CHAPTER 1

***One month from today ….***

You made it.

You, esteemed reader, have made it to the final chapter of one man’s life. It is almost over. No credits will roll. No music will play.

You will just see two words:

THE END

We are almost there, even though we are just beginning.

Fifteen minutes before his life comes to an end, our subject steps out of the lobby of a downtown skyscraper and into the cold afternoon. It is the first day of March. Spring is almost here. Punxsutawney Phil has made his declaration, 27 days ago, but there are no shadows here.

He rushes through the mid-day foot traffic, feeling the breeze cut through his coat on the first day of March. A woman in a hurry nearly runs into him. He hates people who are always in a hurry. He hates crowds. He hates the fucking city.

He looks up at the skyscrapers around him. They, too, make him angry. Claustrophobic. He doesn’t like to feel so small and insignificant. Nobody does, do they? Why anyone would live in the city is lost on him. And now, in these crazy times where people are wearing masks to cover their noses and mouths, he feels even more in danger. Like some creepy, never-ending masquerade party.

Some jackass in a tie passes, talking too loud on his cell phone. A car honks and someone shouts. He just needs to get the hell out of the city, as fast as possible. That he’s carrying important documents under his arm makes him even more eager to get out of this crowd.

The light-rail station is two blocks away. He tucks the documents in his jacket, puts his head down and moves forward. Everyone is an obstacle now, standing in the way of where he needs to be. He’s often looked at life that way, like you’re carrying the ball and everyone is out to tackle you. You just have to keep moving, to stay on your feet.

The sinister sky growls with clouds that look like they’ll break. He hasn’t thought of what he would do if the clouds part and the rain starts coming down. He can’t let these documents get wet. He just needs to get home, to hide them away, and to deliver them first thing in the morning. Then he’ll get paid.

First, though, he needs to make it to the light rail.

Someone bumps his shoulder, and he turns his body but the person has already moved on. He sees a sea of business people but also makes eyes on a man who looks out of place. A man who’s wearing a hood and sunglasses, despite the gloomy day. He stops and turns toward the man, who looks away.

He is nervous now. Even more nervous than he was. When he woke up this morning, he felt a cloud of death in his bedroom. The gloom followed him throughout the day, but he thought maybe he was just having a reaction after another long night of partying. He’d even texted his ex-girlfriend, Kate, a few things he now regretted.

The buildings and the people and the goddamn city seem to be closing in on him. He finds a path between the bodies and picks up his pace. He feels like even the sky may come down on him. He glances over his shoulder again but does not see the hooded man. His imagination is working against him; it does that sometimes. When you grow up with a father like his, whose hands could be like hammers, you tend to fear everything and everyone.

He reaches a crowd at the end of the block, and a homeless man asks for money. He turns his shoulder away, without saying anything to the degenerate. Just another obstacle in his path. He waits for the walk signal and feels something focusing on him. He turns slowly and sees the hooded man again, only now he’s got his head down. The crowd starts to move, and he falls in, trying to lose the hooded man while crossing the street. He’s attempting to shield himself with a coat of humans. He is almost there. One more block.

To his left, an abandoned shopping center. A bookstore that’s gone out of business. This is the heart of the city, but the pandemic has known no bounds. He remembers walking down here a year ago, and there weren’t even people. The whole world had been shut down. Strangely, he had felt free then. Had felt like he could breathe, even in the city.

Up ahead, he sees the sign for the light-rail station. He uses one hand to secure the documents under his coat, and with the other he reaches for his Orca card. It wasn’t that long ago that the only mode of available transportation down here was the city bus – the dirty, bug-infested, smelly bus, where he was forced to surround himself with the dregs of society. It was either that, or take the chance of driving and paying $30 for parking. Now, with the light rail, things are significantly easier.

When he reaches the entrance to the station, he gives another look over his shoulder and sees the man in the hoodie again. Our subject feels a cool chill rush over him. He passes the entrance, hoping to shake the man who is following him. He can’t get trapped in the light-rail tunnel. He hurries his pace, falls into a crowd, and ducks into an alley. He waits, watching the passing faces, trying to get a look at what he can see of the guy’s face. He waits for a minute, then two, but the guy does not pass. He backs into the alley, ducking behind a trash bin. He continues to watch the strangers pass, but the man in the hood is not among them.

After a few minutes, concluding that the guy went into the light-rail tunnel, he stands slowly and takes in a deep breath. His heart is pounding like a bass drum. He checks again to make sure the documents are still there.

“Adam!” a voice calls out from the other end of the alley.

Adam turns away from the dumpster and sees the hooded man, walking toward him. All he can see of the man are his eyebrows. Adam tries to back away but bumps into the dumpster and falls.

“Please,” he mutters as the man closes in on him. When he is 10 feet away, the man lowers his sunglasses. Adam sees his eyes. He knows the man from somewhere. He tries to remember.

When a man has a gun point directly at your face, you can see everything clearly. The lines of your killer’s face. The movement all around you. All sound disappears. And then everything starts to blur. The shooter’s hand dissolves. All you can see is a 9-millimeter, high-carbon, heat-treated steel eyeball, staring back at you, daring you to make a move. You can see it so clearly that you’d swear you could even see the point of the bullet, waiting inside.

“Please, no,” Adam says, raising his hands in the air.

The man lowers his mask and grins. That’s when Adam realizes who it is.

And then the bullet is coming at him. Adam feels it before he hears the sound. All at once, he is falling backward, the sound of gunshot echoing between the walls on either side of him. He falls backward into the dumpster.

He does not see the shooter pull his hood back over his head, turn and retreat. He only sees darkness, then hears the voices of strangers shouting in the city. He tastes blood and closes his eyes. He sees Kate’s face, wishing he had one more chance to talk to her, to try to win her back. Wondering if he’s made a terrible mistake. He thinks of her because love is all there is. A band said that once.

Something inside him starts to fade. He hears thunder overhead. He doesn’t last long enough to hear the sirens or the footsteps of pursuit. He won’t see the story about the shooting on the 6 o’clock news. He won’t get to know if Kate sheds any tears. To find out if anyone really cares.

This is how it will end for Adam.

**CHAPTER 2**

***Today [Feb. 2, 2022]…***

Adam Ostrawski used to be famous. Well, kind of famous. What people now call Facebook famous. Or Instagram famous. Or Twitter famous. Whatever the flavor of the month is.

Adam had found a little corner of the world where people knew his name. Adam Oz, they called him. Adam Oz was a DJ at a small, local radio station in the mid-1990s. He played alternative music. Nobody knew who he was at first or, frankly, cared. Then along came a style of music known as alternative country. Part punk, part rock, part country. It had its own attitude – well, it stole the attitude from guys like Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, and brought it to the latter part of the century. Adam Oz was on a first-name basis with Billy Joe Shaver and Lucinda Williams. With Ryan Adams and Jeff Tweedy. Brent Best. Micah Schnabel. Gary Louris. All four of the 97s. The list went on and on. He’d interviewed Neil Young and Emmylou Harris, had beers with Steve Earle and passed a bowl with two of the guys from Todd Snider’s touring band.

Adam eventually landed an alt-country show on local cable, started to wear Weezer glasses (but did not play Weezer), a John Deere hat (but did not drive a tractor) and bought a guitar that he featured in the background of his show (but not did play guitar). When the internet blew up in the late 90s, he wrote a blog and monitored a chat room. In that small corner of the music world, people knew Adam Oz. They turned to him to tell them who was going to be the next Wilco. The next My Morning Jacket. The next Okkervil River.

But Adam Oz faded away as quickly as alt-country music. About the time these bands traded in a banjo for a keyboard, a steel pedal for digital music software, once Jeff Tweedy and Ryan Adams started bashing on the genre they helped to build, Adam Oz began fading into obscurity. As Mr. Young himself once sang: “Better to burn out than to fade away.” And, like a hologram, Adam Oz just fizzled into the atmosphere.

Now, he is just Adam. Most people don’t even know that’s his name. It’s probably better that way. Considering Adam’s childhood, it might be best if nobody knows who he is. There was a time during his mini-celebrity when he began getting uncomfortable with the recognition. Someone might put it together. Might figure out that Adam Oz used to be …

“Adam!”

He looks up from his phone, adjusts the mask that covers the bottom half of his face, and sees his name written on the side of a plain, white cup, at a non-descript coffee shop north of the city. He no longer wears the black eyeglasses (contacts and, most of the time, mirrored sunglasses now), rarely wears a baseball hat (although his hairline has started receding) and sold his guitar (signed by Bobby Bare Jr., a name that was completely foreign to the guy at the pawn shop where Adam got just $15 for it). He puts aside his phone and an article about Neil Young pulling his music from Spotify. He reaches for his cup and pulls down his mask to blow on it.

“Masks on at all times,” the woman behind the counter says, barely giving him a look. He is nobody to her. He used to be somebody. Now, he is not.

As he turns, a man in a mask smiles with his eyes.

“Fucking policies,” the man says. Adam nods politely and starts to walk by him. He was never one for people. A few years ago, a psychiatrist diagnosed him with something called Generalized Anxiety Disorder, even put Adam on some kind of medication that didn’t work. Adam doesn’t like the label. He never has a problem as long as people leave him alone. This guy, the one who’s angry about the *fucking policies,* turns to follow. “It’s like martial law in this country, right?” the guy says. Adam opens the door and goes outside, and the guy follows. “It’s just the flu, you know?” the guy says, almost shouting now. Adam finds himself adjusting his mask, to make sure it’s tight. “Goddamn president is trying to make it bigger than that, right? To make money off these goddamn masks.” The guy takes off his mask.

“Well, at least the mask is temporary,” Adam says quietly, without looking back. He was never comfortable around other people, and the pandemic has made him even less so. *Unlike your face, which is forever*, Adam wants to say. But he doesn’t have the balls. He never has the balls. A wave of anxiety thrums through his body.

When the man peels off in another direction, Adam is just relieved to be done with him. It’s not the man’s politics that make Adam uncomfortable. It’s his humanness. They all freak Adam out, in their own way.

Turning back to his phone, he is reminded why. Biden and Putin are bickering again. The Cold War is escalating. Gun violence in the county is on the rise. People are still bitching about the ex-president. It’s Groundhog’s Day. Not the movie, although in this pandemic everything does seem to keep happening over and over again. It’s actually Groundhog’s Day. Punxsutawney Phil. The shadow. All that crap. Adam never really cared for that movie, but when he watched it the second time he found himself chuckling at the irony of doing the act over again.

Life really is like Groundhog’s Day. That’s Adam’s existence. *Same shit, different day*, as the saying goes. Wake up late morning, pretend to look for a job, take a couple of hits of methamphetamines to get a boost of energy, then disappear into the late night and early morning.

Rinse and repeat.

Adam checks his Indeed profile. He hasn’t worked at all in almost two years. He likes to blame it on the pandemic, but that wouldn’t really account for the past two decades of general inactivity. He lost his job as a server when the pandemic started, but even that job had only been a part of him for a couple of months. Since he lost his job as a DJ back in the early 2000s, Adam has held about two dozen jobs but has yet to find a career. He is 47 years old, and he is lost. In a world that’s always changing, Adam has been extremely busy staying the same.

He sees an ad for a job as a bicycle repairman down in the city. He knows very little about bikes. An opening in IT. He doesn’t know squat about computers. He needs to do something. And delivering food or driving strangers around the city would be impossible without a car. Bagging groceries, at his age, would be humiliating. But there has to be *something* out there. Since he lost both of his parents to COVID last summer, he’s come into some money but knows it won’t last forever. Adam knows he has to grow up at some point. Both his parents are gone, his girlfriend Kate left him a few months ago, and now he is pretty much on his own.

Two pretty girls pass, and he barely gives them a look. He broke up with Kate weeks – or was it months? – ago, but he still has little interest in women. He really doesn’t have much interest in finding a job, either. But here he is, out pounding the sidewalk. Maybe it’s about proving to Kate that she was wrong. He actually can do something with his life.

He finishes his coffee and tosses the cup in a trash can. There’s a recycle bin next to it, but he doesn’t much care about that, either.

The coffee didn’t do much to give him energy, so he pats on his pocket to make sure he’s got his small bag of crystal. Adam Oz used to be into the downers – weed, mostly. But in the past year or two, he’s picked up a bit of a meth habit. He wouldn’t even call it a “habit.” To him, taking a couple of hits of meth was like drinking a cup of coffee. Just a little something to pick him up and help him get through the night.

The light rail isn’t too crowded at this time of day, and he exits in the heart of downtown. He finds a quiet alley and lights up. He hears someone at the other end of the alley, but when he turns, the figure disappears. Two puffs later, he’s back out on the sidewalk, moving more quickly than before. Adam has a little bounce in his step, one of the benefits of this wonder drug. He’s actually feeling motivated to get a job.

He sees a man sweeping outside a night club and stops to ask if they’re hiring. The guy stops sweeping and looks Adam up and down.

“Depends,” he says. “What kinda skills you got?”

Adam shrugs. “I can deejay,” he says. A little white lie. He does have a background in music. He was, in fact, a DJ. At a small radio station. Not a night club. He used to be a big deal.

“Yeah?” the guy says, leaning on his broom. “You got equipment?”

“Not with me,” Adam Oz says. This is not a lie. He doesn’t have any equipment with him. Nor does he have any equipment.

The guy goes back to sweeping. Without looking up, he says: “Try the Crystal Theatre up the block. They just re-opened.”

Adam nods and heads south. *The Crystal Theatre.* His head humming with methamphetamines, he likes the sound of crystal. The sky is darkening, but he’s still wearing his mirrored shades. He looks back and sees a few people mingling about. One man is facing him but turns away. Adam turns all the way around and faces the man, who looks at him from 20 feet away, then heads off down a side street. Adam considers calling out to him but decides to let it go. Looking back several times, he moves on toward the Crystal Theatre. He looks up at the sign. VACCINATED ONLY. And a list of three bands, none of which appeal to Adam. Something has happened in the past 10 years, where all good music has been stripped down to a 1980s redux. The ‘80s were, in Adam’s opinion, the best and worst of rock. Somehow, forty years later, the worst is resurfacing. Synth pop. Shoe gazing. Everything sounds like Brian Ferry now. And Brian Ferry sucks.

“Hey there!” a voice calls out, startling Adam. When he’s had a couple hits of meth, everything startles him. But, strangely, it feels good. “You buying a ticket?”

Adam lowers his glasses and sees a large man sitting behind glass a few feet away. “To what?” he asks.

“Beach House,” the guy behind the glass says.

Adam raises an index finger, opens his mouth, and pretends to gag himself.

“I’ll take that as a no,” the guy behind the glass says.

“Not my thing,” Adam says. Then, as an afterthought: “I heard you guys are hiring?”

The guy looks him up and down. The guy is overweight, with a tie that’s too short and a white shirt that so tight that it looks like the buttons are going to pop off and chip the glass between them. And *he’s* judging Adam?

The guy looks around, then slides a stack of papers through the hole in the glass.

“Good luck,” he says.

Adam nods, pockets the application and pops his sunglasses back over his eyes. He heads back south, passing strangers in masks. Such a strange time. Or was it stranger two years ago, when we were all so trusting of each other? Adam has learned not to trust anyone. When you have a childhood like his in your rearview mirror, you know to keep others at arm’s length.

He looks for an alley or a corner to take another hit, and when he turns his head he sees the same man as before. The guy is wearing a baseball cap now. Adam lowers his sunglasses, and the guy hurries off.

Someone is definitely following him.

**CHAPTER 3**

**Today [Feb. 3, 2022] …**

Adam awakes just before noon. He has to look at the clock, as the haze outside his window disguises the time of day. There were brief periods of Adam’s younger life when he had to wake up at the crack of dawn, shower and shave, and go into an office job. He quickly realized that life was not for him.

Getting out of bed after a night of meth use can be like trying to lift an SUV off your chest. The mornings have been harder lately. The days have started running together. Since Kate left him, he hasn’t much liked what the world has to offer. He thinks about making a change, just for change sake, and then he remembers the application he got from the Crystal Theatre. It would be a chance to get back into the world of music. When his life was its richest, that’s the world in which he lived. There might be some opportunity there. *Opportunity* is a word that has eluded Adam for a long time.

He wills himself to sit up, go take a piss, and fire up his MP3 player while he gets dressed. His day starts with “Whiskey Bottle,” a classic, followed by a more contemporary tune called “Rusted Out Airplane.” There’s still good music out there, if you know where to look. Eastbound Jesus. Dead Volts. Roadside Graves. But they’re few and far between. Most of the best stuff came and went over the final decade of the 20th Century.

His head throbbing, Adam pauses to look at the small fish tank next to his door, at the two goldfish inside. They swim around eagerly. Adam named them Gold and Fish, but he can’t tell which one is which. He flicks a few flakes of fish food into the tank, turns off the music and heads out for coffee.

That there are people who are halfway through their work day amazes him, somehow. These people have other people counting on them. Adam’s life is much simpler, much more free. He can do what he wants, when he wants. Why would anyone want it any other way?

The line at the coffee shop is ridiculous, but Adam, wearing his mirrored sunglasses, waits and scrolls through the news on his phone. The Ukraine-Russia crisis dominates the headlines. The Winter Olympics are just around the corner, with plenty of controversy surrounding the decision to hold them in China. COVID deaths are on the rise again. The best player in the National Football League hung up his cleats, and a former coach is suing the league. Nothing good ever happens anymore. Whiskeytown doesn’t get back together. Gram Parsons doesn’t come back to life. The world has gone to shit. People are dying. His parents are gone. The government can’t decide whether to sit or stand to piss.

The same jackass from yesterday is at the front of the line, this time complaining to the barista because she won’t give out the Wifi password without a purchase.

“This place is a goddamn monopoly,” the guy says.

To which, the barista replies: “There are plenty of other coffee shops in the city. Literally, dozens within walking distance. Most of them are Starbucks. This one is not. This place is as far from a monopoly as we are from Pluto. If that were still a place.”

“Well, you’re forcing me to pay to use your services,” the guy responds, pulling out his wallet. “That’s, like, Communism or something.”

“Or the opposite of Communism,” the barista says quietly. “I think it’s called Capitalism?”

The guy looks around the coffee shop, makes eye contact with Adam, who looks away. Back at his phone. The U.S. conducted some kind of airstrike on Syria. Winter storms are wreaking havoc through the right half of the country.

“Okay, I’ll take the smallest coffee cup you have,” the guy tells the barista, in a voice that’s obviously meant to invite attention. “Put it in a shot glass. A Dixie cup. Fuck it. Whatever. And the Wifi password.”

“We have eight-ounce,” the barista says.

“I bet you do.” And the guy slaps a $20 bill on the counter.

By the time Adam gets his coffee – *real man* black, *cowboy* black – he is so exhausted that he has considered the alternative: a couple hits of meth. But it’s too early in the … well, afternoon for that. Adam is a man of will power. He can wait until night.

He heads out of the shop and turns back toward his apartment. He doesn’t have plans other than filling out the application and maybe turning it in at the Crystal Theatre. He hates days like this, when he’s got nothing to do. No opportunities.

As he turns a corner, he sees a man walking toward him. Adam has never seen the man before. He is waving a finger. Looking right at Adam, with a menacing look on his face.

“You!” the guy calls out. “There you are!” He gets up in Adam’s face. Well, his chin. The guy is short, but looks like he has lifted a weight or two. “You’re the motherfucker who jumped me last night,” the guy is saying, a mask on his chin. “Take off the sunglasses, fool! I know it’s you!”

Adam can feel his heart beating. His anxiety is spiking. Sometimes when he gets like this, Adam faints. He steadies himself and stares at the guy’s eyes but has no idea who he is.

“C’mon, man, let’s do this!” the guy yells. Then he slaps Adam’s sunglasses off, stepping back as they sail to the sidewalk. Two bystanders step between them. The guy is taking a boxer’s stance. Adam puts his hands up, near his ears.

“I have no idea what this guy is-“ he says.

“Don’t front, dickhead!” the other guy is shouting. A couple of additional bystanders join in, standing in front of the stranger.

“I don’t know who this man is,” Adam says again. Because, truthfully, he doesn’t.

The man pulls the mask off his chin and spits, but his ball of saliva sails off to the side, not hitting anyone. He turns and walks away, muttering threats under his breath.

When he’s out of sight, a stranger asks Adam: “You okay?”

Adam nods, goes to pick up his sunglasses, and finds that they’re broken. The bystanders have decided that Adam is okay, so they disperse. He throws his sunglasses in a trash can, takes in a breath and looks around.

That’s when it dawns on him. Evan.

“Shit,” Adam says quietly.

Evan Ostrawski. Adam’s identical twin. Adam hasn’t seen him in a long time. He wasn’t even sure if Evan was still living in the city. Or if he was still living.

But now, after this run-in, he knows. Evan jumped that guy last night.

Adam feels that familiar churning of worry in his stomach. Since they were 5 years old, and were forced to move out of their hometown, the Ostrawski twins started moving in different directions. While Adam does a little bit of meth every now and then, Evan has been drowning in it for two decades. While Adam is running low on funds, Evan hasn’t worked nor lived indoors for most of his adult life. While Adam is often frustrated by his life, Evan hates being alive. Despises it. Seems to be doing whatever he can to avoid it.

There was a period of time when Adam tried to be there for Evan, tried to bail him out whenever the shit hit the fan. But Evan burned all those bridges too many times. He stole from Adam. Verbally assaulted him. Swore off their brotherhood. Adam basically gave up on him after that.

But now, hearing that Evan is out there somewhere, Adam feels a renewed need to protect. He was born a few minutes before Evan, and he vowed many times to be his protector.

He heads off in the direction where the guy who spit at him went. He’s got to find Evan.

**CHAPTER 4**

**Forty-two years ago …**

The gunshot awoke the boys. Or maybe it was the sound of the shattering glass. One sound hit them first, but Adam was not sure which. They overlapped and wrapped around each other like cords of rope in his mind. He sat up in bed, pulling his covers up over his knees. The next sound was his father shouting.

“Under the beds! Everyone!”

Adam followed his father’s direction. His body pounded with fear.

“Evan!” Adam called out. “Get down here!”

Begrudgingly, his brother joined him. Being beside Evan always made Adam more comfortable, so as they waited together in silence, he felt more at ease.

“Are you down?” his mother called out from the other room. Her voice was higher than usual.

“Uh-huh,” Adam said, his voice quivering. “What was that?”

His parents did not answer. Several minutes passed, and then he heard his mother’s footsteps. She crouched down, and seeing her face brought a sense of relief.

“Are you okay?” she asked, rubbing 5-year-old Adam’s arm.

“What was that sound?” he said again.

His mother’s forehead creased, and her jaw tightened.

“We’ll talk about that later,” she said. “Just stay down, and everything will be alright.”

The boys ended up falling asleep on the floor, under the bed, and two weeks later the family moved out of their modest town and drove across the state to the city. Where they could get lost for awhile. Their last name – Brognan – went away. From that moment on, they became the Ostrawski’s. It took Adam and Evan a few months just to figure out how to say it and more than a year to spell it.

Evan started spiraling after the move. Neither of the boys understood what was going on. Not until they were 8 years old did their father, David Brognan (whose name was now Richard Ostrawski) explain as best he could.

The way their father explained it, he had a falling out with his business partner. He eventually told the feds about some shady things that his former business partner had done. The business partner, who had ties to “some bad people,” as their father described it, threatened the Brognan family. After someone fired a gun at the Brognan home, the family was put into something called the Witness Protection Program.

Adam hated moving to the city. All those people, all that noise. He remembered a couple of times when his father made the boys duck down in the back seat. When they would be walking down the street, and his dad would see a man in dark clothes, and they would duck into a store to hide. There were so many people, and Adam’s father was always looking over his shoulder. All Adam wanted was to go back to their hometown, to become Adam Brognan again.

As much as Adam despised city life, he handled it better than Evan. By the time Evan was 12, he was already stealing liquor from his father’s stash and smoking weed with older neighborhood kids. By 14, he was using cocaine and getting into trouble. Even in the big city, people started to recognize him as a problem child, and often Adam became the target of angry parents who couldn’t tell the twins apart.

By 16 years old, Evan left home. Leaving Adam to fend for himself. Adam floated through a few years of not knowing who he was or where he was headed.

A few years later, he became Adam Oz, and for the first time in his life, he felt like someone. His voice became familiar to a segment of people who were devoted to a style of music. His name became synonymous with people who knew who Townes Van Zandt and Sid Griffin were. By his mid-20s, people saw him on a cable television show dedicated to the genre. Twenty years had passed, and no one seemed to put together that Adam Ostrawski had once been Adam Brognan. He had turned into someone else. In a world of impermanence, a person could even change their identity. A man could change his name and hide in plain sight.

**CH. 5**

**Early this morning [Feb. 5, 2022] …**

The night brings out all seven of the deadly sins. Probably a few more. Vulnerability shines in the dark.

Evan Ostrawski does not know what time it is, nor does he care. Darkness fell over the city hours ago, and he comes out at night. Sirens ring in the distance. A bang that sounds like a gunshot echoes through the sky. Evan notices none of it. With a zombie-like gait, he keeps on through the park.

He can’t remember the last time he ate anything. Or slept. He doesn’t have any friends but knows enough people on the streets that he can get high on meth any time he wants. Amphetamines run through Evan’s bloodstream the way oxygen breathes inside of other people. He can’t hear or see anyone behind him, but he knows they’re after him. He has seen their faces. Has heard their laughter. Evan is not on the internet, but he knows without looking that his name is bandied about freely.

They are all after him. The cops. The government. The men in dark suits from his past. They send their soldiers. He sees some form of gang-stalking every single night.

*Gang-stalking*. It was a term Evan had not heard until two or three weeks ago. Some fool was lighting up a bubble, his face aglow, and said he was being “gang-stalked.” The guy described groups of people, on several occasions, following him and harassing him from a distance. Evan knew exactly what he was talking about. He just had never known what it was called. Over and over, groups of people sent by the government followed him through alleys and parks and shadows. They often wore masks. Shined lights. Rang bells or snapped their fingers. They were meant to drive Evan crazy. To make him go away.

He looks back but sees no one. He continues on through the night, his face free and his body pure. He does not wear a mask, even indoors, because he does not believe in them. They are the government’s way of marking people. Of keeping their voices muffled. Most of all, they are an added source of income. Another way to deepen their pockets with money. And don’t even get Evan started on the vaccines. Another form of government control. He would just as soon get shot up with cyanide as he would with whatever is in those propaganda syringes.

He pauses at a concrete bench in the shadow of the moonlight. He crouches and reaches into his jacket pocket, finding a rig that’s already loaded. He sticks the needle in his arm and jams methamphetamines into his system. He can’t afford to fall asleep. They will find him then. They will grab him and steal his things and Lord knows what else. Sleep is the enemy of the homeless man. The drug vibrates through him. He gnashes his teeth and breathes in through widened nostrils. He looks up at the moon, his eyes dancing. He fears no one and everything.

The meth takes away his hunger. For food. It induces cravings for other things. He wants to break something. To hit someone. To smash glass and slash tires. He does not always cave in to these desires, but often he does. He has been beaten by strangers, chased by cops and at least one man tried to sexually assault him. And so Evan cannot sleep. He cannot take the chance.

Up ahead, he sees a bar. People are straggling out, so it must be closing time. The best time of the night. Follow the drunkest person, wait for them to pass out on a bench, then roll them. Or find some dipshit with a big ego and small fists, and break the fucker’s face. Meth versus alcohol wins most of the time. Evan might not be very big, but he knows how to knock a drunk guy out.

He sees a skinny guy break off from a group of friends and stumble toward the light-rail station. Evan follows him for two blocks, then calls out. Asks the guy if he likes to smoke weed. The guy turns around. His eyes are dancing. He has a pair of designer sunglasses hanging from the buttons of his shirt. He’s wearing expensive shoes, which means he won’t be able to keep his footing in a fight. The guy is not wearing any rings. Check, check and check.

“Say what?” the guy asks, turning to Evan. The guy takes a few stuttered steps toward him.

“I got weed, if you’re buying,” Evan says, bluffing.

“Yeah?” says the guy, who’s not wearing a jacket but has a rolled-up beanie on his head. He looks like he’s on his way to a frat party. “How much?”

Evan grins. “How much you got?” he asks.

The guy fumbles with his pocket, then pulls out a wallet. Evan sees a C-note and a few other bills. One of Evan’s hands it behind his back, holding a rock he’d picked up along the way.

“Sixty?” Evan asks. The guy is fumbling through his wallet. He drops it. He bends over to pick it up, and Evan strikes. He hits him in the back of the head. The guy drops like a cinder block in water.

Evan looks around, crouches and grabs the wallet and sunglasses. He puts them on and heads off to find another sack of clear crystals. Somewhere out there, his twin brother Adam sleeps through it all.

CH. 6

**Today [Feb. 6, 2022]…**

Adam still hasn’t heard back from the Crystal Theatre about his job application, so he decides to put on a collared shirt and take the light rail there to follow up. It’s late afternoon, under the dwindling sun, but he throws on a new pair of sunglasses and heads out into the haze.

He’s only been awake for two hours, so he checks his phone and sees the news of the day is some 5-year-old Moroccan boy who got stuck in a well. The Olympics are in full swing, and some figure skater got heckled for taking a fall. The former vice president and the polarizing ex-president are bickering. A famous podcaster is apologizing for using a racial slur. It’s an ongoing loop of tragedy, anger and hate. Adam turns on some music and tries to zone out. His playlist includes Lucinda Williams and a couple songs from Uncle Tupelo. He wonders what they would sound like now, had Jay and Jeff figured out a way to make it work. How come everyone can’t just get along?

The light rail takes about 15 minutes to drop him off, and when Adam gets there he sees the same sweaty, fat guy with the bad attitude sitting behind the glass. Instead of inquiring about his application, Adam decides to buy a ticket to the show. Ty Segall, one of the only true rock acts still out there, is the headliner. Ty Segall is a throwback, the rare performer who makes you want to sway your hips and bang your head. If rock n’ roll is on life support, Ty Segall is the rare contemporary musician who’s got access to the oxygen tank.

Adam pockets his ticket and heads north, hoping to find a spot where he can get a couple hits of amphetamine energy before the show. He’s still sapped from the previous day, which is often the way it goes with speed. He loves the way meth makes him feel on the way up the hill, and hates the way it sucks the life out of him on the way down. The crash can be excruciating.

He slips into an alley, looks around, and lights up. The drug enters his lungs like fireworks. He feels alive. The world opens up to him. Still wearing his sunglasses, even though it’s dark, Adam sees lights all around him. He no longer feels alone.

As he exhales, he hears someone nearby chuckling. He looks around but sees no one.

“Down here,” says a deep, smoker’s voice. Adam sees an older man, sitting on the pavement, leaning against a brick wall. The man’s got a ragged blanket across his lap. Nervously, Adam palms his meth bubble, pulls it behind his back, and the man chuckles again. He is missing a few teeth. He is not wearing a mask. “Too late now,” the man says. “Already seen it.” The guy rubs his mouth with the back of his hand. He seems to be missing a few teeth. “That shit’ll fuck you up,” the man says. “The brown stuff will break your body, no doubt. But that clear shit? It’ll tear up your brain.” He uses his finger to wipe off the tip of a cigarette stub. “And your soul,” he adds, then pops the butt into his mouth. “Got a light?” he asks.

“Who are you, Nancy Reagan?” Adam says, handing the guy his torch. The guy lights what is left of the cigarette, inhales, and his eyes look Adam up and down.

“You wanna know who I am?” the guy says. “I’m your future. You can count on that. You keep sucking on that bubble, you’ll be sitting next to me, wondering why the shadows have teeth. You hear me?”

Adam nods, thinking of Evan. He’ll never be that strung out. He’s careful not to let it get that bad.

“You know what it’s like when you ain’t got a soul?” the homeless guy asks, exhaling. He adjusts the blanket, and Adam notices for the first time that he’s only got one leg. “It’s like being dead inside, but still having to get through the day.” He shakes his head. “Even dead people got souls,” he says. “But some of these tweakers out here? They’re alive, but their souls are dead. Just a whole lot of nothing inside. All hollow and broken.” He takes another drag off his cigarette, holding it in. “That’s no way to live, son,” he adds. “I should know.”

“You don’t smoke meth anymore?” Adam asks.

The one-legged guy lifts his shirt and starts scratching his stomach.

“Depends,” he says. “You offering?”

Adam shakes his head, makes sure his mask is secure over his nose and mouth, and turns away.

He walks back up the street and enters the concert hall. Adam doesn’t mind going to concerts alone. In fact, he prefers it. When you grow up a twin, you get so used to being with someone that you appreciate your solitude when you get it.

People are streaming through the halls outside the auditorium. Adam finds a bathroom and takes a few deep breaths. He has to pee but knows he can’t. His anxiety is spiking. Being this close to this many people is still not comfortable, two years into this goddamn pandemic. He wonders if he will ever get used to people again. His former therapist recommended that he carry around a grounding tool, something that could calm him. Adam has been carrying around a bottle cap for 15 years now, and he rubs it inside his pocket as his heart rate starts to increase.

Someone bumps into him and apologizes, and for a few seconds Adam decides he’s leaving. Back to the comfort of his apartment. But when he walks out of the bathroom, he sees her.

Kate.

Her hair is pulled up into a bun on her head, and she’s wearing a shawl around her shoulders. Half her face is covered by her mask, but he can still see those wide, wondering eyes. Those eyes are what pulled him in at first, having met her at a poetry reading three years back. Kate didn’t have the kind of looks that knocked you off your feet, but her kind eyes and sense of humor took his breath away. She was an empath, and she seemed like the type that would never give up on him, no matter what. They dated for two years, most of it good. The ending, not so much.

She is laughing at something, and at that moment he notices a dark-haired man who’s holding her hand. The guy kisses her on the cheek, and then her eyes meet Adam’s. His mouth goes dry. He cannot swallow. The joy that’s in her face fades. She is 20 feet away, in a sea of people, and yet Kate is all he sees. The man with her rubs her back, whispers something into her ear, and then walks away. Probably doing something chivalrous, like getting her a drink or checking their coats.

Kate looks away from Adam, then looks back at him. He walks toward her. She does not retreat.

“Following me?” she says when Adam gets within six feet of her. Kate folds her arms across her chest. He can’t tell if she’s being playful or genuinely concerned.

“Why do you say that?” Adam asks.

She shrugs. “Never took you for the Ty Segall type,” she says. “He seems too … I don’t know, *relevant*?”

That hurts. Kate was always making fun of his music. He has a few videos from his days as Adam Oz, when he wore the Weezer glasses and plaid shirts and John Deere hats, and when he showed them to her, she teased him for being a “hipster redneck wannabe.” She said his music was like “constipated Tim McGraw” and tried to convert him to that shit they play on alternative radio these days.

“I can assure you,” Adam says, ignoring her dig, “I’m here for the music. Not for a trip down memory lane.”

“Thank goodness,” she says. That’s so Kate. She rarely swore, and when she did it sounded forced. She was always pure at heart, full of compassion and kindness, and so when she started to spite him over their final few months together, Adam felt like he had poisoned the purest cup of sugar.

She looks around, as if trying to think of something to say. Adam can feel his anxiety rising. He rubs the bottle cap in his pocket. He wishes he had a joint or Xanax bar to calm himself down. He wishes he hadn’t taken that second hit of meth. His chest is pounding. His head is swimming in thought.

“A lot of people here,” she says. “Are you … alone?”

Adam has to take in deep breaths. He is grinding his teeth. Trying not to go into a full-blown panic attack. Not here. Not now. He is working over the bottle cap with such ferocity that his fingertips hurt.

The crowd around them is thickening. The lights above flicker, a signal that the opening band is about to take the stage. He has so much to say, but their time is almost finished. He wants to apologize for the way things ended. He wants to tell her that he should have been a better man. He should have been a better boyfriend. He was lazy. He was wrong. He took her for granted.

He opens his mouth, ready to mend all the scorched land between them.

“Who’s the guy?” Adam asks. He hadn’t expected those words to come out.

He can see her face change. Her eyes sparkle. “Well,” she says. “His name’s Adam, too. So, apparently, there is one thing I still like about you.” She laughs at this. Adam feels his chest tightening. She is staring into his eyes. Almost to his soul. That homeless guy was wrong; there is still a soul in there. It’s just dark. And cold. “He’s good to me,” she says. “He’s got his doo-doo together. You know, like most guys?”

Adam knows this is another dig, but he’s not interested in getting into an argument in a public forum. He also knows this new guy, this *other* Adam, is going to be back soon.

“Well,” Adam says. “I guess I need to go find my seat. It was good to see you.” He means this, even though his face is numb now, and his heart is beating so fast that he thinks he may go into cardiac arrest.

“Likewise,” says Kate, and he gives those big, beautiful eyes one last look before turning away. She blinks, her impossibly long eyelashes serving as a reminder of what could have been. What *should* have been.

Off he goes, back into the sea of people, swimming into the depths of rock n’ roll. During the entire opening set, he searches the crowd for Kate. He wants to see how her new guy is holding her, how he’s touching her. But there are too many people. Adam feels unconditionally alone. And not in a good way.

By the time Ty Segall takes the stage and starts shredding, Adam is lost in the music. He closes his eyes. He lets Ty take him away. Basking in the music, Adam feels his body calm down. He closes his eyes and nods his head. He feels alive again.

After the show, Adam walks home alone, like always. But he’s not totally alone. He hears the footsteps, catches glimpses of the shadows.

Someone is following him.

**CH. 7**

**Earlier this morning [Feb. 7, 2022] …**

Evan walks in the shadows. He moves in darkness because the night is filled with possibility. He took the last bus to the north part of the city, where the sidewalks are empty. Somehow, this part of town doesn’t have the rows of homeless tents and gunshots and police sirens. Evan feels almost like he’s back home. They grew up on the east side of the state, where life is slower and it’s not as easy to get lost. They lived in a large enough town that there were plenty of other kids, but a small enough town where they could bike to a lake to get away. Evan doesn’t think about those days often, but when he does, he feels the kind of happiness that has eluded him through adulthood. Being high on meth gives you a rush of pleasure, but that doesn’t mean it makes you happy.

He walks into a park, down a slope and beneath a foot bridge. He thinks it would be a good place to seek cover. He stops and looks for a spot where he could set up camp for a day or two, but a voice comes out of the darkness.

“The fuck you looking at, hey?”

Amphetamines rushing through his veins, Evan considers running into the darkness, toward the voice with fists swinging. But he’s on a mission. He doesn’t have time for distractions.

He cuts through the trees, barely noticing as a branch scratches his arm and draws blood. Evan keeps moving, onto a pathway and into a clearing illuminated by moonlight. Things around him are beginning to look familiar. He walks up a slope, crosses an empty street, and stands on the sidewalk, looking up at a three-story apartment building. He focuses on the corner apartment. The lights are off. There is no movement. He scans the wall, wondering if there are grooves where he can put his hands to scale upward. The speed rushing through his body, he’s feeling so invincible that he believes he can jump the three stories. This, too, he considers.

Then he walks away and heads north, his arms tucked across his chest as protection from the piercing wind. His face feels numb – more from the meth than from the cold. A car passes, and the driver turns to look at him.

“Fuck off!” Evan shouts, pausing for a moment before the car speeds off.

He walks along the curb and kicks over a garbage bin, laughing at the carnage that spills out into the street. He howls at the moon. A motion light comes on, and Evan throws a rock at it.

Three blocks later, Evan turns east and walks down a long hill. He arrives at another apartment building, this one where Adam lives. He stands on the street corner. He thinks about those childhood years, back when they were young and innocent. Before the bullet through the window. Before the move across the state. Before the new school and the new neighborhood and the new kids. Evan didn’t like any of them. He didn’t like the teachers who kept sending him to the principal’s office. He didn’t like the therapists who put him on Ritalin. He didn’t like the way his father walked around town like an abused woman, always slouching and rubbing his hands together. Always walking with fear. Evan wasn’t the only one changed by the move. He was just the only one who escaped.

His brother’s first-floor apartment is also dark. Evan imagines him sleeping in there. He wonders what he dreams about. Evan misses the person his brother used to be, hates the person he’s become. How long has it been since they’ve seen each other?

He’s still standing there when the sun begins to crack on the horizon.

**CH. 8**

**Today [Feb. 8, 2022] …**

The glorious sun is up there somewhere. It glows behind the layer of clouds and pulls Adam out of bed. He sits up and looks at the fishbowl a few feet away. Gold and Fish are flipping circles. Adam rubs his eyes and leans over, almost touching the tank with his nose. The fish slow and look at him with one eye. He imagines what he must look like to them. How large his eyes are. His mouth. How small they must feel. Adam knows what it’s like to feel that small.

He stands and yawns. He feels like he hasn’t slept at all, but there is still enough daylight that he has time to look for work. The money in his bank account is running low. His parents gave him a decent chunk of change but invested most of what was left at the end. Evan got nothing. Adam still doesn’t get why. That money could have pulled Evan out of his current situation. He could have a place to live. Maybe a car. Food. He could make his life better.

Above his desk, Adam has a photograph of his parents. His father is staring into the camera, barely smiling. His mother is behind him, staring at the camera. It’s from five or 10 years ago. Even in the photo, Adam can see the fear in their eyes. The way they spent the final 40 years of their lives. Waiting for another bullet to shatter glass.

Only once did Adam’s father even mention his decision to be a whistleblower all those years ago. A decision that would change the trajectory of Adam’s life. This was two years ago, before the pandemic. His father had had a few glasses of wine, had got to talking about their former life on the east side of the state. Adam had asked out of the blue.

“Do you wish you hadn’t?” Adam said.

His father swirled wine around in his glass and did not look up. “Move?” he asked.

“Do you wish you hadn’t, you know, gone to the feds?”

His dad kept swirling the wine. He looked up at Adam, as if considering the question, then back down at his glass.

“Do I wish?” he said, almost to himself. He grinned out of one side of his mouth, then looked up at Adam. “Do you know what a wish is, son?” He stood up, finished his wine, and, without warning, threw his wine glass against the wall. Smashed it to pieces. As suddenly as a tsunami. Adam and his mother jumped. His father raised one arm in the air. “That,” he said, triumphantly, “is a wish.” He turned and face the shards of broken glass. “A bunch of broken pieces, that you can’t put back together.”

Adam’s mother started to say something, but his father stopped her with the wave of a hand.

“Don’t,” he said. “I will clean it.” He went to grab the broom and dustpan out of a closet. As he passed Adam, he stopped and looked down at the floor. “Some things you can’t fix,” Adam’s father said quietly. “Understand?”

Adam did understand, and he thinks of that now. *Some things you can’t fix*. He’s not sure if he believes it. His brother, Evan, is a pile of broken glass, but Adam thinks he can put him back together. He just needs to find him.

He turns and looks again at the fish bowl. The two fish have stopped swimming around. They are pressed against the glass, watching him. Their tails are wagging. Like two dogs waiting for their food bowl.

Adam scatters a few flakes of food in the bowl and watches Gold and Fish devour them. He grabs his coat and heads out into the cold.

His first stop will be the book store on 20th. They always seem to be hiring, and it can’t be that hard. They also have a coffee shop there. Adam likes coffee. It might not be his passion, but he could do that.

He takes the sidewalk south and turns on 65th. A passing car is missing a muffler, and Adam turns to watch it. As it buzzes out of view, he sees a man across the street, his head down. Adam probably wouldn’t have noticed the man, except the man is trying too hard not to get noticed. He’s not wearing a mask, and Adam can see that he has a grey beard and salt-and-pepper hair. He’s wearing a black coat, zipped all the way up, and blue jeans. He looks up, sees Adam looking back at him, and turns down a side street. Adam can’t help but to think that it’s the same guy who’s been following him.

Adam crosses the traffic and cuts up a parallel side street. He knifes through the shadows of yards. He finds a large bush near the end of the street and crouches, watching the cross street. Waiting. His body is shaking. He needs coffee. Or meth. Fear rushes through his veins.

In the days and weeks that followed their move to the city, Adam felt this way all the time. His parents tried to shield him from it, but Adam could sense the fear in the house, every second of every day. The waiting inside the house for another bullet to come through the window. The extended looks every time their father left the house, wondering if he’d see him again. Decades have passed. His parents are gone now. He didn’t even get to see them at the end. This should be over. Whatever “this” is. Revenge? Retribution? Fear? Adam never fully understood why they seemed to be pursuing his father until the end. Even now, after his father has been dead for a year. Who are these people? What do they want?

Crouched behind the bush, Adam feels a wave of exhaustion. Whatever adrenaline was rushing through him is fading. His eyes are focused on the street ahead, but he is losing focus. His eyes blink slowly.

And then he sees the guy. Greying beard. Black coat. Blue jeans. Adam sees his full face for the first time. Does not know who he is. He looks to be about Adam’s age, maybe older. A total stranger. The guy is walking hurriedly. Looking back. No longer the lion. Now the antelope. The hunted, not the hunter.

When the man is out of view, Adam stands and begins his pursuit. He walks briskly to the end of the street, sees the man turning a corner, and continues on. Adam is trying to keep pace, but to lay back enough so as not to be noticed.

By the time he turns the corner, the guy is gone. Adam jogs up the block, thinking he might catch him at a cross street, but the only person he sees is a middle-aged woman in yoga pants who’s walking briskly and listening to music. Adam hears a dog bark. He tries to figure out which street to take. He finds himself rubbing the bottle cap in his pocket. He turns and looks back, but there’s no one there.

He decides to keep going in the same direction, down another block, hoping to catch the guy. At this point, he no longer knows which side of the pursuit he’s on. He can’t imagine this ending without some kind of confrontation, and he hates confrontation more than he hates top-40 pop music, but he’s already invested this much time and effort.

His heart is beating like he’s on methamphetamines. His head hurts. He’s working the bottle cap in his pocket.

“Adam!”

The voice echoes through the trees, from somewhere behind him. Adam turns to look, and he sees the guy at an intersection. As soon as they make eye contact, the guy turns down a side street.

Adam gives chase, but the guy has disappeared.

He now knows two things. Without a doubt, someone is following him. And the guy knows his name.

After spending most of his life feeling as if someone has been watching him, Adam knows now that it’s not just a feeling.

He puts his sunglasses on, pulls up his hood, and takes off running.

**CH. 9**

**Today [Feb. 9, 2022] …**

Adam wakes from a dream. In the dream, the man who was following him had caught him and was dragging him through the city. Kate and her new boyfriend were standing on the curb, watching as the man pulled Adam by his feet. His brother, Evan, stood on the other side of the street and did nothing to help. In the end, the man dragged Adam to the cemetery, to a tombstone that carries his father’s name. There was a large opening in the ground, and as the man pulled Adam toward it, he woke up.

Adam is gasping for breath. His heart is pounding. He can clearly see the man’s face in his mind. It is not menacing. He had kind, curious eyes and an easy smile. And yet Adam fears this man. Like he fears every man.

Next to his bed, the bottle cap sits on a side table. He rubs it at night, to try to sleep. Some nights it works. Now, he goes to it. He rubs the bottle cap between his thumb and forefinger. He closes his eyes. He remembers how his former therapist called this act “grounding,” a way of bringing ourselves back to the present.

Adam is sweating when he passes the goldfish on the way to the bathroom. His heart is racing. He drains his bladder then looks in the mirror. His eyes look tired. His face looks gaunt. He has not been sleeping well, if at all. He thinks about the man who’s following him. He thinks about Evan, and what he’s doing out there. He thinks about his parents, how he never got to see them at the hospital. He thinks about Kate and her new man. His stomach turns over. He thinks he might throw up. He falls to one knee, takes in a few deep breaths and wipes sweat from his forehead. He’s always hot. When he’s not on methamphetamines, he’s always tired. He asks himself: How can a man who’s unemployed be tired all the time?

He stands and splashes water on his face, then gets dressed and heads to the coffee shop. A guy in line is talking about Spotify being a bunch of pussies for caving to public pressure. The barista behind the counter is doing her best to ignore him. Neil Young is playing on the sound system, of course. The clock tells Adam it’s already mid-afternoon. He knows he’ll have to adjust his sleep schedule if he’s going to get a job, but he’s not sure how he’s going to do that.

He can’t stop thinking about the guy from last night. His hands are shaking. He orders his coffee black and takes the lightrail to the south part of the city. On the way, he peruses gun shops on his phone. Adam knows that his interaction with the stranger yesterday was all the warning he needs. For the first time in his life, he’s ready to arm himself.

He gets off a few miles south of downtown and follows the directions on his phone, arriving at a store that’s smaller than he expected. No one cards him at the door. The guy at the counter barely looks up. It’s much easier than Adam could ever imagine. Holding the unloaded pistol in his hand scares him. He’ll hide it away in his apartment and have it on hand just in case. He’ll keep it locked up but close enough to have access if anyone breaks in. Just holding the pistol, Adam feels more safe. He puts it on his credit card, tucks it away, and goes to find something to eat. He tells himself he won’t need the gun. He won’t ever fire it. He just needs the peace of mind.

Adam keeps his hand on the pistol as he takes the lightrail back into the city and finds a place to eat. The sun has gone down, and the temperature is much colder as he walks the sidewalk. He pauses in a doorway and lights up. The methamphetamines immediately warm his body. He worries that a cop’s going to come along and frisk him. He needs to get out of the city, back to his apartment, so he can put the thing in a safe place.

He looks around, making sure he is not being followed. When he turns back around, there is a man across the street calling for him.

“Hey, you!” the stranger says. He has long hair and an ample torso. He is pointing a chubby finger at Adam. “You’re the guy from the other night.”

*Evan*. Adam had almost forgotten about him. The guy looks like he wants to cross the street, but there’s too much traffic. Adam’s anxiety is ordering that he get out of there. He starts running, with one hand on the gun, wondering why someone in this part of town has seen Evan. He thinks maybe Evan is closer than he believed.

Once he is comfortable with the idea that this ponytail guy is not following him, Adam slows. He is a few blocks from his apartment. He is just around the corner from where Kate lives. It’s dark now, but he is on familiar ground. Everything is flowing through him now. Anxiety. Adrenaline. Fear. Anticipation. He feels the gun in his waistline. There is so much power there. His feet take him to his ex’s block. He looks up at her unit. The lights are on. He thinks of that asshole who was with her at the concert. He’s probably up there washing dishes with her after a romantic dinner. Or maybe he’s serving her wine. Telling her jokes that make her laugh that way she does, when her head falls back and she places a hand across her chest. Maybe he’s taking her into the bedroom. Maybe he’s making love to her. He strokes the gun that’s in his waistband. He remembers what it was like to be with her. The idea of killing someone does not appeal to him; the image of being alone with her is all he wants.

“Adam.”

A voice from the darkness. Adam whirls around, his hand still on the gun. Squeezing the gun.

Standing 6 feet in front of him, illuminated by a street light, is the man who’s been following him. The bearded man.

Adam is pulling the gun out of his waistband slowly, but deep down, he knows he doesn’t have the courage to use it. His anxiety has paralyzed him too many times in his life. In fight, flight or freeze, Adam always freezes.

“It’s you,” the man says. His kind eyes. His soft beard. His salt-and-pepper hair is styled. There is something vaguely familiar about him, as if Adam had known someone like him in a different life. “Adam Brognan.”

When Adam hears that name, *Brognan*, a name that hasn’t been spoken allowed in decades, his body freezes. His grip on the gun loosens.

He turns around and starts sprinting, as fast as he can. He hears the sound of iron on concrete but does not turn back. He realizes he has dropped the gun.

But he keeps running.

**CH. 10**

**Today [Feb. 10, 2022] …**

When Adam arrived home early this morning -- early, *early* this morning – the door to his apartment was unlocked. The panic had overtaken him, to the point that he had almost collapsed.

Now, he is standing in his apartment with Evan. His twin brother.

“How did you get in here?” Adam asks.

His brother is shirtless. Rubbing his face. He is clearly high on meth. Nothing new.

“Unimportant,” Evan says, waving a hand in the air. He is rocking back and forth.

“You look terrible,” Adam says. While he is nervous having his brother here, he also feels a sense of relief. Evan is alive.

“Yeah?” Evan says. “Well, so do you. We’re identical twins, dumbass. I look good, you look good. I look like shit … well, you know.”

Adam is standing across from him. Wanting to punch him. Wanting to hug him. Wanting to … he doesn’t even know.

“You lost weight, bro?” Evan asks, picking at his face. “You’re getting so sucked up, people are gonna start thinking you’re me.”

“Already happening,” Adam says. “Far too often.” He sits down in a chair next to Evan. “Sounds like you’re creating a lot of havoc out there.”

“Do what I can,” Evan says, shrugging and looking around.

Adam stares at him, seeing the child in him. There was innocence there at one point, but that quickly went away. Now he looks like a skeleton. His eyes are hollow.

“People are following me,” Adam says quickly.

Evan laughs. “Yeah? Join the club. Every minute of every day,” he says.

“Shit,” Adam says. “This is about Dad, huh?”

Evan scratches his bare torso and makes a strange face.

“Everything’s not about Dad,” Evan says. “He’s not even here to-“

Adam wraps his hands around Evan’s throat and slams him against the wall. Evan’s eyes get big, then he just smiles.

“You don’t get to talk about Dad,” Adam says. “You hardly even knew him.”

Evan just keeps grinning maniacally. As if he likes this. Adam releases him and steps back.

“Why are you here?” Adam asks, taking in a deep breath. “What do you want?”

Evan is shaking his limbs, as if ridding himself of Adam’s touch. He goes still and stares Adam in the eye.

“How much money did he leave you?” Evan asks.

“Is that what this is about? Is that why you came here? Again? For money?”

“Chill, bro,” Evan says, smirking. “Don’t get all high and mighty on me now. I just think I deserve to know.”

Adam goes to the apartment door. Before he opens it, he stops. He takes in a deep breath. Without turning back, he says: “Look, Evan. It’s good to know you’re okay. It really is.” His heart is beating. He is going to ask his brother to leave.

And then, just a couple of feet away, there is a knock on the door. He turns to look back at Evan, but Evan isn’t there anymore.

“Evan?” he calls out softly. He waits. ‘Evan?” he calls out again. He walks into the living room, looks around, and calls his brother’s name again.

Then he goes to the door, opens it, but no one is there. It’s early in the morning, and he hasn’t slept. Anxiety if flooding his body. He looks around his apartment, then goes out into the hallway. It’s empty. He goes down the back stairway, out into the lobby and looks out the clear front door. He opens it and scans the front walkway. He sees no one. He turns away, starts to close the door, and then he hears his name.

“Adam.”

When he turns back around, the man who’s been following him is standing there, holding the gun. The one Adam dropped. Adam’s breathing stops. He is frozen in place.

“I believe this is yours,” the bearded man says. He is holding the gun out. Not aiming it. *Offering* it. He nods his head. “It’s yours,” the man says, stepping forward.

Adam believes this is some sort of trick, and yet he can’t think of any way to escape. He carefully steps back into the doorway, reaches out his hand, and the man steps forward to hand Adam the gun. The man willingly releases is, and Adam looks down at the weapon, relieved to have it back but knowing he will likely never use it.

“Who are you?” Adam asks.

“My name is Chris,” the man says. “Chris Brown.”

It’s an ordinary name. Adam has probably met 15 Chris Browns in his life, but he hardly remembers any of them. When you have a name like Chris Brown, you’re easy to forget. Adam had a Chris Brown in his kindergarten class …

And then it dawns on him.

“We used to be friends,” Chris Brown says. “A long time ago.”

Adam nods. “I remember,” he says, “now. From grade school, right?” Chris Brown smiles. “That was a long time ago,” Adam says. “A lot has happened.”

“You still look the same,” Chris says. “I mean taller. Older. But enough that I recognized you.”

Adam cannot say the same. He does not remember what Chris Brown used to look like.

“Why have you been following me?” Adam asks, getting to the point. He’s still standing in the doorway. He’s still not letting this guy in.

“I was trying to make sure it was you,” Chris says. “It’s been, what, 40 years?”

“Something like that.”

“I saw you at the coffee shop one day, and I thought maybe it was you.” Chris looks down at the ground. “I’ve thought a lot about you over the years,” he says softly.

“In what way?” Adam asks cautiously.

Chris smiles. “No, not like that,” he says. “I’m married … well, separated. To a woman. I just mean, the way you left. It was so sudden. One day you were there, then one day you’re gone.”

Adam can feel the nerves in his body awakening again. This guy Chris was small and quiet. He had crazy hair and always looked unshowered. He was more into drawing and playing with clay than playing sports with the other kids at recess. Adam befriended him out because there was something mysterious about him. There still is.

“Yeah, the way it happened,” Adam says softly, “it wasn’t easy. I didn’t know we were leaving. It’s, you know, a long story.”

“I know it’s late,” Chris says. “Well, early. I’ve got work in a few hours. Can we, like, maybe do coffee sometime?” He reaches his hand out and gives Adam a business card. It says he’s in securities litigation now, whatever that is.

Adam holds up the card. He grins.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” he says, flicking it between two fingers.

Chris Brown turns and disappears into the night.

When Adam returns to his apartment, Evan is nowhere to be found. He is completely gone.

Adam stores the gun in a box on the top shelf of the closet.

**CH. 11**

**Today [Feb. 11, 2022]**

It’s almost midnight. Tonight. Most of the country is preparing for another Super Bowl, watching the Olympics or celebrating another weekend.

Evan is running. The gang of faceless people is still back there. They are whistling at him. Calling out. Calling him a “pussy” and a “piece of shit.” People can be so cruel. Thank God for the speed. The crystal. The methamphetamines. On the streets, it’s easy to find. It’s rushing through Evan’s veins, keeping him moving. Keeping them away.

People look down on Evan for using the stuff, but it’s keeping him alive. Ice. Clear. Whatever you want to call it. To Evan, it’s like oxygen. Especially at night. To stay alive, you have to stay awake.

He runs along the sidewalk, jumps over a concrete block, and does not look back. Most people don’t know what it’s like to be homeless. They have no idea. People like Adam don’t know how lucky they are. To have a dry place to stay. To have warmth. A bed. Anyone who lives indoors and says life is hard should have to endure death by rats. Hundreds of them, eating your eyeballs.

Goddamn Adam. He was always the favorite. Still is, even after their parents have been gone. Why is he the one who got whatever money they had left? He has an apartment. He has food in the refrigerator. He has a life. Why not Evan?

He rushes down a stairway, down by the water. He hears someone howl. Like a pack of coyotes. Where is a cop when you need one? Then Evan looks back again, and he sees a cop among them. And a guy in a suit. He can see now, it’s the governor. Why are they chasing him? What has he done?

He passes another homeless guy, who is chomping his toothless mouth. Evan promised he would never end up like people like that, but here he is. Thanks to his parents. Thanks to his brother. Why hasn’t anyone ever helped him?

Since they moved to the city, he has always been running. He had friends back home. He had dreams. Then that bullet crashed through the window, and everything changed. You can never put broken glass back together.

Someone is shouting. Evan keeps moving. He is getting closer to the water. He can smell fish and algae. He sees lights of shops along the waterfront, but they’re all closed. Something hits the dirt a few feet away, and Evan realizes someone has thrown a rock. He picks up his pace.

His chest feels tight. His mouth is dry. He doesn’t really have a plan. He is just going away. From the time he was 5 years old, he was always running from something. Life doesn’t feel fair when you’re always on the run.

The dark sky in front of him carries a thin layer of clouds that block out the stars. He can see the hazy moon and pauses to reach out his hand, as if he could touch it. Mesmerized, Evan imagines a different world out there. A planet where he could escape the constant condemnation of humankind. Voices ring out in the night, and he continues on.

When he arrives at the waterfront, he realizes he has no way out. In front of him, even in darkness, he can see the dark water. He imagines the creatures below. He runs out onto the pier, and a starburst explodes before him. The water rises, in the shape of a dragon, and spits fire into the sky. Evan turns and sees the crowd rushing toward him. They carry torches. They do not seem to notice the pageantry happening in front of him. They bare their teeth. Pierce their eyes.

*I am not afraid to die.*

The words come to Evan, and he turns back toward the water. The gangstalkers are behind him now, within 100 feet. Eighty. Fifth. Their stomping feet arrive on the pier, like a herd of cattle.

He closes his eyes. He steps to the edge of the pier.

As midnight hits, he jumps into the freezing water.

**CH. 12**

**Today [Feb. 12, 2022]**

Chris Brown is sipping coffee when Adam arrives. A few minutes late.

“You look like shit,” Chris says, apparently unaware of social mores.

“Long night,” says Adam, who has not slept. The daily meth use is catching up with him. He promised when he tried it for the first time to never end up like Evan. He knows he’ll need to figure out a way to stop, or that’s exactly what’s going to happen.

Chris looks around the coffee shop. He sips his coffee. His beard is scrupulous. As if he’s hiding raccoons in there. He looks at Adam.

“It’s really you,” he says. “Adam Brognan. Who would’ve –“

“Please,” Adam says, probably a little too loud. “Just Adam. My last name is different now.”

Chris stares at him blankly. Adam’s throat is getting tight. He adjusts his mask. Fiddles with his sleeve. His head is vibrating. Why he agreed to this, he cannot recall.

Chris looks like he’s going to ask the obvious follow-up question, but he just shrugs. Takes another sip of his coffee.

“It’s been a long time,” Chris says, setting down his cup. Adam nods. “What? Forty years?”

“Something like that.”

Chris sips his coffee again. He watches Adam as he does it. Like he knows something that Adam doesn’t. He was a wide-eyed kid, but now Adam can see a confidence in him. The longer he looks at this guy, the further Adam gets from the 5-year-old Chris’ face.

“I moved over here 15 years ago,” Chris says. “I’m at a firm downtown. We mostly do litigation and corporate law, but also some estate planning.” He shrugs. “Definitely not what I thought I’d be doing back when we were in kindergarten at Franklin Elementary.” After another sip of coffee, he asks: “What about you? What do you do?”

A question Adam had been pondering the whole way here. The kind of question that takes a torch to his anxiety and can turn it into a full-blown panic attack. He closes his eyes, remembers what his therapist used to tell him about these situations, and takes a deep breath.

“I’m between ventures,” he says. “I was in the music industry for awhile, but I needed a change.” Not entirely a lie.

“Five-year-old me would be jealous,” Chris says with a kind smile. “Back then, I thought I was going to be in ZZ Top one day.” He laughs at that and shakes his head.

“Well,” Adam says, “you’ve almost got the beard.”

A memory flashes in Adam’s mind. He’s hanging out with Chris and Chris’s older brother after school, listening to a song called “Cheap Sunglasses.” Chris was dancing around like a spazz. It was the first and only time that Adam had seen him act like that.

Now, sitting across from this man, Adam sees very little resemblance.

“There were a lot of rumors,” Chris says. “When you left.”

Adam can feel his temperature rising again. He takes in deep, mindful breaths.

“Oh yeah?” he says, then pulls down his mask to take a gulp of coffee. “Like what?”

Chris tilts his head. “That you died,” he says. “Or that your dad went to jail. Or that you got kicked out of school for having drugs.”

“*Drugs*? We were in *kindergarten*.”

Chris shrugs. “Kindergarteners have overactive imaginations,” he says. “What the hey? I didn’t make it up.”

Adam adjusts his mask and waits for the obvious next question. He’s planned what he’s going to say, how he’s going to say it, but Chris doesn’t ask.

“I do some work for a firm on that side of the state,” Chris says, his voice turning serious. “I guess you could say I know the whole story now.”

“Is that why you’ve been following me?” Adam asks, staring at Chris’ face. Chris closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath.

“You could say that,” he admits. “I mean, not initially. I thought I saw you once and was going to say hello, but I had to make sure it was you. Then I got word that there was some estate forms that needed to be completed, and-“

“Estate forms? What is this about?”

Chris reaches down under his seat and produces a leather briefcase. From it, he pulls a folder that has a thick stack of documents.

“Apparently,” he says, “the money you inherited from your parents was only the tip of the iceberg. There was a settlement from the place where he worked that your father never touched. It went to his estate. It can only be activated by you.”

“By me?” Adam asks, his breathing getting shallow. He leans forward. “How much are we talking?”

Chris smiles behind his mask. Adam can see it in his eyes.

“Depends,” Chris says. “Are we talking?”

“What’s in it for you?”

Chris’s smile fades. His eyes are serious now. “Standard legal fees,” he says. He leans back in his chair, takes a sip of coffee, and leaves his mask on his chin. “Enough to make it worth my while,” he says. He grins out of one side of his mouth. “Enough that I found you.”

“How?” Adam asks.

“Not important.” Chris slides one of the documents across the table. “What’s important is this,” he says.

Adam looks at the number after the dollar sign. There are seven digits. He almost falls out of his chair.

“That’s a lot of ZZ Top records, huh?” Chris says. Adam just stares at the number. He’s not sure what’s happening. He leans back in his chair. He looks at his coffee cup but wishes he had something stronger. He runs his fingers through his hair. Chris is smiling with his eyes again. “It’s your lucky day, huh?” he says.

Putting his hands behind his head, Adam leans forward and asks: “What about Evan?”

Chris Brown’s smile fades. His eyes close. His jaw tightens.

But he doesn’t say anything.

**CH. 13**

**Today [Feb. 13, 2022]**

The Cincinnati Bengals and Los Angeles Rams are warming up on the field. Millions of people are gathering to eat, drink and watch ridiculously-funded commercials.

Adam Ostrawski is just waking up. He is 47 years old. It is 3 o’clock in the afternoon. His days have become night have become days. We, homo sapiens, are a species of purpose. Adam knows this. Underneath it all, he is an intelligent man. He is just an unmotivated one.

As he rises from bed, he feels nothing inside of himself. He remembers what that one-legged man in the alley had told him: *It kills your soul*. He flips on his MP3 player and that song, “Rusted Out Airplane,” comes on. Life has a funny way of delivering a message. “Some day you’re gonna come down,” the Eastbound Jesus singer croons.

The fish tank bubbles. Adam goes to it and picks up the fish food. He thinks about the number that guy Chris Brown showed him yesterday. How it could change his life.

Or could it? Adam is aware that the problem is really inside of him. His soul is dying. Every time he puts that pipe to his lips, he is stabbing his soul and shredding it to pieces.

He sees his reflection in the fishbowl. He is looking at Evan. That is who he is becoming. If he doesn’t stop – soon – that is what he will be. The money won’t matter. The money will just give him access to more, and better, crystal meth. Until the money is gone.

His image blurs, and he can see inside the fish tank. He notices something. A goldfish is swimming around, and Adam squints, unable to find the other one. He looks in the top of the tank. Goes around to the other side. There is definitely, undisputedly, one fish in there. How does a living being just disappear?

He looks under the fish tank, the table, on the floor. Back in the fish tank. He watches as the lone fish – Gold, or Fish, he does not know – swims around innocently. Blissfully unaware. At one point, the fish seems to stop, floating in place, his little eye just staring back at Adam’s big eye. Adam wishes he could take the fish into his hands and tell him everything would be okay.

He stands and drops a few flakes into the water. The fish does not go to him. It dawns on him then. Did this fish eat the other fish? The only plausible scenario. He reaches for his phone and Googles it. Do goldfish eat each other? His phone tells him that it rarely happens. So maybe Adam just imagined it. Maybe he just imagined there were two fish, when there was always only one. Goldfish.

He is starting to drive himself crazy. He can’t trust his own thoughts anymore. He goes to take a shower and makes a promise – not his first – that he will stop using the meth. He will stop eating away at his soul. He will stop becoming Evan.

He will sign the papers that Chris Brown showed him, and he will put most of the money away. He will buy a house. He will find something that makes him happy.

When he gets out of the shower and goes back into the living room, he sees the vase on the mantle. His parents’ ashes. They died together – actually, two days apart. Adam didn’t get to see them in the end. They had each other, but they basically died alone. In a hospital. In separate rooms. Their final days were spent quarantining. Adam thinks of a line he heard once, about being alone when you’re born and alone when you die. The indignity of dying alone.

He thinks about Evan. Adam made a vow, practically from birth, to protect him. And now, he’s out there all alone.

Adam is going to use the money to change Evan’s life as well. He needs to make a plan. He’ll quit meth, he’ll put away some money, he’ll find Evan and build them both a home.

He goes to the mantle and grabs the vase. Adam has a lot of plans. But first, he needs to go across the state.

He needs to go home.

**CH. 14**

**Today [Feb. 14, 2022]**

Because it’s Valentine’s Day, Adam finds himself daydreaming about Kate as he sits in Row 23 of a Greyhound bus, looking out at the snow-covered mountains of the Pass. She took him skiing up here once, when they’d first started dating. She was better than he had expected, and she was patient with his wobbly knees and constant falling.

Between his feet sits a backpack with one day’s worth of clothes and a vase filled with ashes.

He dated Kate for two years, but she never got to meet his parents. The pandemic hit a year into their relationship, and it changed everything. Kate held a job in securities for a billion-dollar tech company in the city, so she was able to work from home. Adam had just lost his job as a server at a local restaurant – a job that Kate had helped him to get. Together, they grew apart. His anxiety spiked. She bugged him all the time about sleeping in and not looking for work. She eventually made him move into his own apartment, a few blocks away, to try to motivate him to start bringing in income. She said they needed the space apart from each other. The space turned into days between visits, then weeks. And then, an ultimatum. He needed to get a job. She couldn’t date an unemployed loser. That’s what she called him. That’s what he had become to her. That’s ALL he had become to her.

An unemployed loser.

Then, his parents got sick. But she was already checked out. She officially broke up with him during the spring of 2020. Almost a year passed before he saw her again, at that concert. He was alone. She was with another man. Another Adam. *Apparently*, Kate had said, *there’s one thing I still like about you*. Even now, that hurts like a kick in the nuts.

Adam settles back into his seat and tries to distract himself. He unlocks his phone and reads about the LA Rams winning the Super Bowl, a gold-medal speedskater and an impending Russian invasion in Ukraine.

Someone is kicking his seat. He looks out the window, out at the large, falling flakes of snow. The weather reminds him of home. He has vague memories. Whenever he thinks of his hometown, whatever images he sees are shattered by a bullet through shattering glass.

The kicking continues. Adam unbuckles his seatbelt and turns to see a man and a woman, pawing at each other, lips locked. The man’s hand is up her shirt. They go at it for a few seconds before the guy notices Adam.

“The fuck you looking at?” the guy says. He looks to be in his early 30s. He’s got hair to his shoulders, a mustache, whiskers on his chin, and a bandana around his neck.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Adam says, “but you guys are kicking my seat.”

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” the girl says. She’s wiping her lips and falling back into her seat. She appears to be significantly younger than the guy. Perhaps too young to be traveling alone.

“I understand that,” Adam says, “but is there any way you could you do that without banging on the seat?”

The guy takes in a deep breath and slouches in his seat. “Whatever,” he mumbles. “Chub’s gone now. You kinda ruined the moment.” He starts picking at his fingernails. The girl giggles.

“Where you headed?” she says, now applying lipstick. She’s using her phone as a hand mirror, not making eye contact with Adam.

“My hometown,” Adam says, although the words sound strange coming off his lips. He’s been in the city for more than 40 years now.

“Yeah?” the girl says. “I’m from the city.” She turns to the guy with the bandana, the one whose tongue was halfway down her throat thirty seconds earlier. “Where are you from?” she asks him.

Without looking at her, the guy shrugs. “Portland,” he says. “And other places.” He reaches down and starts playing with his boot.

“I thought you were dating,” Adam says. “Valentine’s Day and all.”

“Just met,” the girl and guy say in unison, not looking at each other.

“He kisses like a mad hornet, though,” the girl says, grinning. Adam isn’t sure if that’s a good thing, or a bad thing. She puts a hand on her cheek, as if telling a secret, and says to Adam softly: “If it’s up to me, we’ll be kicking your seat again later. A lot.”

Adam clears his throat and looks up and down the aisle. Like he’s in on some secret he didn’t want to be told.

“Kinda weird, a guy taking a bus home, all by himself, on Valentine’s Day,” the bandana guy says. Now he’s using a knife to clean out his fingernails, with the focus of a surgeon. Adam thinks, but doesn’t say: *Weirder than making out with some strange teenager on a cross-state bus?*

“I think traveling alone is a baller move,” the girl says. “As a society, we spend too much time seeking validation from others. Seeking escape in technology. Our brains, they’re designed to be a petri dish of thoughts and ideas, not information.” She takes out a pack of gum, offers a piece to Adam but not to her new tonsil-hockey buddy, and pops a stick into her mouth. “Look at it this way,” she says, curling her legs into a pretzel shape in her bus seat. “Our brains are like a computer. An incredibly vast computer, with so much storage space that a 5G network couldn’t keep up. Right?” She sits up straighter, as if making her thesis statement. “So get this,” she says. “What if they only files we put in there are binary codes, 24-7?” She laughs at that. “Get it?” she says. “Binary. 24-7.” But Adam doesn’t get it. “Anyway, we have this like Dos coding or some shit. You with me?”

“Kind of,” Adam says.

“Totally lost,” the bandana guy says, scraping at his thumbnail. “I hope this isn’t your idea of foreplay.”

“Well, keep up,” she says. “Just because some of us drive a Maserati, that doesn’t mean we need to slow down for every mo-ped.” She takes in a deep breath and pats the back of the empty seat next to Adam’s, like a drum. “So if we’re just padding our minds with information all the time, we’re not advancing. If nobody’s bringing in fresh ideas, we’re just feeding this interface with …” She pauses and looks at Adam, then at the bandana guy. He is folding up his jackknife. Adam wonders how he got it onto the bus, as he doesn’t look like he could afford a ticket. “Okay, how about this?” the girl says. “We’re in a car. But instead of going anywhere, we’re just looking at maps all day. Map of Yakima. Map of Wenatchee. Map of Montana. Michigan. Montenegro. That’s all we’re doing, looking at maps.”

“Is this going somewhere?” the bandana guy says, fiddling with the armrest on the aisle.

“Exactly,” the girl says. “We’re not *going* anywhere. That’s what it’s like, looking at your phone all day, taking in information. Your brain is just becoming a storage bin. It’s not actually working. Not like it’s supposed to. Our brains are becoming suppositories for useless facts, instead of rich forests of biodiverse ecosystems of thought, like they’re supposed to be.”

She closes her eyes, as if fighting back tears. Adam looks at the bandana guy, who makes eye contact with him for the first time. He shrugs, as if to say: *What the hell, she knows how to kiss.*

“How old are you?” Adam asks the girl.

Without opening her eyes, she says: “Age is a social construct. A way of helping others identify us without actually knowing what’s in our minds, our souls, without knowing our experience. Right?” She opens her eyes. “But, yeah, seventeen.”

“Seven*teen*?” the bandana guy says, squirming to look at her.

“Again, a meaningless number attached to a need for common identity,” she says. She looks out the window. “My last boyfriend was 39,” she adds, as an afterthought. “And he said I kissed like I was 35.”

The bandana guy has a look on his face like he wants to spit something out.

“You married?” the teen girl says suddenly. She’s looking at Adam now. “Not that it matters,” she says. “I’m game for whatevs.”

Adam is now the one feeling like he has something vial in his mouth.

“I’m not interested in committing a felony, if that’s what you mean,” Adam says.

The bandana guy nods his head and says, quietly: “Fifteen will get you twenty. Huh, brother?”

Adam looks at his watch. He can’t believe he’s going to have to sit with these two for another – what? Three, four hours?

He turns back around and unlocks his phone. He plugs headphones into it and listens to a couple Say Zuzu songs, then flips on Richmond Fontaine’s *Miles From* album, a perfect collection of road trip tunes. At some point, he drifts off, waking up to the lights of his hometown in the distance. The sun is going down behind the clouds. He wonders if he’s dressed warm enough for the cold temperatures on this side of the state. It’s been more than 40 years, and he’s never come back. A rush of fear thrums through his veins, as if he’s taken a hit of methamphetamines. Today is Day 1 without them, and Adam feels like he could go back to sleep and fall into a five-day slumber.

“What do you do?” a voice says from behind him. He turns to see the teen-aged girl, curled up under a blanket. Adam yawns.

“I’m kind of between ventures at the moment,” he says, rubbing his eyes.

“Aren’t we all, brother,” the bandana guy says, his eyes closed and his head tilted and his ear resting on a denim jacket.

“Like a rolling stone,” the girl says, sitting up to look out at the descending darkness. “Those who stop for too long get covered in moss. Or something like that.”

“You seem a little young to be quoting Bob Dylan,” the bandana guy says, his eyes still closed.

“Misquoting, actually,” Adam says, but no one seems to hear him.

“He’s still alive,” the girl says. “Like it matters. He’s one of the greatest songwriters of all time.”

The three of them spend the next 20 minutes debating whether *Blood on the Tracks*, *Highway 61 Revisted* or *Blonde on Blonde* reigns supreme. When the bus pulls into the terminal, Adam can feel a rush of anticipation rising inside of him.

He reaches into his backpack and rubs the vase. He can feel his parents beside him.

**Today [Feb. 15, 2022]**

*“A parking lot/A movie screen/I don’t feel anything … Now that I’m in town.”*

“In Town,” the opening track to Whiskeytown’s seminal album *Strangers Almanac*, rings through Adam’s head as he sits in the back of a Lyft that takes him through the streets of his hometown. While it’s far from an abandoned parking lot and weeded-over drive-in theatre, it most certainly is a town. Now he lives in the city, and this is just a town. There are plenty of buildings, but none of them are taller than five or six stories. There are cars and people, but not crawling over each other like a colony of ants.

The driver takes him to the edge of town, to where Adam spent the first five years of his life. He was hoping maybe seeing the street names would remind him of where his old house was, but this part of town only seems vaguely familiar. Like some kind of VHS movie he hasn’t watched in years.

An idea dawns on him.

“Take me to Franklin Elementary,” he says. The mind is a fascinating place. Sometimes the memories stored in there are not accessible. Like when you haven’t thought of someone in years, then they walk by you and the name “Dennis” pops into your head. He is hoping the same will happen when he stands in front of the school. His body will just start moving toward the path he took home.

Franklin Elementary School sits inside a brick building that looks very different from how Adam remembers it. As he gets out of the car, he realizes how much the world has changed in the 40 years since he’s been in town. He stares up at the building, turns around to face the street, and waits for a rush of familiarity that never comes. He looks to the east, then to the west.

“Excuse me.”

He turns to see a pleasant woman, maybe in her 50s, wearing a blouse and black skirt. She has an FES mask over her mouth. They are the only two people standing in front of the school.

“Here to pick up your child?” the woman asks, her eyes smiling.

“I, um …” Adam clears his throat. He puts on his sunglasses. “I don’t have any kids, Ma’am,” he says.

Even behind the mask, he can see the woman’s smile fade.

“This is school property,” she says. Her hands move to her hips. Adam looks out at the school behind her.

“I used to go here,” he says. “A long time ago.”

“Franklin?” she says. “You’re an alum? Welcome! What year did you graduate?”

Adam thinks for a few seconds, then says: “Class of ’93.”

Her face looks confused. “You graduated from Franklin in 1993?”

“Well,” he says, “no. I graduated from high school in ’93. I didn’t, um, actually graduate from here. Long story.”

“Oh,” she says, and Adam is not sure what that’s supposed to mean. She tilts her head. He can tell she’s doing some kind of math in her head. “Did you say Class of ’93?” she asks. “From high school?”

Adam nods. “Yes, Ma’am.” He feels like a 5-year-old again.

“So,” she begins, stepping closer to him. She is looking at him strangely. “So you survived the accident,” she says.

“The accident?”

She takes another step toward him. She looks around. They are still the only two out there.

“Come with me,” she says, using her head to nod toward the school.

Adam follows her in through the doors and checks in at the front desk, per her request. She is some kind of an administrator, perhaps the principal or assistant principal. She takes him to a large glass case at the end of the front lobby. There are small trophies and some childlike artwork. She points to a mounted newspaper article, dated Oct. 14, 1989. The headline reads: “Nine killed, dozens injured in bus crash.”

“The Class of ’93 is pretty infamous here,” she says quietly. “Such a tragedy.” She watches his eyes. “You didn’t know, huh?” He shakes his head. He leans forward. In a small graphic next to the photo, Adam sees nine names. He thinks he recognizes a couple. He remembers Hailey Humberth, a cute little redhead. There’s also a boy named Richard Gucelli, who Adam vaguely remembers being known as Gooch.

“Did you know any of them?” the woman asks.

Adam nods and continues to move up the list.

The name at the top sends a jolt of electricity through his body.

CHRIS BROWN

The inside page is displayed next to it, with photos of each of the deceased. The photo next to Chris Brown looks like an older version of the child Adam now clearly remembers from kindergarten.

“Chris Brown,” he whispers.

“A friend of yours?” the woman asks, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He stares at the photo. It looks nothing like the Chris Brown he met a few days ago. Of course, it doesn’t. The Chris Brown with whom Adam went to kindergarten is no longer alive.

“I need to go,” Adam says quietly, stepping backward. He stumbles and almost falls. “Thank you,” he says. Then he takes off running.

When he gets to the curb, a black car is waiting across the street. The windows are tinted. It pulls away slowly.

He pulls out his phone and orders a Lyft.

An hour later, Adam is walking along the riverfront. He is heading toward the river, with the vase in his hand. He remembers a time when his father was still working, and his mother took the boys to the riverfront park. They looked out at the water, his mother explaining how the river streamed all the way north into Canada. Adam remembers how cool that sounded, to be able to get into a canoe and paddle to another country.

The tower that overlooks the water brings back memories of his mother. He can almost see her face. Can almost smell her perfume. He wishes he had known her better. He remembers her always being sad. Some people are like that. He can barely recall her smile, which didn’t show itself often, just that it made him feel good inside. She seemed happiest in this town. In the city, she always seemed lonesome among the waves of humanity.

He looks down at the vase. He can feel his mother smiling at him. He believes she is happy now. She is no longer scared.

Adam takes a few steps forward and walks out onto a foot bridge. The water flows beneath him. Toward him and away from him. He feels a breeze through his hair. He’s wearing his mirrored sunglasses, which reflect back the blue sky. He looks up at the clouds. The air smells like flowers. Spring is near.

Adam opens the vase. He walks to the edge of the bridge. His father loved the water. When they first moved to the city, his father took them to the ocean. His father had stood on a pier and pointed out at the land in the distance. His father told them that he would rather be over there, away from all of this. It was the last time Adam remembered his father feeling so free.

Now, as he looks down at the water, Adam sees a reflection. It’s Evan. He is reaching out his hand. He is trying to say something. Adam turns around, but no one is there. Adam remembers a time when he was standing on a bridge, and Evan appeared out of nowhere. Saved his life.

Where is he?

Adam closes his eyes, breathes in, and when he opens them his brother is gone. He looks down at the vase and imagines his parents, here with him on the bridge. His childhood was not perfect – far from it – but his parents always made him feel protected. Maybe not safe, but protected.

At the end, there was a phone call. His mother was coughing. She said Dad was sick. Really sick. It was 2021, so he knew what that meant. It meant he could not protect them. They went to the hospital. Adam was not allowed inside. He got a phone call six days later. Both were gone. He cannot remember the last time he actually saw them.

He holds out the vase, turns it over and watches as his parents drift in the breeze. Like tiny little fireflies. The sun is shining. The water below is waiting. He feels no sadness but tears well up in his eyes.

He looks down at his hands. They seem fogged-over, despite the sun above. His hands are blurring, and Adam wonders if maybe all that methamphetamine use is catching up with him. His hands seem to be *disappearing*. He blinks his eyes, turns his hands over, and they appear to be normal.

Adam stands on the bridge for a few minutes, watching the ashes touch the water and disappear. He closes the vase and sets it down, then walks back through the park. He unlocks his phone. Orders a Lyft. He is ready to leave home, to go back to the city.

He walks along a path, out toward a parking lot, where there is a car already waiting for him. It’s a black car. The driver turns and looks at him with menacing eyes. He cracks the window.

“Are you Adam?” the driver says. The back windows are tinted, but Adam thinks he can see someone in the backseat. He looks at the driver. He feels a tightening in his chest. He thinks of that photo of Chris Brown, how he’s been dead for 30 years now.

Adam turns away. And starts running.

**CHAPTER 16**

**Today [Feb. 16, 2022]**

Adam wakes up in darkness. He’s slept most of the day on the bus back to the city, and he fell back asleep again a few minutes after walking into his apartment in the early afternoon. He’s heard that methamphetamines withdrawal can suck the energy out of you, but he’s never experienced it. The answer, of course, would be to fill himself with more. More, more, more. There is never really enough.

The fish tank still has one goldfish. Despite Adam being out of town for two days, it’s still alive. He sprinkles some food in the water and turns on some Justin Townes Earle. Second-generation alt-country. God rest his young soul. Drugs took Justin, the son of genre legend Steve Earle. It’s an all-too-familiar story. One that could have been the final chapter to Adam’s own story, if he kept going like he was.

Then he thinks of Evan. He wonders if his brother’s in trouble. He hasn’t seen him in a week or two. Since Evan showed up at his apartment, looking like death warmed over.

There was a time in their lives when Adam could sense Evan’s situation. Could sense danger. He imagined Evan could do the same for him. Once, when Adam was 16 and feeling hopeless, he took a city bus to the Aurora Bridge and stood on the edge, staring down at the water 500 feet below. He hadn’t seen Evan in months, and yet as he stood on the bridge, ready to jump, he heard Evan call out his name. He turned, and Evan was just shaking his head from side to side. Don’t do it.

He wonders if Evan is out there somewhere, standing on a bridge.

A few days have passed since Adam took his last hit of meth. He misses it, sure, but he’s starting to get his energy back. He’s waking up earlier. He might even get a job one of these days, although he needs to find out about the inheritance first. He doesn’t know what to believe anymore.

The bus ride was non-eventful. There were no kissing strangers or too-smart-for-their-own-good teenage girls. Adam did, at one point, see a bald eagle in the massive blue sky above. And twice he looked out the window and saw a black car driving alongside them, then falling back.

Adam is starting to feel like he did when they first moved to the city. Like he can’t trust anyone. Like every stranger means danger. Children are protected from such things. Adults must fend for themselves.

He goes to the closet and reaches up, making sure the gun is still there. He feels a blanket, a few hats, but no gun. His heartbeat quickens, but he also remembers he was on a meth run when he put it up there. He may have put it somewhere else. No one has been in this apartment since then, so it has to be here somewhere.

He whips up a plate of scrambled eggs, turkey bacon and toast and heads out for the coffee shop.

As he stands in line, Adam looks at his phone. The forecast tells him that the clouds are going to remain into the weekend. The COVID numbers are, thankfully, plummeting. He orders his drink and continues looking at his phone. Controversy follows Russia at the border and on the Olympic ice.

“Adam?”

He looks up, thinking his coffee is ready, and that’s when she steps into view.

Kate.

“I thought that was you,” she says.

Adam feels as if he’s swallowed his tongue. At once, he feels excited and insecure. Happy and angry. He looks around and then back at her large, soft eyes.

“It’s just me,” she says, smiling behind her mask. God, how Adam misses that smile. He has a jolt of hope. Maybe she’s single now. “Adam’s working,” she says, as if reading his mind.

Knowing they are alone, Adam has so much to say. But he can’t think of a single thing.

“This is twice in, what, a week?” she says. “You’re not following me, are you?” She giggles at this, but something in her eyes says she’s not entirely joking.

“Just getting coffee,” he says, hearing the nerves in his own voice. “There are only so many coffee shops, you know.”

His order is up. Adam goes to it, and she waits for him.

“One-hundred and forty-three,” she says. Adam tilts his head. “Coffee shops,” she says, her eyes smiling. “In Seattle. And those are just the Starbucks.”

“Yeah?” Adam says, sipping his coffee. “I thought it would be more.”

“It will be.”

He’s not sure why he’s standing here, in front of the woman he loves more than anything in the world, talking about Starbucks. He has so much else to ask her. So many things to tell her.

He wants to start with Chris Brown. And the money. But she speaks first.

“I got promoted,” she says. She does this little dosey-do thing, one of the many cute things Kate used to do. Probably still does. Just not in front of him. “We’re really expanding.”

Adam can’t believe he’s standing here with Kate, talking about work. He wants to tell her about going to disperse his parents’ ashes in the river. About finding Evan, and losing him again. About quitting meth and making the decision to make something of his life.

“Speaking of,” Kate says, nodding toward a fruity drink that the barista has just set on the counter, “I really need to get back.”

He wants to hug her. Maybe even give her a peck on the cheek. But that’s not how this is going to end. He can see that now.

Kate turns and walks out. He watches her cross the street, get into her car and drive off. Toward her fancy job in securities. Her new boyfriend. Couldn’t she have been with a Lance or a Kevin? Anything but Adam? He imagines her, still calling out his name at night, only while in bed with another man. She has moved on. And Adam is still here, stuck.

He knows how he’s going to win her back. He needs to meet up with Chris Brown, sign the paperwork, and start making something of what’s left of his life.

**CHAPTER 17**

**Today [Feb. 17, 2022]**

Adam wakes up on a cloudy, cool morning, still thinking about Kate. Most of the meth is out of his system, so he’s got energy now. Energy to go out and become the man she always wanted him to be.

He reaches for Chris Brown’s business card and texts him, asking to meet for lunch. Chris Brown, or whoever this guy is. He thinks of the black car in Spokane. Adam wasn’t imagining that. All these years later, they’re still after him. He wonders which side this Chris Brown guy is on.

Standing and stretching, Adam looks out the window. Light spills in, and when he turns he sees his own shadow spilling out onto the rumpled bed sheets. He remembers a concept his therapist introduced to him called the Shadow Self. Created by some 20th Century shrink named Carl Jung, the Shadow Self was based on the idea that every person has parts of their personality that are hidden to himself or herself. Some things are in the light, others are in the dark. The key is to go into the darkness, to really explore it, and to understand it without fear.

Adam’s former therapist tried to take him into the shadows. That was about the time Adam stopped seeing his therapist.

He goes to his bathroom and pulls out an electric razor. Adam looks in the mirror and carefully shaves his head, leaving a quarter-inch of hair. He has changed his identity too many times in his life – from Adam Brognan to Adam Ostrawski to Adam Oz – and now he is going to need to do it again. The black cars and the realization that Chris Brown is not who he says he is are enough for Adam to start hiding again.

He puts on his sunglasses and goes out for coffee. He almost forgets his mask, maybe because it’s feeling like this whole pandemic is almost over – again.

He needs coffee. Caffeine is his new meth. It doesn’t give him quite the buzz, not nearly, but without it, he is useless. He thinks of Kate as he walks, wondering if she’ll be there. Hoping she will be there. Adam has not been in a lot of relationships in his lifetime, and his one with Kate was by far the most serious. There was a time when he’d even gone out looking at engagement rings, only to realize he couldn’t afford one at the time.

As he reaches up to play with his hair, he remembers that he’s shaved his head almost to the scalp. He isn’t quite so keen on seeing her like this.

She is not in the coffee shop, nor does he see her as he walks the sidewalks and sips his coffee, biding his time before his meeting with Chris Brown. The sun from earlier in the week is gone, but the temperatures are moderate for February. His light jacket is enough to keep out the cold.

He returns to his apartment and changes clothes before heading back out to meet Chris. On the way, Adam rubs some dirt on his face and arms.

He is intentionally 15 minutes late. His heart is ticking like a stopwatch. Or a bomb.

“I thought maybe you were on Alaska time,” Chris Brown says when Adam arrives. “Nice haircut, by the way.”

“I always wear it like this,” Adam says, scowling.

“Excuse me?” Chris Brown’s confidence fades.

“You heard me,” Adam says as he sits down. He leans in close, looking Chris in the eye. “I’m Evan,” Adam says. “Adam’s brother.”

“Adam’s brother?”

Adam nods, playing the part. “But I guess you wouldn’t know about me,” he says.

Chris Brown looks uncomfortable. He squirms in his seat. His brow furrows.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on,” he says.

“Neither do I,” Adam says. “I know this. My brother, Adam, he said you’re trying to screw me out of some money. Something my parents left behind.”

Chris looks down at the briefcase at his feet. The documents are in there. Adam knows this now. He’s not leaving without them. And then he’ll be finished with this imposter forever.

“Adam,” Chris Brown says, “I’m not sure-“

“It’s Evan. I told you that.”

“I apologize for my confusion,” Chris Brown says, “but I’m not sure I’m following. I didn’t even know-“

“Of course, you didn’t,” Adam says, still playing the part of Evan. “Because you were never friends with Adam. You never went to school with us. You’re not even Chris Brown.”

The attorney bends down for his briefcase, as if to leave. Adam reaches across the table and grabs him by the wrist. He squeezes hard, staring the guy in the eye.

“You don’t know me,” Adam says, channeling his inner Evan, “so you don’t know what I’m capable of.”

“Let go of my wrist,” Chris says firmly.

“Give me the documents,” Adam says, “or see what happens.”

With his other hand, Chris reaches into his pocket. “This is ridiculous,” he says, producing a cell phone. “This is assault.”

Adam twists his hand back, so hard that Chris drops the phone. He falls off the chair, onto his knees.

“Please,” he mumbles.

Two tables away, some middle-aged woman is wearing a Happy 54th Birthday! hat as two friends make jokes about her age. They are having such a good time, a few seats away from this chaos. Adam’s anxiety is sending off fireworks in his brain, and these middle-aged women are singing and laughing.

With his foot, Adam pushes Chris backward and grabs the briefcase. One of the women stops laughing and gasps.

“What’s going on here?” she shouts. The others look at Adam, who pulls out the documents, shoves them under his arm, and takes off into the streets of the city.

Adam doesn’t see it, but a man sitting in the driver’s seat of a parked black car starts his engine.

**CHAPTER 18**

**Today [Feb. 18, 2022]**

He needs to find Evan. Of all the things spinning through Adam’s head as he rummages through his apartment, searching for that damn gun, he knows above all else that he needs to find Evan. He’s put Evan in a bad place. But it was the only way Adam knew to get out of this. To redirect the attention. To buy himself a little time.

The gun has to be here somewhere. A gun just doesn’t walk away. Nobody’s been in the apartment and …

Then it hits him. Evan.

He got in once, he could do it again. Evan is out there, somewhere, with Adam’s gun. And there could be people looking for him. A scenario that probably doesn’t end well for anyone.

Adam is thankful for his own sobriety. His anxiety is vibrating right now, but he’s got enough of a clear mind that he can handle it. He needs to think. He needs to plan. If it’s two miles into the woods, it’s two miles out. He has to strategize. Take each step and proceed.

First, he needs to find Evan.

He rushes out of the apartment without feeding the fish. The documents are tucked under his bed. He’s wearing a hat and sunglasses. He doesn’t have time for coffee. He needs to find Evan.

Adam looks around as he crosses the street. He wishes he knew who this Chris Brown guy really was, who he might be working for. The documents were pretty straight forward and seemed legit. There was an account of cash – lots of cash – out there that Adam’s father never touched. It’s Adam’s now. But this Chris Brown guy, and maybe whoever’s following Adam in the black cars, wants a piece of it. That’s as clear as crystal.

Looking for someone while others are looking for you is not an easy venture. As he keeps his head down and works through the shadows, Adam thinks of a scene in the movie, Momento, where the lead character thinks: “I’m chasing this guy … No, he’s chasing me.” Adam is searching not only for his brother but also for whoever might be coming after him. First and foremost, the man who said his name was Chris Brown.

Adam knows of a homeless camp over by the freeway. He hopes someone there has seen Evan. It’s cloudy, and there aren’t many people wandering around the streets. He searches under overpasses, in ditches, and alleys, and abandoned buildings. Whenever he comes upon a homeless person, curled up under blankets, his heart quickens. And then he feels the burn of disappointment. He looks under benches, in tents, down embankments leading to the highway. There are so many homeless people, but none of them are Evan. Adam wants to weep for these people, these unfortunate people, their souls broken and lives shattered. They were once someone’s sons and daughters, and then something changed. They were like Evan. Their lives must have been happy at some point. And then someone shot a bullet through the windows of their destiny.

Adam is breathing hard and feels tightness in his chest. He looks down at his feet. They blur, the way his hands did on the bridge a few days earlier. Like he is disappearing. He stops and holds out his hands. They, too, seem to be dissolving. He looks around but sees nothing else strange. He wonders if he’s having a heart attack. He sits on a small concrete wall, catches his breath. His skin looks translucent. His anxiety is rising. Adam closes his eyes and starts breathing. Four seconds in through the nose, hold for seven seconds, and out through the nose for eight seconds. He repeats three times. He can feel his heartbeat de-escalating., His parasympathetic nervous system is taking over, is calming him down.

When he opens his eyes, his hands and feet are no longer fading away. He starts walking again.

No one seems to be following him, but he can’t be sure. Adam carves an unpredictable path, making his way across streets and through alleys, finally coming to a row of tents beneath the highway overpass. He begins asking about Evan. No one knows the name. No one seems to recognize Adam. He’s about to leave, when an older woman taps him on the shoulder.

“Evan,” she says. “You’re back.”

She appears to be without teeth but has pleasant eyes. Her fingertips rest on his forearm. Adam looks down. His arm is translucent again. Her fingers seem to be touching a ghost.

“What’s going on?” he whispers.

“Excuse me?” the woman says. She looks familiar. Like Adam knew her in a past life.

“Nothing,” he says, shaking his head. “About Evan,” he says, placing a hand over hers. “First, I’m not him. He’s my identical twin brother.”

“Yes,” she says, pulling her hand back slowly. “He’s spoken of you.”

“I need to find him,” Adam says. “It’s important.”

The woman’s eyes turn sad. “I haven’t seen him in days,” she says. Adam’s heart sinks. “Not that that’s out of the norm,” the woman adds.

Adam looks around at the tents. He is about to move on, when he stops suddenly. He steps forward and takes the woman by the wrists.

“Has anyone else come here looking for him?” Adam asks.

Her head drops, as if in thought. When she looks up, she says: “You look so much like him. It’s … frightening.”

“Please,” Adam says. “Answer my question.”

She looks him in the eye. A strange grin turns up in one corner of her mouth. “No, Adam,” she says. “No one has come looking for your brother Evan.”

She says it strangely, as if talking to a child.

“Well, they will,” Adam says.

And then he’s off running, out to another part of town, to another homeless encampment, to another chance of finding his brother. And maybe saving him.

They need each other now. Maybe more than ever, they need each other.

**CHAPTER 19**

**Today [Feb. 19, 2022]**

After nearly two days of searching the city for his twin brother, Adam is almost on empty. That Chris Brown has not shown up at his apartment gives Adam a sense of heightened anxiety, as if the guy’s planning something. The anticipation is worse than the attack. Scary movies are all about the anticipation. It’s even more terrifying than a man in a goalie mask.

Adam lies on his couch in the middle of a cloudy day. His body can’t continue like this. Adam needs something to get him going, maybe just a little bump of crystal. But Adam won’t let himself go back there. He’s made it this far.

Sleep comes and goes, and finally Adam sits up and rubs his eyes. His head hurts. His feet hurt. He barely remembers what day it is. (It is today.) His body tells him he needs more sleep, but Adam can’t give up. If he doesn’t find Evan, someone else will.

He fights through the exhaustion and makes it out his front door, down the stairs and out into the late afternoon. His nerves are vibrating. The sun hides behind a thin layer of clouds on a weekend afternoon. On his way to the lightrail, he passes Kate’s apartment. He glances up but does not stop moving. There is no time.

He remembers meeting her at a Farmer’s Market. Before the virus. Before the social isolation. Before the masks and political upheaval and Divided States of America. The world was a simpler place then. The kind of place where a girl could reach for a tomato at the same time as a man, and their eyes would meet.

On their first date, Kate told him about her family. Her parents got divorced when she was 10 years old. Shuffling between her mother’s house on the weekdays and her dad’s on the weekends was tough. Although Adam did not say as much, hers sounded like a pretty simple life. His parents had stayed together, despite his mother’s depression, or maybe because of it, and yet his childhood seemed somehow so much more complex.

At one point during their first date, Kate had looked up at him between bites of a fish taco, as if noticing him for the first time.

“You have love in your eyes,” she had said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

Adam told her that no one had. She nodded her head, took another bite, and used two fingers to push the lettuce from the corner of her lips to her mouth.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Kate said when she was finished chewing. “If anyone else had seen it, they’d still be with you.” She had smiled. It was the first of many times that Adam would feel his heart flutter at the sight of her smile. “Isn’t that what it’s all about?” she said, rearranging the ingredients inside her taco. “Love?”

Almost two years would pass, their relationship would crest and fall, like so many good things, and then one day he would be sitting in their shared living room, downloading music. She would walk in with a single pearl in the palm of her hand.

“I just found this,” she would say, holding the pearly out for Adam. “It was my mother’s.”

“What is it?”

“A single pearl,” Kate would say. There was a lot of tension in the apartment at that time. The pandemic had forced them to spend virtually every hour together, and Adam’s inactivity had continued to grate on her. Hours would pass, sometimes days, without them speaking. “Probably not worth much,” she would say. She would close her fist, turn it over, pull her hand up to her face and gently pull her fingers away to expose the pearl. “Weird, huh?” she would say.

Adam would look up at her, then away. “What is?” he would ask.

Staring at the pearl a couple inches from her face, Kate would say: “That a single pearl is worth so little. It’s pretty much useless. But string it together with a few other pearls, and you have something beautiful.”

She would continue to stare at the pearl, her large eyes dancing. Adam would play with his mouse, clicking and dragging music files. When she didn’t say anything, his fingers would pause.

“Is that a hint that you want me to buy you a pearl necklace?” he would ask.

Out of the corner of his eye, Adam would see Kate wrap her fist around the pearl again. He would feel her frustration.

“No, Adam, that’s not what I’m saying,” she would say between gritted teeth. She would turn away, stop, then turn back toward him. Adam would be looking up at her then. “What I’m saying is that we all need to be a part of something,” she would say. “That’s what humanity is. When you’re alone, you’re practically worthless. When you’re surrounded by others, you can make something beautiful.” Adam would continue to stare up at her blankly.

As she would start to walk away, Adam would think about the pearl that was still in her hand.

“Why do you still have it?” he would ask, without looking at her.

Kate would stop. She would stand in the doorway. The tension would be excruciating. Adam would hear the clock ticking. His heart beating.

With her back to him, she would say: “What do you mean?”

Adam would wish he hadn’t said anything. He would continue: “The pearl. If it’s useless on its own, why bother keeping it?”

Kate would turn around then, with her fingers curled loosely around the pearl. She would have a grin on her face. Not the smile that made his heart flutter. More of a grin that meant she understood something in a way he never would.

“I don’t know,” she would say softly. She would stare at her fist. “That’s a good question,” she would say quietly. “I do not know.”

Kate would take in a deep breath, and in that moment Adam would feel more distance between them than he ever had before. She would walk over, set the pearl on the desk where he was downloading music, and she would go into the bedroom alone. Within a week, she would ask him to move out.

Now, as he takes a break and sits down on a curb, still doing a whole lot of nothing with his life, Adam can almost feel her presence. He can almost hear her telling him to get off his ass and make something of the time he has left. There might not be as much as expected.

All Adam can think is that he doesn’t have the energy. Maybe that’s the way it’s always going to be. Without meth. Maybe he’ll never feel whole again. Maybe his soul is empty.

He wants nothing more at this moment than to fill his lungs with crystal energy. Something to get him going.

He thinks about something they say in Narcotics Anonymous meetings about taking it one day at a time. If he could just make it through today, maybe he’ll be alright.

He reaches into his pocket and takes the bottle cap between his fingers. He rubs slowly. He can make it through the day.

Can’t he?

Still rubbing the bottle cap, he stands and zombie walks through the city. Daylight has faded. He goes to all the darkest corners. He has to find Evan.

It’s close to midnight when Adam finally runs into a homeless man who seems to know Evan.

“You sure you ain’t him?” the guy says.

Adam explains again that he is Evan’s identical twin. The guy stares at him, tilts his head. Doesn’t seem to understand. Or to believe.

“Last I seen you … I mean, him,” he says, “he was acting a fool. Screaming and running toward the water.”

Adam asks what water.

“Down toward the waterfront,” the guy says. “Tweaking out. Screaming like people were following him.” The guy scratches his beard. “Nobody was there, course,” he says. “But I guess you see what you see.”

Adam asks the man to point him in the direction Evan was going. The guy takes his elbow with a strong grip. He leans in close. He smells like bourbon and decay.

“Can’t be certain,” the guy says quietly, “but I think he may be armed.”

“Armed?”

Somehow, the guy leans in even closer.

“I guess you ain’t Evan,” he says, staring into Adam’s eyes. “He ain’t this dumb.” He releases Adam’s elbow. “Armed,” he says again. “As in: with gun.”

Adam feels his heart drop.

With gun.

The water.

Is Evan still alive?

**CHAPTER 20**

**Today [Feb. 20, 2022]**

His feet hurting after another day of dead ends, Adam finds himself at an NA meeting. Narcotics Anonymous. Adam has tried a few in the past, and it’s not really his thing, but he knows he’s going to need to do shit like this if he’s going to stay off the meth. His mind is telling him that he needs meth to keep on going. His soul, what’s left of it, tells him to get his ass to a meeting. Before it’s too late.

Some old guy who calls himself Scott J is chairing the meeting. He says it’s his “belly-button birthday,” and immediately Adam remembers why he hates these things. All the little sayings. The inside communication. The cliques. It’s like being in a cult.

Scott J says he’s 52 years old today. He makes a lame joke about getting old. Adam looks at him, thinking: *If that’s what 52 looks like, maybe I’d rather be six feet under.* Scott J talks about what he was like when he used to get loaded, what happened, and what his life is like now. The way they tell you to do it. Scott J tells the 25 or so people in the church basement that he was miserable over his final two years of getting loaded, and that he was even more miserable during his first year of sobriety.

“The only thing that kept me going, even though every day I wanted to choose death over the desolation of life,” Scott J says, “is the message of hope you hear in these rooms. I would keep dragging my sorry ass into rooms like these, and I would listen to the Ninth Step Promises that they read at the end. They would tell me that things would get better. They promised me a new freedom and a new happiness. They promised that I would find something called serenity. I don’t know if I believed them, but I had hope. The message was all I had, so I had to believe it would happen. And I’ll be damned, but it did. I got all those things. Because of this program, I got all those things.”

He clears his throat. This guy Scott J, who said he’s got more than 20 years of sober time, he looks around the room, at each of the faces, like he’s holding the key to happiness. When his eyes meet Adam’s, Adam looks down at the floor.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned,” Scott J the birthday boy continues, “is that nothing is permanent. When we’re angry, or sad, or anxious, when we’re hopeless or helpless, it feels like we’ll always be that way. But it’s not.” He clears his throat from behind a white mask. “When I first got sober, and my mind kept telling me I’d be better off dead, I thought that feeling was permanent. I thought things weren’t going to get better.” He grins, as if lost in thought. He looks around the room again. “There’s this thing,” he continues, speaking slowly now. “It’s called impermanence. It’s this idea that nothing is going to stay as is. That things will change, sometimes for the better. Impermanence is something I can have faith in. Not hope, but faith. Meaning, I know it will be there. I know when I’m feeling like shit, I won’t be feeling like shit forever. I know when life isn’t being fair, it won’t be unfair forever.” He folds his hands together, like a preacher. As they all sit in the basement of some church. These people. “Impermanence,” he says softly. “Sometimes, it’s all we have.”

The others clap when he’s done, although Adam isn’t sure why. This guy Scott J, and his stupid 52nd “belly button birthday, he’s got these people eating out of his hands.

People respond to his little speech, talking about how much better their lives got when they stopped using drugs and alcohol. Adam feels a little lighter as he gets ready to leave than he did when he arrived. Isn’t that what it’s all about?

When he walks out through a back exit, he sees the speaker, Scott J, sitting outside on top of a closed sharps container, smoking a cigarette.

“You’re new, huh?” Scott J says, without looking up. Adam looks around. He is the only one here. He reaches a hand into his pocket, finds the bottle cap, and starts rubbing.

“Kind of,” Adam says. “I mean, I’ve been to meetings before. Just not this one.”

The exit door opens, and two younger women walk out, barely giving Adam and Scott J a look.

Scott J watches them, stubs out his cigarette and looks up at Adam.

“Do you know what the best thing is about this program?” he says as the women wander out of view.

“What’s that?”

Scott J walks up to him and pats Adam on the shoulder.

“The 13th Step,” Scott J says, grinning. He’s not wearing his mask now. His face is more strange than it was when the mask covered his mouth and nose.

“Excuse me?” Adam says. He has heard of the 12 Steps – in fact, was looking at all 12 of them on a huge banner for most of the meeting. He’s never heard of the 13th Step.

Scott J nods toward the direction where the two younger women walked.

“The 13th Step,” Scott J says. He grins out of one side of his mouth. “That’s the one where you prey on vulnerable women.” He pats Adam’s shoulder again. Adam stares at him, not sure if he’s kidding. Scott J must see something in his eyes, because he raps Adam on the chest gently, with the back of his hand, then turns away.

“Think about it, kid,” Scott J says. Adam hasn’t been called “kid” in a long time. “A pretty, young, broken woman, just reaching for something to grab onto?” He turns and looks at Adam. Pulls out a pack of cigarettes and plucks two from the pack. “Oh, I’ll give them something to grab onto,” Scott J says. Adam takes a step back. Scott J doesn’t seem to notice. “Low-hanging fruit, kid, you hear what I’m saying?” Scott J says, holding out one of the cigarettes. Adam waves one hand in refusal, and the other rubs at the bottle cap in his pocket. “Low-hanging fruit,” Scott J says again, staring off at something in the distance. He puts both of the cigarettes back in the pack, and another woman walks out of the exit.

Scott J goes to follow her and stops when he is within inches of Adam’s ear. “Happy birthday to me,” Scott J whispers, winking at him. He stands there for a couple of seconds, watching the woman go. Preparing for the pursuit.

“Isn’t that, like, unethical or something?” Adam asks.

Scott J takes a step back, as if he’s been slapped in the face. He looks at Adam and chuckles.

“All those pretty, lonely women, just looking for someone to support them in their time of need?” he says. “I think it would be more unethical not to, you know” – he makes a circle with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and pokes his other index finger through it – “pump them full of recovery and shit.” He winks at Adam again, pulls a skinny cigarette out of his shirt pocket, then heads off to chase skirt. After a few seconds, Adam smells the scent of a marijuana joint permeating from where Scott J went.

Adam decides he’s never coming to an NA meeting again.

**CHAPTER 21**

**Today [Feb. 21, 2022]**

“*I went away off to the city/Where it’s fast and it’s cold/And I was all alone/With a million ‘mount of people/That didn’t know my name.”*

Adam lies on the couch listening to the slow purr of Willy Tea Taylor’s voice, letting the sound subside his anxiety. His fingers gently work the bottle cap, which he holds near his pounding heart. The strum of Willy’s guitar offers something like freedom from anxiety’s storm.

Adam has spent most of his life trying to find the tonic for his anxiety. The therapist offered some tips. Meditation. Breathing. DBT skills. Grounding techniques. Weed worked for awhile. Nothing works quite like music. As Willy Tea himself once sang: “Just get lost in a song, and find our troubles go away.”

It’s after 10 p.m., and Adam is still trying to get lost enough for his troubles to go away. Panic fills his chest. He hasn’t seen or heard from Chris Brown in a couple days, yet he is well aware that the guy knows where his apartment is.

Adam hears a gentle knock at the door. The music disappears, replaced by a headful of racing thoughts. He sits up, looks around and thinks about the gun. If only he had it for protection. But he doesn’t have it. Somewhere out there, Evan has it.

Slowly, he creeps toward the door. A floorboard creaks, and Adam almost lets out a shriek. He keeps moving, more slowly, more carefully. He presses his face against the door, looking through the peephole.

What he sees nearly knocks him off his feet.

“Adam? Are you in there?”

Kate’s soft, sweet voice. But it’s shaking. And through the peephole, there is something different about her.

“Are you alone?” he asks.

“Oh, thank God.” And then she starts crying. “You’re home.”

Adam opens the door, and her head is down.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, but she cannot speak. “Kate, look at me.”

When she does, Adam is instantly filled with rage. Her eye is bloodshot, and the skin under it is purple. There is a knot there, about the size of a knuckle.

“Are you okay? What happened?” He can feel his heart pounding in his head. He wants to wrap his arms around her, but he knows that isn’t his role anymore.

“Can I come in?” Kate asks, sniffling. Adam steps aside. He is immediately ashamed of his apartment. A fast-food bag is on the table. Dirty clothes are on one of the chairs. It’s funny how you don’t see the mess around you until you invite someone else in.

“Who did this to you?” he asks, his voice more menacing than he anticipated.

She moves some clothes and falls into a chair.

“He wasn’t on his medication,” she says.

“Who?”

“My boyfriend,” she says. “You know, the other Adam.”

“Where is he?” Adam is reaching for his coat. Underneath her anger, Kate lets out a giggle. More embarrassment than humor.

“Please,” she says, poking gently at the skin beneath her eye. “Just sit with me. I just need to feel safe.” She wipes her face with the back of her hand. She, too, seems to have had a few drinks. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

Adam takes in a deep breath, staring at the bruise beneath her eye. He can’t see anything else. He tries to remember the guy’s face. How lovely it would feel to land a punch on the bridge of his nose.

Adam sits down on the couch. She wants to feel safe. And so she came here.

“I am such a dummy,” she says. She shakes her head. “He wasn’t right for me. I should have … seen.”

Adam has to resist holding her hand. Caressing her hair.

“We see what we want to see,” he says. “We ignore the rest.” A thought occurs to him, one of which he is not proud. He considers that maybe this night will end with Kate staying over, with the two of them waking up together. With them going out for breakfast and talking about a new life together.

“It was my fault,” Kate says, looking down at her hands. Adam thinks maybe she’s making a concession toward getting back together. But then she says: “I accused him of something. He wasn’t feeling well. When he’s not on his meds, he gets a little crazy like that. I should have known.”

“Kate,” Adam says, his anger rising again. “You’re blaming yourself for something-“

She cuts him off, as if she’s not even listening to him. “It was stupid,” she says. “I misplaced some important company information, and for some dumb reason I thought he took them. I said some not-nice things. He got loud.” She touches the dark spot beneath her eye. “I didn’t think he’d be capable of this.”

Her head drops. Adam tries to chase away the picture of this douchebag actually swinging a fist at her. His body vibrates with anger. He clenches his teeth. He wants to move closer and to put an arm around her, but Adam thinks that might be too much, too soon. Sitting next to hear, feeling her energy in his apartment, Adam is certain that he needs to win her back. His life without her is nothing.

“I should go,” she says, sniffling. She stands. Adam starts to protest, but he does not know what to say. He never knows what to say. Instead, he goes to the freezer and gets an ice pack. When he turns back around, she is standing close. So close that his heart flutters. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t have come here. I just …” She looks down at the floor. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Adam thinks maybe in a different movie he would lean in and kiss her. But this isn’t that movie. So he just hands her the ice pack.

“You can’t go home,” he says. “What if he’s there?”

She shakes her head and presses the pack to her upper cheek.

“I told him I called the cops,” she says. “I didn’t, but he won’t come back. He’s not that dumb.” She grins. “Dumb,” she says, “but not that dumb.”

“Can I walk you home?” he asks.

Kate shakes her head. She goes to the door. She’s been in his apartment a few times, but they’ve never made love here. They’ve probably never kissed here. Once he moved into his own place, everything died.

“Do you remember when we talked about moving to California?” Kate says, turning around to face him. Adam nods. She is still holding the ice pack over one eye, but the other one sparkles. As if she’s looking at a happy photograph he cannot see. “We were going to move into a place by the beach,” she says, lost in the dream. “Never wear shoes. Go to the beach every day, maybe with a bottle of wine.”

“I never liked wine,” Adam says.

Her eye looks at him. “Corona Light, then,” she says. Adam can see the image. They are side by side, sitting in beach chairs, their pinkies intertwined above the sand. They are looking out at the sea and the sun above. “Well,” she says, “maybe that would have been good for us. Maybe that’s what we needed.”

Adam nods, hearing something outside like raindrops on the leaves.

He walks her down the hallway, down the stairs and to the front door of the building. He opens the door, and she does not turn back. Holding the ice pack to her face, she walks out into the drizzle of a February night. Adam watches her disappear, then he turns and releases the door.

Something from the darkness comes at him, sticking out something to hold the door. As Adam turns toward it, he feels the crunch of a blunt object striking his head.

**CHAPTER 22**

**Today [2 22 22]**

It’s a few minutes after midnight when a man dressed in a sweatsuit walks in. He appears to be in his 70s, but in good shape for a man his age. He is bald and has a pointy nose. Adam is pretty sure he’s never seen him before. Two larger men stand near the doorway. Adam has seen enough movies: they’re in case he tries anything funny.

“Sorry about the strong-armed tactics,” the man says as he walks slowly toward Adam. The man sits down in a large chair and motions with his hand for Adam to take a seat across from him. “We tried subtlety, but apparently you’re not a fan.”

Adam sits down. His head still hurts from the blow.

“So you’re Dave Brognan’s kid, huh?” the man says.

“I’m not a kid.” The guy laughs. He laughs so hard, he tilts his head back. The four of them seem to be in some kind of a warehouse. The man looks at one of the bigger guys and lifts his chin. The large man goes to a bar in the corner and pours him some kind of liquor on the rocks.

“You’ve got balls,” the man says. “I should have known.” The big guy hands him the drink. He takes a sip. “Just like your father.” He smiles. “He had balls the size of coconuts, apparently.”

“Who are you?” Adam asks, his hand in his pocket as he works the bottle cap. He knows his anxiety can overtake him. Not now. He needs to tame the dragons.

“Gordon Weddington is the name,” the man says. Adam’s facial expression must have changed, because Gordon smiles. “You remember, huh?”

Adam does not answer. He has never met Gordon Weddington, but he heard his father and his father’s lawyer speak of him over the years. It’s a name that sent fear through Adam’s body for most of his adult life. Whenever Adam thinks about his own death, he sees the name in his head.

“Your father and I were business partners,” Gordon says. “Back in the day. You were probably too young to remember.”

Adam is carefully holding his tongue. Vigorously rubbing his bottle cap.

“You have something of mine,” Gordon says, taking another drink. “I’ve decided the only way to get it back is to work with you, instead of against you.”

“What does that mean?”

Gordon sets down his glass and stands. He goes to a window that looks out on downtown.

With his back to Adam, he says: “It means you have two choices. To play ball. “ He turns and looks at Adam. “Or to take a fastball, high and tight.”

One of the goons giggles. His voice is higher than Adam expected.

“I’m listening,” Adam says.

The guy Gordon smiles without teeth. He saunters over toward Adam again, pausing before he sits down.

“You’ve got your father’s eyes,” he says.

“Don’t talk about my father.” Adam feels his face get hot. The man puts his hands up in surrender. He stares at Adam, as if trying to read his mind.

“Do you know where I’ve been?” the man asks him.

“Prison,” Adam says. “Where you belong.”

The man lets out a short, loud burst of laughter.

“That’s one opinion,” he says. “Another is that I wasted 30 years of my life behind bars, for a simple mistake. One I did not make on my own.” He takes another sip. “Your father took away nearly half of my life.”

“My father,” Adam says, “just exposed what you’d done. He didn’t put you in jail. You put yourself in jail.”

This guy Gordon leans forward. Adam can see that he was probably intimidating back in the day, in a CEO kind of way, but at the moment he holds very little power.

“You seem to know it all, huh?” he says. “Well, let me tell you the only undisputed fact of this entire situation. You don’t know shit.” He leans back. Interlocks his fingers and rests his knuckles against his chin. Crosses his legs. “Your father and I started a pharmaceutical company together,” he says. “A very successful one. Our product changed a lot of lives for the better. But it was not without problems.”

“You’re a crook, and my father exposed you.”

“Zip it, kid,” Gordon says fiercely. “Start with this. Your father was in on every decision we made, from Ground Zero, right up until he turned on me. Yes, there were some corners cut. Some shortcuts, if you will. But your father was right there in the passenger seat, alongside me. He was just savvy enough to turn on me before I turned on him.” He grins, then it quickly fades. “Do you know why he turned on me, Adam Brognan?” Adam doesn’t answer. He looks down at the floor. Anywhere but this asshole’s eyes. “It’s because of what happened to Evan.”

Adam’s eyes flash on the man’s face. He is biting down so hard that his inner lip bleeds.

“Yes,” the man says, holding his S like a snake. “What happened to Evan, when we tried our product on him, that was your father’s choice, not mine. He made the decision, it went very, very badly, and then he tried to put all the blame on me.”

Adam is unaware of this part of the story. He is pretty sure the man is lying. The story his father has told him is that Gordon Weddington embezzled money. Paid off people at the FDA to approve products. Nothing to do with Evan.

“It’s a shame, really,” Gordon says. “I mean that, honestly. I wish I could take it back.” He holds his palms up in the air. “What’s done is done,” he says.

Adam’s anxiety is under a blanket of anger now, barely even discernable. Anger is bursting through his pores. That Evan’s life could have somehow turned out differently – if this asshole is telling the truth – infuriates him.

“Not only did your father cost me 30 years of my life,” Gordon continues, “but he also cost me millions of dollars. Money that I never thought I’d see again.” He stands. He rubs his palms on his thighs, then goes back to the window. “Then along came Adam. The beneficiary. The lone pipeline to what’s rightfully mine.” He turns and looks at Adam coyly. “I’m a poet,” he says, “and I don’t even know it.”

One of the goons laughs. Easily entertained.

“What I’m proposing should work out for both of us,” Gordon says, walking slowly toward Adam. “I have the lawyers to turn all that inheritance into my inheritance, but I’m not going to do that. I’m an old man, and I don’t have a ton of fight in me.” He pops a fist against his palm. “So what I’m proposing is,” he says, “an even split.” He is standing two feet away from Adam now. Neither of them are wearing masks. Gordon leans forward to look Adam in the eye. His hands fall to the armrests of Adam’s chair. “You sign over half to me,” Gordon says, “we both go our separate ways.”

The guy’s eyes narrow. Which is amazing, because they were pretty beady to begin with. He’s got the shadow of a horseshoe around his bald dome but shaves his head. Adam can’t help but to think what it might be like if he took a cowboy boot to the guy’s bare skull.

”And if I don’t play ball?” Adam asks, folding his arms.

Gordon Weddington looks over toward the goons and lets out a laugh. He nods his head and claps his hands together.

“Good,” he says, looking back at Adam with a smile. His teeth are yellow. “Very good.” His smile fades. “You have spunk,” he says. “Or maybe it’s just stupidity.” Gordon clears his throat. He closes his eyes. “If you don’t want to play ball?” he says. He shakes his head. He opens his beady eyes and folds his hands together, leaning back. “Who was the girl?” Gordon Weddington asks.

“What girl?”

“My friends here tell me that a girl left your apartment earlier tonight,” Weddington says. “Looked like she got roughed up or something. Who was she?”

“That’s none of your business.” Adam’s jaw is tightening again. He tries to imagine how quickly he could get his hands around the man’s neck before the goons would pull him off.

Gordon unfolds his hands and wraps them behind his head.

“Don’t make her my business,” he says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Weddington smiles, stands up and claps his hands together. As if ending the session.

“Just play ball, Adam Brognan,” he says. “Don’t make things difficult. For you. For me. Or for her.”

And then the guy turns and leaves. Adam sits in silence for a few moments, not even sure if he’s breathing, until the two large men come for him and lead him back to a black car.

They don’t speak for the first 15 minutes as they head toward Adam’s neighborhood. He sits in the backseat, looking down at his hands, which fade into his lap. His forearms dissolve gradually. He looks down at his feet, which are also fading into transparency.

“You believe in karma?” the guy in the passenger seat says as they slow to a red light.

“Excuse me?”

“Karma,” the guy says, turning toward Adam. He has one gold tooth. “Do you believe in it?” Adam shrugs. The guy turns and looks out the window, pointing up. Adam leans over and follows his line of sight. Snow is falling lightly now. The goon is pointing to a telephone wire, where a pair of shoes with laces tied hangs above. A light coat of snow has gathered on the shoes.

“What do you see there?” he asks.

“Shoes,” the guy repeats. The light turns green, and they’re moving again.

The goon in the passenger seat turns back toward Adam.

“Seven years ago,” he says, “a shoe floated ashore at Pier 86. With the foot still in it. You hear about that?” Adam notices for the first time that the guy’s got a Canadian accent. *Aboot*.

Adam shakes his head. “Can’t say that I did.”

The guy turns back toward the front windshield. “I might not know something about that,” he says. “Maybe.” The drivers chuckles his high-voice chuckle. The two goons look at each other. They laugh louder.

The driver looks at Adam through the rearview mirror.

“Think anyone’s ever checked if any of those tennis shoes on the clothesline might still have feet inside of them?” he asks, his high voice sounding sinister now.

“To be honest,” Adam says, looking at his dissolving hands again, “I’ve never thought about it.”

The guy in the passenger seat snickers and looks out the side window.

“Well,” he says, “you’re thinking about it now.” *Aboot*.

Adam can feel his fingers but can’t see them.

“Karma,” the guy in the passenger seat says softly. He’s still staring out the window. Adam can’t tell if he’s smiling or not.

The driver pulls over. They are a mile or two from Adam’s apartment.

“Get out,” the driver says.

“Here?”

“This isn’t a limo service.” The two guys in the front seats chuckle. “You want Uber, get the app,” the guy in the passenger seat says. Even the way he says “*Uber”* sounds Canadian. Adam hears the back door unlock. He opens the door. Snow is gathering on the street and sidewalk.

“Hey,” the guy in the passenger seat says, without confrontation in his voice.

When Adam looks at him, he points a finger at him and holds out his thumb. Like he’s aiming a gun at his face.

“Have a nice day, eh?” the guy says.

Then Adam gets out into the cold, dark morning.

**CHAPTER 23**

**Today [Feb. 23, 2022]**

Adam doesn’t know what to do first. The adrenaline finally wore off early this morning, and after about two hours of sleep, he is sitting up in bed with his head spinning. He needs to find Evan. He needs to check on Kate. He needs to decide whether to take that Weddington asshole up on his “deal.”

*What happened to Evan*. Gordon Weddington’s words echo through his head. What did that even mean?

Adam looks at his hands. He wiggles his fingers. He can’t figure out why they are there sometimes and not at others. He can’t figure out why he is disappearing.

He thinks of that Weddington guy’s face. His goons. The black car. He thinks of Chris Brown, or the guy who called himself Chris Brown.

*What happened to Evan*. More than ever, Adam needs to find the gun.

An epiphany comes to him. The storage room. In the basement of his apartment building, there is a storage room where tenants can lock up their things. Maybe while on a meth binge, he might have stuffed the gun in there. He prays that the homeless guy was wrong, that Evan doesn’t have it.

Adam goes to the basement. It’s dark and cold in there. He unlocks the storage room and goes to the door of his apartment number. He opens the door and sees boxes and some scattered items. He does not remember the last time he’s come down here. He has no need for any of these things. He has stored them away because his apartment is not that big.

He ruffles through some towels and summer clothes. He opens one of the boxes and finds a bunch of old books. As he rifles through them, looking for the gun, he finds a few of his old yearbooks. He pulls one out. From Franklin Elementary. The year, 1980.

The front cover is worn and tattered. Adam runs his palm across it, feeling as close to the school as he was last week, when he actually stood between its walls.

He turns to his kindergarten class. He sees his teacher, Ms. Wallis. He looks at the photos of Hailey Humberth and Gooch, two of the kids that died in the bus crash a few years later. They both look so free and full of joy. Like their whole lives are still in front of them. He runs his finger across the photos, resting on Chris Brown. He, too, has since perished. Staring at the photo, Adam feels as if Chris Brown is there with him. He remembers his laugh. His awkwardness. His love for music. He, too, has been dead for years. A child, frozen in time.

He moves his finger over one spot, to his own photo. Adam Brognan. A name he hadn’t heard for years and years, but lately he’s heard it often. He looks at his 5-year-old face. Remembers how innocent he was. How happy. But as he looks at the black-and-white photo, he notices something else. He notices a sadness in there. This was before the bullet shattered the living room window. Before the family moved and had to change its name. Before Evan started to lose himself. This was before all that, and yet Adam can see in this faded, black-and-white image that he has a darkness in his eyes.

As if he has lost something.

And then it hits Adam. There is only Adam. There is no Evan. The yearbook photos include only one Brognan child. He looks to the bottom of the class, where there is a list of three children who were not pictured. None of the names is Evan’s. He is certain that they were in the same class. He can’t figure out why Evan’s photo wasn’t in the yearbook. Why he wasn’t included in the class.

*What happened to Evan*.

Adam is about to close the yearbook when he decides to flip through the pages, to see if he can find Evan among the action shots. Using his thumb, he flips through the pages. He glances at each of the pages briefly, and has he flips from one page to another, he notices a name. He turns back.

WEDDINGTON, STEPHEN

Weddington. Not a common name. He looks at the photo, faded and pixilated. It’s from Mr. Blatney’s fourth-grade class.

Adam pulls the photo closer to his face. So close that the face becomes a series of dots. It’s a child’s face, but he has seen it before. There is no beard, and the boy’s hair is buzzed into a crewcut.

It’s the attorney. The one who called himself Chris Brown.

“No wonder,” Adam whispers, as he sits alone in the storage room.

A door slams, and Adam drops the yearbook. A woman passes the open door and looks in.

“Oh, hello,” she says. “Sorry if I startled you. I didn’t know anyone else was in here.”

His heart pounding, Adam stands.

“No worries,” he says, touching his chest. “I was just … Yeah, I didn’t expect anyone.”

The woman, a neighbor Adam barely recognizes, continues on her way. Adam puts the yearbook back in the box. He goes through the rest of his stuff, does not find his gun, and locks up.

Instead of returning to his apartment, he goes for a walk. He can’t seem to go back there, to sit in the loneliness, just Adam and Fish. Or Gold. While he isn’t consciously heading there, his steps take him toward Kate’s residence a few blocks away. He buzzes in, hoping to check on her.

She invites him up. His heart is drumming against his rib cage. He wonders if she’ll still be crying. What she’ll be wearing. What he should say.

When he gets to her floor, her door is open. She stands on the other side of a kitchen counter, slicing vegetables. She has tears in her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

Using the back of her sleeve, Kate rubs her eyes. “Onions,” she says. The mark under her eye is smaller, more grey than purple. She is wearing a concert T-shirt from a show they saw together, before the pandemic, back when people used to see live music. The Avett Brothers. The True Sadness tour. The tune of “No Hard Feelings” strums through his mind. *Lord knows they’ve never done/Much good for anyone*. *I’ve got no hard feelings.*

He stands in the doorway until she says: “Come on in.” Adam walks inside the apartment, feeling a flood of emotions. He remembers the first time they pawed at each other on her couch. The nights when they shared a blanket while watching a movie. The day he moved in. The night when he moved out.

“Excuse the mess,” she says. She wipes her hands on a towel and comes around the counter. For a moment, he thinks she is going to hug him, maybe even kiss him on the cheek. But she stops a few feet away.

“Making dinner?” Adam asks, with a hand in his pocket as he rubs the bottle cap. He sees her eyes move there, as if she knows what he’s doing.

“I am,” she says. “For one. I wasn’t expecting company.”

Adam focuses on his breath. He closes his eyes, then opens them.

“I just, um, wanted to check on you,” he says. He feels like he’s a 12-year-old on his first date. “After the other night.” He feels hope in his heart.

Kate reaches up and touches the spot on her cheek.

“I’m fine,” she says. “More embarrassed than anything.”

Adam nods. He takes a step forward.

“I was thinking about you,” he says. “I mean, I’ve been thinking about a lot of things. There’s a lot that’s happened.”

She smiles, in the way a mother smiles at a hurting child.

“I bet,” Kate says. She looks down. “Listen,” she says. “I shouldn’t have come to you. The other night. That was wrong.”

“No,” he says. “Not at all. You know I’m there for you.”

She stares into his eyes. He sees something that does not make him feel welcome anymore. He is feeling a sense of déjà vu.

“I found Evan,” Adam says quickly. “And then I lost him again. But he’s out there. He’s okay.”

Kate’s face changes. He sees sadness in there. Pity.

“There are these people following me,” he continues. “I didn’t know who they were. But it turns out there’s this huge inheritance sitting out there for me. All I have to do is sign the papers.”

“Adam,” she says. She steps toward him. Reaches out, as if she is going to touch him, but then she pulls her arm down. “Adam, I know there is a lot going on. For you.”

“I want to take you away from all this,” Adam says suddenly, putting all of his cards on the table. “I am going to be rich. Like you always wanted. I can give you the life you deserve.”

He smiles, thinking she will come to him and whisper that she’s ready to run away. But she stands still, her eyes filling with tears. He assumes it’s not the onions.

“Is that what you think of me?” she says. “That a little bit of money will win me back?”

Adam doesn’t know what to say. He stands, his mouth open. Too shocked to even rub the bottle cap. He has made a mistake. He sees that now. He moved in too soon. He came on too strong.

Kate walks past him, to the front door. She opens it and looks down at the floor.

“I think you’d better go,” she says. She waits.

Adam turns and walks slowly toward the door. He knows there is something he could say to change all of this, to win her back, but he doesn’t know what it is. He can’t even look at her as she passes.

He feels her soft touch on his forearm.

“I know this isn’t my place,” she says. “Not anymore.” He looks at her. Kate’s eyes make his knees weak, even in a moment like this. “Can I give you a little piece of advice?” she says. “You need to give up on Evan. You need to let him go.”

Adam pats her hand. He looks out at the hallway.

“Never,” he says.

And then he goes out into the world.

**CHAPTER 24**

**Today [Feb. 24, 2022]**

In addiction recovery, they call it the “fuck-its.” The moment when all the work you put into sobriety seems hopeless, and you say … well, two words.

That’s where Adam is on this cold, sunny Thursday afternoon, as he sits on a city bus heading to the west part of the city. A part of the city he hates even more than downtown. A part of the city known for prostitution and drug dealing. As the city goes, there’s no place better to find resolution for the “fuck-its.”

Uncle Tupelo’s “Gun” plays on his headphones. The beat pumps through his veins. For the first time in a long time, he’s not feeling anxious. He’s on a mission, after all. A much-younger Jeff Tweedy sings about tripping on a wrinkle in the rug and breaking shins on rungs of ladders – images that hit the spot for Adam as he moves away from the future he once saw with Kate.

How stupid was he, thinking that everything would go back to the way it was? That’s not how life works. Things change. Then they don’t go back. That’s why you shouldn’t mess them up in the first place. People come in and out of your life. You protect the ones you need.

The houses and families with strollers turn into pawn shops and massage parlors. Adam can almost taste the meth on his teeth.

Evan is all he has left. There is no other way to paint the picture. Evan is out there, and Adam needs to find him. Everything else will take care of itself. Evan will help him decide if he should sign away the papers and give half the money to Gordon Beddington, or if he should risk keeping it all. That might mean moving again. Changing his name. He’s done it before. He can do it again.

He exits the bus at 95th and Aurora. No one comes to this part of town to make their lives better. This part of town is where you go to feed your reptile brain, to feel good for just a little while and then to fend off the pangs of regret.

A hooker winks at Adam and makes sure to lift her skirt and inch or two, to show him all of her leg. He walks past, barely noticing. He has a more important itch to scratch. He needs to get out of his head for awhile. He needs to chase away the thoughts of Kate, of her basically breaking up with him again. Her life is no longer intertwined with his. All he ever did was treat her right. She ends up with a guy who abuses her, and that’s not enough for her to see what she had.

He turns up the music in his headphones, trying to fog his brain. It’s Lucero now. Ben Nichols is singing about nights when the sad songs don’t help, when your girl’s with someone else. He sings along to the line, “She had a thing for writers, and I was never much good with words anyway,” then plays air guitar as he walks along the sidewalk. A homeless man stares at him. Like Adam is the crazy one.

A half-block ahead, he sees what it was for which he came. A 30-something guy is walking along the sidewalk, wearing a black coat with a thick chain hanging around his neck. He’s got cheap sunglasses and both ears pierced. The kind of guy who’s trying desperately to look cool.

And to sell drugs.

Adam pulls down his headphones and, sure enough, the guy lowers his sunglasses as he passes.

“You lookin’, bro?” he asks.

“Clear,” is all Adam says. Less than 60 seconds later, he’s walking away with a bag of crystal meth.

He hits a weed shop another block up, buys a torch and a glass pipe, and goes off to do his business. In this part of town, he hardly needs shadows. The cops have all but given up on this part of town. As long as the prostitution and drug deals go down without any gunfire, the cops turn the other cheek. Adam doesn’t understand it, but at least he can get his high without much hassle.

He ends up at a park a couple of blocks off the main strip. He pulls out the glass bubble and plucks a shard from the baggie. He uses the torch to light up and feels the burn of cool heat in his lungs. He looks around, realizes he’s alone, and takes another hit. Something inside of him awakens. It’s like he’s alive again. He sneers and gnashes his teeth. He closes his eyes and feels the energy rise within him. The sun is fading. The blue sky is turning orange. Adam can’t even remember how many days he went without, but that doesn’t much matter now.

Across the park, a man with a blanket over his shoulders stumbles across an abandoned baseball field. A car pulls into a nearby parking lot, but no one gets out. Adam crouches over and takes one more hit, for good measure, then goes back out to the strip to catch a bus.

As he waits at the bus stop, he turns on his music. Alt-country from the early part of the century doesn’t sound as good when his head is swimming like this. He wishes he had something with a little more tempo. He fiddles with his audio player until he finds something from The Yawpers that has a little juice to it. A song about someone who’s tied to a living-room chair. He closes his eyes and feels his heart beat to the drums.

Beneath the music, he hears cars pass and someone honking. In the distance, a siren. When he opens his eyes, a child is standing two feet away, looking up at him. He looks to be 5 or 6 years old. Adam pulls off his headphones.

“You, like, deaf or something, mister?” the kid says. He’s chewing a wad of grape gum that appears to be an entire pack.

“I was listening to music,” Adam says, startled. He’s tweaking too hard to talk to anyone right now, much less a kid. He scratches at his arms.

“I asked if you seen my mama,” the kid says. “She was headed this way. Left me back there” – he points – “at the Fred Meyer. Says I was being a whiny little shit.”

“Wow,” Adam says. “That’s a big word.”

“I know what a motherfucker is,” the kid says. Adam recoils at the sound of it. The kid looks up at him with daring eyes. “Bigger word.”

“Listen, I’m sorry to hear that,” Adam says. “And I’m sorry to hear about your mom. Truth is, I haven’t really been paying attention. Mick Jagger could’ve walked by, and I wouldn’t have –“

“Who the hell’s that?” the kid says, then blows a large, purple bubble and lets it explode on his face. Using his thumb and forefinger, he pulls the gum off and slaps it back in his mouth. He looks like he hasn’t showered in two weeks. Or brushed his teeth in maybe three.

“Your mom can explain,” Adam says, smiling to himself. He sees the bus coming. “Look, kid, I gotta go.”

The kid chomps at his gum and stares up at Adam.

“Really?” the kid says. He chomps some more. “You’re gonna let a kid who can’t find his mama just, like, sit here? By myself? On this shitty street?”

Once again, Adam winces at the cuss word. The bus pulls up, and the doors open. All Adam wants to do is get on and go away. But he waves the driver off.

“Okay, kid,” he says. “You’re right. Let’s go find your mom.”

Adam watches the bus pull away. His chest is pounding. He wants to take off running. Or break something. He wants to throw a rock or punch a stranger. Instead, he’s stuck with this foul-mouthed, motherless kid.

The little boy takes his hand.

“She makes men happy,” the boy says. “That’s what she does for a living.” He blows another bubble, smaller this time, then pushes it into his mouth. “I don’t know if you know what that is.”

“I do,” Adam says. The boy’s hand is making him uncomfortable. This part of town makes him self-conscious enough, and now he’s got some strange kid holding his hand. Adam tries to pull away, but the kid squeezes tighter. They walk south for a block, the kid looking inside store windows and alleys.

“I’m Miracle,” the kid says when they get to the corner.

“That’s your name?”

“Yeah, you got a problem with it?”

Adam smiles. His body is vibrating. “Nah,” he says. “It’s an amazing name.”

“Damn right it is.”

They cross at the light, and someone shouts at them from a passing car. Adam watches but the driver doesn’t seem to know them. The meth is really pounding inside of him, like a speed bag, and Adam doesn’t know how much longer he can play this surrogate father gig.

And then, across the street and between two abandon buildings, Adam sees him.

Evan.

He’s crouched over, pawing with one hand at something he’s holding in the other hand.

“Evan!” Adam pulls his hand away. Evan looks up, around, and then right at Adam. He squints his eyes, then grabs a backpack, puts it on, and takes off running.

“The hell you looking at?” the kid says. He boy grabs onto Adam’s shirt tail.

“Sorry, kid,” Adam says, prying his fingers off. “I can’t.”

He sprints across the street, barely avoiding getting hit by a passing car, and gives chase.

Evan is still out there. Somewhere.

**CHAPTER 25**

**Today [Feb. 25, 2022]**

It’s past 3 a.m. when Evan finally stops running. He’s not even sure why he started. He looks around, thinking someone is following him. The speed is flowing through him, telling him he’s in trouble. Voices are calling out to him. People are looking at him. A guy who looked like his brother called out his name.

He walks by an electronics shop where televisions show images of war. Of tanks and soldiers marching through snow. The revolution is on. It’s kill, or be killed. Evan pats at his coat, making sure the gun is still in there. His only protection.

Someone calls out to him. He grips the gun through his jacket and turns his head. A child is walking toward him.

“Hey, Mister!” the kid says. “I found her!”

Evan doesn’t know who this person is.

“Get away!” Evan yells. “Back off!”

The kid stops. Looks at Evan with wide eyes.

“Damn, bitch,” the kid says. His face morphs into that of an adult. A small adult. With a large head. He is a government spy. He is wearing a puffy jacket, and inside of it he has an artillery.

“Back away, I say,” Evan sneers. “I know who you are! I know why you’re here!”

This man-child, his face cringes and his eyes well with tears. His lip quivers. The mini-man begins to cry. He turns and runs off.

Everyone is looking at Evan. He sees faces in the darkness. Eyes from passing cars. He looks up at the stars, all satellites looking down at him. The enemy is everywhere. He needs to find someplace safe. Someone who can guarantee his safety.

He pats the gun and walks on through the night. A woman in a short skirt is up ahead, looking at him, and Evan knows she’s with the government. He crosses the street.

“Hey, baby!” she calls out. He starts to pull the gun from his jacket, but she continues on. He sees lights from a bar up ahead. Someone screams in the distance. Then a gunshot. The soldiers are raping and pillaging.

Evan flags down a passing bus. It’s not slowing down. He goes out into the street, and the driver hits his horn, veering to avoid him. Evan punches the rear of the bus with his fist and feels no pain.

He stands in the street, looking out at the oncoming lights. A car horn blasts. Evan raises his arms toward the sky. As with every war, the sky will one day bring danger as well. The car veers past him, the sound of the horn fading as it continues on. Someone shouts for him to get out of the fucking street.

Evan begins walking. Down the middle of the street. When the tanks come, he will start shooting. He swerves as he walks, pawing at his shirt. He cuts up a main road until he has to sit down at a bus stop. He is breathing hard, waiting for the inevitable attack.

A bus pulls up. There is no one on board. The doors open. The driver is a cartoon character. She looks like Marge Simpson. She smiles.

Evan boards the bus. He falls into a seat and ducks down.

“Don’t let them get us,” he whispers.

His hands go inside of his jacket. He touches the gun, rubs his fingers along its contours. Steel safety. His life feels so different, now that he has protection. He still fears the people that are chasing him, but he knows he can rid himself of the threat, if needed.

The driver says nothing. Evan sees passing lights. When he finally peeks out the window, he sees the familiarity of a part of town he recognizes. He reaches up and pulls the cord. The driver eases toward the curb.

On his way out, Evan warns: “They are here. You must protect yourself. Don’t trust anyone.”

He gets off the bus. The driver pulls away. There is no one around.

Evan has the gun in his hand now. He is ready for warfare.

A car passes. Slows down. The driver looks out at him. Evan raises the gun but does not shoot. He runs north. He keeps running, holding the gun, until he sees his brother’s apartment building. He puts the gun away.

He stares up at the apartment. The lights are off. He does not want to scare Adam. He wants to warn him. He assumes that by now, his brother knows he has stolen the gun.

“Adam.” A voice from behind him. Evan turns slowly, reaching inside his jacket. A bearded man is standing a few feet away, closing a car door. The only person around. Evan does not recognize him. “Adam, I’ve been waiting for you,” the man says. “It’s late.”

“I’m not Adam.”

The man smiles. Evan does not like him. There is something about the guy’s smile.

“Adam, please,” the man says. “It’s time. We need to sign the paperwork. Let’s go upstairs.”

Evan turns all the way around, to face the man.

“I told you,” he says, “I am not Adam. I am his brother.”

The man takes in a deep breath and shakes his head.

“I’m not sure what’s going on here,” he says. “It’s late. Let’s not play games.”

Evan reaches into his coat, his hand wraps around the gun.

“Who are you?” Evan asks. “Are you with them?” He looks around. He sees no one else, but no matter. The trees have eyes.

“Pardon me for asking,” the bearded guy says. “But have you been drinking?”

That’s when Evan pulls the gun. He holds it in front of him, forcing the man to put his hands in the air. Evan’s hands are shaking. The man begins to back away.

“What the hell, Adam?”

“Stop calling me that,” Evan says. “I know you’re with them. I know what’s happening here. You will not take me. You will not take Adam. Get the fuck away from here before it’s too late.”

His hands in the air, the man continues to back away. He makes it to his car. He gets in, starts the engine and pulls off.

Evan puts away his gun, looking around. He knows he should go upstairs and warn Adam. But he also knows he needs to get out of here. Before the cops come. They will shoot first and ask questions later.

He feels like he doesn’t know anymore: Is Adam even on his side?

Evan heads off into what’s left of the night.

**CHAPTER 26**

**Today [Feb. 26, 2022]**

Adam knows, instinctively, that Evan is in trouble. A couple of days have passed since he saw him on the west side of town, and he awakes with a feeling that his brother is in some sort of danger.

Adam has been on a two-day meth run. He finally fell asleep at about 3 this morning, and now, nine hours later, he has the taste for another hit. Just to get him going.

He can hear a clock ticking, although all of the clocks in his apartment are digital. Something inside of him is ticking. Like he is getting close to the end of something.

Adam has developed an instinct for such things. It wasn’t always that way. When his father moved him from his hometown, across the state, and into the city, it came without warning. When his 15 minutes as Adam Oz expired, he became anonymous overnight. Now, on a brisk day in late February, Adam can feel the winds of change whistling outside his window.

Change is the enemy of content. Adam remembers moving into his new house in the city, back when he was a child. How there were no children in the neighborhood, at least none the same age as Adam and Evan. His mother had become distant then, as if she had left something behind in their hometown that she could never get back. He often heard her crying at night. When their father would comfort her, she would turn away. When they’d lived in their hometown, Adam could always count on his mother and Evan to keep him company. After the move, his mother lived in darkness, and his brother started to drift away. Adam tried to reel him back in but never could. Evan had become like an empty canoe that slowly floated from the dock.

Adam started working for his father as a teenager, but his father’s perfectionism was too much to take. Adam missed a day or two at work, and his father fired him. Sent him out to fend for himself. Adam tried college but didn’t much care for the classes and couldn’t find a major that ignited whatever light was inside of him. He floated from job to job, making ends meet, and he never felt alive until he became Adam Oz.

He still remembers listening to Uncle Tupelo for the first time, thinking: This is either the worst band I’ve ever heard, or my new favorite band. It took him three listens to understand what was going on. And then he was hooked. Grunge took over the airwaves, and whatever was “alternative” became mainstream. Bands like Bush and Stone Temple Pilots and Smashing Pumpkins were all the rage. Adam wanted something more off the radar.

By the mid-90s, he stumbled onto a local , hourlong weekly radio show that played something called “Twang.” Some of the bands being played took the sounds of old-time country, bluegrass, rockabilly and punk, and melded them into a sound that was a lot like what Uncle Tupelo was putting out in the early 1990s. He learned of bands like Old 97s, Blue Mountain and Whiskeytown, of artists like Steve Earle and Lucinda Williams. One night, he heard the DJ on the “Twang” show refer to the sound as “alt-country.” Adam was delivering pizzas for money at the time, and he finally felt like he had found a bigger purpose. He contacted the radio station, got his own weekly segment, and within two years he was hosting a local cable show called “New Sounds from the Old South, with Adam Oz.” He started a blog and became one of the so-called experts of the genre. If Adam Oz said a band was cool, they were cool.

He attended concerts in beer-stained taverns almost every night. When a band would start setting up, unpacking their fiddles and banjos and harmonicas, maybe even a stand-up bass, he knew he was at the right show. When a lead singer would take the stage in a flannel shirt or denim jacket, Adam Oz would start to feel his heart beat to the drums.

But like most good things, alt-country music wouldn’t last. The genre packed up and took the first tour bus out of town, leaving Adam cold and alone. His light went out. He stopped living and started dying.

Now, as he sits alone in his apartment grieving a lost relationship and worrying about his brother, Adam feels like he has almost nothing left. His only chance is to cash in on the money, find his brother, and move again. Go find a new life somewhere.

As he stands up, the blood rushes to his head. He falls backward, onto the bed. He looks up at the ceiling, remembering what it was like during those two weeks of sobriety. He looks at the clock. It’s almost 12:30 p.m. It shouldn’t be this hard.

The anxiety sets in. What if he can’t stay sober? What if he can’t find Evan? What if he never finds someone like Kate? What if he dies desperate and alone? What if? What if? What if?

His hands are shaking. He holds them up in front of him. They are no longer transparent. Now that he knows Evan is still alive, he is no longer losing a part of himself.

Adam sits up, he reaches down to grab the pair of pants he wore last night. His phone is in there. So is his bubble, torch, and one more rock of crystal. He pulls it out. Holds it in his hand. Remembers that day when Kate held that single pearl in her palm. How she talked about how worthless we are when we’re all alone.

He fires up the bubble, breathes in, and takes a long, cool hit of fuck-it. He holds it in, sets the glass pipe on the nightstand, and slowly exhales. The cloud in front of him dances. It becomes a transparent blob, then a brain, then a ghost. His room starts to change. It becomes brighter. He hears an airplane overhead. A thought occurs to him: that previous generations, in other countries, were traumatized by the sounds of aircraft. Here, at this time and in this place, it just means people are going from one place to another. It just means that their lives are not permanent.

When Adam stands up this time, he feels like a superhero. Strength pumps through his body. He breathes in air through his nostrils. His right hand hurts, but he can’t remember why. He tries to make a fist but can’t. When he looks up, the single fish is staring back at him. Swimming in place. Trying to tell him something. He heard once that animals sense changes in weather before people do, that they go crazy before an earthquake or tsunami hits. The fish twirls around, up to the edge of the water, then dives back down. Swims circles. The fish knows something. The single fish. Gold or Fish. Does it really matter? They both look the same.

Blood rushing through his veins like a hurricane, Adam goes to the fishtank. He picks it up. Stares the fish in the eye. The fish stops for a moment, than continues its frantic dance.

The goddamn fish is trying to tell him something. That danger is near. Adam can’t take it.

He hoists the tank over his head. Walks to the patio. Looks down. Hears The Bottle Rockets song in his head, singing: “If kerosene works, why not gasoline?” Adam throws the fish tank down to the street below. Waits for the sound, his body tense. The shattering glass brings comfort, not fear.

He turns and looks at his apartment. He’s not long for here. Change is coming. He needs to find Evan. He needs to take him out of here. He needs to take the money, change his name, and start a new life.

Away from here.

**CHAPTER 27**

**Today [Feb. 27, 2022]**

Chris Brown is waiting for him at the coffee shop, just as planned. His beard is trimmed. His expression is much different; his eyes are no longer kind. His arms are folded across his chest. His mask his lying flat on the table. He waits for Adam to order a coffee and sit down.

“That was some shit you pulled the other night,” he says.

Adam is wearing sunglasses. He’s been up all night. Again. Methamphetamines are coursing through his system.

“Come again?” Adam says, stirring his coffee.

Chris Brown, or whatever his name is, unfolds his arms and leans across the table.

“You pulled a gun on me, dipshit,” he says, trying to keep his voice low. “What, were you too drunk to remember?”

Adam stops stirring. He looks at Chris Brown. Feels something turn within him. Something like a hurricane.

“Where was this?” he asks.

“This guy,” Chris Brown says to no one, shaking his head. “In front of your fucking apartment, Adam. Don’t play dumb. If not for this inheritance, and the handshake deal both of us already made to sign the paperwork and all, I would’ve called the cops on your ass. Is that thing even registered?”

“I don’t even have a gun,” Adam says. “Not anymore.” He takes off his sunglasses. “That must have been my brother.”

“Save it, Brognan.” Chris Brown throws his hands up in the air. “You and this Evan bullshit. Do you even know who you are?” He looks around the coffee shop, then back at Adam, as if noticing him for the first time. “You’re fucked-up right now, aren’t you?” he asks, keeping his voice down again. “You’re high. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Relax, Nancy Reagan,” Adam says, putting his sunglasses back on. “I just need my coffee. That’s all.” He stirs and takes a sip. “Let me ask you this, Steve,” he says. And when he says the name, he notices Chris Brown’s expression change. “Do you know who *you* are?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Chris Brown says. But the way his body language changes, with his lip quivering and his arms crossing again across his chest, Adam can tell that he does.

“I talked to your father the other day,” Adam says, feeling confident not just from the amphetamines but also from this guy’s reaction. “Apparently, the goal is for me to sign the paperwork and give half the money to him.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” says Chris Brown or Steve Weddington or whoever this guy is supposed to be.

“You don’t know shit about shit, huh?” Adam says, putting a cap on his coffee cup.

“Look, did you bring the signed papers?” the guy with the trimmed beard asks. “You texted me that was the reason we’re meeting, remember?”

Adam pulls the paperwork out of his backpack. He sets it on the table between them. Chris Brown reaches for it, but Adam pulls back.

“I’ve been accused of not having a soul,” Adam says. “I thought maybe they were right.” He shrugs. Takes a sip of his coffee. Then chugs the rest. He’s already out of his mind. “Well, maybe so,” he says. “But I know this.” He holds up the paperwork. “If I was to sign this, and give your father half the money, I would be giving away what’s left of my soul.” He reaches into his pocket. “I can’t do that.” He pulls a torch out of his pocket.

“No,” Chris Brown says, the desperation dripping from his voice. “Please. You’ll regret this.”

Adam holds the torch but does not light it.

“You can’t access the money without us,” Chris Brown says. “If you light that, you’re burning away your future.”

“And yours, apparently.”

A bead of sweat rolls down Chris Brown’s jawline. He looks around the coffee shop. No one seems to notice them. Adam is feeling calm and confident.

“I’m an attorney, Brognan,” Chris Brown says. “My future is bright, with or without you. Believe me.”

“And your father?” Adam says.

“My father has nothing to do with this …”

Adam sparks the torch. A two-inch flame rises. Now the people around the coffee shop are watching. Chris Brown leans forward.

“Okay, listen,” he says. He is holding his hands out, like he’s in some kind of a stick-up. “Maybe you’re onto something there, okay? Maybe I do have a horse in this race. But, trust me here, splitting this money is in your best interest. It’s the only way. Without us, you can’t access it.”

“There’s a reason my father turned on your father,” Adam says, the flame burning inches from his face. A barista across the way is coming out from behind the counter. “Maybe there was a mistake made. Maybe it didn’t turn out the way they wanted. Maybe they experimented with some kind of drug, and it went wrong. I don’t know exactly what happened. Anyway, my dad tried to make it right.”

“Sir!” the barista calls out, approaching them. Adam does not even look her way.

“What happened to your brother,” Chris Brown says, between his teeth, leaning even closer now, “your father had just a big a role as my father did. Okay? There is no hero here. The difference is, my father did his time. He paid the price. Your father got off scott-free.”

“Sir!” the barista says again. She is standing next to them now. “You can’t have a lighter in here. Please.”

Without looking at her, Adam kills the torch.

“Please,” the barista says. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Both of you.”

Adam stands. “I was just leaving, in fact,” he says. He fists the torch, packs the documents under his armpit, and heads for the door.

When he gets outside, Chris Brown tackles him from behind. The blow knocks the wind out of him. To break his fall, Adam releases both the torch and the documents. They scatter all over the street. Chris Brown gets to his feet, wiping his face. A woman shrieks. Chris Brown starts gathering the papers. Adam stands, his hands bleeding, and spits.

“Without me, those are worthless,” he says. Chris Brown keeps picking up papers, trying to organize them.

“You’re making a mistake,” Chris Brown says. “My father, he is a dangerous man.”

“Yeah?” Adam says. “Maybe we were all better off when he was behind bars.”

Chris Brown turns toward him, holding a folder against his chest with papers bulging out of all sides.

“Just sign the papers,” he says. “Trust me on this. It’s the only way.”

With the back of his hand, Adam wipes blood from his chin. He feels no pain. He is about to tell Chris Brown to go fuck himself. But then he hears a voice.

“Adam?”

He turns, and Kate is standing a few feet away. Her ex-boyfriend, the other Adam, is standing next to her. They look like they have been arguing.

**CH. 28**

**Today [Feb. 28, 2022]**

Everything dies. Or does it?

As The Boss himself once sang: “Everything dies, baby, that’s a fact. Maybe everything that dies, some day comes back.” Another famous singer once lamented “the day the music died.”

Adam Oz can’t remember the exact moment when his genre of music started to die. The Jayhawks suddenly had a top-40 hit. Wilco started experimenting with computerized sounds. My Morning Jacket became more like Radiohead than Crazy Horse. Ryan Adams started mocking the term “alt-country.” Bands like Mumford and Sons featured a banjo and became punchlines to musical jokes.

Once alt-country started permeating the mainstream, the public backlash was immediate and fierce. Bands like the Fleet Foxes and Father John Misty came along and sucked all that was great out of the genre, and turned it into something that the mainstream liked better. Folk became the new thing, then Americana. Then one day, the alt-country sound was completely dead. Like Don McLean had said: the music died. The century turned, the Twin Towers fell, and all those fiddles and banjos got locked away. Adam Oz went back to being a nobody.

He meandered from job to job. Apartment to apartment. He fell in love, and even found a way to screw that up.

Now, as he packs his things and prepares for another change, he can’t even remember when he used to dream about anything. The best he can muster now is getting away from all of this. Taking Evan with him. Getting the hell out of the city. Maybe getting Evan some help.

He sets a suitcase on top of the bed and goes outside to sweep up the remaining glass shards from the fish tank on the sidewalk below. The goldfish is gone, having been scavenged by some critter in the night. “Everything dies, baby, that’s a fact.” Adam’s time will come, too. As he cleans up the mess on the sidewalk, he is filled with a sense of impending doom.

Once he’s finished, he leans the broom against the dumpster and heads off for the heart of the city. He will find Evan, and he will convince him to find something better. Together, they will start a new life.

His hand still hurts. He looks at it, watching the veins bulge as he makes and releases a fist. He thinks of the child from a couple days ago, how he’d lost his mother and wanted Adam to help him find her. How Adam had seen Evan then, and left the boy behind. Was this all a dream? He couldn’t remember much from the rest of the night. Only that he had this premonition that Evan was going downtown.

He walks past Kate’s apartment without even glancing at it. He does not look back. He walks with his head down. His body is tired. He still has some meth in his pocket, and he knows he will need it. Need, not want.

The lightrail drops him off in the center of tall buildings, where a Monday crowd wanders beneath the grey clouds, through a mist of rain. Adam sees a group of tents and goes to them, asking about Evan. He sees a man wrapped in a blanket, sleeping on a cold afternoon. Not Evan. Another man says he saw someone who looked like Adam camped out over by the Art Museum, a few blocks away.

He walks south on First Street, eyeing the people as they pass. He looks up at the buildings, at the sky. His parents are up there somewhere. Are they watching him? Have they given up on him?

A man bumps into him. Adam looks, but the man does not seem to notice him. Another man passes, on his right, and Adam recognizes him from the back. From where, he does not know. He follows, still keeping his eyes out for Evan.

Up ahead, Adam sees a man get off a city bus and grab a woman by the arm. Two men intervene, and the crazy man runs off. He reminds Adam of Evan. But, he is not Evan.

Evan is everywhere, but he is also nowhere.

The man he is following crosses the street, and as he turns, Adam sees the man’s profile. It is Kate’s new boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. The one who was with her yesterday. The one who punched Kate in the face. Anger fills Adam as he stops and watches the man put on his suitcoat and head for the Art Museum. He walks beside a Hammering Man statue, on his way to work. Adam watches him, imagining the guy going into work. Imagining him carrying on with a normal life, as if everything were okay. As if he didn’t strike a woman. A woman that Adam loves, and always will.

Adam sits down. Watches the passing faces. Takes notice whenever anyone who looks like Evan comes into view. An hour passes, then two.

Adam sees Kate’s ex-boyfriend again, this time leaving work. He heads north, probably for the lightrail. Adam imagines following him home, taking a hammer to his head.

Then he hears something like a gunshot. He stands up. People are stopping to look. Someone has set off a firecracker. Adam’s anxiety is building. His heart is coming up into his throat. Too many people. Too much noise. Evan is here, somewhere. Adam just can’t find him.

He takes in a deep breath. Closes his eyes. Rubs the bottle cap. The anxiety builds, like a wave in the ocean. There are times when it engulfs him, takes him under. When he feels like he is drowning.

He puts on his headphones. The music calms him. James McMurtry, Houndmouth. The Yawpers’ “American Man.”

Of course, the music has not died. It never will. There’s always something out there, if you really look. Spirit Family Reunion. Jason Isbell. The Too’s. He wonders what will come next. He thinks maybe he can be at the cutting edge. Maybe he can start his own show, maybe become famous. Instagram famous. Get hundreds of thousands of TikTok followers.

Maybe all that is his destiny. Or maybe it just was. Once. Maybe it can never be that way again.

Maybe Adam Ostrawski is coming to the end of something himself.

He can hear a clock ticking. He opens his eyes. He is outside the lightrail station. There are people all around him.

He is all alone.

**CH. 29:**

**Today [March 1, 2022]**

And so we have made it here. Adam is back in the city. A warm front has taken over, but light rain cools off the downtown square. He can feel a sinister breeze. Adam woke up this afternoon with the taste of death on his lips. He can feel the end of something, coming in from the nearby ocean.

This is where we began.

The skyscrapers that surround him remind Adam that we are all in a fishbowl, that everything is bigger than us. We are all floating in an ever-changing body of water. Like Adam’s goldfish, we are all alone eventually -- even if Adam is more alone than most.

The clouds overhead tell him that something dark is coming. Strangers pass and do not seem to notice him. He has that sense that he’s being followed. His sunglasses, despite the rain, cover intoxicated eyes. He looks back and sees dozens of human beings, taking in the day.

A day of death.

Adam could smell it in the air when he awoke this morning. He lumbered out of bed and hit the bubble a couple of times, then headed out into the wet afternoon.

###

Evan stands on the corner of First Avenue, watching the people in suits pass on a midweek afternoon. Across the street, a large statue of a man hammering draws attention of passersby, as it always does. Evan scans the faces. He is no longer so concerned with who is following him as he is with finding someone else. He feels his chest tightening. In the sky above, a Triple-7 cuts through the clouds on its way to the airport. Seagulls call out from the water a few blocks away.

He looks around. Picks at his face. Speed pumps inside of him. Down the street to his left, he sees a music venue. A strip club. The market. He smells popcorn and coffee in the air. He hears people talking about war. Tanks and mortars. He looks up toward the sky, then back at the people who surround him.

Waves of humans pass by. Evan focuses on the faces of every one of them. He is looking for someone.

###

After leaving his apartment, Adam took the lightrail through the University District, past Capitol Hill and into the breast of downtown.

He departed the train and took an escalator up to the street, where the sounds of voices and honking horns assaulted his senses. The city. Adam never liked it down there.

He found an alley and crouched down behind a dumpster, looking around to make sure no one was watching. He took three long hits off his bubble and resumed his search. He took a left on First, passed the strip club and the music venue, and could see a hammering man on a statue up ahead. He walked toward it, crossed over, and started to feel the rush of amphetamines kick in.

###

Evan spots him. He pulls up his hood starts his pursuit, falling into the crowd. He follows along First Avenue, mostly keeping his head down but careful not to take his eyes off his subject. Something is pumping inside of him, like an open fire hydrant. The faces of the passing men and women have gone blurry. He can only see one person.

On Pike, he crosses the street and heads east. Evan tries to keep a safe distance. He pulls up his hood. The crowd of people thins out. His target looks back but does not seem to notice Evan.

Evan lowers his head, as if looking at his feet. The man is heading for the lightrail; Evan has no doubt. He has to make a move now. That’s his only chance. At one point, the man turns toward him, and Evan quickly looks away. He hopes he’s not been spotted. He slows his pace. He feels the gun in his hand, tucked into his waistband.

Evan follows as the man slows at the entrance to the lightrail station. Evan’s target pauses, then continues to walk. Evan is in pursuit, trying to keep a safe distance.

The man ducks into an alley, thinking Evan does not notice. Evan cuts up a side street, quickening his pace. The rain falls, but he’s sweating through his clothes now. The hunt is more exhilarating than a half-gram of methamphetamines. His heart is pounding at a rate that Evan briefly thinks he might be going into cardiac arrest.

###

Adam once said that his sole purpose on earth was to protect his brother. The thickness of blood has no equal. They slept in the same crib. The same bed. The same room.

And then something happened to Evan.

*After what happened to Evan*, that man had said.

What happened to Evan?

###

Evan makes it to the other end of the alley. He sees the man, crouched down, his back turned. Evan steps forward. Calls out his name.

“Adam!”

The man looks back, fear in his eyes. His face is sapped of all hope. Evan pulls out the gun. Raises it. The man backs up, bumps into the dumpster and falls. Evan pulls down his hood and sees recognition in the man’s eyes. Something worse than fear.

Papers fall out of the man’s jacket as he scrambles to stand. He falls again. Evan has never seen these papers, but he knows what they are. They are from the files this man stole from Kate. This man recently dated Kate. His name is Adam. Just like Evan’s brother.

But he is not Evan’s brother. He is the other Adam. The one who struck Kate in the face.

“Please,” the man Adam says, weakly. Evan comes at him quickly. He feels a sense of accomplishment, just making the man feel so much fear. He wonders if the man has pissed himself. “Please, no,” the man says, raising his hands in the air.

Evan grins. The man’s eyes get wide. Time slows down. Evan can see every pore on the man’s face, even from this distance.

And then, Evan pulls the trigger.

This Adam falls backward, toward the pavement, and Evan fires one more shot before taking off on a sprint. He does not wait for death. As rewarding as it would be to see this abusive asshole take his final breath, Evan does not stick around to witness the end. He dumps the gun in a full dumpster, runs out onto the sidewalk and stuffs his hands in his pockets. People are scrambling all around him, wondering if it was a gunshot or fireworks. Evan speed-walks across the street, through and alley, and finds a group of tourists walking on the sidewalk across the way, and pointing up at the buildings. Evan falls in with them and pulls his hands out of his pockets.

As he does, a bottle cap falls out, clangs on the sidewalk, and rolls sideways into the street. An oncoming car runs over it, flattening the bottle cap into something like a coin. The driver does not even notice.

Oblivious, Evan continues on his way. He needs to get out of the city. And fast. He might have just gotten away with murder.

Above him, the birds take in the scene. They are perched like a camera looking down at the city, witnesses to the scattering bodies and the hooded man as he makes his escape.

You, dear reader, could be among the birds, watching the story end. It is March 1, 2022. You have made it to the end.

The end.

But the story does not end here.

**CH. 30**

**Today [March 2, 2022]**

The end.

Two words that say so much. But is there ever really an end? There are days that follow. Years. Generations.

This story has another day, at least. A killer, after all, is on the loose.

And so we all arrive in the patrol car of Detective Javier Nelson, who sits outside Adam’s apartment calling for backup. He’s punching numbers into a computer system when someone taps on the car window, startling the detective. He looks up and sees the suspect, staring back at him. The detective reaches for his gun.

“Apologies,” says the suspect, whose name is Adam Ostraswski, through the car window. The guy is holding up his hands. Det. Nelson stares at him, feeling some combination of fear and anger. “I was just, you know, wondering what’s going on. Why you’re here.”

The detective waves him away. His hand is still on the gun. When the suspect doesn’t move, Det. Nelson shouts: “Step back! A few steps. Do as I say.”

The suspect shows no sense of fear. Nelson can usually smell guilt. This guy looks confused.

When he’s at a safe distance, Nelson opens the door and steps out, his gun drawn.

“Down,” he says. “Stomach on the pavement.”

“But I-“

“You have the right to remain silent,” Nelson says, and the man kneels down, then lies on his chest. He places his hands on the back of his head. Nelson finishes reading the Miranda rights and the man turns his head. He is grinning.

“Shit,” the suspect, this Adam Ostrawski, says. “This is about Evan. I can almost guarantee, it’s about Evan.”

“Evan,” Det. Nelson says, steadying his gun as he kicks Adam’s legs out. As he waits for backup. “Who’s that?”

Nelson begins frisking him.

“I have an identical twin,” Adam says. Det. Nelson is holding the gun with one hand, deciding that the man is not armed. “He’s had a rough life,” Adam says. “If he’s done something, I can –“

“Just stay where you are,” Nelson says. He walks around to the front of Adam, who looks up at him with pleading eyes. Nelson pulls out a notebook. “A twin, huh?”

“Swear to God,” the suspect says. “What’s happened? What’s Evan done now?”

Det. Nelson can see concern in the guy’s eyes. Not for himself, but for his brother.

“Where could I find him?” Nelson asks.

Adam rests his forehead on the cement.

“Wish I knew,” he says. “I haven’t seen him for several weeks.” The guy’s really broken up. The guy doesn’t look or act like a killer. But Nelson’s been fooled before.

“Does he have a residence?” the detective asks. Adam shakes his head.

Backup arrives. A couple other cops who Nelson knows well get out, reaching for their guns. Nelson lifts up Adam and loads him into the back of the car.

“He looks just like me,” Adam says. “I assure you, there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“Oh, yeah?” Nelson is running a search now.

“People are confusing me for him just about every day. It’s a simple mistake. Can you at least tell me what he’s done?”

“Same last name?” Nelson asks.

“Excuse me?”

“Ostrawski?” He spells it. “First name, Evan?”

In his rearview mirror, he sees the suspect nod.

“There was a murder yesterday,” Det. Nelson says, still punching numbers on the computer. “You probably saw it on the news?”

“Shit,” Adam mumbles. Nelson watches him collapse into the seat. “That was Evan?”

“You tell me,” Nelson says. “You certainly fit the witness descriptions. Better lead me to this Evan guy, or you’re our best match.”

“But I can’t …” The guy’s voice trails off. He runs a hand over his scalp. His eyes are bloodshot, like he’s been up all night. “I don’t know where he is,” the guy says.

Det. Nelson turns to look at him.

“Of course you don’t,” he says. “There’s this. No Evan Ostrawski in the system. The guy doesn’t exist.”

Adam leans forward. “OK, try Brognan,” he says. “Evan Brognan. That used to be our name. We were in the Witness Protection Program. Back in the late 70s, early 80s.”

“I bet,” Nelson mumbles, and he turns back to his computer. A third patrol car pulls up. People are starting to gather on the sidewalk. “Tell you what,” Det. Nelson says, putting on his seatbelt. “How about we finish this interrogation at the precinct?”

“Interrogation? I have an alibi. I was nowhere near the shooting. Like you said, I just saw it on the news.”

Nelson pulls the car into Drive and doesn’t say another word until they arrive at booking.

###

His wrists and ankles shackled, Adam looks down at the floor and hears music coming from around a corner. A janitor shuffles by with an MP3 player on low. Adam looks down at his hands, which are disappearing again. He wishes he could rub his bottle cap. He doesn’t know where it’s gone. Did the cop take it when he was frisking him? Adam’s heart is racing. He can’t calm it down. He tries to focus on the music, which moves away from him as the janitor slowly walks toward the bathrooms.

Adam stands, his wrists and ankles handcuffed, and shuffles over toward him. The janitor is emptying a garbage can. He looks up at Adam.

“Help you?” he asks.

Two cops move slowly toward Adam, taking their places on either side of him.

“The music,” Adam says softly. “What is it?”

The janitor stares at him, then grabs his MP3 player. He looks at the screen.

“Something called I Love You Alien,” the janitor says. “New album that dropped yesterday.”

“I like it,” Adam says. “Sounds like psychedelic, punk, a little Kinks-meet-The-‘Mats vibe. Kind of sinister, too. Would be a good soundtrack to a murder.” He laughs, awkwardly, and the janitor looks away. “Weird band name, though,” Adam adds.

“I pushed through the resistance,” the janitor sings to himself, bobbing his head. “Get paid for the persistence.” He stops singing, looks at Adam and winks. “Who’s scrawny now?” the guy asks, cryptically.

“Sir,” one of the cops says to Adam, “please return to your seat.”

Adam turns to see the guy’s got one hand on a taser. He turns away from the janitor.

“Chris Brown,” the janitor calls out.

Adam’s body tightens. He turns to look at the janitor, who is holding up the MP3 player while tearing off a piece of beef jerky between his teeth. “That’s the artist’s name. I Love You Alien is just a moniker. Says here on Bandcamp that he played all the instruments himself.”

“Chris Brown,” Adam says, chewing on the words as they come out of his mouth.

The janitor looks up from his MP3 player. He looks Adam dead in the eye.

“Not *that* Chris Brown,” he says. “C’mon. Common name.”

Adam nods, turns away, and goes back to his seat.

“Ostrawski!”

One of the cops helps Adam up and holds his arm as he shuffles toward the window. A large woman is standing behind it. Next to her, Det. Nelson steps into view. He’s got some kind of printout in his hands.

“Found him,” the detective says. Adam’s heart quickens. The detective slides the printout to Adam through a slot in the plexiglass window. Adam looks at what appears to be an obituary. “Evan Brognan,” Det. Nelson says. “Born on May 19, 1974. Same day as you. Same hospital. Separated by 53 minutes.” Adam’s hands start shaking. His fingers are disappearing. The detective reaches through the opening in the window and taps the printout. “Problem is,” he says, “Evan Brogan died of pharmaceutical intoxication in 1978.” Adam looks up at him, their eyes meeting. “But you already knew that,” the detective says.

Adam’s head gets cloudy. His legs give way. It’s as if they, too, have disappeared.

“Easy, buddy,” one of the cops says from behind him. It’s the last thing Adam hears before he faints.

**CHAPTER 31**

**Forty-four years ago**

Sweat dripped between the tree branches.

“Pull the shade,” Gordy Wennington whispered. Dave Brognan, his best friend, complied.

Inside a second-floor office at Periwinkle Pharmaceutical, Gordy pulled an overhead light toward the observation table where a small child lied flat on his back, unable to catch his breath.

“What’s happening?” Dave asked, also having some trouble breathing by that time.

Gordy, with small, dark eyes and a head of curly, unkempt hair, touched the boy’s breast bone.

“We need to decelerate his heart rate,” he said. He looked up at his friend. “He will be fine, Dave. Trust me.”

Dave rubbed his son’s arm, then pulled fingers through his own coiffe of hair. He could feel the pressure building inside of his skull. Six months earlier, he had agreed to allow his two sons to be guinea pigs for a new amphetamine product, meant to control overactive children. Ritalin was just starting to be prescribed to children, with polarizing public reaction. Adderall was working its way back into the mainstream after being taken off the market in the 1970s. Gordy and Dave had come up with a cutting-edge medicine that was about to put Periwinkle Pharmaceutical on the map.

Gordy fit a stethoscope into his ears and held the other end to the boy’s chest. He looked up, toward the door, and noticed something. Dave turned to look. His other son, Adam, was peeking in through a long, thin, vertical window above the door handle. Dave went to the door and opened it a crack.

“What’s wrong with Evan?” the child asked, his voice shaking. The boy was trying to look past Dave, into the room.

“I told you to wait in my office,” Dave said sternly. He moved to shield Adam from what was going on in the room. He stepped outside and closed the door. “I need to get you home,” Dave said. “It’s getting late.”

“What about Evan?” The child’s eyes welled up with fear. His lip quivered. Dave knelt down and took the boy’s shoulders in his hands.

“He just feels a little sick,” Dave told his son. “He’ll be fine.” Dave wondered what was happening on the other side of the door at that exact moment. Evan had been gradually given increasing doses of the amphetamine product. FDA approval would come next, but first Dave and Gordy wanted to test it on their own. Evan had been given the amphetamine product, while Adam had been given a placebo. Neither child would be told as much. “Adam, I need you to do something for me,” Dave said, squeezing his son’s shoulders gently. “You can never tell your mother about this. She doesn’t need to worry. You hear me?” The boy nodded, then dropped his head. “In fact,” his father continued, “you need to forget this ever happened. Evan will be okay. Things will be back to normal soon. But you need to pretend this is all a dream.”

“A dream,” the 4-year-old child said quietly.

“A dream,” said Dave.

He drove his son home. Adam had been instructed to pretend he was sleeping when Dave pulled into the driveway. He carried him up to his room. Adam’s mother kissed her husband and tried not to wake the boy. Dave whispered that Evan was still in the car. He took Adam upstairs, packed a few pillows under the sheets, and told his son to sneak out the back door. A minute later, Dave was carrying him in again, as if it were Evan.

He tucked the boy in, then headed back to the office.

By the time he got there, Evan’s condition had worsened. Gordy’s hands were shaking.

“We need to take him to the hospital,” Dave said. Gordy just shook his head.

“We’ll lose our license,” he said. “We’ll lose everything.”

They came up with a story. Another lie that Dave would have to carry with him, to his grave. The child found some medication and swallowed it without Dave and Gordy knowing. They would take him to the hospital, but by that time the boy would have gone into cardiac arrest. Dave would have to make up more lies. Would have to save his own ass. To cover up for Gordy.

A year would pass, thoughts of putting the medication on the market would be shelved, and Periwinkle Pharmaceutical would start making money on other forms of medication. Dave and Gordy would cut corners. Hide money. Get rich. But the animosity would grow. Dave could not forgive his friend. Over time, he could no longer call him a friend. They became more like enemies. It would become clear to Dave Brognan that his best shot at revenge would be to expose all of the company’s financial deceptions. He would blow the whistle on Gordy, who would end up doing time in prison. But not before Gordy would send someone to scare the Brognan family with a gunshot through the window of the family home.

Adam would be good to his word during this period. While his mother would fall into a deep depression, never fully learning how or why her son died, Adam would forget everything. It was a promise he’d made to his father. And a way of coping with the worst kind of loss.

And so, in Adam’s mind, Evan never really died. He became something of an imaginary friend. He was always there, so clear that Adam could see him. He would talk to him. Adam’s parents would take him to therapists, would ask if this was normal behavior. They were told over and over again that their son was just processing the loss in his own way.

Once Adam discovered methamphetamines, he could actually *become* Evan. He could live his life as Adam in the light, and as Evan in the shadows.

Adam would find that when you don’t like how your life is going, sometimes you can just become somebody else.

**CHAPTER 32**

**Tomorrow. Or the next day. And the days that follow.**

Impermanence.

Things inevitably will change. Feelings. Situations. Names and cities. Even one’s reality.

How does a man live a life that is not his own?

Lying on a half-inch mattress inside Cell Block C, Adam Ostrawski should be asking himself this question. How did he come to believe that his twin brother, deceased since an experimental drug took him at the age of 3 years old, was still alive? Adam was always a dreamer, but sometimes what is the dream and what is reality become entangled like weeds.

We believe what we want to believe.

Adam’s cell mate is a man that goes by the name of Shiv. This is Adam’s greatest inconvenience. Not that the man might shiv him in his sleep, but that Adam has to share space with another human. He will tell this man his truths. *His* truths. That he was accused of a murder he did not commit. That he has a twin brother.

“But I am proud of him,” Adam tells his celly. “Damn proud of him. He’s come so far.”

“Yeah?” his celly says, lying on the mat above Adam’s.

“You know, when we were kids, our parents got caught up in a controversy. We had to move to a new town, across the state, and our lives weren’t easy. Not at all. My mom got really depressed. Basically crawled down in a dark hole. Never came out. Despite it all, my brother persevered. He rose above it all.”

“Hmm,” Shiv says, sounding like he’s half-listening. Maybe a quarter-listening. “What’s his name?”

“My brother?” Adam says. “My brother’s name is Adam. He’s my twin.” Adam says this. And he’s not lying. Not really. Adam actually believes he is Evan now. This is the one permanent thing in his life: that Evan will always be around. Will always be in trouble. Will always be the bad one. As long as Evan is alive, Adam can be the “good” brother. “He’s famous now. You may have heard of him. They call him Adam Oz.”

“I thought your name was Adam,” his celly says. “They told me your name was Adam.”

“Weird,” Adam says. “Anyway, Adam Oz is a DJ. He’s got a cable show. He’s out there right now – what day is it? He has a show on Thursday nights. Lots of people know his name. Adam Oz. You sure you haven’t heard of him?” Adam’s celly doesn’t answer. “He’s the good twin. Doesn’t do drugs. Never been arrested. He was my parents’ favorite. Before they died. They were so, so proud of him. So proud of him.”

As Adam stops talking, he looks out at the cell door. His anxiety is building. There is no way out. He will be in here for a long time. He reaches for his pocket, hoping to rub his bottle cap. He has no pockets. He has no bottle cap. The reality is setting in. He can’t decide if he’s even breathing.

He hears a noise from above him. Like God, sending a message. It’s a rumbling sound, like thunder rolling across the sky. Adam lies back onto his pillow.

He realizes the sound is just his celly. Snoring.

###

This is how we cope. We develop coping mechanisms, to help us get through the day.

Go outside the walls of Walla Walla Correctional Facility, where Adam is likely to spend the rest of his days, and you will find a corrections officer smoking a cigarette, to relax his nerves during an eight-hour shift of dealing with some of the most dangerous men on earth.

Go a few blocks to the south, and you’ll find a man drinking away the thoughts of his marriage gone bad.

Two states away, and you will find a teenager cutting his arms because he doesn’t fit in.

On the other side of the country, you will find a woman putting away her fourth glass of wine because she was molested three decades ago.

In the Ukraine, you will find a woman cowering in the basement, stuffing her face with borscht because the soldiers are coming.

We protect ourselves in strange ways. We protect ourselves by harming ourselves. It’s our way of taking control.

Some people protect themselves simply by going away. It’s called disassociation. We can simply make ourselves disappear in plain sight.

Or, maybe it’s not that simple.

###

He lies on his mattress, looking up at the top bunk, listening to his murdering celly snore. He closes his eyes. He sees Adam clearly, out there somewhere, his arms wrapped around Kate’s waist. Adam is smiling. She is laughing at something he said. They are in some kind of a studio, listening to “Winding Wheel,” from Ryan Adams’ first album. When the song ends, Adam Oz kisses Kate on the forehead and leans into the microphone.

“It’s so good to be back,” he says.

This is happening, out there in the real world. Evan is certain of it. This cell is a nightmare, and Adam Oz is out there in the real world, living the dream. It’s what he was meant to do.

Evan has never been so proud. He smiles. Folds his hands together behind his head.

His brother is free. It’s another comforting reminder.

“The way things are,” he whispers to himself, “they won’t always be that way.”

From above, he hears movement. Shiv rolls over, leans off the bed, and looks down at him.

“Why don’t you shut the fuck up,” Evan’s roommate says. “’Fore I cut you so straight that you end up shitting out the back of your neck.”

Evan looks at him. He is still smiling. He says nothing.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Shiv bleats.

Evan keeps smiling. He closes his eyes. He sees Adam and Kate, looking at wedding rings. Then he notices something. Adam is disappearing. Kate doesn’t seem to notice. He is dissolving.

“Stop,” Evan says. “Don’t go.”

Siv climbs down from his upper bunk, his large feet hitting the concrete floor beside Evan. As he leans over, Evan braces for whatever is going to come.

“You do a whole lot of talking,” Siv says, his hands on his knees. “Anyone ever told you that?” He stands upright, folds his arms across his massive chest, and says: “While you’re in here, you’d be better off listening. You hear that?” He sneers. “People like me, we put in our time. Me, I got a 10-year sentence, but I’ve been in here at least fifteen. You know what that means? That means I spent far too much time running my mouth and putting hands on people.”

Evan is careful to maintain eye contact. While he certainly doesn’t like being in this cell, he’s grateful for the cot. And the three hots.

“I don’t know what kind of crazy you got running around in that dome of yours,” Siv continues, “but we all human at the core. You hear me? So maybe I can give you a little advice. From a person who’s been around.”

Siv puts his hands together. Interlocks his fingers, and starts cracking his knuckles.

“As long as you’re in here, you best get to starting to forgive yourself,” he says. His eyes are closed. It’s almost like he’s talking to himself. “That’s all you can do in here. You sure as hell ain’t gonna get no pussy in here. You ain’t gonna make any real money. You won’t feel any breeze, won’t get to dip your toes in the sand, won’t feel a woman’s lips on your neck. You got to give all that up.” He opens his eyes. Snaps his fingers. “You’re gonna spend a lot of time in that crazy head of yours. So you might as well do something productive up there. You might as well get on forgiving yourself.” He smiles, claps his hands together, then climbs back up onto his bunk. The springs creak as he settles in.

“You do that,” Siv says. “You’ll be free. No matter what they tell you, no matter where you are, you’ll be free.”

The bed squeaks again, as if Siv is rolling over.

“Now one more piece of advice,” he says. “Shut the fuck up down there, or your boy here is gonna get another five years tacked on. You hear me?”

Evan closes his eyes again. The image of Adam is almost completely gone. Kate is alone now. Evan prays for sleep. He hasn’t used meth in days, but the chemicals inside his brain have kept him awake. Or maybe it’s just because, on the streets, you could never sleep. He’s become programmed to stay awake.

Perhaps this will be his penance. Never sleeping again. Maybe he will never be able to sleep, and maybe he will never be able to forgive himself.

Or, worse, maybe one day he will be stricken with a much more powerful fate.

The truth. In this world, it’s so much easier without it.

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Evan awakens in the dead of night to a hand over his mouth. He opens his eyes. He is looking into his own face.

“Don’t freak out,” Adam says, straddling over his twin brother with hand over his mouth. “I’m you.”

Evan mumbles something. He is confused.

“It’s from a song, dipshit,” Adam says, laughing. Evan wants him to be quiet. He doesn’t want to wake Siv again. Adam pulls his hand away from Evan’s mouth.

“Everything is a song, with you,” Evan whispers. He squirms but can’t roll away.

“I’m here to save you,” Adam says. He grins. A hero’s grin. “Let’s go,” Adam says. “Let’s be free. Together.”

Evan stares at him. Wondering: Am I Adam? Or am I Evan? Does it even matter anymore?

“Let’s be free,” Adam says.

“Let’s be free,” Evan whispers.

Adam stands. He turns away from Evan. He goes to the door. Opens it without a key. Evan starts to unwrap him self of the bed sheet.

“One day,” Adam says. “One day, we will be free.”

He walks out the cell door, closes it behind him, and disappears.

“Adam!” Evan shouts, standing from his bed. “Adam!”

From the bunk above, Evan feels Shiv’s thick are wrap around his neck.

Maybe he’ll never have to know the truth. Maybe this fate is better than that.

THE END

[No, really]