

Firecracker

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CHAPTER ONE

I woke up sweaty and shaking. Tense. I had been dreaming about ghost roads again. This one was leaving an apartment complex swimming pool, and there was a little girl walking down it. She was looking back over her shoulder at me, eyes solemn behind a cheap kid's snorkeling mask, and wearing pool flippers; slow dreamy duck-steps, a trail of wet inhuman footprints disappearing into the dim black-and-white houses, the humming silence.

I looked at the clock display on my VCR, but the glowing blue numbers just flashed

– 00:00 –

– 00:00 –

– 00:00 –

Time unstuck and drifting. That lost feeling, like when you're a kid with a fever and the night breaks around you forever.

I lay on my dingy mattress in my tiny living-room, body humming with the premonition of something terrible about to happen. That copper taste in my mouth. Eyes wide in the darkness. Waiting.

The phone rang and I grabbed for it. 'Hello?'

'DK?'

'Who the hell is this?' Nobody had called me DK in ten years, not since my cousin AJ died. DK had been her nickname for me.

'It's your cousin, Tom. Tom Hanlon. My dad married your Aunt Dot's half-sister.'

I dredged up a vague memory of a strident woman in puff-ball hair lecturing my Uncle Waylon on the evils of drink while he sipped Coors Lite from a paper cup. 'Okay. I think I got it.'

'Now we're talking,' Tom Hanlon said. 'Do you remember me at all?'

'Not at all.'

'We talked at that one family reunion. I asked you what ghosts were like.'

'What did I say?'

'Dead.'

That sounded like me. There are other things to say about ghosts, of course. They're all different, like demons, not all the same, like zombies. Some can touch you and some can't, some are sad and some are mad as hell. The main thing is, they all want *something*, and they want it way worse than you want anything. If you've got the sense God gave a cockroach, you stay the hell away from dead people.

Just to be polite I said, 'Tom, are you aware that it's the fucking middle of the night?'

'There's a dead girl in my garage.'

'Call the cops.'

'No, not dead like that. I mean, more dead.'

Oh. 'Shit, man. Can't help you. I don't do that any more. Good ni—'

'I'll give you a thousand bucks,' he said. 'Think about it.'

I thought about it.

'A thousand dollars, just to get rid of one ghost. That's a lot of money.'

One thousand dollars. Six thousand packages of Ichi-Ban noodle soup. Lunch at my current lifestyle for about . . . fourteen

years. Ten good trips to Six Flags for me and Megan, Dr Peppers included and all the Frito Pie we could eat.

‘I notice you aren’t hanging up,’ Hanlon said with a tired laugh. ‘You know what they say, every man has his price –’

I hung up.

Six hours later I was out on my every-second-Sunday visit with my twelve-year-old daughter, Megan. Megan is short and fast and scrappy, not only the captain of her soccer team, but the only girl in the entire Greater Houston AYSO to get a red card this year. ‘Great eyes, ref!’ she had said after a terrible no-call, clapping sarcastically and paying no attention to the blood dribbling from her split lip.

That’s my daughter.

If she got a certain streak of cussedness from me, Meg inherited from her mother her blond hair, her athleticism, and – thank God – a complete inability to see the dead. I never told Megan about me and ghosts. No kid wants to think her daddy is a freak.

I don’t drive, so Megan and I take the bus when we go out, which she is beginning to think is lame. Today we’d spent an hour bumming around the Cactus Records on Shepherd listening to the free tracks. My current shitty job was at Petco, and on my budget, free was good. This had been a reliable outing even six months ago, but this time Meg was so obviously unimpressed that I decided to spring for a root beer float at the 59 Diner to salvage the afternoon, only to hear Meg say that she was trying not to drink extra calories.

Jesus.

‘You’re too young to give up beer,’ I said.

She rolled her eyes.

The bus ride back to her house in Woodland was long and awkward. Woodland is a professional suburb on the north side of Houston, all carefully manicured pine trees and midscale housing developments. Even the Taco Bells are clean and neat.

There was a dead woman on the bus, Chinese or Vietnamese, clutching a plastic shopping bag, with the usual grim expression. All in black and white, of course. Caught myself wondering why, of all the places in her life, she chose to come back here. Not a really useful line of thought. The dead have their reasons, and by and large the living are better off not knowing them.

‘Earth to Will?’

I flinched. ‘Hey, sorry. Day-dreaming.’ Usually I’m better at ignoring the dead, especially when Megan is around. I don’t want her to . . . as I said, that part of my life isn’t something she needs to know about.

‘Day-dreaming?’ She was giving me a Knowing Look spookily like her mother’s.

‘Hey, this is like every second Sunday, here. Pay attention to me.’

‘So, how are Trish and Fonda these days?’ I asked, hoping I had remembered the names of Megan’s posse.

Meg reached to ring the bell for our stop. ‘I don’t even know or care about Trish. Fonda and Azul are at Six Flags today.’ Tickets to Six Flags are \$39.99/day for each person over forty-eight inches tall, and that doesn’t include bus fare, balloons, or Dr Peppers. Not easy to do on Petco money. ‘They asked me to come, but . . .’

But your mother made you come out with me.

In twelve years I have never missed a Christmas pageant, a Brownie merit badge ceremony, or a school concert. I planted pumpkins at Megan’s daycare, I picked up books at library sales and donated them to her school, I sold raffle tickets to send her to science camp. Josie, my ex, once said, ‘Will, you’ve been a great . . .’ She floundered. ‘. . . the best estranged father I can imagine.’

Best Ex-Dad in the Lone Star State. I’m thinking of putting it on a T-shirt.

Megan and I stepped into the steamy Houston air at the bus stop in front of Jamison Middle School. Heat waves shimmered

off the metal slides in the playground. 'How come your name isn't on my birth certificate?' Megan asked.

'What?'

'Mom had it out last night. She was looking for my shot records. Your name isn't on my birth certificate. Dad's is.'

Dad meaning Don, the jarhead fucking ex-Marine Josie married a year after leaving me. 'My name's not on the certificate?'

'That's what I was trying to communicate.'

I said, 'By the time you were born, your mother and I weren't together any more. I guess she decided it would be easier to have Don's name there.'

'Don't they do a blood test or something?'

'No, I think they just take the mother's word.' Or maybe the nurses didn't even ask Josie. Maybe Don went and filled out the paperwork himself. 'She never told you I wasn't your dad.' Silence. 'She never said Don was your biological father.'

'No. She always said you were.' Meg not sounding convinced here.

As we turned up the walk to Meg's house, Josie waved at us from the living-room window. 'See you, kiddo,' I said. When I leaned forward to kiss the top of her head, I saw she was wearing a bra.

My daughter stood a moment on the front steps, her hand resting on the doorknob. 'Will, why don't you even have a car?'

Then Josie pulled the door open, and Megan disappeared inside.

I ride the bus a lot, which is not a very Houston thing to do, but I have my reasons. Every second Sunday for twelve years me and Megan had been going out together; half my memories of her are about riding buses. Megan nine months old and screaming with laughter as I zoomed her around like a fighter plane, until an old hag at the bus stop said, 'I never did see anybody treat a child so reckless!' Megan gurgling with laughter the whole time, pounding on my arms with her fat fists to make me

do it again. Bottles of formula sticking out of the pockets of my leather jacket.

Megan, still chubby at three, kicking her feet until one of her canvas sneakers – she called them her slip-offs – went sailing into the head of a Vietnamese grannie across the aisle.

Megan skinny and eight, absorbed in a classroom copy of *Charlotte's Web*. Me watching the way her bangs fell in front of her eyes. When she came to a hard word she would squint, and the tip of her tongue would stick out.

Now she was wearing a bra, and I didn't even have a car. She was looking nowhere but forward, at thirteen and sixteen and twenty-one. All those little Megans were invisible now. Ghosts, and only I could see them.

My name is Will Kennedy. I'm smart, but not as smart as my cousin Andy, who took up computers in Boy Scouts and now works in Austin's Silicon Gulch. I've been in trouble with the law, but not like my uncle Jerome, who is currently in jail for assault after catching his wife in bed with his parole officer. I'm considered a bit peculiar in the family, but not as peculiar as my Aunt Dot, who – though still a Baptist – believes that in a past life she was the queen of the planet Saturn. (Aunt Dot got into past-life regressions as a weight-loss therapy, and since discovering that she died of famine in eighth-century Ethiopia, she's lost forty-eight pounds. And kept it off.)

Aunt Dot once told me it was thinking about me that got her interested in the idea of reincarnation. Personally, I have a hard time believing we all live many lives. The dead folks of my acquaintance have a hard enough time getting over just one.

When I was six years old, my Uncle Billy was killed in the K-resin facility of the Philips Petroleum complex. Vaporized, actually, except for the steel soles of his work boots, which he left behind on the factory floor like wet silver footprints. Statistically, this was not surprising. If you're a boy growing up

in Deer Park, or Pasadena, or any of the other little suburbs east of Houston, the odds are pretty fair that Refinery Row will get you sooner or later. Before he died, Billy had been a deacon at the Deer Park Church of Christ, where we used to go before Mom got too heavy to fit in her Sunday dresses. Once a month he spelled Missy Pierce in the Sunday School rotation. As I recall, he took the Journeys of Paul very seriously, and could not abide a spitball.

The explosion came on the first Friday of first grade for me, during Show and Tell. We ran to the classroom windows and watched a black cloud seep into the hazy Texas sky like blood staining a gauze bandage. I didn't know then that Uncle Billy had dissolved into that dark air; I didn't hear about that until almost five o'clock, when the school decided it was safe to let us hurry into waiting cars, breathing through our hands, to be whisked home. My mom still likes to tell how the company and county officials came on TV to tell everyone that the fumes billowing from the plant weren't *dangerous*, but we citizens should stay inside for the rest of that ninety-nine-degree August day. With all the windows shut. And the air-conditioning off.

Like a lot of kids in Deer Park, I woke up in the middle of that night with a nose bleed. There were bloodstains on my pillow the next night too, and the night after that. 'Solvent vapor,' said my twelve-year-old cousin AJ wisely. Her daddy was a Brown & Root pipe fitter. AJ (short for Julie-Anne) had an abiding interest in industrial pollution, on account of she'd been born with the second and third toes on both her feet stuck together.

The next time I saw Uncle Billy was three weeks later, at the family reunion. This was back when the reunion was still on the Labor Day weekend, in a campground down on the banks of the Little Blanco River. What I remember best about those reunions is the food. The picnic tables were heavy with lemon pound cake and potato salad, brisket and fat quarters of watermelon. That year Uncle Raider's pretty Mexican wife, Juanita, had brought

tortilla soup and chile rellenos and cinnamon cookies and jalapeño spread and chicken tacquitos, which my dad said was trying too hard, and my mom said you couldn't blame her. I said their oldest boy, Carlos, told me his grandma Braunfeltzer (Raider's mother, this would be) didn't like Juanita on account of she was Catholic. Mom and Dad looked at one another for a spell and then Mom told me to hurry up and fix my plate.

I went for the hot dogs (made special with Hill Country German sausage and slathers of ketchup and chow-chow) and a little bit of slaw, the kind with raisins, and also a fat splotch of banana pudding with Nilla wafers in it. I had just grabbed a handful of Fritos when I bumped into Uncle Billy. He was so cold my sunburned shoulder puckered up with goose bumps, and he was black and white, as if he had come out of an old movie. I had seen plenty of ghosts before, and I knew right away that him being black and white meant he was dead.

Having left his boots on the refinery floor, Uncle Billy stood woefully barefoot, staring at Aunt Dot's famous Ambrosia salad, which was always a favorite on account of she used fresh pineapple instead of Del Monte fruit cocktail, and real cream instead of Cool Whip. Uncle Billy turned to look at me, and I felt guilty, because he was never going to experience the sticky tug of banana pudding against a spoon, or taste the fizzy burn of a cold Coke. I was so guilty, and so glad. So glad it was him dead and not me.

By the time Uncle Billy met his maker at Philips Petroleum, I had learned not to talk about dead people. Even my mom's mouth pulled down and her eyes got worried every time I mentioned ghosts. Everybody knew I saw them, of course – this was small-town East Texas, after all – but I kept my mouth shut with everyone except my cousin AJ.

AJ wasn't like the rest of Deer Park. She wore John Lennon glasses and burned incense in her room and told people she was a witch. When the cousins were over at Uncle Walt and

Aunt Patty's house, the grown-ups would hunker down in the heavily upholstered front room to 'set for a spell,' which meant talking slowly but loudly over the baseball game on the TV. Us kids, meanwhile, would rush outside, ignoring our mothers' warnings about being out in the heat of the day. This was the '70s, and if sunscreen *had* already been invented, word of it had not come to Texas. It was the business of any self-respecting white kid to burn to the point of peeling over every square inch of exposed skin twice a summer. The best place to peel was at your ear-tops, where sometimes, if you were very careful, you could slough a whole curled layer in one piece, translucent and slightly bendy, like the abandoned shell of a cicada, which we called katydid's back then.

AJ was expected to mind the rest of us. Sometimes she would grab the magnifying glass out of the garage and let us try to burn pinholes through a Cornflakes box on the patio, but most often our general holler and hubbub would be too shattering on Aunt Patty's nerves, and she would order AJ to take us back to the rumpus room at the back of the house where they kept a TV so old it didn't know any programs but *Gunsmoke* and *Popeye* cartoons. We'd fight awhile about what we were going to play next, until finally AJ would drawl, 'Hush you up, vermin!' and turn off the lights and bring in one of her tapers of incense. We would happily hush and pull the curtains closed while she told us truly terrifying stories about the bloodthirsty ghosts left over from Jean Lafitte's pirate crew; or about this friend whose sister had picked up a Cajun hitchhiker who turned out to be a homicidal maniac just bust out from a Louisiana prison for the criminally insane.

Once AJ even brought out the skull of a monster baby that had been given to her by an old blind prophetess in Lake Charles. Trying not to seem impressed, my cousin Doreen said it looked like a cat skull to her, but AJ said that was how they knew it was a demon baby, because it had been born with fangs and eyes where the pupil slits ran catwise, up and down, which

is why as soon as the parents got home from the hospital they killed it themselves by emptying half a can of Raid into the baby's bottle. Then we all felt sorry for the kid, even if it was a cat-headed demon baby, and everyone got quiet and very respectful because we all knew this story was particularly true and poignant for AJ, on account of her toes.

When I was twelve, AJ was the object of my very first crush. Of course, she was a senior in high school and I was only a seventh grader, but I found I could use my stories about dead people to make myself interesting. I told her about Mr. Johnson, the old black janitor at my school who was still wearily scrubbing down the bathrooms even though he'd hung himself from a beam in the boiler room with a bright orange extension cord when I was in second grade. AJ seemed kind of disappointed by how ordinary most ghosts seemed to be, but when I tried to make my stories more exciting, like hers, she could always tell right away that I was lying. She'd look at me over the tops of her little round sunglasses and put on the heavy Black Girl accent she used to aggravate her daddy. 'You axin' me to b'lieve dat, DK?' DK short for Dead Kennedy, which was her nickname for me. So I learned to stick to the facts.

Then AJ left high school, moved out of Uncle Walt's house and disappeared into the world of grown-ups, which it seemed to me then was another kind of dying.

I had other crushes, and dates, but after that first love I didn't talk about the dead until my junior year in high school, when I started going out with Josie Wells. Josie was the only girl in the history of Deer Park High to make the cheerleading team and then drop out without getting pregnant. She was blond, with six rings in her left ear and two useless doper parents. We got married a month after senior prom and moved to Houston proper. First, because I was damn good and ready to live someplace where nobody would start humming 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' when I walked by, and second because it's never the wrong time to get the hell out of Deer Park.