloth with the words PILLSBURY'S BEST FLOUR printed across it again and again; the corners had been knotted like hankies. She was charmed by the whimsy of it; it was like floating on a cloud.

Scott. She tried to say his name aloud and could not. The dream wouldn't let her. The driveway leading to the barn was gone, she saw. So was the yard between it and the house. Where they had been was a vast field of purple flowers, dreaming in haunted moonlight. *Scott, I loved you, I saved you, I*

5

Then she was awake and could hear herself in the dark, saying it over and over like a mantra: 'I loved you, I saved you, I got you ice. I loved you, I saved you, I got you ice. I loved you, I saved you, I got you ice.'

She lay there a long time, remembering a hot August day in Nashville and thinking – not for the first time – that being single after being double so long was strange shite, indeed. She would have thought two years was enough time for the strangeness to rub off, but it wasn't; time apparently did nothing but blunt grief's sharpest edge so that it hacked rather than sliced. Because everything was *not* the same. Not outside, not inside, not for her. Lying in the bed that had once held two, Lisey thought alone never felt more lonely than when you woke up and discovered you still had the house to yourself. That you and the mice in the walls were the only ones still breathing.