What the Dead Know

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

Her stomach clutched at the sight of the water tower hovering above the still, bare trees, a spaceship come to earth. The water tower had been a key landmark in the old family game, although not *the* landmark. Once you spotted the white disk on its spindly legs, you knew it was time to prepare, like a runner crouched in blocks. *On your mark*, *get set*, *I see*—

It hadn't started as a game. Spotting the department store nestled in this bend of the Beltway had been a private contest with herself, a way to relieve the tedium of the two-day drive home from Florida. As far back as she could remember, they had made the trip every winter break, although no one in the family enjoyed this visit to Grandmother's house. Her Orlando apartment was cramped and smelly, her dogs mean, her meals inedible. Everyone was miserable, even their father, especially their father, although he pretended not to be and took great offense if anyone suggested that his mother was any of the things that she undeniably was—stingy, strange, unkind. Still, even he couldn't hide his relief as home drew nearer and he sang out each state line as they

crossed. *Georgia*, he growled in a Ray Charles moan. They spent the night there, in a no-name motor court, and left before sunrise, quickly reaching South Carolina—"Nothing could be finah!"—followed by the long, slow teases of North Carolina and Virginia, where the only points of interest were, respectively, the lunch stop in Durham and the dancing cigarette packs on the billboards outside Richmond. Then finally Maryland, wonderful Maryland, home sweet home Maryland, which asked for only fifty miles or so, barely an hour back then. Today she had needed almost twice that much time to crawl up the parkway, but traffic was thinning now, up to normal speeds.

I see—

Hutzler's had been the city's grandest department store, and it marked the Christmas season by setting up an enormous fake chimney with a Santa poised on its ledge, caught in a perpetual straddle. Was he coming or going? She could never decide. She had taught herself to watch for that flash of red, the promise that home was near, the way certain birds told a sea captain that the shore was within reach. It had been a clandestine ritual, not unlike counting the broken stripes as they disappeared under the front wheels of the car, a practice that quelled the motion sickness she never quite outgrew. Even then, she was tight-lipped when it came to certain information about herself, clear about the distinction between eccentricities that might be interesting and compulsive habits that would mark her as odd as, say, her grandmother. Or, to be absolutely truthful, her father. But the phrase had popped out one day, joyful and unbidden, another secret dialogue with herself escaping into the world:

"I see Hutzler's."

Her father had gotten the significance instantly, unlike her mother and sister. Her father always seemed to understand the layers beneath what she said, which was comforting when she was really little, intimidating as she got older. The problem was that he insisted on turning her private homecoming salute into a game, a contest, and what had once been hers alone then had to be shared with the entire family. Her

father was big on sharing, on taking what was private and making it communal. He believed in long, rambling family discussions, which he called "rap sessions" in the language of the day, and unlocked doors and casual seminudity, although their mother had broken him of that habit. If you tried to keep something for yourself—whether it was a bag of candy purchased with your own money or a feeling you didn't want to express—he accused you of hoarding. He sat you down, looked straight into your eyes, and told you that families didn't work that way. A family was a team, a unit, a country unto itself, the one part of her identity that would remain constant the rest of her life. "We lock our front door against strangers," he said, "but never against each other."

So he seized "I see Hutzler's" for the family good and encouraged everyone to vie for the right to say it first. Once the rest of the family decided to play, that last mile of Beltway had been unbearable in its suspense. The sisters craned their necks, leaning forward in the old lap seat belts, the ones worn only on long trips. That's how things were back then—seat belts for long trips only, no bicycle helmets ever, skateboards made from splintery planks of wood and old roller skates. Pinned by her seat belt, she felt her stomach flip and her pulse race, and for what? For the hollow honor of being the first to say out loud what she had always been the first to think. As with all her father's contests, there was no prize, no point. Since she could no longer be guaranteed victory, she did what she always did: She pretended not to care.

Yet here she was again, alone, guaranteed the win if she wanted it, hollow as that victory would be, and her stomach *still* flipped, unaware that the store was long gone, that everything around the once-familiar cloverleaf had changed. Changed and, yes, cheapened. The placid dowager that had been Hutzler's was now a tacky Value City. Opposite, on the south side of the highway, the Quality Inn had morphed into one of those storage places. It wasn't possible from this vantage point to see if Howard Johnson's, home of the family's weekly fish-fry suppers, remained at the intersection, but she somehow doubted it. Did Howard Johnson's exist anywhere anymore? Did she? Yes and no.

What happened next transpired in seconds. Everything does, if you think about it. She would say that later, under questioning. *The Ice Age happened in a matter of seconds; there were just a lot of them.* Oh, she could make people love her if absolutely necessary, and although the tactic was less essential to her survival now, the habit was hard to break. Her interrogators pretended exasperation, but she could tell she was having the desired effect on most of them. By then her description of the accident was breathlessly vivid, a polished routine. She had glanced to the right, eastward, trying to recall all her childhood landmarks, forgetting the old admonition *Bridges may freeze first,* and felt a strange sensation, almost as if the steering wheel were slipping from her grasp, but the car was actually separating from the road, losing traction, although the sleet had not started and the pavement looked bone dry. It was oil, not ice, she would learn later, left from an earlier accident. How could one control for a coating of oil, invisible in the March twilight, for the inactions or incomplete actions of a crew of men she had never met, would never know? Somewhere in Baltimore, a man sat down to supper that night, unaware that he had destroyed someone else's life, and she envied him his ignorance.

She clutched the steering wheel and pounded on the pedals, but the car ignored her. The boxy sedan slid to the left, moving like the needle on a haywire tachometer. She bounced off the Jersey wall, spun around, slid to the other side of the highway. For a moment it seemed as if she were the only one driving, as if all the other cars and their drivers had frozen in deference and awe. The old Valiant—the name had seemed a good omen, a reminder of Prince Valiant and all that he stood for, back in the Sunday comics—moved swiftly and gracefully, a dancer among the stolid, earthbound commuters at the tail end of rush hour.

And then, just when she seemed to have the Valiant under control, when the tires once again connected to the pavement, she felt a soft thump to her right. She had sideswiped a white SUV, and although her car was so much smaller, the SUV seemed to reel from the touch, an elephant felled by a peashooter. She glimpsed a girl's face, or thought she

did, a face with an expression not so much frightened as surprised by the realization that anything could collide with one's neat, well-ordered life at any time. The girl wore a ski jacket and large, cruelly unflattering glasses, made worse somehow by white fur earmuffs. Her mouth was round, a red gate of wonder. She was twelve, maybe eleven, and eleven was the same age when—and then the white SUV began its lazy flip-flops down the embankment.

I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*, *I'm sorry*, she thought. She knew she should slow down, stop, check on the SUV, but a chorus of honks and squealing brakes rose up behind her, a phalanx of sound that pushed her forward in spite of herself. *It wasn't my fault!* Everyone should know by now that SUVs were prone to tip. Her mild little nudge could never have caused that dramatic-looking accident. Besides, it had been such a long day and she was so close. Her exit was the next one, not even a mile ahead. She could still merge into the I-70 traffic and continue west to her destination.

But once on the long straightaway toward I-70, she found herself veering right instead of left, toward the sign that read LOCAL TRAFFIC ONLY, to that strange, unfinished road that her family had always called the highway to nowhere. How they had gloried in giving directions to their house. "Take the interstate east, to where it ends." "How can an interstate end?" And her father would triumphantly tell the tale of the protests, the citizens who had united across Baltimore to preserve the park and the wildlife and the then-modest rowhouses that ringed the harbor. It was one of her father's few successes in life, although he had been a minor player—just another signer of petitions, a marcher in demonstrations. He was never tapped to speak at the public rallies, much as he longed for that role.

The Valiant was making a terrible sound, the right rear wheel scraping against what must be a crushed fender. In her agitated state, it made perfect sense to park on the shoulder and continue on foot, although the sleet had now started and she became aware with each step that something was wrong. Her ribs hurt so that each breath was like a jab

with a tiny knife, and it was hard to carry her purse as she had always been instructed—close to the body, not dangling from her wrist, a temptation for muggers and thieves. She hadn't been wearing her seat belt, and she had bounced around inside the Valiant, hitting the steering wheel and door. There was blood on her face, but she wasn't sure where it was coming from. Mouth? Forehead? She was warm, she was cold, she saw black stars. No, not stars. More like triangles twisting and turning, strung from the wires of an invisible mobile.

She had been walking no more than ten minutes when a patrol car stopped alongside her, lights flashing.

"That your Valiant back there?" the patrolman called out to her, lowering the window on the passenger side but not venturing from the car.

Was it? The question was more complicated than the young officer could know. Still, she nodded.

"You got any ID?"

"Sure," she said, digging into her purse but not finding her wallet. *Why*, *that*— She started to laugh, realizing how perfect that was. Of course she had no ID. She had no identity, not really. "Sorry. No. I—" She couldn't stop laughing. "It's gone."

He got out of the patrol car and attempted to take the purse to look for himself. Her scream shocked her even more than it did him. There was a fiery pain in her left forearm when he tried to slide the purse past her elbow. The patrolman spoke into his shoulder, calling for assistance. He pocketed her keys from her purse, walked back to her car, and poked around inside, then returned and stood with her in the sleeting rain that had finally started. He mumbled some familiar words to her but was otherwise silent.

"Is it bad?" she asked him.

"That's for a doctor to say when we get you to the ER."

"No, not me. Back there."

The distant whir of a helicopter answered her question. *I'm sorry*, *I'm sorry*, *I'm sorry*. But it wasn't her fault.

"It wasn't my fault. I couldn't control it—but still, I really didn't do anything—"

"I've read you your rights," he said. "The things you're saying—they count. Not that there's much doubt you left the scene of an accident."

"I was going to get help."

"This road dead-ends into a park-and-ride. If you really wanted to help them, you'd have pulled over back there or taken the Security Boulevard exit."

"There's the old Windsor Hills Pharmacy at Forest Park and Windsor Mill. I thought I could call from there."

She could tell that caught him off guard, her use of precise names, her familiarity with the area.

"I don't know of any pharmacy, although there's a gas station there, but— Don't you have a cell phone?"

"Not for my personal use, although I carry one at work. I don't buy things until they work properly, until they're perfected. Cell phones lose their connections and people have to yell into them half the time, so you can't safeguard your privacy. When cells work as well as landlines, I'll buy one."

She heard her father's echo. All these years later, he was in her head, his pronouncements as definitive as ever. *Don't be the first to purchase any kind of technology. Keep your knives sharp. Eat tomatoes only when they're in season. Be kind to your sister. One day your mother and I will be gone, and you'll be all that each other has.*

The young patrol officer regarded her gravely, the kind of awed inspection that good children reserve for those who have misbehaved. It was ludicrous that he could be so skeptical of her. In this light, in these clothes, the rain flattening her short, spiky curls, she probably looked younger than she was. People were always placing her at a full decade below her real age, even on those rare occasions when she dressed up. Cutting her long hair last year had only made her look younger still. It was funny about her hair, how stubbornly blond it remained at an age when most women needed chemicals to achieve this light, variable hue.

It was as if her hair resented its years of forced imprisonment under those home applications of Nice'n Easy Sassy Chestnut. Her hair could hold a grudge as well as she could.

"Bethany," she said. "I'm one of the Bethany girls."

"What?"

"You don't know?" she asked him. "You don't remember? But then I guess you're all of, what—twenty-four? Twenty-five?"

"I'll be twenty-six next week," he said.

She tried not to smile, but he was so much like a toddler claiming two and a half instead of two. At what age do we stop wishing to be older than we are, stop nudging the number up? Around thirty for most, she assumed, although it had happened to her far earlier. By eighteen she would have done anything to renounce adulthood and be given another chance at childhood.

"So you weren't even born when— And you're probably not from here either, so no, the name wouldn't mean anything to you."

"Registration in the car says it belongs to Penelope Jackson, from Asheville, North Carolina. That you? Car didn't come up stolen when I called the tag in."

She shook her head. Her story would be wasted on him. She'd wait for someone who could appreciate it, who would understand the full import of what she was trying to tell him. Already she was making the calculations that had long been second nature. Who was on her side, who would take care of her? Who was against her, who would betray her?

At St. Agnes Hospital, she continued to be selectively mum, answering only direct questions about what hurt where. Her injuries were relatively minor—a gash to the forehead that required four tiny stitches, which she was assured would leave no visible scar, something torn and broken in her left forearm. The arm could be stabilized and bandaged for now but would require surgery eventually, she was told. The young patrolman must have passed along the Bethany name, for the billing person pressed her on it, but she refused to speak of it again no matter how they poked and prodded. Under ordinary circumstances

she would have been treated and released. But this was far from ordinary. The police put a uniformed patrolman outside her door and told her that she was not free to leave even if the hospital determined it was appropriate. "The law is very clear on this. You must tell us who you are," another cop told her, an older one, from traffic investigation. "If it weren't for your injuries, you'd be in jail tonight." Still she said nothing, although the thought of jail terrified her. To not be free to come and go as she liked, to be held anywhere—no, never again. The doctor entered the name "Jane Doe" on her chart, adding "Bethany?" in parentheses. Her fourth name, by her count, but maybe it was her fifth. It was easy to lose track.

She knew St. Agnes. Or, more correctly, had known it once. So many accidents, so many trips. A calf sliced open when a jar of fireflies was dropped, the shards ricocheting up from the sidewalk and nicking the roundest part. A flyswatter applied to an infected smallpox vaccination with nothing but good intentions. A knee opening like a flower after a fall in the underbrush, revealing the terrifying interior of bone and blood. A shin scraped on the rusty valve of an old tire, a huge inner tube from some tractor or truck, their father's makeshift version of a bouncy castle, obtained and erected in deference to their mother's Anglophilia. The trips to the emergency room had been family affairs, more father-enforced togetherness—terrifying for the injured party, tedious for those who had to tag along, but everyone got Mr. G's soft ice cream afterward, so it was worth it in the end.

This is not the homecoming I imagined, she thought, lying in the dark, allowing self-pity, her old friend, to come for her, envelop her.

And she *had* imagined returning, she realized now, although not today. Sometime, eventually, but on her own terms, not because of someone else's agenda. Three days ago the hard-won order of her life had jumped the track without warning, as out of her control as that pea-green Valiant. That car—it was as if there were a ghost in the machine all along, nudging her north, past the old landmarks, toward a moment not of her choosing. At the I-70 exit, when it would have been so easy

to go west, toward her original destination, and possibly escape detection, the car had turned to the right and stopped on its own. Prince Valiant had brought her most of the way home, trying to trick her into doing what was right. That's why the name had popped out. That, or the head injury, or the events of the past three days, or her anxiety about the little girl in the SUV.

Floating on painkillers, she fantasized about the morning, what it would be like to say her name, her true name, for the first time in years. To answer a question that few people had to think about twice: *Who are you?*

Then she realized what the second question would be.