

PROLOGUE

AUGUST: WASHINGTON, D.C.

Late Sunday morning I was trying to put my new air conditioner into a living-room window when the front door of my townhouse opened, and my son, Alex, walked in holding a plastic bowl with a lid.

Three years out of college, with a job and his own apartment in Baltimore, Alex still had a key to my place and stopped by at least once a week. His mother, my ex-wife, was a wispy, blue-eyed, strawberry blonde, and Alex had some red in his hair, but the rest of him—the hazel eyes, broad shoulders and thick chest—came from my side of the family.

“Something funny?” I asked, bent over, struggling to hang onto the air conditioner.

Alex stood there, in his olive-green T-Shirt and black cargo shorts, grinning at me.

“Need help, Dad?”

“Not yet. Wait till I drop this thing on my foot and you can drive me to the hospital.”

Alex put the plastic bowl on the coffee table and came over and lifted one side of the air conditioner. With the window open I could feel the heat and humidity outside, which made my quaint, tree-lined street in Georgetown seem about as charming as a triple-canopy jungle.

We got the unit in, and I turned it on and sat on the couch.

“Did you see your next-door neighbor moving in?” Alex asked.

I shook my head.

“She’s hot,” Alex said.

“You break-up with Julie?” I asked, referring to the young woman he had been seeing for a year, a dark-haired beauty who worked at the State Department and spoke five or six languages.

Alex said, “No way. Julie went up to a nursing home in Wilmington to see her grandmother. And I meant your neighbor was hot for a guy like you.”

“Old?”

“Experienced.”

“Alex, I’ve been getting my own dates since I was a teenager.”

“Maybe, but this last year you’ve been a dorkus.”

“I haven’t heard ‘dorkus’ since you were in middle school. You still use it?”

“Only where applicable,” Alex said, and laughed.

I loved hearing my son laugh—in part, because his mother and I had split up when Alex was in third grade, and I had taken away an enduring, guilt-curdled image of him stretched out on his bed sobbing into his pillow. When Alex was fourteen, my ex remarried and moved to Virginia, and Alex decided to live with me. From the day he moved in, Alex had been trying to fix me up—with a couple of his teachers, some divorced soccer moms, and once with a woman who struck up a conversation with him in the cereal aisle at Safeway.

“Julie and I made hummus for you,” Alex said, pointing at the plastic bowl.

“You’ve got pita in the freezer?”

I nodded. “Thanks. But I can still feed myself.”

“I know that, Dad. I thought we could eat lunch and go to the ball game.”

“Ball game?”

Alex said, “I’ve got two tickets for the Nationals. Third-base line. They’re playing the Mets.”

“You wanna sit out in this heat?”

“They sell cold beer at RFK.

“True,” I said.

Alex was looking at me with an expression I recalled from his childhood—a vulnerable blend of curiosity and fear.

“What’s going on, kiddo?”

“Nothing,” he said, and I didn’t believe him. Alex would tell me when he was ready—he always did.

“Let me go change,” I said, and stood up and went upstairs.

* * * By the bottom of the fourth inning, both Livan Hernandez and Pedro Martinez were pitching shutouts, and Alex and I were baking in the sun and working on our second round of beers.

“I had a fight with Julie,” Alex said.

I looked at him—at a face that so resembled mine—and wondered if, once-upon-a-time, I had ever been so young.

“A big fight,” he said.

“What happened?”

shrugged. “One minute we’re talking about nothing important, and the next minute she’s yelling at me.”

“So you yelled back?”

“I did, and what’s weird is I wasn’t even sure what Julie was mad about.”

“It’ll blow over,” I said, sipping my beer.

“This time maybe. But—”

“But?”

“You and Mom are friends now, right?”

I nodded.

Alex said, “The way I remember, it wasn’t too long after you separated that neither of you even seemed sad when you saw each other.”

“We weren’t fighting any more. We weren’t so disappointed and angry. And we had you. We both loved you. What’s this got to do with Julie?”

“Because I never felt this way about a girlfriend. When I imagine us breaking up I can’t imagine ever getting over her.”

“That’s a possibility. So be careful with your relationship.”

“Did it happen to you?”

I stared out at the field and saw Pedro strike out Tony Blanco with a fastball.

“Dad?”

I put my arm over his shoulder and pulled him toward me.

“A long time ago,” I said, and took my arm away, and we sat back and drank our

beer.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Two days after Christmas the snow was still falling.

I should have been at my older sister's outside Boston, visiting with Elaine, her husband, children and grandchildren. But the snow had started on Christmas Eve, closing the airports, and by morning the world was white and silent.

I decided to drive to Elaine's from D.C. and make a couple of stops on the way. There wasn't much traffic, but the plows were out on I-95 and it was slow going, so I didn't get to the Mt. Lebanon Cemetery in New Jersey until early afternoon.

The snow had piled up between the rows of carved granite, and I high-stepped through the drifts to the Meyers family plot. My father had bought these dozen graves in 1951. Around then, my mother was bugging him to buy a house in Jersey, like his brother, but my old man had refused to leave Brooklyn, saying he had plenty of time to go to Jersey when he was dead.

Now he was there, with mom, my uncle and aunt, and almost everyone else I'd ever loved. There was even space for me. Someday. And probably sooner rather than later, since the men in my family weren't notable for their longevity.

I cleared the snow from the foot stones with a windshield brush, then stood in the pale gray light and stared at the names and dates until tears were freezing in my eyes.

Then I drove to Manhattan and checked into the Grand Hyatt.

Much of my life has been passed alone in dilapidated hotels and guest houses in the peskier backwaters of Europe, Asia and the Middle East—not necessarily places

you'd go unless, like me, you had been a civilian consultant to the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Yet even in the most genteel cities, when the accommodations were five-star, the rooms filled me with loneliness.

Television helps. So does vodka. And after turning on the news and pouring an Absolut from the minibar, I sat on the bed and re-read the page I'd printed from the Doctor Finder on the American Medical Association Web site:

Glenna Rising MD

Location:

289 W. 51st St
New York, NY 10017

Medical School:

COLUMBIA UNIV COLL OF
PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS
NEW YORK, NY 10032

Residency Training:

NY AND PRESBY HOSP

Office Phone:

212-490-0422

Primary Specialty:

PEDIATRICS

Major Professional Activity

OFFICE BASED PRACTICE

I doubt that when the government initially funded the Internet they suspected it would become a popular method for tracking down ex-girlfriends. I hadn't seen Glenna in thirty years, and certainly, given my career collecting and analyzing intel on foreign armies and paramilitary groups, I could have used my skills to uncover more about her.

Except I didn't want to ruin my vision of Glenna: beautiful, available and willing to concede that I still owned a piece of her heart.

Reaching into my daypack, I took out a photograph of her. Long ago I had sealed it between laminated sheets, and though the edges were curled with age, the image had remained as detailed as an etching. Glenna is standing in the golden autumn light outside a hotel in Bennington, Vermont, with leaves falling all around her. Her long silken hair is the

color of maple syrup with sun shining through it, and a breeze blows her hair off the

shoulders of her sweater, swirling it around her face, but you can still see the cameo perfection of her features. She is smiling, and yet, doesn't seem happy, appears suspicious instead, and to this day I don't know if it was happiness she didn't trust or me.

Perhaps it was both.

Someone once said that a photograph is a far cry from a memory. I'm not so sure this is true, because I remember looking through the viewfinder of the Minolta on that breezy sunlit Saturday, smelling the wood smoke rising from the white-brick chimney of the hotel, and thinking that no matter what became of us I would love Glenna—and be haunted by her—forever.

I finished the vodka and glanced at the television, where the newscaster was announcing that three more U.S. soldiers had died in Afghanistan and another five Marines in Iraq. Sadness and disgust rose up in me, and I shut off the news with the remote, put away the photo and went into the bathroom.

I considered calling Glenna, but odds were her receptionist or answering service would pick up and I'd have to leave a message, which might not be returned.

Of course, Glenna might not be at her office when I showed up. She could be on vacation with a lover or seeing patients in the hospital.

Standing under the hot spray of the shower, I dismissed these possibilities for the best and worst of reasons: I didn't want them to be true, because even though I knew that my reunion plan was ridiculous, I also knew that if my life hadn't come apart I never would have stopped in New York to see her.

CHAPTER 2

Darkness was coming on when I revolved out the Hyatt's doors and went past Grand Central Station. The snow had let up, but the plows were out, and the street lights sparkled on the ice-cruled peaks along the curb.

Crossing Madison Avenue, I glanced downtown and saw the office building where my father and Uncle Jerry used to work in public relations for Danzig Pharmaceutical. An ache of loss went through me like the icy snap of the wind, but thinking about my old man and his brother, usually locked in a ferocious debate over something—which way the rivers flow, for instance—always made me smile.

My father, Alex, was seven years older than Uncle Jerr. Their parents died young, and Uncle Jerr was in Eastern District High School and living with my mother while my old man was off fighting Nazis in Hürtgen Forest, where he lost most of his hearing in his left ear and won the Silver Star. My father kept his medal in his dresser, and I remember coming into his room when I was a kid and seeing him, big and broad-shouldered, standing in his boxer shorts and staring at the gilt-toned medal cupped in his hand, his handsome face hard as stone and his sepia, gold-flecked eyes filled with a grief and rage I didn't understand.

As I headed north on Fifth Avenue, the city felt deserted in these lost, snowbound days between Christmas and New Year's Eve, this season of loss and gain. Turning up the collar of my camel-hair coat, I was curious why I couldn't stop thinking about my old man and Uncle Jerr and then it struck me that they had been responsible for my meeting Glenna.

the summer of 1968. I was working in the public-relations department at Danzig, because I had recently earned some of the lowest grades in the history of Brooklyn College and failed to graduate on time, which led my father to insist that I get a real job. Since he was head of PR and was either traveling or in a meeting, Uncle Jerr showed me the ropes. Banging out press releases and proof-reading direct-mail pieces was a cinch, and in the evenings I hung out with a few different girls from school who had jobs in the city.

And it was a gas working for Uncle Jerr, who took PR a little less seriously than the fate of the Mets, Jets, Knicks, and Rangers. He wasn't exactly a degenerate gambler, since he avoided money trouble, but in the mornings when I went to get my assignments from him, my uncle had several sports sections opened up on his desk, and we would spend an hour going over the day's starting pitchers before he called his bookie.

Sometimes my father would drop in to see me. Once, he stopped by while I was reading Bernard Fall's *Street Without Joy*. Fall had been killed in Vietnam on patrol with the Marines and evidently, from the concern on my father's face, he was familiar with Fall's obituary.

My father asked, "How's the book?"

"Interesting."

He eyed me suspiciously. "There's things more interesting than war," he said, lighting a Lucky Strike. "I thought you'd like coming to work here. It's no great shakes. But we'd be together. And you gotta work at being something."

A shimmer of guilt passed over me. I hated disappointing him.

been thinking about being a writer,” I said. “Like those stories I wrote for the lit mags. Or maybe journalism.”

“Gordon, that writing was fine for high school and college. But you’re twenty-one, almost twenty-two. How you gonna support yourself?”

I shrugged. Truth was, I didn’t have a clue of what to write about. Nor did I have any knowledge of how one becomes a writer, and I was convinced that I had no experience worth recording, which partially explained my attraction to Vietnam. Even if the war was shaping up into a grotesque mistake, I still wanted to see it for myself, though I was enough of a middle-class kid to be ashamed of feeling thrilled by the possibility of going.

My father crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray on my desk. “We’ll talk about the writing,” he said.

We didn’t talk about it again until August. Aunt Lil and Uncle Jerr had been to another peace rally in the city, and afterward, drove to Brooklyn. We were at the redwood table in the back yard, and my father was barbecuing steaks and knocking back Chivas on the rocks when he said, “Gordon, this writing plan is bullshit. You got better things to do.”

I opened a bottle of Michelob. “Like public relations?”

Before my father could reply, Uncle Jerr said, “Alex, you gotta give the boy room to grow.”

“What is he?” my father said. “A plant?”

Uncle Jerr said, “Nephew-a-mine, so you want to be a writer?”

“Butt out, baby brother,” my father said. “Quit tryin’ to raise my son. You don’t have any kids, and I raised you.”

With their thick bodies, intense, dark-eyed stares and the Yardley pomade in their wavy, graying black hair, my father and uncle looked so much alike it was as if one person was arguing in a mirror. I drank my beer and listened. Once those two got going, there was no percentage in my getting involved.

My uncle said to me, “You wanna write, I got contacts with some papers.”

My old man snapped, “He’ll do it on his own.”

Uncle Jerr ignored him. “I’ll help you,” he said to me. “But you gotta buckle down in school and hold onto that student deferment.” “I told you to butt out,” my father said. “I’m tryin’ to keep Gordon out of a goddamn war.” “Go back to your peace march, baby brother. Don’t tell me about war.” Aunt Lil walked out of the back door of the house with a big, wooden bowl of salad. Under her bleached brassy bouffant, her face was as round and sweet as a cider doughnut. Her miniskirt didn’t flatter her stubbornness, though it did testify to her abundant courage.

“Darling,” she said to me. “You stay in college till you’re a hundred and seven. That II-S can save your life.”

My mother, small and slender in a red sun dress, came out right behind my aunt with a covered dish of baked beans. “What’s this deferment talk?” she asked.

“Relax, Renée,” my father said.

Apparently, my old man had mentioned my reading Bernard Fall to her, because my mother glared down at me, her slate-gray eyes suddenly as cold and colorless as frost. “Gordon,” she said quietly, placing the dish on the table. “I sat home worried sick while my husband went to war. I don’t want to do it for my son.”

All these years later it was still painful for me to recall the raw fear and resentment in my mother’s eyes, and as I cut across Rockefeller Center, passing the glass angels blowing trumpets and the Christmas tree shining like a pillar of flame, I was grateful for the wind whistling through the dark spaces between the skyscrapers, the wintry blast proving that I was no longer at a summer cookout in Brooklyn.

Glenna’s office was only a few blocks away, but as I stopped on the terrace above the enormous gold statue of a reclining Prometheus and watched the skaters in colorful knit caps gliding through the lights of the ice rink below, I had a disquieting moment of sanity and asked myself two questions: What was I doing here? And what could I possibly accomplish by seeing Glenna?

I didn’t like the answer to either question.

No doubt, it had been easier meeting her that first time. At work, a couple of days after the barbecue, my uncle said, “You got everybody nervous—even your old man—with your lousy grades and your reading material. Get yourself out to the *Long Island Press* in Garden City tomorrow and see the managing editor.”

His name was Mack Grunch, and he had the pallor and squinty eyes of a man who’d spent years underground running a tarantula farm.

“Nice to meet ya, Gordon Meyers,” Grunch said, handing me a slip of paper with a name and number. “Your Uncle Jerry tells me you got ability but no experience. Listen,

here's my plan. There's this organization of med students over at Columbia doing abortion lobbying. A few guys and gals. Go talk to one of them young ladies, type me four pages, and you'll make the double sawbuck. And don't sweat it. Reporting ain't like playin' ball in the bigs. If you had to be that good, would there be so many papers?"

Armed with Grunch's philosophy of excellence, I called the number he'd given me and my interview turned out to be with Glenna.

The skaters were leaving the ice. Across the way I looked at Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from Zeus and passed it along to humanity. For his trouble, Prometheus was shackled to a rock, where an eagle arrived to eat his liver, which would grow back every night, so the eagle could eat it again.

Ever since reading that myth I'd wondered why his statue was in Rockefeller Center.

Maybe it was a warning to the tourists.

And now, I wondered, if it was a warning to me.

CHAPTER 3

According to the directory on the wall in the lobby, Glenna Rising, M.D., occupied Suite 1515. I rode the elevator up, and my heart was pounding as I walked down the corridor to her office. When I reached the frosted-glass door with her name stenciled on it, I had to step back to let a UPS deliveryman out.

Having imagined seeing Glenna again for so long, I viewed myself as ready for anything—anything, that is, except entering the waiting room and actually seeing her with a UPS box in her hands, standing amid the tube-framed chairs and low, laminate-

topped tables that made me think all doctors must shop at the same discount-furniture outlet.

“Can I help—” Glenna said, and then went silent, gazing at me.

I was stunned, not quite believing it was her. From the looks of it, she had been getting ready to leave. She was wearing an ankle-length, belted coat the color of Bordeaux and tan, wool-lined, sheepskin boots. Her hair was shorter than I recalled, cut even along her shoulders, the soft luminous brown highlighted by strands of silver. The age lines in her face were visible under the harsh gleam of the florescent ceiling panels, but she was still beautiful, the features softer now and just as lovely.

Although I had rehearsed several clever remarks, the best I could do to break the ice was: “We’ve got the same boots.”

Glenna didn’t reply. I had expected a melancholy rush of nostalgia. Instead, I felt the anguish of love abandoned, the torment of unfinished business—regret without end.

And then, thankfully, Glenna laughed, her own special music, irony always playing around the edges of joy.

She put the box on the receptionist’s desk, then came over, lifted up my Irish tweed cap, touched my short gray hair and said, “We’re old, Gordon.”

“We’re getting there.”

I can’t say who made the first move, but hugging her was perfectly natural, as if we had seen each other that morning, before Glenna left for the hospital and I returned to my writing, as though thirty years hadn’t vanished. And when her arms came up around me and the side of my face touched hers, memories flashed through my head like a movie

being rewound so fast the scenes are reduced to a blur of colors. The smell of her hair,

though, that was real, like crisp apples in the fall. My throat constricted; I almost started to cry; and yet, at the same time, I had the comforting illusion that my whole adult life was starting again, and everything that happened had not happened at all. The disturbing sense that I had taken a wrong turn and lived the wrong life was gone.

She stepped back, looking up at me, and I remembered how I used to love the amused spark in her big green eyes—a deep, startling green, somewhere between jade and emerald.

“What’s the occasion?” she asked, grinning. “You lose your mind or something?”

“Something.”

“Well that clears it up,” Glenna said.

I had prepared a lengthy answer for her, but what I said was: “I wanted to see you.”

“C’mon, Gordon.”

I shrugged. “Do you have to get home?”

“No,” she said, staring at me, her eyes narrowed, curious. I recalled that look.

Like she was studying a slide under a microscope.

“Gordon, you okay?”

I nodded, wondering if I still had the heart to tell her my story. “You know a place we can have a drink?”

“In Manhattan?” Glenna replied, smiling. “Not likely.”

“You done for the day?”

She continued studying me. “I’m done. Let me lock up.”

Outside, it was snowing again.

“Let’s walk,” Glenna said, slinging her leather briefcase over her shoulder. “I skipped the treadmill today.”

We went up to Broadway and headed downtown. I didn’t know where to begin, and when the silence became awkward, I said, “So you finished your internship and residency.”

“I started right after I saw you the last time.”

“I shouldn’t have just gone like—”

“It’s all right, Gordon. It was my fault, too.”

The snow was falling through the velvety blue evening the way it falls through a dream, slow, steady, the flakes big and bright as if each one had been cut from a doily by a child’s giddy hand.

Glenna said, “Are you still with that company?”

“No. I sold my partnership last month.”

“What exactly were you doing? I remember you told me it was like journalism, except it paid better.”

I gave her the abridged version. “I ran around the world, watched military exercises, talked to people in and out of the governments, and wrote up my impressions for the Defense Intelligence Agency.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Glenna said, and though she tried to keep her voice neutral, I heard her disapproval, dismissing the work as another one of my risky adventures.

Perhaps she was right.

I said, "In friendly countries it was mostly safe."

“And in unfriendly ones?”

“I had the Special Forces for company.”

For a while, we trudged on, saying nothing. As we stepped around a mountain of snow at the corner of West Forty-seventh, I said, “I want to give writing another try.”

“Good for you,” Glenna said, and the confidence in her tone took me back in time, when she had believed I could do anything and her faith was the only proof I needed to believe that all I dreamed would be mine.

Glenna said, “What’re you going to write about?”

“My misspent youth.”

“About us?” she asked.

“I’m not sure I know the end of the story.”

“Is that what you came for, Gordon, the end of the story?”

I didn’t answer, but a familiar numbness spread through me, an iciness that made the wind blowing over us seem like a breath of summer.

“You know I had a life,” Glenna said.

“Had?”

“Have. I have a good practice. My husband—”

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks, turned and stared at me, anger flashing across her face like lightning. “You knew, didn’t you? Before you came here?”

For a moment, I was too embarrassed to answer. Then: “His obit came up on Google.”

“Fucking Internet. The whole country’s a bunch of Peeping Toms.”

there, feeling embarrassed and recalling the facts from the obituary. Dr. David Aldrich had died eighteen months ago, from cancer, at the age of seventy-four. He was a big-time ophthalmologist, with a brother in Albuquerque, New Mexico, two sons from a previous marriage, and a wife of twenty-two years, Dr. Glenna Rising.

“I’m sorry about your husband,” I said, and I was, even though, for an instant, I could remember how jealous I’d felt reading the obit, jealous that Glenna had been with someone else for so long.

Glenna said, “You never did understand, did you? About me. That there is other sadness in the world besides your own.”

“I—”

“Gordon, do we have to dig up ancient history?”

“No.” I couldn’t bring myself to meet her gaze and kept my eyes focused downtown, where the lights of Times Square burned orange and red and yellow and blue, a neon kaleidoscope glowing through a snowy haze, with small dark silhouettes moving along the sidewalks.

“Why the hell are you here, Gordon?”

“For the nice weather?”

I don’t know what Glenna saw in my face. Snowflakes were landing on my cheeks and melting, and maybe she thought they were tears, or maybe they were. She reached up and wiped the water away with a gloved hand.

Softly, Glenna said, “What do you want?”

“A drink. I want a drink.”

Without saying a word, she started walking again. I followed her up a block and into Lally's Tavern. It was dark with paneled walls and a big stone fireplace. A few people were drinking on the stools at the mahogany horseshoe, but the rough-hewn tables and chairs were empty.

"Looks like one of those tourist traps in the Swiss Alps," Glenna said, and began slipping out of her coat. I helped her off with it, letting my hands linger on her shoulders. She glanced back at me, the tightness in her features a sign that my touch had come as an uncomfortable surprise. I removed my hands, feeling myself blush.

"This is confusing," she said, turning toward me. "I feel—I think I might still be mad at you. And I'm angry at myself for—I'm not sure why."

"For still being mad at me?"

Shrugging, she tried to smile, but didn't quite make it. "Hold onto my coat while I find a bathroom," she said. I watched her wend between the tables, her hips swaying in smartly tailored charcoal-gray slacks, and suddenly I had the dizzying sensation of bouncing from the past to the present and back again. I stood there, telling myself to move on and yet unable to move, frozen for a wistful moment by memory's guile, its sad and evil magic.

Finally, I went and sat at a table by the fireplace.