

THE LIMINAL MAN

by

Todd Keisling

KICKSTARTER SAMPLE

Edited by Amelia Bennett
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*For the men who defined me:
Jerry Dickerson, Todd Isaacs, and Robert Keisling.
Thank you.*

“Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.”

— *Japanese proverb*

“A lack of excellence implies mediocrity. And in a society that is willing to accept a standard of mediocrity, the opportunities for personal failure are boundless. Mediocrity can destroy us as surely as perils far more famous.”

— *Hyman Rickover*

-PROLOGUE-
THE THIRTEENTH MAN

Joe Hopper shoved the gun into the assassin's temple. The beaten man winced, struggling against the cuffs.

"I got your number," Hopper growled. "You and the rest of 'em. Now you tell me something, hoss. How many are there? Who else was behind this?"

The assassin looked up at him with blood and hate in his eyes.

"Twelve plus one, amigo. And the thirteenth, good 'ol Butcher Pete, he's the one you should be afraid of. He's gonna gut you and your whole goddamn family."

– *Donovan Candle*, Monochrome Dream

#

Richard Henza awoke in a haze of blood and liquor. His head throbbed, rusty nails shooting behind his eyes and down his neck. Dark maroon splotches burst and trailed like fireworks across the black expanse of his vision.

His thoughts swam fuzzily through his head. Where was he? Was he still at home? Sounds drifted in and out around him, accompanied by a dull ache pulsing to a beat.

The Talking Heads. Of course.

He *was* still at home. His stereo was still on.

And there was something wet on his face. Warm.

He tried to wipe it away but his hands would not cooperate, and forcing them to action made his joints sing. He gasped, suddenly aware that his wrists were bound to the arms of his chair.

A deep, grating chuckle issued from somewhere across the darkness, startling him. *The man with the beard.* The sound of his throaty voice called forth a memory of grizzly features: tall, big, a surly son of a bitch with gnarled hair and dirt caked into his wrinkled face.

Remnants of the evening swam into focus. Richard recalled an empty glass, his hand reaching for the bottle, turning to find a huge grimy intruder standing in his den. The last

thing he saw was the bastard swinging down the bottle in a swift arc, a burst of stars, then nothing.

Richard winced as he tried to move again. His head throbbed as a fresh stream of blood coursed down his face. When he opened his eyes he felt his eyelids brush against something rough.

Blindfolded. He relaxed, fighting the hazy cloud smothering his thoughts. The evening played back in the darkness like a silent film, and he was its captive audience. He'd been drinking, brooding over his meeting with the heads of the network—and one new face he did not recognize. *Bastard thinks he can take my show away from me? Not without a fight,* he thought. *He hasn't met my attorney yet.*

More laughter. Chuckles. Richard Henza cleared his throat.

“Uh, sir?” The defeat in his voice startled him. “Look, you can have anything you want. Anything. Want a check? I'll write you a check for a hundred grand right now. I'll give you my car. Brand new, less than two thousand miles on it. I'll give you anything, just please, please don't—”

The air in the room swelled, growing heavier between syllables. Henza sucked in his breath. He was wrong—there *was* more than one person in the room with him.

“Kale,” said another man. His imperious voice raised the hairs on Richard's neck. “Everything is in place. Remove the blindfold now.”

The first man hacked out what must have been a laugh, but which to Richard sounded like the choked cry of a wild beast.

“Sorry, Dick. You'll have to pardon my associate.”

The blindfold came away from his face, and the onrush of light left his vision blurred. Cloudy shapes swirled into focus, revealing the bearded man's hulking shape. Richard blinked a few times to make sure he was seeing things properly.

“I hope Kale didn't hurt you too badly. I need you to be lucid. You're no good to me with a concussion—not that it will matter for much longer.”

Richard squinted at the other figure. His blood pressure spiked, amplifying the throbbing in his head. Even though the man lacked definition in the haze, Richard knew him, knew his voice. Yesterday afternoon's events came rushing back in a furious reverie. There were twelve directors for the WBS television network. Richard Henza had sparred

with them all for the sake of maintaining creative control over his show, but this man had changed everything in the span of one meeting.

This smug asshole had remained in the shadows, barking directives and ultimatums, and the rest of the board cowered in his presence. Richard didn't know his name, and he didn't care to know. This thirteenth man was an interloper, an enemy, and he wouldn't allow one smug son of a bitch in a suit to take away the success he'd worked so hard to achieve.

Richard looked up at the thirteenth man. His fear vanished. In its place was pure unbridled anger. He wanted to tear himself from his restraints and choke this man. How *dare* he enter Richard's home. Henza was not one to be coerced, and he'd show the bastard—

“Dick, please. Don't scowl at me like that. You brought this on yourself.”

“I'm going to have your head on a plate for this, I swear to Christ.”

“Christ? Oh come now. You're not a man of God any more than I'm a man at all.”

Richard fell silent and stared. “What?”

The thirteenth man grinned at his prisoner, revealing two rows of perfectly aligned teeth. They shimmered and flickered a shade of gray. His eyes lost their sheen, darkening for an instant before returning to normal. Richard wanted to believe the odd effect was just the result of bourbon on an empty stomach, even a possible concussion, but lingering doubts suggested otherwise. He searched for something witty to say, some statement sharp enough to hurt this impenetrable figure, but nothing came to mind. He glared up at his captor.

“Dick, you and I need to come to terms with something.” The thirteenth man knelt before him. He put his hands on Richard's knees. His fingers were cold. “*Fading Out* isn't yours. It never was.”

“The hell it isn't,” Richard spat. He'd nurtured that show from the ground up, crafting the pitch, seeking investors, and giving his all to sway the opinions of anyone who would listen. Hell, he'd been in the production van during the first week of filming. That show was his baby, and damn anyone who told him otherwise.

“I know you think it is, Dick. I can appreciate that fact. After all, you've helped make the show a success.” The man walked to the bar and poured a shot of bourbon. “But did you ever stop and think about why that board of fogies agreed to carry the show?” He returned, pushing the shot glass against his prisoner's chin but Richard turned away, spilling bourbon on his shirt. “I mean, you seem like a thorough guy, am I right? Surely you would've wondered why a TV network saturated with other reality TV shows would pick up

yours. What good could they possibly see in a show all about following around dipshit twenty-somethings who work dull, dead-end jobs?”

Richard didn't want to admit it, but he had a point. Sometimes he *did* wonder why the WBS boys offered him a contract at all. The right place, the right time, the right idea— everything was in the cards, as he'd heard so many times before. Looking up at the pale man, Richard felt the slow chill of realization crawl through his gut.

“*You* did this?”

His captor chortled, more to himself than his audience, and set the glass down on the coffee table. Kale leaned against the bar, arms folded across his chest as he watched the two of them. He did not join in his master's amusement.

“You could say I provided the necessary motivation to sway the board in your favor. You may have birthed the idea, Dick, but I pulled the strings to make it happen. The show is, for all intents and purposes, *mine*. And now I'm here to take it to the next step.”

He motioned to Kale. The bearded man nodded and left Richard's view.

“See, I can't have you thinking you have any sort of influence. That would only gum up the works.” He turned and pushed the coffee table closer to Richard's chair. “And it seems only fitting that I demonstrate the significance of my creation.”

Kale returned, carrying a square object with a long, black cord. Richard wasn't sure what it was until the small television was placed on the table before him. Kale picked up the cord and plugged it into a nearby socket.

The screen came to life, revealing a simple black and white outline of a door. Richard knew it well, it was his own design.

He looked up at his captors and laughed, “You broke into my house and tied me up to make me watch my own show? Really?”

The thirteenth man grinned what could have been a charming smile in the right circumstances, but Richard saw no charm. That lifeless smile chilled his bones.

“Yes, Dick, that's precisely right. You'll see just how special this show really is.”

The Talking Heads came to a halt. Richard looked over and saw Kale standing at his stereo. He ejected the disc and snapped it in half, dropping the pieces on his way to the bar. There he stuck his hand into a fishbowl full of promotional buttons for the TV show. Grinning, he pulled one out and affixed it to his shirt pocket.

“Much obliged,” Kale said.

The thirteenth man stepped out of view. Richard felt icy fingertips on his head, redirecting his attention to the small screen.

“You sit tight and watch this. When it’s over, I think you’ll understand the gravity of your mistake.”

“Yeah?” Richard smirked, staring incredulously at the screen as the show’s title sequence began. “What makes you think so?”

“Because,” said the thirteenth man, now whispering directly into Richard’s ear, “you’re going to see just why you should’ve walked away when I gave you the chance, Mr. Henza.”

His voice distorted as he said Richard’s name, dimming in a flurry of white noise. The air in the room swelled as it had minutes before, and he realized the thirteenth man’s hands were no longer on his head. He glanced toward the bar and saw that Kale was gone as well. Then the lights in the room went out, leaving only the blinding screen of the television draping him in its pale glow.

Richard struggled against his restraints until he could no longer bear the discomfort it caused, and when that didn’t work he tried calling for help. He had no family, and his housekeeper wouldn’t arrive until the morning. Exhausted, he slumped against the back of the chair, and tried to rethink his situation.

Concentration proved difficult as the television flashed images of his TV show. Episode after episode of *Fading Out* played before him in succession. His thoughts of escape dwindled, and after the first episode’s conclusion he found himself willingly glued to the screen. Richard was okay with this, despite the numbness creeping up his arms and legs.

Things began to change for Richard Henza at some point in the early hours of the following morning. The sudden onset of nausea snapped him from his fatigued trance. What began as a discomforting sensation quickly transformed into an invisible hand threatening to disembowel him. And the noise, oh God, the noise was horrible. The low, thrumming drone of bells and static hissed together in his ears.

When he blinked, he found the darkness of the room was gone, replaced by a stark gray palette. Gone were his bar, sofa, and fireplace. The coffee table and TV were nowhere to be found. The room was empty but for the shapes of four tall, scrawny figures. They stood before him, impossibly elongated like the drawings of children.

The drone of bells faded from his ears. A low, mournful sob filled them. He thought it sounded like the yawn of a man who’d not slept in years, carrying on forever in that empty

room. The shapes before him came into focus, and Richard's bladder gave way when he saw them.

Pale, their rubbery flesh stretched taut over bony frames, the figures stood impossibly tall. Looking up at them, Richard supposed they couldn't be less than seven feet. They towered over him, arms swaying to and fro, their knuckles scratching dryly along the floor. Their eyes were set back into their rounded heads like polished orbs of obsidian, and their mouths quivered hesitantly.

Richard Henza understood then what the thirteenth man meant by his warning. He understood it when the giant white lummoxes opened their mouths, revealing rows of worn, white teeth. He understood it when their jaws unhinged, stretching open to reveal four equally bottomless pits.

The closest figure quickly leaned forward, closed its jaws around the top of his face, and plucked his head from his torso. Richard Henza had no time to scream.

PART ONE
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THE HESITANT MAN

“Hesitation is his natural impulse in the face of exciting, terrifying new territory. He will stand on the line forever if allowed, a prisoner of his own inaction.”

– *A. Sparrow*, *A Life Ordinary: A Comprehensive Study in Human Mediocrity*

LESS DEFINED

Donovan Candle's cell phone rang as he exited the gas station. He carried a latte in each hand, with a glazed donut balanced atop one of the lids, and a copy of the morning newspaper tucked underneath his arm. The phone chirped again. Answering it involved a juggling act that ended with the loss of the donut, and he cursed when it hit the pavement. He stared at it with longing for a moment before answering the phone.

"Donna, you owe me a donut."

"I do?"

"Yes, you do."

Donna Candle laughed. It made him smile, and the donut, once a seemingly monumental loss, was now forgotten. He set the lattes on the roof of his car and fumbled for the keys.

"It's not like you need that donut anyway." Her playful jab was punctuated with more laughter.

Donovan unlocked and opened the door. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She laughed again. "I'm just teasing. I forgot to ask you to stop for me on your way later today." He tossed the newspaper into the car, retrieved the lattes, and took his place behind the wheel.

“Let me guess,” he said, starting the engine. “More pickles?”

“Yes, please.”

“Sure. Any other strange pre-ggo requests?”

“Umm, nope, that’ll do for now.”

She wished him a good day at work and hung up. He couldn’t help but chuckle. After talking and planning for a couple of years, he and Donna had finally conceived a child. Now she was six months along, and had been craving pickles for weeks. The first time her craving struck was late at night, and he’d dragged himself out of bed to venture out for her coveted snack. He didn’t mind, though.

Life for Donovan Candle was blissfully chaotic, thanks in part to that growing bump in Donna’s belly, and he wanted it no other way. He’d spent the first part of his adult life meandering about in an effort to define himself as a husband, as a writer, as more than a blank face in the crowd—and now, at thirty-three years old, Donovan found himself comfortable with the idea of adding “Dad” to that list of definitions. It had a nice ring to it.

Smiling, Donovan put the car in gear and pulled out into traffic. When the morning commuters merged left toward the freeway, he went right.

He rolled down his window and let the morning air fill the car. With one hand on the wheel, the wind in his hair, and a latte in his other hand, Donovan Candle steered himself from the lifeless freeway into the bright summer green of the countryside surrounding the city.

Donovan glimpsed the rearview reflection, watching the congested freeway ramp vanish behind a row of trees. *A year ago I would’ve been sitting in that gridlock right along with them.*

He’d spent nine years suffering through the same commute, toiling away at a thankless job, and compromising his hopes for what he thought was happiness. In the end, that bitter routine almost cost him his marriage, and his life.

But never again, he thought. *I’m not going to live like that anymore.*

The old farming road circumvented the city limits, flirting with the thoroughfares and avenues but never quite crossing those boundaries. He came to a stop sign, switching on the radio as he made his turn. A newscaster gave the latest local report:

“—case you’re just tuning in, the city’s still buzzing about the latest bombshell to drop. Richard Henza, creator of the acclaimed, locally-produced reality show *Fading Out*, has been missing for a week now. He was last seen Thursday evening leaving the WBS building.

Rumors of pending litigation between Henza and the network surfaced earlier this week; however, his attorney Joseph Rochester has not returned calls for comment. Authorities are asking for anyone with information on Henza's whereabouts to step forward. In other news—”

Too early for that. Not yet. He changed the station. Pink Floyd filled the car, and he sighed. The countryside slipped away, its fresh air displaced by the stale fumes of smog. He sat in a line of traffic four cars deep and watched droves of people in suits and ties march to their jobs. Their faces were blank, reminding him of himself just a short year ago. They looked like inmates walking the final mile to death row.

That's what I used to be, he thought. *All blank and gray, headed toward my daily execution.*

Traffic inched forward.

He was less than a block from the new office when someone knocked on his window, startling him from his thoughts. The snap back to reality made his heart race. A large man tapped on the glass, smearing some kind of black gunk across the surface.

Donovan looked down and made sure the door was locked. He'd worked in the city long enough to know anyone approaching an idling car was suspect. The traffic light up ahead was still red. He muttered “shit” under his breath and slowly cracked the window an inch.

“Can I help you?” he asked. An acrid stench permeated the car, catching him by surprise. He tried not to retch.

“Sure can,” said the man. His hair was black and knotted, and a huge shrub of a beard clung to his chin. He wore a tattered dress shirt with a small white button stuck to the breast pocket. In the center of the button was a black outline of a doorway.

The man stuck out his hand. A glint of light from a metal watchband caught Donovan's eye. He looked at it, saw it was a very nice watch for an otherwise homeless man, and pretended not to notice.

“Very hungry,” he said. “Spare change?”

I'm sure that watch could fetch you a few meals.

“Yeah,” he said, scolding himself for having such crass thoughts. He dug out a handful of nickels and dimes from the console, opened the window a little more, and gave them to the man.

“Much obliged.”

The car behind him honked. Donovan looked up at the green light. He sped away without telling the man he was welcome.

#

“Good morning, Mr. Candle.”

Donovan cringed. Rosie smiled up at him from behind her desk.

“Rosie, you can call me Don. Calling me Mr. Candle makes me feel weird. Like a teacher or something.”

“Sorry, Mr. Ca—er, Don. Sorry Don.”

“No worries,” he told her. “Any calls?”

She checked her computer. “Just one. Your brother said he’s going to be out for most of the morning. Mrs. Beckman called him at home and said her husband left rather early. She thinks he went to meet with his mistress.”

Donovan rolled his eyes. Mrs. Gloria Beckman was one of Michael’s first clients. She lived in a mansion in Soaring Hills, and was forever convinced her husband, a network executive prone to working late hours, was cheating on her. Michael had yet to find a shred of evidence to prove this, but she was absolutely certain—as was her checkbook. Who were they to turn down steady work?

He opened the door to their office. Although the new place was ample enough for their needs, it wasn’t excessive. They still shared workspace, but were now afforded enough room for their own desks and computers. Donovan set his things down on his desk, booted up his computer, and took a sip of his latte. He went to put the second latte on Mike’s desk, then thought better of it and offered it to Rosie.

“No thanks. I don’t drink coffee.”

“Give yourself a few years.”

Donovan shrugged and set the latte on the corner of his desk, took a seat, and unfolded the newspaper. The headline read: SEARCH CONTINUES FOR FAMED TV PRODUCER. He skimmed the first line, recalling the radio announcer’s broadcast. Richard Henza, creator and producer of the acclaimed reality show *Fading Out*, seemingly fell off the face of the planet a week ago.

Fading Out. He'd heard of that show. Never watched it—he rarely had time for TV these days—but he'd seen and heard its many advertisements. He set down the paper and called out to Rosie.

“Hey, what’s that reality show you watch?”

“*Fading Out*?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Have you been following the news about the show’s creator?”

“I have. I hope they don’t end the show. It’s one of my favorites.”

He went back to the paper and looked for anything else that might be noteworthy. Not a week went by that he didn’t read of someone else going missing. These notices were often accompanied by a smiling photo of the person, their faces home to eyes rendered blank by gritty newsprint. Given enough time, those faces would end up in files on his desk.

Michael assigned him to Missing Persons duty soon after making him a partner. “It’s steady,” his brother explained, “and should keep you busy. Been the bread ‘n butter of the company for a few years now.”

Bread ‘n butter was only the half of it. Two months after he became licensed, Donovan found the volume of contracts growing. When he and Donna returned from their vacation at the shore, he found his brother taping paperwork to the wall of his home office. A conversation about file storage grew into a search for actual office space, and within a month they’d negotiated a lease.

The reports did not stop coming. His brother dismissed them as cut-and-dried cases—usually runaways, people who wanted to disappear and start new lives. Donovan wanted very much to believe him, but deep down he knew he could not.

After what he’d seen, the prospect of someone *wanting* to disappear seemed far-fetched to him. At first he’d believed Michael was right. The first four cases involved runaway teenagers—all of whom he managed to track down over the course of a month. The fifth case, however, was the beginning of an unsettling trend: the first of many to go into his “unsolved” pile.

He lifted a file from the stack and flipped through its pages. Here was a straight-A student, cheerleader, and vice president of the National Honor Society. The young woman’s senior photo smiled back at him. The local police had closed the case after only a month-long investigation, determining she was a runaway. Her parents weren’t convinced, and had turned to Candle & Candle for assistance. That was eight months ago.

Donovan stared at the frozen smile in the photo. *Where did you go?*

A familiar voice spoke in his head, one he'd listened to during many late-night writing sessions. And although this character existed solely due to Donovan's imagination, he considered him a real person. *You know it's not that simple*, spoke Joe Hopper. *Ain't nothin' ever is with you, boss.*

Hopper spoke the truth. Donovan had a theory for all these investigations, but it didn't exactly fit their circumstances, and the disparity didn't stop him from asking a pivotal question: *What if?*

Some of the cases on his desk fit his theory dead-on. Brian Owens, a subway operator, vanished from the locker room preparing for a day's work. Jaquelyn Ridgeway, mother of three and social security caseworker, left the office on her way to a client's place of residence but never arrived. Donovan's old boss, Timothy Butler, was in the stack, too. He'd disappeared from the offices of Identinel between the hours of noon and four. That was seven months ago.

These people all had the same thing in common: mediocrity. If there was one thing Donovan had learned in the last year, it was that mediocrity is a disease. Enough of it would make a person "flicker out." If nothing was done to end this mediocrity, the victim would flicker out of existence altogether. What lay in wait for them on the other side, however, was far worse than any death he could imagine.

Donovan knew this all too well. He'd seen it with his own eyes. It almost consumed him; worse, it almost cost Donna her life.

But this was different. In the last two months, he'd received similar cases from distraught parents whose daughters and sons seemingly vanished into thin air. All were in their late teens or early twenties. All had bright futures. Some of them held part-time jobs here and there, but nothing as strenuous and soul-sucking as the older subjects. He'd watched the pile grow one folder at a time, documenting the disappearances of these young adults. They were children by most respects, all of whom had no business vanishing into thin air, and that fact disturbed him.

He'd resisted the urge to bring his suspicions up to his brother, if for no other reason than the hole in his theory. Though Michael had followed Donovan into the abandoned subway line to rescue Donna, he did not have the opportunity to see what Donovan saw. All he knew was the colorful world before his own eyes. Several months after the incident, and

shortly before he and Donna left for their vacation, Donovan tried to talk to his brother about what happened. Michael, however, would hear none of it.

“I don’t want to know, Don. We saved the day. That’s all that matters. Let the past stay where it belongs.”

Frustrating though it was, Donovan understood his brother’s reasoning. Michael was always the one grounded in reality. He approached problems with logic rather than speculation, never looking beyond the realm of flesh and blood. Peering beyond that veil into the fantastic and impossible was Donovan’s specialty.

He flipped back through the file and stopped on the girl’s photo once again. *You’re too young to flicker out*, he thought. *So where, in this big scary world, did you wander off to, kiddo?*

Donovan put the file back on the stack, and looked at his watch. Forty-five minutes had passed. He pushed away the mystery of the missing kids, logged on to his computer, and went to work.

#

He heard the door open and slam shut. It was the end of the day, and he had just shut down his computer. Michael Candle entered the office and stripped off his tie, followed by his dress shirt. Donovan leaned back in his chair and smirked.

“Rough day?”

Michael glared at him. “Don’t even start with me.”

“That great, huh?”

“Did Rosie fill you in?”

“Only that Mrs. Beckman called you again this morning.”

Michael plopped down in his chair. Sweat dripped off his forehead. Rings of it stained his undershirt. Summer was in full effect, and seeing his brother like this made Donovan glad he’d spent the day in the air conditioning.

“Yeah, she called,” Michael said. “Because, as you know, her husband is screwing every bimbo in town.”

“So she says,” Donovan added.

“So she says. Damned if I can find any proof of it. Want to know where I’ve been all day?”

Donovan did not say anything, nor did he have to. Michael was on a roll.

“She calls me first thing this morning, tells me she thinks John’s meeting with one of his *many* mistresses today, and proceeds to demand—not ask, but *demand*—I stake out the Spruce Lodge to make sure he’s not ‘bumping uglies’ there.”

“Why the Spruce Lodge?”

Michael threw up his hands. “I asked her the same thing. Her response? ‘A hunch.’”

“And being the good detective you are—”

“That’s right, Don. I drove all the way out there and sat in the friggin’ hundred-degree heat all goddamn day. Don’t look at me like that. It’s not funny.”

But Donovan was already laughing. Michael growled to himself. He rose from his seat, reached into a bottom drawer, and pulled out a fresh change of clothes.

“Good thing she pays well,” he mumbled, turning back to Donovan. “What about you? Anything exciting happen today?”

Donovan shook his head. “Nothing new today. Finished some paperwork, made some calls, that’s about it. I’m sorry to say it wasn’t nearly as exciting as sitting in a car all day.”

Michael gave him the finger, waited a beat, then asked, “Everything still on for tomorrow night?”

“Oh yes. She doesn’t suspect a thing.”

His brother chuckled, and Donovan bit his cheeks to keep from saying anything. Michael had proposed the surprise baby shower for Donna. He made the arrangements and sent out the emails, requesting that everyone keep it a secret.

Donovan didn’t have the heart to tell him Donna already knew. She caught him one Saturday morning before he had his coffee and asked what she already suspected. He told her to act surprised, and he hoped like hell she would put on a performance worthy of an Academy Award. The hardest part was keeping her knowledge secret from his brother.

“She still thinks we’re meeting you for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Good,” Michael said. “I can’t wait to see the look on her face.”

“Speaking of tomorrow night, is there any chance Jennifer will be joining us?”

Michael shook his head. “No, I think that’s dead in the water.”

“She pushed the marriage issue, didn’t she?”

“What can I say?” Michael shrugged. “Just not my style.”

They walked to the front desk. Rosie was already gone for the day. Donovan opened his mouth to wish his brother a good evening when Michael cut him off.

“Y’know, I meant to ask you something last week. Have you heard from any of those agents yet?”

Donovan swallowed and shook his head.

“Nope. Still no word.”

“Bummer. Well, I’m sure one of them will bite.”

“Sure hope so,” Donovan said. “Have a good night.”

A gust of hot afternoon air smacked him in the face when he left the office, but it failed to sweep away the cloud hanging over his head. Truth was, in years past, Donovan would have been thrilled by his brother’s interest in his artistic endeavors. Talking about the story helped keep the plot fresh in his mind. He was amused by how quickly things changed in the span of a year. Now he did everything he could to avoid discussing his novel.

Thoughts of the book, its completion, and its future were set aside as he approached his car. There was a slip of paper flapped under the windshield wiper. The flyer was small and rectangular, with the outline of a doorway printed in black and white. The words “Attend the Great Fade-Out!” were printed across the front. The details followed: “Join us in celebrating the show’s second season by tuning in to a marathon of the first!”

The thought of watching reality television curdled his stomach. Watching an entire season’s worth would be enough to turn any person into a drooling zombie. He crumpled the flyer and put it in his pocket.

Donovan took a different route home, suffering through traffic for all of five minutes before taking an old highway directly through the city’s desolate South District. The area was familiar territory. Two blocks away lay the entrance to the subway’s Yellow Line. It was not that large in comparison to the rest of the subway system, but to someone on foot it still amounted to several miles of track. The Blue, Green, and Red Lines received the most traffic, were considered the safest, and could take citizens just about anywhere within city limits.

Worn-out track, outdated cars, terminals in the slums of the city, and a rising deficit: it hadn’t been hard for the council to rule in favor of closing down this blight on the subterranean network. The tunnels, marked by a yellow stripe on the city subway map, had been notorious for muggings and junkies. Growing up here, he’d often heard it was called the Yellow Line because it smelled like piss, and in his brief experience this wasn’t far from the truth.

Passing in its vicinity always gave him chills, thinking back to that day he and his brother went into the dark in search of Donna. When he turned toward the highway entrance ramp, Donovan turned off the air conditioner and rolled down his window. He put on a pair of sunglasses and cranked the radio's volume. *Don't sweat it*, he told himself. *It's beyond you. You're past it. Enjoy the reward.*

He was almost home when he remembered Donna's pickles, so he stopped at a local gas station and purchased a jar. The sun hung midway above the horizon, a lazy orange eye that might close at any moment.

Back in the car, Donovan took a deep, satisfying breath. This was life. This was *the* life he wanted. He felt complete. Catching a glimpse of his reflection in the rearview, he saw a smile looking back. It felt good.

#

Donovan pushed away his plate, letting out a low belch. Donna smiled at him while she chewed her food.

"That was good." He went to the sink and rinsed his plate. "How was your day?"

Donna swallowed her food and said, "Laid back. The baby was still for the most part. I did some work in the nursery, had a nap, then tidied the office."

"Sounds like a relaxing day."

"It was. Why didn't you mail those query letters like you said you would?"

He paused. Water poured over the plate and his hands. He turned his head and caught Donna's stare. It was ice cold, and he stood frozen in its spotlight. A dozen responses flooded his mind, and out of them all he picked, "What, honey?"

She cocked her left eyebrow, upgrading her stare to an official glare, and Donovan knew he'd been caught.

"You heard me, Donovan Candle."

Oh man, he thought. *The full name. Time to face the music.* He shut off the faucet and put the dish in the drainer. When he looked back at her, he felt the full weight of her gaze bearing down on him.

"You're right. I did say I would."

"And?"

"And I didn't. I'm sorry."

She laughed and threw her hands in the air. “Don’t apologize to me, honey. You’re the one who worked so hard over that book. If you should say you’re sorry to anyone, take a look in the mirror.”

He wanted to spout off some witty retort, but nothing came to mind. Instead he sought a real answer to her question. Why didn’t he? The simple answer was that he’d forgotten, but it ran deeper than that. He’d spent three months working on that book, and another four revising it. He honed it down, chiseling Joe Hopper’s visage out of white stone and black text, until he knew every single dimple, flaw, and pore.

When he was done, he spent another month researching the market, finding the right agents to query, and when he’d done that he found he still could not bring himself to mail the letters. It had been years since he’d let strangers read his writing, and he feared what their opinions might be.

“I guess I’m just not ready to send them,” he mumbled.

Donna wiped her mouth and nodded. “I understand that, but you know what makes me a good wife is knowing when to act in your best interest.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I found those letters while tidying up your desk, and I mailed them this morning.”

His legs went limp. “You did *what?*”

Donna approached him with a snarky smile. She kissed the tip of his nose. “I mailed your query letters. After spending years watching you agonize over that book—which, by the way, I happen to think is brilliant—I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit here and watch you chicken out now. So, I thought I’d do my spousal duty and give you a little nudge.”

Donovan tried to find the words. She shushed him with another kiss. “You can thank me later.”

He watched her leave the kitchen, and after a moment of gawking at the floor he finished the dishes. He felt lost. Donna’s actions were the last thing he’d expected, and for a period of hours following dinner he found his small world turned upside down. Sure, he had written those letters and prepared them for mailing, but he’d not intended to send them. Not really. He retreated to the creative space of his office and stared at his computer, not quite sure what to do with himself. Donna had, more or less, pushed him to that first step, and he found himself wondering if this was really what he wanted to do.

It's either this, he thought, or the alternative.

Finishing that book had been part of his life pitch to Aleister Dullington, part of what saved his life from the horror of the Monochrome. Giving up on it now, after coming so far, seemed foolish. And yet timidity lingered over his head like a rusty halo.

Joe Hopper, the man to whom he gave life and through whose veins ran the blood of ink, was the one to reassure him—as he'd always been in some form or fashion: *Ain't nothing you can do about it now. What's done is done. Question is, what're you going to do about it when the tidal wave comes, boss?*

Donovan sat back in his chair. He sighed. *Ride it out, he thought. Just like everything else.*

He carried that thought with him to bed. So what if the letters went out? So what if the agents didn't care for his book? He would query other agents if need be. He would ride the wave wherever it took him, whenever it decided to crash down.

His last waking thought was that of the wave itself, and wondering if it would come. He had no idea how soon it would.

#

It came in the form of a cell phone chirp. Donovan rose from a dream he could not remember, blinking away confusion.

The phone rang a second time. He rolled over quickly in fear that it would wake Donna. She'd not slept well these last few weeks, and the last thing he wanted was to rouse her from a meager slumber. He lifted the phone from the nightstand and answered the call. Donna stirred beside him.

"Hello?" His voice came out a low, dry rasp, and he looked toward the bedroom window. It was still dark outside. He lifted the phone away from his ear for a moment and looked at the screen. It was 3:31 in the morning.

"Don?"

The voice did not register with him at first. It was late, he'd only been asleep for a few hours, and he wanted very much to return to that unconscious state. Impressionist phantoms of color danced about the darkness when he closed his eyes. He found it difficult to resist the weight of his eyelids.

"You there?" The voice again. It was alert. Concerned. Donovan wondered who would be awake at this hour. "Don, for Christ's sake."

He forced open his eyes. Alarm in the caller's tone culled the image of a face from his sleepy mind: Detective Nathan Brock. Even in the haze of sleep Donovan could see the man's graying mustache. The ghostly smell of cigarettes hung about the image.

"Jesus, Brock, do you have any idea what time it is?"

"I do, and I'm sorry. I hope I didn't wake the wife."

Donovan glanced over his shoulder at Donna. He fell silent while he watched the bulge of her belly rise and fall beneath the sheet. "No, she's still sleeping."

"Good. Very good."

Donovan fought back a yawn. "Did you call just to make sure she's sleeping okay? You could've waited until morning for that."

"No, Don, that isn't why I called. I'm not sure I know how to put this."

He pulled back the blanket and put his legs on the floor. By some miracle, he found himself returning to full consciousness, but the cloudiness of sleep still hung about his head. The significance of Brock's trepidation was lost on him.

"We found some of those kids."

Donovan's breath caught in his throat. It stayed there for a few seconds, threatening to burn a hole right through him. He let it out slowly and asked his friend to repeat himself.

"We found them, Don."

He rose to his feet with such force that it rocked the bed. Donna stirred once more, but did not wake. Donovan put one hand out and pressed it against the wall. He'd braced himself for this phone call for the better part of a year, and he wasn't about to take it sitting down. *Please*, he thought, *please, please, please say what I hope you'll say.*

"Alive?"

Detective Brock hesitated. The catch in his breath over the phone was enough of an answer. Donovan felt his insides plummet. His legs were suddenly weak and limp, and he had to sit down on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry, Don."

"Me too." His eyes stung, and when blinking did not relieve their discomfort, he closed them altogether.

"Anyway," Brock went on, "I thought you should know. Give me a call in the morning and I'll fill you in on the details."

"Thanks, Nate."

Donovan ended the call. He placed the phone on the nightstand, but he did not lie down. Instead he remained on the edge of the bed with his bare feet brushing the carpet. He looked back over his shoulder at his sleeping wife.

Thoughts came easily to Donovan Candle in the small hours. It was, he supposed, an inherent quality of his creative nature. Now it was his curse. He thought about the child growing inside her. He thought about all the dangers from which he would have to protect that child.

For the first time in a very long time, Donovan Candle felt something he did not recognize at first. It crept up the length of his spine and stopped at his shoulder. There it whispered things he did not want to hear. It was an old friend, come to say hello, reintroducing itself as Doubt.

The wave had come, crashing down upon him and washing away the lines of his own self in a matter of minutes. He was now a man less defined, irrationally fearing for the life of his unborn child.

Donovan sighed. *Stop it*, he told himself. *Get some rest. Long day tomorrow.*

He stretched out and pulled the sheet over him. Tomorrow would be a long day, but for now there was only the night, and he feared it would go on forever.

BAD OMENS

Donna woke as the first hints of sunlight pierced through the curtains, splitting the room with bright, golden bars. She was used to these early mornings. Ever since she'd become pregnant, she found sleeping until seven or eight o'clock to be a chore.

What she was not used to, however, was waking to an empty bed. She ran her hand across Donovan's pillow—it was cool. She sat up and called out to him, but he did not answer.

"Donnie?" She held her breath and listened. All she heard was the erratic thump of her heart. *Don't panic, she told herself. He's probably downstairs.*

Her heart pounded. She took a deep breath to calm herself. *You're just scaring yourself. Of course he's still home. He wouldn't have left without waking you. Stop being such a chicken shit. You didn't used to be like this.*

She didn't, but that seemed like a long time ago. A home invasion and abduction were enough to change anyone's perspective on home safety. That she woke to find her husband out of bed did not alarm her; that he did not answer was another matter altogether.

Donna fought her hesitations and got out of bed. The baby kicked in her belly, startling her, and when she steadied herself she progressed down the hall. The bathroom was empty, as was the office.

"Donovan?" She waited. Nothing.

She was about to make her way downstairs when she noticed the light on in the nursery.

Donovan sat on the rocking chair, staring idly out the window. Their cat, Mrs. Precious Paws, was curled up in his lap, and he scratched between her ears. She purred in approval. Donna stood in the doorway watching him. He seemed a hundred miles away.

“Honey?” She tapped on the door. Donovan blinked and looked up, startled from his thoughts.

“Morning.” He watched her put her hand on her chest. “You okay?”

Donna nodded. “Just panicked when I couldn’t find you. I called out, but you didn’t answer.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” She walked over, stood beside him, and ran her fingers through his hair. “Are you okay, Donnie?”

He took a deep breath and shook his head. “No, I’m not. Nate called this morning. Some of those kids turned up.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “But that’s good news!”

Donovan put his hand on hers and looked up at her. His red-rimmed eyes were glossy and wet.

“They’re all dead. Murdered.”

Donna exhaled. Tears welled up in her eyes. “Oh Donnie, I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

My God, she thought. *All those parents*. She imagined the police were now making their rounds delivering the bad news. A chill worked its way down the back of her neck.

Donovan squeezed her hand. He offered up a weak smile.

“No tears,” he said. “It’s not your burden to bear.”

“Are you—”

“I’m fine.”

Liar.

She held his hand as they stared out the window together. Birds chirped, the neighbor’s dog barked, and the street filled with cars. The world woke up and went about its way. Her heart ached for all those parents. She didn’t know what she would do in their situation. The

idea of losing a child was something she'd considered before, but she didn't want to think about it any more than she had to.

Donovan was more deeply invested in those cases than he wanted her to know, but she saw and heard things he thought she wouldn't notice. There had been too many nights she'd awoken to hear him on the phone, discussing matters with the cops or tracking down leads that always came to dead ends.

Donna wasn't blind; she knew her husband and she knew how easy it was for someone to disappear. Last year's events had reshaped her views, and their effect on her still lingered. Some nights she woke from nightmares in which Donovan failed to find her. Some nights she found herself still locked in that utility closet, cold and hungry, terrified to the brink of insanity.

Of course, they were only nightmares, and she was thankful that the incident had reached a different conclusion. In the end Donovan *had* found her, and though she did not fully understand the circumstances behind her abduction, she understood his fear and determination.

"I should get dressed."

His words snapped Donna out of her trance. She was staring at two birds tottering along the electrical wire.

"Where are you going? It's still early."

"I need to start closing those files and make a few calls."

She followed him out of the room and asked if he wanted breakfast.

"No," he said. "Not today." He kissed her cheek.

"Call me if you need me, okay?"

"I will."

"Are you going to be all right?"

Donovan stared off into space for an instant, then squeezed her hand. "I'll be fine. Promise."

He kissed her again, and she smiled. She watched him walk down the hall to the bedroom. Donna turned back to the window and watched the birds out on the power line. Her husband's words tumbled back into her thoughts: *It's not your burden to bear.*

"But it is," she whispered to the empty room. "I just hope I can help you carry it as far as you need me to."

Her stomach grumbled, and the baby stirred. She drummed her fingers across her belly.

“Guess it’s time to feed us, huh?”

She went downstairs to make breakfast, hoping the day would distract her from the uneasiness settling in the back of her mind.

#

“Don?”

He looked up from his paperwork. Michael stood beside the desk with a cup of coffee in his hand. Donovan nodded, took the cup from his brother, and sipped. The coffee was pitch black and he didn’t care. He grimaced only once, savoring the burn and bitterness on his tongue.

Michael smirked. “Thought you could use that.”

“Thanks,” Donovan mumbled, wiping his mouth. He looked at the clock on his desktop: a quarter to noon.

“Why don’t you take a break?”

“No.” Donovan scribbled his signature on one of the work contracts, closed the file, and opened another.

“Don—”

He sighed, set down his pen, and looked up at Michael. “What?”

“It’s not your fault. None of this is. You did the best you could.”

“Maybe,” Donovan said, “and yet I can’t help but feel like that’s not true.”

“You can’t do this.” Michael pulled his chair over to Donovan’s desk. He sat and gave his brother a hard stare. “If you take everything personally, it’s going to eat you alive. This is just the job, man.”

Donovan took a breath, feeling his blood pressure rise. Sometimes he wondered why his brother even bothered with this line of work.

“It’s more than just a job, Mike. They were sons and daughters. Their parents trusted us to find them and to succeed where the police failed.”

“I understand that, but you aren’t accountable for what happened to them. No one expected this.”

Donovan took another sip of coffee. “No,” he said, “I suppose you’re right about that.”

He'd spent most of the morning trying to keep his mind off the discovery, but it wasn't easy. Detective Brock was kind not to reveal the specifics during his pre-dawn phone call, but he was less affable in the later morning hours. He'd called just before nine to discuss the gory scene in explicit detail.

Donovan barely got a word in before Brock had to go. All he was left with were a grim mental image of the scene as described by the detective, and a mounting fear building up in the pit of his stomach. There were fourteen victims clustered together in a back alley on the city's south side, dead of blunt trauma and multiple stab wounds. Some of them showed signs of post-mortem sexual assault. The coroner estimated their deaths had all occurred within the last twenty-four hours.

But where were they all this time?

This was a question that had eaten away at him all morning. The victims didn't fit the profile, but the way of the Monochrome was Donovan's only explanation for their sudden reappearance. They had all flickered out somehow, and for whatever reason Dullington had murdered them and—

The bodies. Why would they return? He keeps what's his.

The bodies. A trickle of nausea seeped into his belly, forcing Donovan to second-guess another drink of the coffee.

"I think . . ." He trailed off. Michael looked at him, waiting. *I know where they were*, he wanted to say. *I knew where they were all this time and I was too afraid to act. I knew, and I didn't do a goddamn thing about it. Because I was afraid.* The words were there, waiting for him to give them voice, but the chirp of his cell phone spared him from the decision.

Michael moved the chair back to his desk. Donovan picked up his phone and answered. It was Donna's nephew, Quinn.

"Hey, Don. Are you free for lunch?"

"Uh, sure." He met Michael's gaze. His brother frowned. "I was just heading out anyway."

#

City traffic made the drive slow-going, and Donovan was nearly fifteen minutes late when he parked along the curb behind a dusty brown Cadillac. He fed some coins into the meter and made his way into the small diner on the corner. The restaurant bustled with

lunchtime activity, filled with the murmur of its patrons and punctuated by a pop song on the radio.

Donovan didn't recognize Quinn at first. He scanned the scene, looking for a college student among the haystack of skirts and three-piece suits. He'd not seen Donna's nephew since Christmas, and when the stout kid in the dress shirt and tie beckoned to him, Donovan did a double take. He'd expected a college student in a T-shirt and shorts. No wonder he hadn't seen him.

"Uncle Don, over here." Quinn Upton stood up from his corner booth.

Donovan met him with a smile and a handshake. "My God, look at you. When the hell did you grow up?"

"I guess working here in the city does that to a guy."

They took their seats. Donovan nodded. "Working in the city, huh?"

"Yeah, didn't Mom tell you?"

Donovan shrugged. In truth, he and Donna's sister Amanda hadn't always got along. They agreed to be civil for Donna's sake, but the terms of that truce did not include regular chats. Quinn got the hint and moved on.

"I got the internship."

"The one at the law firm?"

Quinn nodded, beaming. A waitress came and took their orders; afterward, Donovan sank back into his seat allowing himself a moment to relax. He watched Quinn speak, remembering what it was like to be twenty and carefree. Those days were long gone, but he liked to indulge himself with nostalgia from time to time.

"—the best part is that it's a paid internship. The whole thing has been eye-opening, for sure."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," Donovan said. "So you think that's what you want to do after undergrad?"

Quinn nodded. "Definitely."

Good for you, Donovan thought. Quinn had wanted to be a lawyer for as long as Donovan had known him, and that went back to the days when the kid was in grade school. His penchant for arguing reinforced that drive. Seeing him today in the shirt and tie, looking so damn grown up, gave Donovan a sense of pleasant satisfaction.

“Oh, before I forget—” Quinn dug into his pocket. “This whole reason I wanted to meet with you today.” He placed a small black box on the table.

“What’s this?”

Quinn pushed it across the table. “I got it for Aunt Donna. It’s a gift for her baby shower tonight.”

Donovan opened the box. Inside was a necklace with a small red pendant.

“Do you think she’ll like it?”

“I do,” Donovan smiled. He traced his finger across the jewel. Red was Donna’s favorite color. “Where did you get this?”

“I didn’t, actually. My girlfriend made it.”

“No kidding? Is she the one who came with you to Christmas dinner?”

Quinn nodded. “Wendy. She makes jewelry in her spare time and sells it online. I told her about Aunt Donna’s favorite color, and she made this.”

“Well,” Donovan said, closing the lid. “I think she’ll love it.” He slid the box back across the table and was about to speak when something outside the window caught his eye.

At first he wasn’t sure what that “something” was, and all he could determine was that something was there which was not before. When he turned to observe, he saw a slice of the city framed in glass, bustling with life and lunchtime rhythm. Crowds moved along the sidewalk while cars inched forward on the street.

And yet—

Yes, there *was* something off. Something that wasn’t there before, and Donovan now realized just what it was that abruptly stole his attention from the conversation.

A man stood at the corner, leaning against the side of a lamppost, his huge meaty arms folded across his chest. A matted beard swallowed most of his face. His clothes were tattered, covered in an oily grime Donovan could not identify. There was something else, too. He wore several small, white buttons on his chest, affixed like medals on a soldier.

On any other day, Donovan would not have given this man any thought. In fact, he would have looked right past the hefty figure, counting him as another blank face in the city’s moving crowds when it struck him—he *knew* this man.

Much obliged, he thought, recalling the transient to whom he’d given a handful of coins yesterday. Only the man hadn’t been there before, he was sure of it.

Like he just popped into focus, Donovan thought. *Flickered, even.*

Quinn was talking, but Donovan couldn't hear him. He was too concentrated on the guy outside. Slowly, the man turned his head, and for an instant their eyes met. The big man nodded to his spectator with a grin framed by the tangles of his beard—and then promptly vanished.

Donovan refused to blink, keeping his eyes trained on the place where the bearded man should have been. The big guy's considerable outline remained within Donovan's vision, a specter of retinal trickery. He had trouble reconciling the fact that the man was no longer there.

The effect lasted only for a moment, and the bearded man blinked back into existence, still leaning against the pole, grinning. Now he held a rusty screwdriver in his hand, using it to pick his teeth. This sudden reappearance was enough to confirm Donovan's suspicions. His stomach plunged as a dozen questions raced through his mind, all clouded with the onset of utter confusion.

“—Uncle Don?”

Startled, Donovan turned away from the window. “I'm sorry, Quinn. What were you saying?”

“Our food,” Quinn said, smiling. “It's here.”

Donovan glanced up at the waitress and thanked her before turning back to the window. The bearded man was gone.

“What are you looking at?” Quinn craned his neck to look out the window.

“Huh? Oh, no, nothing. Just spacing out. Got a lot on my mind.”

“Mom always said you were a brooding writer.” Quinn smirked. “Guess this means you're a brooding detective now, too?”

Donovan paused, lightheaded as the adrenaline left his bloodstream. He looked back at the lamppost and nodded. “You could say that.”

#

After lunch, Donovan waited at the corner, watching Quinn jog across the street. When the kid reached the other side, he spun on his heels and waved.

“See you tonight!”

“Sure thing.” Donovan said, forcing a smile. He waited until Quinn was out of sight before walking back to his car.

The early afternoon sun beat down on the city, causing heat to ripple from the sidewalk, but he couldn't shake the icy feeling in his gut. His sense of uneasiness went beyond the bearded man's vanishing act, drilling down into a core of memory.

If he was flickering, how could I see him?

Donovan had no idea how the odd state actually worked. He only knew the flickering occurred when a person became too saturated with mediocrity, boredom, or malaise. Dullington's minions, the Cretins, prevented others from noticing those who were flickering out. He remembered their tiny white bodies, their hollow eyes, and the way they whispered their jarring, backwards language into their victims' ears.

These creatures were the stuff of nightmares, but Donovan had witnessed them with frightening clarity. When he went to unlock his car, he realized his hands were shaking. He sat inside and tried to calm himself.

Who was that man? Why was he watching us?

People who flickered out—the Missing—were slaves to Aleister Dullington in the Monochrome. When Donovan made the exchange to save Donna's life, he was instructed to go to the Yellow Line subway, in the South District. The same area where the bodies were discovered.

His head swam with possibilities. *Might actually be something to your theory, boss.*

Donovan put the key in the ignition, took a breath, and listened to his pounding heart. The Yellow Line was a place he swore he'd never go to again, but his desire to know—to prove his theory was true—circumvented any promises he'd made to himself in that regard.

Terrified, he looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror. *You sure you want to do this?*

He turned the key. The car purred to life.

“Guess that's a yes,” he whispered, shifting the car into gear.

#

Crowded streets gave way to empty parking lots and blind alleys. Sidewalks once filled with people were now abandoned and falling into disrepair. The city's South District contained the symbols of its heritage: empty storefronts, fenced-off lots, coin-op Laundromats—signs of a civilization that had moved on to better things. The living, breathing part of the city had grown up around its humble beginnings, leaving them to wither and rot.

He drove past the tattered shell of what used to be Winthorpe Station, a hub for the city's old subway system. New lines had replaced the old, and when operating costs became too high, the station closed. The building remained a mute testament to more elegant times, boarded up and forgotten.

Donovan's chest tightened. He circled the block once before overcoming his hesitation, parking along the curb in front of the aged structure. The building towered over him like the corpse of a giant. He got out of the car and took a breath.

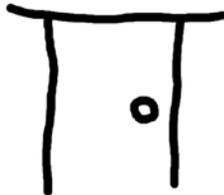
"What am I doing?" he said to himself, waiting for an answer that he did not have. What did he hope to accomplish by coming here? His suspicions were just that—suspicions. He had no way of confirming them without venturing down into the rotting labyrinth of the Yellow Line, and he was not prepared to do that. No one knew he was here, and he had no way to defend himself.

These facts did not set his mind at ease. His thoughts ran rampant with possibilities circling around a central fear: that there was more to the murders than he once suspected. How he could see one of the Missing was something he could not answer, but that question didn't concern him as much as why the man was watching them in the first place.

He tried to calm himself. *Stop it, Don. Just have a look around and get the hell out of here.*

The building's windows had been shattered long ago, leaving behind fragments jutting from their frames, sheets of plywood covered the openings like coins over dead eyes. Various symbols, possibly gang related, adorned most of the lower level.

One cryptogram caught his eye. It was small, just off to the right of the main entrance. Had it not been painted in neon pink he would have missed the design entirely, but its conspicuous color screamed for attention. To most it would have been an eyesore, but the image jumped out at him: crudely drawn—nothing more than three straight lines arranged to form double-Ts, and off to the side of the right line was an imperfect circle.



“Here’s what you missed on last week’s Fading Out!” He recalled the narrator’s voice, one he’d heard many times before in an amalgamation of background noise. Donovan walked up the short flight of steps and traced his fingers along the pink lines. Up close, he could see it was even more crudely drawn, with the grain of the brick showing through the paint. Squiggles of paint-drip accented the edges.

He caught movement in the corner of his eye, but when he turned, he saw only a scrap piece of paper caught in the wind. It scraped across the pavement, down the steps, and under his car.

The door to the building shot open, startling him so that he nearly toppled backward. A woman in a thick winter coat emerged from the opening. She stepped out onto the top step, lifted a handkerchief, and hacked into it for a good minute. Her coat was tattered and dirty, covered in some sort of gray sludge. The woman surveyed the empty street, squinting against the early afternoon light, then turned and coughed again. She wiped her nose and spat.

Donovan watched, frozen in place and unsure of what to do or say. The transient slowly turned her head. The wild look in her eyes gave him a chill. “The fuck do you want?”

When he spoke, his throat felt stuffed full of cotton. He fought to keep his composure, and after a few agonizing seconds he said the first thing that came to mind: “Do you know what happened to the children?”

She curled back her lip into a toothless snarl. “S’pose I do,” hissed the crone. “Seen what he did, too, and good riddance to ‘em all. Spies ‘n traitors ‘n everyone who don’t serve the king burn in Hell. Did ya know that?”

“What king?” he asked. “Who is this ‘king?’”

“The Monochrome King,” she went on.

A pit opened in his stomach, threatening to swallow him from the inside. “You mean Mr. Dullington? He’s here?”

The woman waved her hand to the sky. “Somewhere.” She grinned that horrid, empty grin like a rotting jack-o-lantern. “Somewhere o’er the rainbow.”

Donovan’s frown prompted her to let loose a wild cackle. He realized he wasn’t going to get any answers, and was about to walk back to his car when her laughter ceased.

She took two long strides toward him, and stopped so close he could smell the stench rising from her body. “I know you,” she said. “*He* knows you.”

Donovan paused. “Who?”

“The king. He knows you. Knows us all. Over the rainbow, under it, other side of the darn thing where the colors don’t show. He knows, and he knows *you*, and we’ll all be seein’ you soon.”

Donovan stepped away from her. He suddenly felt very vulnerable, remembering he had nothing but his hands with which to defend himself. A scenario flashed before him: this filthy hag leading him into the depths of Winthorpe Station, where he would be cornered, robbed, and brutalized at the hands of an army of homeless people.

But they’re more than just homeless, whispered Joe Hopper. *They’re lifeless and empty, boss. They’re the Missing.*

The hag cackled once more, and he recoiled from her acrid breath. He watched as she did an odd dance back across the pavement toward the open door. She sang, “*He sees you sees me sees you sees us all!*” as she went, and stopped in the opening. Beyond it her saw what appeared to be stacks of televisions, what might have been an entire wall of them, all blank and gray and busy with static.

“The king sees us all,” she finished, “and we’ll all be seein’ you *soon*.”

She closed the door. Its hinges groaned. Then she was gone, and he was alone on the steps of the station once again. The exchange left him reeling, drained of his last ounce of determination.

He retreated to his car, realizing that he was not ready to make that descent after all.

#

Kale Abrams watched colors bleed from the world as the car sped away. When he turned back from the window, he found the upper floor of the station devoid of texture and detail. He took a deep breath of the stale air and smiled.

He was home.

Kale, spoke his master, *come to me*.

The bearded man obeyed, trudging down the hallway toward his king’s chamber. The room used to be a manager’s office, but the shades of the Monochrome had stripped its characteristics, reducing it to a husk of gray, flat geometry. Within the center of the room was a white, fleshy mass of tendrils that stretched to the corners, suspending it inches above the floor like a perverse hammock.

His master slumbered within, resting for the tough days ahead. In their quiet hours together, the Monochrome King told Kale of his plans, revealing to him the fate of the Spectrum dwellers. Oh yes, there would be a great upheaval, a tip of the scales in their favor, and so far everything was going according to plan.

There was just one last detail to be rectified, one more indulgence to be had.

Kale knelt before the rubbery mass. The white tendrils pulsed with a sickening, gray light. His master stirred.

Did you follow the man I sent you to find?

“Since yesterday.”

What did you learn?

“He’s happy.”

Of course he is. But not for long.

Kale smiled. “No, sir.”

Why did he come here? Were you followed?

“Not sure.” Kale closed his eyes, trembling. The fleshy mass pulsed, indifferent to his fear.

But he did not enter.

“No.”

Too bad. You could have had so much fun, Kale. No matter. Everything in its time.

The bearded man exhaled in relief. “No matter.”

He met someone today?

“Yes. Family.”

Family. The mass stirred, pulsing brighter. Yes, why didn’t I think of that? This could work in our favor, Kale. Yes, it just might.

The ropy tendrils slackened, allowing the white cocoon to touch the floor. Layers of the pale flesh slid back, revealing Kale’s master. A bald, pale man with gray eyes took a breath, savoring the taste of the air on his tongue like a serpent. He looked down at his subject.

“My son.” The Monochrome King reached out his hand. Kale lowered his head and kissed his master’s pale knuckles. “Tonight, you play.”

Kale found he could hardly contain himself. He shook like an excited dog.

“Blood?”

“Oh yes, Kale.” A sharp grin spread across the pale man’s face. “Lots of blood.”

FADING OUT

“Do we really have to do this?”

Donna looked at her husband with big doe eyes. He smiled and shut off the engine.

The car fell silent.

“It won’t be that bad.”

“You know I hate these social things.”

“Come on, Donna. It’s for the kiddo.”

She sighed. “I know, but still. My parents are in there. My sister’s in there. *Your* parents are in there. They’re all going to be after the same thing.”

Donovan laughed. “They’ve waited this long. I think they can wait another three months.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You can go hang out and drink with the other men. You don’t know what it’s like to be alone with these women. They’re *ruthless*.”

He leaned over, kissed her cheek, and patted her belly.

“Come on, Momma. You can handle them.”

Early on, they’d made the decision to keep the baby’s sex a surprise for everyone else, but the mystery did not go over well. She weathered at least one call a week from parents and in-laws alike attempting to break her resolve. She’d stood firm so far, but now, as they

walked up the driveway toward Michael's house, she questioned her constitution. Their mothers knew the power of incessant nagging: it was not to be taken lightly.

They entered the house to balloons, fanfare, and a singular shout of "Surprise!" She did her best, feigning shock and making a note to thank the Academy later on. Family and friends alike greeted her with hugs, kisses, and good tidings.

Michael pushed his way through the crowd, gave her a big kiss on the cheek, and led her to the den. He arranged his armchair in the center of the room so she would remain the focal point. *Oh you bastard*, she thought with a smile. He meant well, but being the center of attention was the last thing she wanted.

The evening went on in a whirlwind of light banter, shouts of exclamation, and more pretend surprise. Over time, conversation migrated away from her pregnancy, and Donna was relieved to have lost the spotlight. She sank back in her chair, listening to the idle chatter, and observing the crowd.

Her sister, Amanda Upton, took a seat on the floor beside the armchair.

"How are you holding up?"

"How do you think?"

"Terribly." Amanda winked. "You're a bad actress."

"Oh well," Donna said. "You know I've never been one for these sorts of things."

Her sister took a drink. "I know. I'm not gonna lie, little sister—it made me giggle, watching you squirm."

"Thank you, big sister. You're too kind."

"I do try," Amanda said. "So how are you, really? I haven't talked to you in a few days, and you've got that look on your face. What's going on?"

Donna sighed. She'd hoped to hide her concern, but Donovan's brooding did not make it easy. "Today wasn't a good day. I'm sure you heard the news this morning? About those kids that were found in the city?"

Amanda nodded. "I heard about it on the radio. It's heartbreaking."

"Yeah, I've thought about it all day. I'm worried about Don, too. He had cases on most of those kids."

"My God," Amanda sighed, shaking her head. "I don't know what I'd do if Quinn—" Her cell phone vibrated in her pocket, startling her. She checked the number, smiling at first, but her expression quickly transformed into a frown.

“What’s wrong?”

Amanda shook her head. “Quinn just texted me. He isn’t going to make it tonight.”

“Why not?” Donna tried not to sound disappointed, but her sister was right when she called her a bad actress. “He said he’d be here.”

“I know, but he says some of the interns didn’t show, and there’s some big case tomorrow. I think it’s got something to do with that missing TV producer. Quinn hinted at it a couple of days ago. They’ve had their whole staff working odd hours lately.”

Donna leaned back in her seat, watching friends and family mingle. Quinn’s was one of the faces she’d hoped to see tonight. She had a soft spot for the kid, having helped her sister take care of him when he was a baby. She was twelve when he was born, and she’d known from the first moment she held him that she wanted a child of her own.

“At least the internship is paid,” Donna said, even though she knew the bright side would not ease her sister’s mind. Amanda never liked the idea of Quinn pursuing a law degree; a medical degree was a nobler effort in her eyes, and one more worthwhile of her son’s time.

Donna, however, was happy Quinn had managed to get his foot in the door of Rochester, Isley, & Moss. The firm was the oldest in the city, with a solid reputation. He would do well there. She was sure of it.

“Yeah, I guess that’s something.”

A few moments passed before Amanda took her phone and rose to her feet. “I’m going to call him anyway. Maybe I can talk to his boss or something.”

“Amanda, don’t be ridiculous. He’s 20 years old, for heaven’s sake. If he can’t make it, he can’t make it.”

But Amanda wasn’t listening. She stormed out of the room, phone held to her ear. *So stubborn*, Donna thought. Her sister meant well, but Quinn was an adult now, and she’d have to let him go sooner or later. Such a terrifying thought, raising a child to adulthood and then letting them venture out into the world on their own. Donna wondered how she and Donovan might react once their child was old enough to “leave the nest.” Surely Donovan would—

Donna blinked. Where *was* her husband? He wasn’t among the living room crowd. She twisted in her seat, craning her neck to look back toward the kitchen, but he wasn’t there,

either. When she faced front, looking toward the patio doors, she remembered he'd gone out for some air.

She stood and went to the glass door. Patio lights illuminated a gravel pathway through the backyard toward a large gazebo. Donovan stood with his back to the house, looking up at the sky with his hands in his pockets. The lights cast a sad, pale glow upon him. She knew the morning's news bothered him greatly, but beyond this, she feared some other storm was brewing in his mind.

He would tell her sooner or later, but for now she could only speculate, wondering just when that storm would break.

#

The night was warm and clear, but Donovan still had a chill. Arms folded, he searched the sky for shooting stars, but the city's polluted haze obscured any sign of them. He took a breath, savoring the stillness, listening to the low throng of laughter from within his brother's home.

The party would probably last into the late hours of the night. That was fine. He could stand out here until morning. It was a beautiful evening, with a canopy of stars twinkling overhead while a symphony of crickets played on. He was in good company, for the most part, save the uninvited thoughts dwelling in his head.

His doubts had lingered ever since last night's phone call, and the odd encounter earlier that afternoon had brought his fears into play. These fears were a cancer of the mind—a debilitating series of thought processes that could erode the soul—and sometimes they took on the voice of Aleister Dullington, speaking in low mechanical tones that gave him goose bumps.

Suppose, Mr. Candle, your child blinked out of existence. Suppose it was they who vanished for most of a year, only to turn up in a forgotten back alleyway, their clothes dirty and tattered, a rusty screwdriver jammed into their temple. What would you do then?

"I don't know what I'd do," he said, imagining the senior photo of a missing student.

What would you do? What could you do?

He took a seat on the gazebo swing, chuckling to himself. Sitting here reminded him of being a kid, when their mother had forced Michael to let him tag along to the playground

down the street. Those were simpler times, but not much else had changed; being allowed to accompany his brother still made him feel invincible, important.

The sound of the party heightened as the glass door slid open. Michael stepped out onto the patio holding two bottles of beer.

“Thought I might find you out here.”

Donovan leaned forward, watching his brother walk down the path toward him.

“I needed some air. Her friends get on my nerves when they get together like this.”

Michael plopped down on the swing and handed him a beer.

“Thanks.”

“No prob,” his brother said, taking a drink from his own bottle. “I had to get out of that noise, too.”

Donovan sipped his beer, trying to forget his thoughts. The brothers were quiet for a few minutes, letting the crickets carry the conversation for them, but their silence quickly grew stale. Michael leaned forward and looked at his brother.

“What’s on your mind, Don?”

He shrugged, taking a drink. “Not a thing.”

Michael chuckled. “You wouldn’t be sitting out here if there wasn’t. You look, uh, what’s the word I’m looking for? Thoughtful? Deep in thought?”

“Pensive?”

“That’s the one. Something’s on your mind, or I figure you wouldn’t leave the old lady in there to fend for herself.”

Donovan looked to his brother, then across the lawn to the patio door. He could see a silhouette standing beyond the glass.

“She sent you out here, didn’t she?”

Michael grinned. “I’ll never tell.”

“She’s sneaky like that.”

“She’s just worried about you. So come on, level with me. I know you’ve had the day from hell. She knows it, too, even if you’re trying to hide it.”

“Donna’s good at that.”

“So talk, if you want to talk.”

A moment passed. Donovan wanted to blurt out his troubles to his brother, spilling his guts on the gazebo floor to be examined one piece at a time. *Here's* the root of anxiety; *there's* the cause of his fear; and over here, well, *that's* an interesting specimen, isn't it?

But he couldn't bring voice to the things bothering him. There were all those kids, and there was the implication of their deaths. There was the possibility he didn't want to face. He knew it was there, lurking in the shadows of his brain, the monster he'd spent the last year trying to avoid. Naming the beast might wake it from slumber, inviting it to run rampant in the halls of his mind.

No, he wasn't about to ruin the evening by talking about it. When Donovan didn't say anything, his brother spoke: "Donna told me you didn't mail your book to those agents like you said you would."

He sank further into his seat. His beer suddenly tasted very warm, very sour.

"As long as I can remember, Don, you wanted to be a writer. You worked your ass off to finish that book. Why stop now?"

"Mike, with all due respect, I don't need a lecture." Donovan shook his head. "The book has nothing to do with this, anyway. That's the *last* thing on my mind."

Michael shrugged. "Then tell me, man. What the hell is going on with you? Is it the murders? Didn't I tell you to stop taking it personally?"

"It's . . ." Donovan paused. *It's that I was too afraid to act on my suspicions*, he wanted to say, but he couldn't bring himself to speak the words. He sighed. "It's nothing. I'm just wondering if I'm cut out to be a father."

He washed the lie down with a gulp of beer, but couldn't get rid of the bitter taste it left on his tongue. He didn't like lying to his brother, but deflecting Michael's scrutiny was the only thing he could think to do. This wasn't the time or place to rehash a conversation which could only end poorly, and frankly, Donovan wasn't ready to talk about it in the first place.

Michael waited a beat, and then chuckled to himself. "Do you remember that one summer we spent at Gran's house?"

Thoughts of their grandmother's home in the country made him smile. "Of course I remember."

"There was that old tire swing at the lake. Remember when I tried to get you to jump?"

Donovan nodded. He saw that moment clearly, dusty though it was with age. There were dozens of times they'd ventured out there over the course of that summer, and every

time he refused to go up in the swing. Finally, after two months of teasing, Michael finally persuaded him to give it a try.

His brother pushed the swing as high as he could, and shouted for him to jump, but Donovan couldn't. There was something about being at the zenith with the wind soaring through his hair and the creak of the rope against the old oak branch that made him seize up. He knew he only had a fraction of time to act, but in that moment—suspended above the water and the world—he froze and could do nothing but watch as everything moved in, out, and into focus once more.

“What’re you afraid of, Don? How d’you expect to land on your feet if you don’t jump?”

He remembered feeling shame and self-loathing, unable to meet his brother's disappointed gaze. Over twenty years later, Donovan still didn't have an answer to that question.

Michael shook his head. “You wouldn't take that jump to save your life.”

Donovan finished his beer. “Is there a point to this reverie?”

“There is, smart ass. *This* is your time. Don't let anything hold you back. Too many people get to where you are and stop. Don't be like them. Don't be afraid to jump.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Anyway, enough of that crap. Tonight belongs to you and Donna, and if we don't return to the party, we'll both be in trouble.”

“Yeah, you're right. I don't want to spend the night on the sofa.”

“What, like you were getting laid anyway?”

“Very funny.”

Chuckling, they collected their empty bottles and walked toward the house. Michael put a hand on his brother's shoulder.

Donovan forced a smile, and he wore it like a mask.

#

“What do you want me to do, Mom? I'm not happy about it either, but I don't have a choice. I can't—No, you didn't let me finish. Can I finish? Please? Okay, thank you.” Quinn rolled his eyes, collected his thoughts. “There is no one else here to do this, Mom. I don't know where the hell they are, okay? The other interns didn't show and they didn't call in—for the second time, no, I have no fucking idea.” He sighed. “I'm sorry for swearing, but

you're frustrating the crap out of me. Tell Aunt Donna I love her and I'll see her this weekend, okay? Thanks. Love you too, bye."

Quinn closed his eyes and leaned against the wall of the employee break room. The white clock on the wall ticked off the seconds. Its hands move around the face, inching closer to nine o'clock. He'd been there for a little over twelve hours.

He shoved the phone into his pocket. *Should've known better than to send a text*, he thought. *Like that would've done any good, stupid.*

At the time, staying late seemed like a great way to show initiative and put himself ahead of the other interns, especially when they didn't show up for the day. John and Erin always tried to one-up each other, currying favor with the firm's partners. Quinn kept to himself—he was just here for the experience, after all, and didn't care for office politics—but when the day began and their absence was apparent, their responsibilities fell to him, and he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. He thought he could manage everything within eight, possibly nine hours, but now, twelve hours later, there was still work to do.

The offices of Rochester, Isley & Moss emptied hours ago, just in time for Happy Hour, and only a handful of employees remained. Most of them were part of the nightly cleaning crew, but Quinn had spotted Mr. Rochester himself on the way back to his office. He wasn't surprised by this. Joseph Rochester was Richard Henza's attorney, and he'd been putting in long hours all week.

Quinn was glad he wasn't alone in the building. The hallways were dim in the late hours, and the pale fluorescent lights sucked the life out of everything, making the walls and carpets appear washed out, faded. Odd noises were more than apparent in the absence of the firm's workers—they were overpowering. These characteristics melded together in a perfect mixture of ambience, giving the halls and empty offices an eerie quality that often made Quinn jump at the slightest sound or shadow.

He listened to the hum of ventilated air and tick of the clock. *Get going*, he told himself. *The sooner you finish, the sooner you can go.*

Quinn was about to leave when a man entered the break room. He was an older man, possibly late fifties by the look of him, wearing a gray suit and tie. Patches of silvery stubble dotted the top of his mostly bald head, glistening under the lifeless fluorescent lights.

"Hello there," said the man. He stuck out his hand. Quinn reluctantly shook it. The man's skin was cold, clammy. "I'm sorry if I startled you."

Quinn stared at the stranger for a moment, wondering what a client would be doing here so late. Then he remembered Mr. Rochester, and it all made sense.

“You must be here about the Henza case,” Quinn said, smiling. The man seemed genuinely surprised.

“In a matter of speaking,” he said, grinning. “I just paid a visit to old Joe to settle some business of mine.”

A moment of silence moved between them, and Quinn took the opportunity to excuse himself. “Well, have a good night.” Quinn began to step around the gentleman. “I still have some work to do.”

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Oh, don’t go yet, son. Would you mind showing an old man to the door? I get awfully lost in a big place like this.”

Quinn hesitated. “Uh, sure. If you hang a right outside the door and walk down the hall, you’ll end up in the lobby.”

The old man’s grip tightened on his shoulder, and a spike of fear shot through Quinn’s gut. A hard, cold stare met his eyes.

“I didn’t ask you to *tell* me, kid.” His smile fell. “I asked you to *show* me.”

Quinn’s mouth went dry. For an instant he wanted to tell the man to remove his hand, but then remembered his place. One wrong word and he could say goodbye to his internship. He took a breath and forced a smile that stretched the muscles in his face.

“I can do that. Follow me, sir.”

The gentleman’s eyes lightened, their hard edge replaced by the kind, elderly charm with which he’d entered the room.

“Why, thank you, son. Lead the way.”

Quinn did as he was asked. The old man walked by his side. He did not remove his hand from the young man’s shoulder.

An uninvited weight invaded Quinn’s feet, making each step heavier than the last. He felt silly for being so apprehensive, but the way the man’s demeanor had changed so quickly left him feeling uneasy.

The old man’s grip tightened on his shoulder. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Quinn.”

“I like that name. It wouldn’t be my first choice for a name if I had a son, but no, not a bad name at all. Say, do you like television?”

“I guess,” Quinn said, wincing. “You’re kinda hurting me.”

The gentleman ignored him and went on talking. “I never cared much for TV, but it’s a great way to spread a message. You might say it’s a new hobby of mine.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small, white pin adorned with a black outline of a door.

Quinn recognized it immediately.

“Do you work on *Fading Out*?”

The gentleman smiled. “You could say that. In fact, you might say I’m responsible for it.” He pulled open the door and ushered Quinn into the lobby.

“But I thought Richard Henza was the creator?”

The old man released his grip. They stood in the empty lobby, staring at one another.

“We’re all puppets, Quinn, but some of us have more strings than others.”

“I don’t—” he began, but was interrupted by the appearance of a very large man with a bushy beard. He entered the lobby from the opposite hallway, rubbing his hands with a dark rag. Quinn intended only to glance, but his eyes would not listen; they remained locked on the bearded man’s dark hands and the blood that dripped from them.

“Did you take care of Rochester?”

“I did,” Kale grunted.

“Good,” said the gentleman. “Let’s prep our boy here for the transition.”

“Yes, sir.”

Quinn did not have time to react. The bearded guy, big and lumbering though he was, moved with intense speed. He cracked Quinn’s nose with a right hook. Stars exploded before the boy’s eyes, and the last thing he saw before losing consciousness was a blurry image of two figures standing over him.

The bearded man smiled. “Sweet dreams.”

#

Donovan packed an assortment of baby-related gifts into the trunk while Donna made one last round of goodbyes, gave her sister another hug, and worked her way to the car. Once inside, Donovan put the key in the ignition and turned to his wife.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Our mothers are a force of nature when they get together.” Donna closed her eyes and leaned against the window. “Just get us home, please.”

He put his hand on hers and drove. She slept the whole way, and when they arrived Donovan had to give her a nudge to wake her. He helped her inside and up the stairs, kissed her, and put her to bed.

“Love you,” he whispered.

“Love you D . . .” she mumbled, and was fast asleep. He smiled, brushing strands of hair from her cheek. In the early days of their marriage, he’d lie awake some mornings, watching her slumber. They were short, peaceful moments, affording him a chance to focus his thoughts and reflect on things, something he hadn’t the opportunity to do any other time.

Donovan stepped back and closed the door behind him. He found himself alone in a quiet house with nothing to keep him company but the turbulent thoughts in his head, and he wasn’t ready to face those yet. Instead, he went about emptying the car.

When the last load was inside, Donovan locked the door and went back upstairs to the nursery. He sat on Donna’s rocking chair, observing the assortment of packages spread out before him, a smirk on his face. *I think we’re prepared*, he thought.

Except he knew he wasn’t. He thought he was, but after the last 24 hours, Donovan Candle wasn’t so sure of himself anymore. He replayed the morning’s conversation with Detective Brock, imagining the gruesome scene in his mind with stark clarity, and wondering how the parents were coping with such grievous news.

Donovan felt a bottomless pit open in his gut. Fearing he might fall into himself, he rose from his seat, paced the room, and took a teddy bear from the crib. A baby was what he and Donna wanted. This was what they’d talked about for so long, and what he’d inadvertently stalled from happening for even longer. Now the baby was on its way, and he found the excitement he’d longed for was nowhere to be found—replaced instead by a colder, simpler emotion: fear.

Images of the missing kids flashed before him. He saw their photos, their smiles frozen in print. The details of the disappearances, the savage manner in which they were murdered—all of these things looked simple in black and white to the untrained eye, but in the negative spaces between the facts was something else altogether. He knew what it was, had known the cause all along, and his willful ignorance sickened him. *I’m a coward*, he thought. *If I’d acted then, maybe they’d still be alive.*

He thought back to his brother's lecture. How many times in his life had he approached the apex of flight only to freeze up at the last moment? He knew what happened to those kids, but he was too afraid to make a move, and why shouldn't he be? He'd seen the horrors waiting on the other side of reality—they were pale, cold, with black eyes and maws that could swallow a man whole. One trip to the Monochrome was enough to suit him.

What if I can't protect my own child? he wondered, to which his brother's voice asked, *Why are you afraid to jump, Don?*

Donovan returned to his seat, where he slowly rocked himself into a daze. Mrs. Precious Paws crawled out from underneath the crib and hopped onto his lap. She curled into a ball, dug her head between his arm and thigh, and purred. He scratched behind her ears, staring off into space for a time, alone with the feline and his troubled thoughts.

He was so lost in his own head that he didn't hear Donna walking down the hallway. She stopped in the doorway, yawned, and gave him a peculiar look.

"You're up late."

"Am I? How late is it?"

He looked at his watch. It was a quarter past one in the morning.

"Oh," he said, "I guess I am. Go back to bed. I'll be in soon."

Donna nodded, placing one hand behind her back and the other on her belly. She started to turn but paused and looked back at him.

"You okay, honey?"

"I—" he began, took notice of her face, and stopped. He thought for a moment, then said, "No, Donna. I'm not okay. No sense in lying to you. You'd know the truth anyway."

"It's those kids, isn't it?" She walked over and stood beside him. She ran her hand through his hair. "Tell me."

"It is," he said, "but it's more than that. I'm scared, Donna."

"Of what?"

He put his hand on her belly. She looked down at him, his words slowly sinking in, and put her hand on his.

"You're scared of the baby?"

"No," he sighed. "Not *of* the baby."

"Of what, then?"

Donovan leaned forward, staring at the floor. "I'm guess I'm scared that I'll fail."

“Fail? At what?”

“At protecting our child.”

His lower lip quivered. He bit it back. *Don't*, he told himself. *Not now*.

“Donovan Candle, you can take this on my authority as your wife: you are not a failure. I wish you could see what I see, Donnie. I see a man who poured his heart into finding children that weren't his own. I see him torn apart inside because he couldn't stop bad things from happening to them.”

“I couldn't—”

“You did what you could. You did what you had to. And I have complete faith that you will do whatever you can for our own child. The only person putting pressure on you is *you*, Don.” She took hold of his chin and made him look at her. “I love you with all of my heart and soul, and I'll support you until the very end, but I can't help you through this. You have to find your own way.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “I know,” he said.

“Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“Don't give up. Not like you almost did before. Not again. I need you, Don. *We* need you.”

He looked away from her and down at his feet, smiling when she ran her hand through his hair again.

“I promise,” he said. He stood and embraced her. When they let go, Donna took his hand and led him out of the room. He stopped her at the bedroom. “I'm going to watch some TV until I get sleepy.”

“Suit yourself. You'll pay for it in the morning.”

Donovan smiled. She was right. There wasn't enough coffee in the world to combat four hours of sleep. It was a battle he'd fought and lost many times.

“Don't be up too late.”

“Yes, Mom,” he mocked. She disappeared into their bedroom. He was sure he heard her say, “Damn right.”

Downstairs, he stretched out on the couch and turned on the TV. The changing channels painted their living room a deep, flickering shade of blue. He searched for something to occupy his mind and prevent everything he was struggling against from

seeping in. Those thoughts still ran rampant through his mental attic, scurrying about like rodents nesting in the shadows.

He flipped through product infomercials, late-night movies, and re-runs of old sitcoms. His eyes drooped. Just before he decided to give in and turn it off, a familiar logo faded in on the screen, beginning with a simple, black and white image of a door. At first he thought it was an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, but the picture quality was too clear, and it lacked Rod Serling's iconic voice.

The door swung open, and the camera move forward into the light.

“Here’s what you missed on last week’s *Fading Out!*”

What followed was a series of scenes depicting young twenty-somethings lamenting about the lousy job market, their lack of direction, and the mundane nature of their generation. The show was, in a sense, a depiction of everyday life, only dramatized in the same fashion as every other reality TV show.

“Critics call *Fading Out* ‘the most refreshing, realistic reality show on television!’”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

The commercial concluded with the doorway. It closed. An infomercial followed.

Donovan frowned, rolling his tired eyes. “The shit they show on TV these days,” he whispered, realizing that he sounded like his parents. He chuckled all the way back up the stairs. Sleep came quickly, and he soon forgot about the commercial, the party, and the thoughts plaguing his weary mind.

#

“Here’s what you missed on last week’s *Fading Out!*”

The screens were already playing when he came to, casting him in a permanent glow, encompassing him in their shifting, bright light.

Quinn Upton opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came. His throat was raw, and his nose ached. The back of the folding chair dug into his shoulder blades.

The TV screens shifted in unison, transitioning from the *Fading Out* intro music to the show itself. *I’ve seen this episode before*, he thought. In fact, he’d seen them all, having watched the first season over the course of three months earlier that year.

Focus, Quinn, he told himself. *I need to get out of here*. He craned his neck to the side and looked over his shoulder. He was bound to the chair with handcuffs. They dug into his wrists.

Where was the old man? And what about the huge dude with the beard?

He remembered the sucker punch, and his face throbbed with the memory. His mind was still lost in a haze, circling around the despair of his situation but never quite taking the plunge.

And the TVs were so damn loud. The shows repeated, caught in an infinite loop, and he soon gave up trying to think of ways out.

Quinn slumped back in the chair and watched TV, curious to know what he'd missed on *Fading Out*. He forgot about his restraints, losing himself in the haze, and the show played on.