

PANDEMONIUM

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The woman next to me said, It's the Kamikaze. Someone else said, No, it's the Painter—the Painter or the Fat Boy.

The river of people leaving the gates had log-jammed against a line of cops, and rumor rippled back through the crowd. A demon had possessed a man, and O'Hare security had sealed off the concourse between the gates and baggage claim. Reactions varied from exasperation to excitement. It was another travel delay, but at least it was an *interesting* delay.

I could see nothing beyond the end of the crowd but the cops' blue shoulders and the cavernous space of the United terminal. We couldn't go back: we'd just come through the security, and more travelers were filling in behind us. There was nothing to do but wait for the demon to finish its business.

I dropped my blue nylon duffel bag between my feet and sat astride it, surrounded by a forest of legs and luggage. The scraping sensation in my head, quiet since morning, started up again. I stared at my shoes and tried to take clarifying breaths. My last doctor was big on clarifying breaths—that, and heavy meds.

I was tired. I'd been traveling all day, flying standby and catching one flight for every three, portaging the duffel through three airports, three sets of security shakedowns. At least I wasn't Japanese. Those poor bastards were practically strip-searched at every gate.

Someone backed into me, stumbled, and moved aside. I looked up, and the crowd shifted backward like spooked cattle. A path opened through the bodies, and suddenly I was alone in the middle of an aisle with the possessed man running toward me.

He was naked to the waist, his skinny chest and arms coated with gray dust, eyes wide and happy. He grinned, his mouth making words I couldn't hear. I got out of his way, leaving my bag in the middle of the floor.

He veered suddenly toward a popcorn vendor cart. Parents yanked children out of his way; people scattered. The crowd's mood had lurched from morbid curiosity to outright fear. A demon five-hundred yards away was a lot different than one in your face.

He grabbed the cart by its handles and tipped it easily with the cartoon strength of the possessed. Someone screamed. The glass case shattered. Yellow popcorn blossomed into the air, and a metal pan bounced off the tile and rolled away like a hubcap.

The possessed man cackled and began to scoop up the popcorn, ignoring the shards of glass. He rose into a squat, arms full, and winked at me conspiratorially. His hands were bloody. He staggered back the way he'd come, hunched over his load. The cop let him pass without making a move.

What else could he do? He couldn't shoot the guy. It wasn't his fault, and if they obstructed him the demon might get pissed, jump to someone else (like a cop with a gun), and start hurting people. Nothing to do but keep the gawkers back and wait for it to burn itself out.

I picked up my bag and walked forward—plenty of room at the front of the line now—until I'd reached the temporary barrier, a ribbon of nylon strung between plastic posts. There was no one between me and the demon but a line of cops.

The United terminal was an art deco cathedral of steel and glass, shining ribs arcing under a blue glass. I'd always liked it. The demon, trailing puffs of popcorn, shuffled to the middle of the concourse, stopped between the Starbucks and the shrine to the Kamikaze, and opened his arms. The popcorn spread over the marble with a susurrant *buff*.

He surveyed the mess for a moment, and then began to dance. He crushed the popcorn beneath his glossy black shoes. He paused, then danced again. When he was satisfied he dropped to hands and knees and began pushing the yellow powder into the borders of his sand painting, his collage, his sculpture—whatever the hell it was.

What it was, though, was a farm: a quaint white farmhouse, a red silo and barn, a line of trees, wide open fields. The farmhouse was powdered detergent or sugar or salt; the silo bits of red plastic and glass that could have been plucked from smashed exit signs; the trees cunningly arranged candy wrappers and strips of Styrofoam from coffee cups and junk food packages. The crumbled popcorn became the edge of a wheat field. The picture was simultaneously naturalistic and hazily distorted, a landscape seen through waves of heat.

The demon began to add details. I sat down on my duffel and watched him work. He fiddled with the shards of red glass to suggest the warp of barn wood; gently blew the white powder into the ghosts of gutters and window frames; scraped his shoe heel against the marble to create a smudge above the house that could have been a cloud or a large bird. The longer he worked, the more familiar the scene became. I'd never seen the place before—at least, I didn't remember ever seeing a farm like this—but the picture was so relentlessly quaint, so Norman Rockwell, that maybe it was the *idea* of the farm that I recognized. The Jungians thought demons were archetypes from the collective unconscious. Perhaps the subject matter of archetypal artists was archetypes.

And then he abruptly stood and walked away, not even glancing back at the finished picture. The man took maybe a dozen steps, and then collapsed. No one moved for perhaps a minute.

Finally a cop edged forward, his hand on his nightstick, and asked the man questions I couldn't catch. The man looked up, frightened. The cop helped him to his feet, and the man looked at his cut hands, then around at the crowds. The cop put an arm around his shoulder and led him away.

“Del!”

Lew, My Very Bigger Brother, bellowing from the other end of the atrium. His wife, Amra, shook her head in mock embarrassment. This was part of their shtick: Lew was loud and embarrassing, Amra was socially appropriate.

Lew met me halfway across the floor and grabbed me in a hug, his gut hitting me like a basketball. He'd always been bigger than me, but now he was six inches taller and a hundred pounds heavier. “Jesus Christ!” he said. “What took you so long? The board said your flight got in an hour ago.” His beard was bushier than when I'd last seen him a year and a half ago, but it had still failed to colonize the barren patches between ear and chin.

“Sorry about that—something about four bags of heroine up my ass. Hey, Amra.”

“Hello, Del.”

I hugged her briefly. She smelled good as always. She'd cut her long, shiny black hair into something short and professional.

Lew grabbed the strap from my shoulder and tried to take it from me. “I got it,” I said.

“Come on, you look like you haven’t slept in a week.” He yanked it from me. “Shit this is heavy. How many more bags do you got?”

“That’s it.”

“What are you, a fuckin’ hobo? Okay, we have to take a shuttle to the parking garage. Follow me.” He charged ahead with the duffel on his back.

“Did you hear there was a demon in the airport?” Amra said.

“I was there. They wouldn’t let us out of the terminal until he was gone. So what happened to the Cher hair?”

“Oh...” She made a gesture like shooing a fly. “Too much. You saw it? Which one was it—not the Kamikaze?” The news tracked them by name, like hurricanes. Most people went their whole lives without seeing one in person. I’d seen five—six, counting today’s. I’m lucky that way.

“The Painter, I think. At least, it was making a picture.”

Lew glanced back, gave Amra a look. He wanted her to stop talking about it. “Probably a faker,” Lew said. “There’s a possession conference going on downtown next week. The town’ll be full of posers.”

“I don’t think this guy was faking,” I said. That mad grin. That wink. “Afterward he was just crushed. Totally confused.”

“I wonder if he even knows how to draw,” Amra said.

The tram dropped us at a far parking lot, and then we shivered in the wind while Lew unlocked the car and loaded my duffel into the tiny trunk.

It was new, a bulbous silver Audi that looked futuristic and fast. I thought of my own car, crumpled like a beer can, and tried not to be jealous. The Audi was too small for Lew anyway. He enveloped the steering wheel, elbows out, like he was steering with his stomach. His seat was pushed all the way back, so I sat behind Amra. Lew flew down 294, swearing at drivers and juking between lanes. I should have been used to Lew’s driving by then, but the speed and erratic turns had me gripping the back of Amra’s seat. I grew up in the suburbs, but every time I came back to Chicago I experienced traffic shock. We were forty minutes from downtown, and there were four crammed lanes on each side of the road, and everyone moving at 70 mph. It was worse than Denver.

“So what have you been doing with yourself?” Lew asked. “You don’t call, you don’t write, you don’t send flowers...”

“We missed you at Christmas,” Amra said.

“See, Lew? From Amra, that actually means she missed me at Christmas. From you or Mom that would have meant ‘How could you have let us down like that?’”

“Then she said it wrong.”

They’d only been married for a year and a half, but they’d been dating on and off—mostly on—since college. “So when are you guys going to settle down and make Mom some multiracial grandbabies? The Cyclops has gotta be demanding a little baby action.”

Amra groaned. “Do you have to call her that? And you’re changing the subject.”

“Yeah,” Lew said. “Back to your faults as a son and brother. What have you been up to?”

“Well, that’s a funny story.”

Lew glanced at me in the rearview mirror. Amra turned in her seat to face me, frowning in concern.

“Jeez, guys.” I forced a smile. “Can you at least let me segue into this?”

“What is it?” Amra said.

“It’s not a big deal. I had a car accident in November, went through a guardrail in the snow, and then—”

Lew snorted in surprise. “Were you drunk?”

“Fuck you. The road was icy, and I just hit the curve too fast and lost control. I went through the rail, and then the car started flipping.” My gut tightened, remembering that jolt. My vision had gone dark as I struck the rail, and I’d felt myself pitching forward, as if I were being sucked into a black well. “I ended up at the bottom of a ravine, upside down, and I couldn’t get my seatbelt undone.” I left out the caved-in roof, the icy water running through the car, my blind panic. “I just hung there until the cops got me out.”

“Weren’t you hurt?” Amra asked.

I shrugged. “My arms were scraped up, and my back was killing me, but that turned out to be just a pulled muscle. They kept me in the hospital for a day, and then they let me go. And afterward... well, all in all I was pretty lucky.”

“Lucky?” Lew said. “Why do people say that? You get a tumor, and if it turns out that you can operate on it, people say, gee, that was lucky. No, lucky is *not* getting cancer. Lucky is not getting cancer, then finding ten bucks in your shoe.”

“Are you done?” Amra said.

“He totaled his car. He’s not that lucky.”

Amra shook her head. “You were about to say something else, Del. What happened after the accident?”

“Yeah, afterward.” I suddenly regretted bringing it up. I’d thought I could practice on Lew and Amra, get ready for the main event with Mom. Amra looked at me expectantly.

“After the accident, I had some, well, complications, and I needed to go to a different kind of hospital.”

Amra frowned in concern. Lew said, “Holy shit, you mean like One-Flew-Over different?”

Amra shushed him. “Are you okay?” The tiny cabin and the high seat between us made the space simultaneously intimate and insulating.

“I’m fine. Everything worked out.”

“Fine, he says. Holy shit. Does Mom know? No, of course not, she would have told me. She would have told me, wouldn’t she? Holy shit.” He swept down on the rear end of a truck, and for the first time in the trip he slowed down rather than change lanes. “So what were you in for? Did you check yourself in, or did they commit you? Does Mom know?”

“I’ll tell her tonight. It’s not a big deal.”

“You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,” Amra said. “But you should feel free to talk about this. It’s not a stigma.”

“Come on, it’s *sort of* a stigma,” Lew said.

I nodded. “There *are* a lot of crazy people in there.”

Amra turned back around. “I’m trying to talk seriously. This is important.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said.

Lew laughed. “Every time you say that it gets more convincing.” He gunned the engine, swung around a station wagon, and swerved back right across two lanes, just in time to catch our exit. I braced myself against the door as we swooped into the hard curve of the offramp.

“So what was it?” Lew asked. He glanced left and merged onto the street. “Thought you were Napoleon? Seeing pink elephants?”

“More like hearing things.”

“No shit.” I’d shocked him sober.

Amra looked at Lew, back at me. “Is this about the thing that happened when you were little?”

So Lew had told her. Which I should have expected—they were married. Family. “When I was possessed, you mean.”

Amra looked so sad I made myself laugh. “Come on, I barely remember it.”

“You ask me, he was faking,” Lew said. He steered the car onto our block. Familiar trees scrolled past the windows, bare limbs raking a close, steely sky. “Del would always do anything to get Mom’s attention.”

Dinner had been waiting since 1985. The meal was straight out of my childhood—glazed ham, mashed potatoes, the mix of regular and creamed corn I loved, hot rolls. My mother brought it out of the oven—she’d been keeping it warm—two minutes after we walked in. We ate off the same white-and-green Corelle plates we’d always used.

We talked easily about trivia: changes to the neighborhood, the two winters I’d managed to miss. Lew and Amra didn’t bring up demons or psych wards. My mother didn’t ask why I hadn’t shown up for Christmas, or why I’d suddenly decided to fly here with barely a day’s notice.

Afterward, Mom tried to shoo us away while she cleaned up. Lew and Amra ran out to buy us ice cream, but I stayed to ferry dishes from the dining room to the kitchen. My mother loaded the dishwasher—it didn’t work if anyone else did it.

She was high-waisted, big-boned woman, built like a municipal building—solid, tall. Lew got his size from her. Her hair was feathered with gray, but when she smiled or spoke she seemed the same as the day I left for college. But when she wasn’t concentrating—like during the long breath she took between sitting down and picking up her fork—her face sagged and she seemed to age twenty years.

“What did you do to your hand?” she asked.

I’d rolled up my sleeves to rinse the dishes. There was a long thin bruise like a bracelet around my left wrist. “Oh, that. That’s nothing.” She looked at me. I laughed. “I’d looped a rope around my wrist, I was—a friend of mine got stuck, we were trying to pull his car out. He hit the gas before I let go and—it’s fine, it doesn’t hurt, it just looks bad.”

She tried to pat down the hair at the crown of my head, my eternal cowlick. “You’re always getting in accidents. You look tired, too. Have you been sleeping?”

“It’s just travel—I had to get up early and I lost two hours.” I handed her another plate. “I can’t believe you still have these dishes.”

“I can’t believe I have any left.” Lew and I had dropped a lot of them over the years, and when they hit the tile they exploded into millions of needle-sharp slivers you could only find with your bare feet. I was uncritically nostalgic for everything in the house that I’d been oblivious to when I lived here: the cheap dishes, the Formica furniture, the thin carpets furrowed in the hallway. Every new thing in the house—like the oak magazine basket next to Dad’s recliner—struck me as presumptuous and suspect, like a stranger wearing my mother’s bathrobe.

Mom closed the dishwasher without switching it on—she wouldn’t run it unless it was packed tight.

“What’s wrong, Del.” This was the first non-traditional thing either of us had said to each other since I’d arrived. The starting gun for the real conversation.

I had a plan. Start with the car crash. Hint at the stress I’d been under. Then bring up the hospital—I had to tell her about the hospital, it was too likely that she’d find out about it somehow—but make it seem like the visit was my idea. Just something I needed to clear my head. End of story.

“I’ve just had a tough winter.” She didn’t say anything, waiting for me to fill it in. “The first snowfall, I spun out and crashed into a guardrail—” I kept talking through her gasp. Thank God I hadn’t said *through* the guardrail. “It’s okay, I was fine, just scraped up my arms when the airbag went off. The car was pretty banged up, though. And after that, I had some trouble.”

“Have the noises come back?” she said.

I opened my mouth, shut it. So much for the plan.

When I was a teenager I had a swimming accident, and after that I started hearing the noises. That’s what I called them, anyway, what everyone in my family called them. But they weren’t exactly sounds. I didn’t hear voices, or humming, or music, or screams. It was more physical than that. I felt movement, vibration, like the scrape of a chair across the floor, a fist pounding against a table. It felt like someone rattling a cage in my mind.

But that was too hard to explain, even to myself.

“Oh, honey.” She dried her hand on a towel, and pressed her hand to my neck. “When do you hear them? At night, when you’re tired...?”

“It comes and goes.”

“Right now?”

“Right now, not so much.” Another lie. Every few minutes, I felt a lurch and a flurry of clawed scrabbling, like a raccoon in a cardboard box.

She studied my face, as if by concentrating she could hear what was happening in my head. Her left eye, the glass one, was fixed on a point just beside my right ear. “You should talk to Dr. Aaron,” she said. “She helped you so much last time. You could do some therapy with her.”

“Mom, it’s not like getting a lube job, you can’t just drop in for some quick therapy.”

“You know what I mean. Talk to her. If you’re worried about the cost—”

“It’s not the money.”

“I can lend you the money.”

“She’s not going to charge me, Mom.” I rubbed the side of my head. “Listen, I already called her. I’m going to see her tomorrow.”

“Then why are you arguing with me?”

“I’m not arguing! I’m just saying that I’m not ‘doing therapy.’ I’m just going to stop in and say hello.”

“Maybe she could recommend somebody in Colorado. There must be good psychiatrists that—”

“I’m not going to see anybody else.”

She blinked, waited for me to calm down. I grabbed a plate, scraped off the food, rinsed it, and handed it to her.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to...” I opened my hands, closed them.

“What happened back there?” she asked quietly.

Amra and Lew were coming back soon. I didn’t want to be in the middle of it when they walked in. I weighed what I could tell her. Enough to be plausible. But too much and I’d have to manage *her* reaction.

“It’s complicated.”

She waited. I sat down at the table, and she sat next to me.

“The noises weren’t bad at first,” I said. “They came mostly at night, but I was handling it okay. Then they started to get worse, more persistent. I missed some days of work.” I kept my tone matter-of-fact. “So anyway, my car’s totaled, the people at work want to fire me, I

wasn't sleeping well... I knew I was stressed out. The doctor who took care of me after the accident referred me to a shrink, a psychiatrist. I told him my history, you know, the stuff from when I was five, and the stuff from high school. But if it's related to possession it's something he's never heard of before, so we had to spend a lot of time talking about what *I* think is going on. And in the meantime he's teaching me meditation techniques, ordering scans of my head, having me try out medications. And of course none of it worked. The MRIs and fMRIs and CAT scans didn't show anything, no tumors or blockages. The meditation exercises were all things Dr. Aaron taught me years ago, straight out of some post-possession handbook they all must read—and I'd *been* trying those.

“The drugs, though. He opened up the whole medicine cabinet: antianxiety, antipsychotics, anti-everything. Nothing was too horrible, but the worst combination made me sleep sixteen hours a day and then wake up with a dry mouth and a queasy stomach. But the noises didn't go away.

“After one particularly rough night I went in to see him and he says, why don't we try some environment that's less stressful, where people could watch out for you? Like on *Wild Kingdom*, why don't we tag you and bring you to a safer environment? And the next thing I know I'm in the psychiatric ward of the hospital, hanging out with schizophrenics. There was a guy there, Bertram—nice guy, maybe fifty, totally whacked. One minute we're having a perfectly normal conversation, talking about Pakistan or the weather or something, and the next second his head would jerk up and he'd stare at the lights and say, 'Did you *feel* that?' 'Feel what, Bertram?' 'They just scanned us.' See, he believed there were these super-telepaths named slans...”

I was rambling.

Mom sat silently, her mouth pulled tight. She'd sat through the recitation, absorbing the facts like blows. Her face had hardened, and her gaze had shifted from my face. I didn't know what I'd expected—not tears, my mother was not a crier—but not this. Not anger.

“What is it?” I said.

Headlights slid across the front window. Lew and Amra's Audi coasted into the driveway, bass pumping. The stereo cut off.

Mom stood up quickly, walked past without looking at me. “I'm going to make coffee,” she said. “It has to be decaf, I can't drink caffeinated at night.”

Amra followed me down the dimly lit stairs, one hand on my shoulder. Sometime during the run to Jewel, she and Lew had decided to stay the night instead of driving back to their house in Gurnee, about an hour away. Dinner had become a slumber party, and slumber parties required board games. Amra was trying very hard to treat me the same as she did before she knew I'd escaped the loony bin.

At the last step, I reached out and found the lightbulb chain. "The vault," I announced.

The basement was a maze of shelves, and the shelves were stacked with the treasure of our childhood—Lew's childhood and mine. Mom saved everything, not only every G.I. Joe and Matchbox car, but every Hot Wheels track, Tinkertoy, and puzzle piece. Anything that didn't stack neatly was sealed in clear plastic tubs. Farther into the dark were our baby clothes and old toys, Dad's army uniforms and paraphernalia, Mom's wedding dress, boxes of letters and books and tax returns, and odds and ends with irregular silhouettes: elementary school art projects, bicycle parts, an arbor of golf clubs and fishing poles. I was itching to explore farther, but not with Amra.

"The games are over here," I said.

I led her past the comic collection—eight long white cardboard boxes and one small brown box labeled in Magic Marker block letters: "DeLew Comics." The small box was more than big enough to hold the complete output of our short-lived company. The winter I was in sixth grade and Lew was in eighth, we'd tried to sell our self-made comics for a quarter apiece to our friends. Our biggest seller, *RADAR Man*, made us maybe a dollar fifty.

"I never come down here," she said. "I can't believe your mother still has all this stuff."

"The Cyclops sees all, saves all."

She frowned at me—she hated that Lew and I called her that—and then spied a box on the game shelf. "Mousetrap! I used to have this!"

We pulled games from the shelf, comparing personal histories. I couldn't believe she'd never done battle with Rock'em Sock'em Robots, and we set it aside to bring upstairs. The games, I knew, were complete, down to every card and counter, even the gazillion red and white Battleship pegs.

"Here's the masterpiece," I said, and unfolded a massive, asymmetrical playing board taped together at odd angles. The tape was yellow and cracking. "Life and Death."

"What did you *do*?" she said.

“It’s a game we made up, Lew and me. We cut up boards from Monopoly, Risk, and Life and—”

“Your mother must have killed you!”

I grinned. “Yeah.” I sat down and pulled out Ziploc bags full of plastic pieces and dice. On the bottom was a sheaf of handwritten pages illustrated by pencil sketches of my pre-teen obsessions: soldiers, trains, and superheroes. The Official Rules.

Amra was oohing and ahing over her finds. “Ker-Plunk! Stay Alive. Don’t Break the Ice—unbelievable.” I flipped through the faded pages, trying to remember how to play.

“Bang.”

I looked up, and Amra was aiming the slingshot at me, the rubber tube pulled back. There was nothing in the pocket, but she looked at my face and lowered the weapon. “What?” she said quietly.

I stood up, too quickly, and my pulse thumped in my temple. “Just put it back.” My throat was constricted, and my voice came out strange. “That shouldn’t—I didn’t know that was down here.”

I took it from her. The homemade weapon was small in my hands, just a Y of tree limb, a strip of black rubber, a patch of leather for the pocket.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I tossed the slingshot back into the open box she’d found. I took her hands, dry and smooth and cold. “You just have to promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“You’ve got to let me win in *Rock’em Sock’em Robots*. I’ve got a frail ego.”

I lay on top of the covers in my sweats and T-shirt, staring at the nighttime shapes surrounding my bed, waiting for the house to quiet. Mom had made my room into a sewing room, and the walls were lined by Rubbermaid boxes and stacks of fabric. Bolts of cloth leaned in the corners. When I was a kid, the walls were covered by my drawings, my homegrown superheroes and supervillains. In bed I’d stare up at RADAR Man and Dr. Awkward and Mister Twister, imagining them in motion, even when—especially when—the lines were too faint to make out. The pictures were better in the dark.

In the hospital my walls had been perfectly plain, though some of the long-term people had taped up posters (but no framed pictures: glass, nails, and framing wire were all big nos). I'd had no trouble falling asleep, though. At 9:30 every night they gave me two big yellow pills, and by ten I was unconscious. The nurses locked me in anyway: my shrink had told them about my sleepwalking problem, or as I liked to call it, wolfing out.

Every night since leaving the hospital I held a strategy session with myself. Did I need one pill tonight, or two? When should I take them? The last six capsules of Nembutal were in my duffel bag at the foot of the bed, and I didn't have a prescription for a refill. I was on war rations.

I hadn't taken anything tonight. I didn't want to fall asleep yet, and if I waited I might get lucky. The noises, usually most persistent after dark, were quiet for the first night in weeks. Maybe coming home had given me some control.

Around midnight, Lew finally clicked off the living room TV and clumped to bed. Mom and Amra had gone to bed hours ago. I waited a half hour more, breathing. The thing in my head kept still. I sat up slowly, afraid to wake it.

I opened the door and stood for a long moment peering into the dark, listening. Then I walked down the hallway with short steps, trailing fingers along the wall until I'd passed the bathroom and found the corner at the end of the hall. I turned into the living room. Moved past the couch and around the end tables and footstools, navigating by the moonlight silvering the edges of the furniture. In the kitchen, the vent light above the stove had been left on like a nightlight. I unhooked the basement door, stepped down, and shut the door behind me. The stairs creaked as I went down.

I walked through the vault, the cold cement stinging my bare feet.

I went past the comics and the board games, past the box where Amra had found the slingshot, and turned farther into the maze, down a narrow path between the wood veneer cabinet stereo and the orange crates full of phonograph albums.

Two green dry-cleaning bags hung from a black pipe: my father's uniforms. The workbench was just behind them, against the far wall, near the water heater and sump pump. Tools hung from a peg board that had been screwed into the cinderblock. Only a few silhouettes were empty. The bench held the heavy red toolbox and stacks of Cool Whip containers full of screws and nails and orphaned hardware. A red Craftsman hammer lay on the bench like he'd left it minutes ago.

The safe was on the floor, under the workbench. It was a small steel box, about twelve inches to a side, painted black. I squatted down, and pulled on the door's little silver handle. It was locked, as I expected.

I leaned down on one forearm, and looked up at the underside of the work bench. It was too dark to see. I ran my finger along the lip of the bench, until my fingers found the cuts in the wood. I smiled. I couldn't read the numbers etched there, but I didn't need to—Lew and I had memorized the combination long ago. Not that my father had made it difficult: 2-15-45 was my mother's birthday.

I leaned sideways to let the light hit the dial. The safe didn't open, and for a moment I wondered if Mom had changed the combination. I tried again and this time it opened.

The inside of the safe seemed much smaller than the outside. A shelf divided the space into two small compartments. On top was a dark leather holster, flap closed, and a small box of ammunition. On the floor of the safe was the pistol swaddled in an oiled rag. I moved my hand under it, lifted it out like a baby, and unfolded the cloth with my free hand. A gleaming black .45 automatic, my dad's service sidearm in Korea. I fit my hand around the stubbly grip and aimed at the white cylinder of the water heater, feeling the weight of the Colt tug at the end of my arm. Before Lew and I had cracked the safe we'd held only plastic toy guns. The heaviness of the metal had come as a shock.

On the other side of the basement, the door to upstairs creaked open. I quickly folded the rag back over the gun and set it in the safe.

"Del?" It was my mother.

"Down here," I called. I was afraid to close the safe, sure that the metallic click would be immediately recognizable. I pushed the door to within an inch of closing. "Don't worry, I'll turn off the lights when I'm done."

The stairs complained as she stepped down. I did the only thing I could think of: I coughed and pressed the door shut. When she turned the corner I was walking toward her, a short stack of vinyl LPs in my hands. "I hope I didn't wake you up," I said. "You know, you could sell these on the Internet."

She was dressed in a housecoat and thick blue woolly socks. She glanced at the albums, then at my face. "You haven't slept at all yet."

I shrugged. "My circadian rhythms are all messed up. I don't sleep much anyway."

“I used to hear you walking around the house at all hours,” she said. She took the top album from me, a painted photo of Bing Crosby in a Christmas stocking cap, and turned it over in her hands.

“You could have told me,” she said.

“I know.”

“I would have come.”

“I know.” She would have. She’d pulled me back from the brink twice before, and she could have done it again. She would have flown down, cleaned my apartment, counted out my pills, rubbed my head through the night.

But I couldn’t tell her. I’d talked to her on the phone almost every week, and I never once said, Hey, I’ve lost my car and my job and my mind. And by the way, I’m calling you from the crazy house.

“It’s not...”

I almost said it aloud: *It’s not just noises*. I felt... vertiginous. Like my heels were rocking on the edge of a balcony rail. All I had to do was lean forward a few inches and let myself fall.

The thing’s inside my head, Mom, and it’s trying to get out.

“It’s not that I didn’t want to tell you,” I said.

She picked up the hammer and hung it in its silhouette on the pegboard. “Well, you’re home now.” She touched my arm as she passed. “Don’t forget to put everything back when you’re done.”