

ONE



# 1

WHEN THEY ERECTED their first pop-up tents to treat the addicts who wandered in and out like living corpses, I thought: Sure.

When the newspapers ran article after article about the opioid addiction taking the city by storm, it was more along the lines of: No kidding. Nothing slips past you guys.

But when the mental health infrastructure became obsessed with the zombies, I had to put my foot down.

Nobody cared about my griping.

With all these people addicted to addicts now, where are the humble murderers of the city supposed to turn for our mental health support? I ask you. We have been reduced to complaining about it in our weekly meetings. Not that there are murder support groups in Vancouver. I don't want you to get the wrong idea. Alternative outlets for the murderous of the city are sadly lacking. Private therapists can cost an arm and a leg—so to speak—and it's not like you can find community discussion groups on the topic, either. The closest I've found is one for people with eating disorders, but I don't expect people who have done terrible things to their appetites to understand that I killed a person or two last year. In self-defense, but still.

During my share, I settle for telling my fellow nutjobs that I feel like I'm being shadowed by my demons, and they nod in

understanding. We are strangers who all know one another's deepest secrets, bonded in the sacred circle of a urine-stained meeting room in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. They lift their anemic arms in polite applause afterward and we disperse from the collapsed circle. We are blessedly strangers again.

The feeling of being watched follows me from the low-income Eastside Vancouver neighborhood I frequent back to the swanky town house in Kitsilano that I now occupy some space in. I drive with the windows up because the air is thick with forest fire smoke from Vancouver's north shore, smoke that has drifted here in pungent wafts and settled over the city. It doesn't help that we are experiencing one of these new Octobers that doesn't remember that there's supposed to be a fall season and is almost unbearably hot for this time of year.

As I drive, I obsess over still another death. One that hasn't occurred yet. But it will.

Soon.

# 2

WHEN I GET back to the town house, Sebastian Crow, my old boss and new roomie, is asleep on the couch.

I reach out a hand to touch him, but pull back before my fingers brush his temple. I don't want to wake him. I want him to sleep like this forever. Peaceful. At ease. In a place where the C-word can't reach him. Every day he seems to shrink a bit more and his spirit grows bigger to compensate for the reduction of physical space he occupies. He's ill and there is nothing I can do about it because it's terminal. My dog, Whisper, and I have moved in to keep him company and make sure he doesn't fall down the stairs on our watch, but beyond that it is hopeless. There is a great fire that he seems to burn with now. His body has turned against him, but his mind refuses to let go just yet.

Not until the book is done.

When he asked me to help organize and fact-check it for him, I couldn't say no. Not to Sebastian Crow, the career journalist who is writing his memoirs as he nears the end of his life. Writing it as a love letter to his dead mother and an apology to his estranged son. Also as an explanation to the lover he has abandoned. What I have read of it is beautiful, but it means that he is spending his last days living in the past. Because there is no future, not for him.

Whisper nudges my hand. She is restless. On edge. She feels it, too.

I put her on a leash, because I don't trust her mood, and we walk to the park across the street. There's a man there who has been trying to pet her, so we steer clear of him in a spirit of generosity toward his limbs. On the other side of the park is a pathway that hugs the coastline. Smoke from unseen fires lingers, even here. Not even the sea breeze can dispel it. We walk, both of us feeling uneasy, until we circle back around to the park. I sit on a bench with Whisper pulled close.

The man who has been watching me walks right past us.

"Nice night for a bit of light stalking," I say. "Don't you think?"

The man stops. Faces me. He opens his mouth, perhaps considering a lie, but shuts it again. My back is to the dim streetlight that overlooks this section of the park. Whisper and I are just dark shapes to him, but he is fully illuminated. His coat is open and at his neck there is a long swath of mottled skin running from the hinge of his jaw to his collarbone. It looks like new skin tried to grow there once but gave up halfway, leaving behind an unfinished impression. He's an older man, but I find his age hard to place. Whatever it is, he has used his years to learn how to dress well. Sleek jacket. Nice shoes. It doesn't add up. A man, careful with his appearance, who spends his evenings sitting in a park and following women as they walk their dogs.

We wait in a kind of charged silence, all three of us. Whisper yawns and runs her tongue over her sharp canines to speed things along. He takes this as the threat it's no doubt meant to be.

"Your sister told me where to find you," he says finally.

If he thinks that's supposed to put me at ease, he's off his

meds. Lorelei hasn't spoken to me since last year, since I stole her husband's car and ran it off the road and into a ravine.

But I decide to play the game anyway. "What do you want?"

"Damned if I know," he says, with a rueful smile. "Taking a trip down memory lane in my winter years, I suppose."

"And what's that got to do with me?"

"I knew your father once." It's a good thing his voice is soft because said even a decibel louder, that statement could have knocked me on my ass, if I wasn't already on it. "May I sit down?" He gestures to the bench. There's something odd about his tone. His enunciation is too measured for someone confronted by an unpredictable animal. I wonder if the scar at his neck has anything to do with his casual demeanor. If he is one of those men who is so accustomed to danger that it doesn't faze him anymore.

"No. Knew my father from where?"

He pauses in his approach and considers Whisper's bared teeth. "Lebanon. You know he served with the marines there, right?"

I ignore this because I did not know that, but if it's anyone's business, it isn't his. "Doesn't explain why you're following me."

He swipes a hand over his face, the tips of his fingers pause at his scar. He notices my eyes flicker toward it. "From Lebanon. An explosion." He considers his next words carefully before he speaks. "I said I'd check up on you if anything ever happened to him."

I laugh. "You're a few decades too late."

"I'm not a very good friend. Look, I'm retired now and I had to make a trip to Canada. I thought I'd look you up. I had checked

on you and your sister after I heard he died all those years ago, but you were with your aunt and everything seemed fine. A couple days ago I managed to track down your sister. She wasn't exactly very forthcoming about you—"

"She wouldn't be." Lorelei and I had not parted on good terms. She had kept her maiden name, though, when she got married, and had a robust online profile. She wouldn't be hard to find, if you had a mind to go looking.

"I told her we were old friends. Took some convincing, but she told me that I could find you through Sebastian Crow. And here I am."

"But why?"

He becomes agitated, fishes out a lone cigarette from his jacket, and lights it. His eyes linger on the wisp of flame from the lighter. "You ever made a promise you didn't keep? I've done a lot of wrong in my life, but how things turned out with your father, in the end . . . I never thought what happened to him was right. I knew he was struggling after the trouble in Lebanon, but goddamn. What a waste."

He looks down at my hand, where my fingers are clenched so tight around Whisper's leash that my nails dig into my palm, leaving crescent-shaped marks.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," he says helplessly. He hasn't taken a drag of the cigarette yet, seems to have no intention of smoking it.

I almost drowned last year. I don't remember a lot about it, only that I must have blacked out at some point. Any free diver or scuba enthusiast will tell you that in the final stage of nitrogen narcosis, latent hypoxia hits the brain. It can cause



neurological impairment. Reasoning and judgment are often affected, at least in the moment. But it can also feel pleasant, this lack of oxygen. Warm. Safe even.

It can make you delusional.

I wonder if I'm experiencing a more long-term fallout from my near-drowning. Because I used to be able to tell when people were lying, almost definitively. But now I'm not so sure. After the events of last year, when my daughter went missing, the girl I'd given away without a second thought, I have looked at people differently. Maybe it's my sluggish maternal instincts kicking in, muddling my senses. Or maybe I've lost my mojo. Because when he said he doesn't know what he's doing here, I believed him. I believe that we do things that don't make sense. Even to ourselves.

It's also possible that I am falling into my own hallucinations.

I'm so confused that I say nothing at all in return. The veteran looks as unsettled as I feel. I stare at him hard until he walks away, toward the ocean, and disappears into the dense night. Then I rub some feeling back into my hands. My thoughts are a jumble, until one of them shakes loose.

It isn't just the surprise of someone coming to find me after all these years. It isn't even that he felt the need to follow me in the dark to ascertain whether or not I'm doing okay. It goes deeper than that, and has to do with the things about my father that I didn't know. That there was trouble in Lebanon. With my father.

My father had trouble in Lebanon and then, some years later, he blew his brains out.



# 3

DEEP IN SPACE, a star named KIC 8462852 flickers for some unknown reason, while down on Earth an ex-cop, ex-security agent, ex-husband, and ex-amateur bowler grimaces as he downs a glass of spinach juice and hopes that his internal organs are paying attention to the effort he's making on their behalf.

This particular star has confounded scientists the world over by its constant dimming and brightening, while Jon Brazuca confounds only himself with his new resolution to be kinder to his body. He inherited low self-esteem from his spineless mother and weak-chinned father, both of whom apologized through life and then on into their retirement.

But Brazuca is over it. This demeaning cycle of "I'm sorry" and "I beg your pardon" would end with him.

He is turning over a new leaf, and then blending it into a smoothie.

The evening sun is low on the horizon and he is filled with chlorophyll and contentment. Brazuca has always been more awake at night, more alive, and has now turned to astronomy to help fill in the gaps. He is not a man of science, but wishes that he were. His mother had once taken him to Spain as a child, to the cliffs of Famara, and together they had looked out at the stars reflected in pools of water on the beachfront below.

Thinking of this, he longs for a simpler time, when women he

generously pleased didn't drug him and tie him to a bed, leaving him to be found by astonished maids. Which is something that actually happened to him approximately a year ago. Nora Watts, the woman he'd attended AA meetings with, the woman who had gone and lost a daughter that she hadn't even wanted, the woman whom he felt compelled to help for no rhyme or reason that made any goddamn sense to him—she had left him high, literally, but not at all dry. No, she'd fed him a booze-and-sedative cocktail that put him to sleep and gave his body the little bump it had been wanting for so very long.

And it has taken him months to kick the habit again.

Brazuca stands on the balcony of his apartment in East Vancouver and winks up at the sky, in the general direction of the flickering star he has read about in a magazine. He feels for a brief moment a sort of affinity for the universe. He chugs the rest of the juice and belches in contentment.

His friend Bernard Lam has asked him to come over, and for the first time ever, he feels like hanging out with a billionaire.

"Brazuca," says Lam, at the door of his sprawling Point Grey mansion. If there's a housing crisis in Vancouver, it might be because so much space has been taken up by this single estate. There's an east wing and a west wing, and about twenty rooms in between them. There are outdoor courts for every sport, and a miniature golf course for variety. If you get bored of the saltwater pool, there's a freshwater one on the other side of the property.

Bernard Lam, the playboy son of a wealthy businessman and philanthropist, gestures for Brazuca to follow him inside. His famous charm is nowhere to be seen. His manner is grave and

uncertain as he leads Brazuca down a long hallway filled with family photographs mounted on the wall, newer photos of Lam and his recent bride, and then into a study. “What’s wrong?” Brazuca asks as soon as the door is closed behind them.

“One moment.” Lam goes to his laptop on the desk. There’s a bottle of scotch next to him and no photos to speak of here. It is a family-free zone. Lam turns the screen toward Brazuca.

“She’s beautiful,” he says, glancing at the woman on Lam’s computer. In the picture, she’s in a sundress on a yacht, laughing up at the camera. She’s tall and voluptuous, with a sheet of glossy dark hair and bright eyes.

“Her name was Clementine. She was the love of my life.”

No amount of spinach juice can stop the headache that begins at Brazuca’s temples at Lam’s use of past tense. The woman in the photo wasn’t the woman on the walls of the family home. So the love of his life was not Lam’s new bride. “When?”

“They found her last week in her apartment. They say it was an overdose. She’s . . . she *was* four months pregnant.”

“Yours?” Brazuca asks, careful to keep his voice even.

Lam raises a brow, as if the possibility of anything else doesn’t even exist.

Brazuca decides not to push. “So what do you need?”

“You’re still working with that small PI outfit? They give you any time off?”

“I take contracts as needed. They’re flexible.” His new employers weren’t picky about what work he chose, as long as he took some of it off their hands. They’d even offered to make him a partner in a more formal sort of arrangement, but he’d said no to that. He didn’t want formal.

“Good,” says Lam. “That’s very good. I need you to find out who her dealer is.”

“Bernard . . .”

“You will, of course, be generously compensated.”

“It’s not about the money.”

“Then do it for a friend. Do it for me. My girl and my child are dead. I want to know who’s responsible.”

Brazuca wonders if Lam knows that, with the use of the word *girl*, he has painted both of them with the same brush of idealized innocence. “You’re not going to like what comes out of this,” he says quietly. “It will bring you no peace of mind.” Death by overdose is a nasty thing to deal with. Blame is hard to pin down.

“Who says I want peace of mind?” Lam pours a shot of scotch into his glass and knocks it back. “I’ll give you the paperwork and her contacts. They didn’t find anything on her phone. The drug she took . . .” He looks away, gathers his thoughts. “It was cocaine laced with a new synthetic opiate now hitting the streets. A fentanyl derivative more potent than what’s been seen before, and actually stronger than fentanyl. Called YLD Ten.”

“Wild Ten? I’ve heard of it. Not much. But I know it’s out there.” It was the stupid name that got to him. Easy to remember when you place an order from your friendly neighborhood drug dealer.

“Then you know how dangerous it is. She was only twenty-five. She had her whole life ahead of her, Jon, and it was with me. I need to know. Please.”

“Okay,” Brazuca says, after a minute. Because he’s not the kind of man who can say no to a cry for help. Turns out, his leaf isn’t

so fresh after all. “I’ll look into it. Do you have a key to her apartment?”

Lam nods. “Of course. I own the place.”

“Of course,” Brazuca murmurs. “I’ll get started right away.” He doesn’t have to say the “sir” because it’s implied. Bernard Lam, whose life he saved several years earlier, is oblivious to this dig.





# 4

I'M HERE AGAIN at my sister's house in East Vancouver. It's Saturday, and you can only tell it's afternoon by the clock. The haze is not as thick as it was yesterday, but it's still there. Still obscuring the daylight and conjuring frightening images of smoker's lung to the health nuts of the city, who will not quit hiking or cycling in these conditions but will complain incessantly while they do it. I hear there's another forest fire on the Sunshine Coast and the winds are blowing the smoke over this way.

Vancouver isn't on fire, but it sure as hell seems like it is.

I've waited until Lorelei's car pulls out of the drive to approach the narrow gate leading to the backyard. Her husband, David, is sitting on the small deck, contemplating his shitty garden. There are a few herb plants mustering some strength, but they are no match for the mint growing like weeds, even in this postapocalyptic atmosphere. He looks like he's trying to stay positive, but failing. I feel sorry for men like David, the decent, hardworking men of the world. Try as they might, the simplest things seem to overwhelm them. He can't even succeed at coaxing something edible from the earth.

He's drinking a light beer and doesn't bother getting up when I round the corner. The last time we laid eyes on each other, he had thrown some money at me and asked me to stay away from Lorelei for a spell. He doesn't seem surprised now that I have

broken our agreement. Then he sees Whisper and a delighted smile crosses his face. Part of the reason I brought her with me is that dog people are so easy to manipulate. She understands her role well enough to trot over and say hello to his crotch with her nose. Bam. Nice to see you.

“Who’s a good girl?” He grins, reaching over to scratch behind her ears. “Who’s a very good girl?”

And then he looks at me. The grin disappears. I try not to be offended. Good girls are overrated anyway.

“The yellow box,” I say. There’s no reason to beat around the bush.

He considers this for a moment, then makes a decision. “Upstairs, in the guest room closet. Top shelf.”

I walk past him and into their house. My visits to my sister’s home are usually of the clandestine sort so, at first, I’m not sure how to proceed. Am I supposed to move differently now that I have permission?

Lorelei’s house is much like her personality. Spare, uncluttered, and a little nauseating in its blandness. There’s no room for surprises here. The box is exactly where he said it would be. When I come back outside with the yellow shoe box tucked under my arm, I find that things have progressed for Whisper. She is busy enjoying the touch of a man. She’s on her back now, and has offered her stomach for a thorough rubdown. The nympho.

“Thank you,” I say, when David looks up at me again.

He nods.

“Will you tell her I’ve been here?”

“Not unless she notices the box is missing. But she hasn’t opened it in years, so I wouldn’t worry.”

I nod, too, and both of us are doing a thing with our necks that is attempting to smooth over the rough patch we've hit. We now have an understanding between us. A secret. My sister's husband and I have agreed that she is not to know that I've been here and that I've taken something from her. I won't tell her because she no longer speaks to me. His silence on the subject is probably due to a misplaced guilt over our tense relationship. Even though it has nothing to do with him. But David is a good man and would not deny me what I have left of my father, all conveniently contained in a box that used to hold a pair of Lorelei's nude pumps, size seven.

I close my legs a notch. The pressure builds slower than I like. Slower than I've become used to. And then it is over, several excruciating moments longer than it used to take. I'm not ashamed, which I suppose is in its own way progress, but then again I'm not much of anything, really.

I still feel like I'm being watched but the angle is all wrong.

As I remove my knees from their indentations beside the stranger's head, I wonder—was it worth the trip over here? The answer doesn't come to me, not when I put on my jeans or even when I untie his hands from the bedposts and make for the door. Like the cliché I have become, the money is in an envelope on the dresser.

It comes when I'm already halfway to the motel's parking lot.

*I will sit on your face, says the ad I placed online. And your hands will be tied. When it's over, I'll leave. NSA. No fuss. No games. My teeth are sharper than yours.*

Then I name a reasonable rate that I'm prepared to pay.

All things considered, it's an insulting ad. I have come to hate myself more than the lonely schmucks who answer it, but I haven't taken it down yet. I come, then I go, and it had all worked out well at first.

My old Corolla takes a minute to get used to the idea that something is expected of it and while I wait I'm left with the unsettling answer. It's not enough anymore. No matter how many strangers whose faces I try to erase with my thighs.

About an hour later, I park next to the restaurant at Burnaby Mountain and head to a spot about halfway up the lawn. The air is cleaner up here, plus the view of the beautiful Japanese wood carvings beneath me and the city of Vancouver to the west can't be beat. I'm at this spot because my journalist friend Mike Starling loved coming to this place to think, or so it claims in his obituary last year, after he was found dead in his bathtub with his wrists slit. To me, Starling wasn't the type to sit around on mountains and contemplate life but, admittedly, my memory isn't the greatest. What I remember the most about him was his disdain for drinkers of multisyllabic coffee and what he looked like in death, in a tub full of bloody water.

My support group friends assure me that I've got nothing to feel guilty about because I'm not the one who killed him—but what the hell do they know, anyway? It's not like their judgment is exactly sound. And what they don't know (because I haven't told them) is that I'm the reason he's dead. He was killed because some dangerous people had come looking for me and he'd made the choice to protect me. He may have even sat here while he thought about it and decided that my life was

worth fighting for, and he'd be looking into who painted the target on my back.

I sip at the coffee I brought with me—four syllables—and pour a little on the ground beside me for him. So he'll know the woman he gave his life to save still has a sense of humor. Maybe he did like to come up here, and maybe there's a little bit of him left behind in this place, too, because it seems to me Mike Starling could never walk away from a mystery.

Clearly, I can't either.



# 5

IT'S LATE. THE contents of the box are spread out on the coffee table in front of me and I'm slumped on the floor, staring at them at eye level. There isn't much there. A love letter. A strip of crumpled blue silk. Five postcards from an address in Detroit. A few faded photographs. One is of a woman in bed, holding a baby. The woman's head has been cropped out, perhaps deliberately, and she's cradling a wrinkled infant in her tanned arms. The date on the back of the photo tells me that the sleeping infant is me.

I put it aside.

The other two are of my father, Lorelei, and me. These photos don't have a date on them, but all three of us have changed drastically from one photo to the next. Lorelei and I are growing with the speed that children do, but my father's aging has taken a dramatic turn. In both, his hair is straight and black, his eyes dark. It's the deepening lines on his face that have changed him. In the first he looks like a content but tired father. In the second, he looks like a haunted man with one foot in the grave. Raising children isn't for everyone.

"What are you doing?" says Seb, from the doorway. My own living ghost has decided to put in a stealthy appearance, his face gaunt and pale.

"Hungry?" I gesture to the box of pad thai that I picked up from his favorite place, just around the corner from the town house. I

buy some every couple of days, just in case he's in the mood for a heavy dose of sodium and carbohydrates. I always end up eating it the next morning because he never is. Though he assures me that he eats, I rarely ever see it. I, on the other hand, have put on about ten pounds since I moved in. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's letting food go to waste. Because then you have to figure out how to get more.

He shakes his head and drifts toward the photos. "Who are these people?" he asks, peering over my shoulder.

"My father and my sister."

"And you. Beautiful." When he smiles, the room brightens and I almost forget that he is about to die. "Why the trip down memory lane?"

We keep no secrets from each other anymore. There's no time for that. I tell him about the man from last night and how he claimed to know my father.

"Weird," he says, collapsing on the stiff armchair beside the coffee table. One of the few pieces of furniture that his lover Leo, my former boss, left behind in a scorned rage. "After all this time. Why bother?"

I shrug. "It's just . . ." My eyes skip over the ceiling, the floor, Whisper, anywhere but at the photos.

"Just?"

"We never knew much about his life. After my aunt got sick we were put into care and these things are what I had taken with me at the time. When she died, she'd donated most of what she had to charity and everything else disappeared. We don't have any records of his life left." Or our early life, mine and Lorelei's. I don't say that, though, because it's implied.



“Is that what’s bothering you? That you only have this box?” His voice is so light, so gentle that it floats over the tension that has reared up inside me. “Because you’ve described your dad as a Sixties Scoop survivor. Many children of indigenous heritage who were taken away from their families and put up for adoption knew less about their parents than this. Had less than what you have in this box.”

And some had more, and others had around the same amount. Years after the Canadian government implemented the residential school system, it also tacked on a policy of forced adoption that didn’t seek to help matters. Out of reserves, out of urban centers, the imposed assimilation came at communities where it hurt. If you think about it, this strategy is always the one that is most used when trying to erase people. In Canada, like it was elsewhere in the colonial world, they began with the children.

I know Seb is probably right that I should be grateful for what I have, but at the moment it doesn’t feel like I could possibly know less than I do right now. “What’s bothering me is that I can’t confirm any of what he said. It’s not that I have no information, it’s that what I have is incomplete.”

He reaches for the postcards. “And what about these? Who are they from?” There is no signature on any of them. Just my father’s name, scrawled in a sloping hand.

“He grew up in Detroit. It’s where the family that adopted him lived. But he never talked about them to me as a child. We never met. I found out about them from my aunt, but she didn’t know much, either.”

Seb stares past me, his eyes unfocused. With a sudden burst

of energy, he rises from the chair and grabs hold of my hands. His voice, when he speaks, is low and urgent. "Sometimes these things happen for a reason, Nora. Don't you see? This man comes into your life and forces you to look at what you knew of your father. And, you said yourself, there isn't much. You've been holding on to your memories of him that you had as a little girl and maybe now is the time to get to know who he really was without the childhood blinders on."

But he's dead, I want to say.

I want to tell him to mind his own business and leave me out of his obsession with the past, but I don't. Maybe it's because I normally don't speak of my father out loud. I have built a bunker in my heart around his memory. With concrete walls. Built to withstand a nuclear blast. What is striking in this bunker is not what's in it, but what is absent. There are no answers there, only questions. This is why I have chosen to keep it buried so deep for so long. Because unlocking it only shows me what I don't know.

"Go to Detroit," Seb continues. "Find whoever sent these postcards. Whatever trouble there was, the person who opens the door at this address might know something about it. If you don't go, you'll always wonder. It will haunt you."

Now I see what he's doing. He is trying to save me from making the same mistakes that he has made. I should shut up, but I don't. I don't have any control over what I say next.

"Just like Leo will always wonder," I say. "When you die. He'll wonder why you didn't tell him. And that maybe he should have known that you were sick." Leo, his lover, who was devastated when I left him to work with Seb. Leo thinks it's a professional

betrayal, but it isn't. It's a personal one. I'm one of a handful of people who know of Seb's illness and agreed to keep it from the others in Seb's life.

Seb releases my hands as though they've scalded him and leaves the room without another word. Whisper rises gracefully from her spot by the window and trots after him. Like Seb, she refuses to look at me, as if to remind me that I don't deserve either of them.

When I hear his bedroom door shut, I turn off the lights in the living room and stand at the edge of the curtains, staring for a long time at the park across the street. Just because I don't see the veteran, it doesn't mean he's not there.

I call David, who up until now was unaware that I have his number. It's good to have someone around who will always answer the phone when you call. Even if he doesn't recognize my number on his call display, he's too polite to let it slip to voice mail. "Hello?" he says, after the fourth ring. His voice is heavy with sleep.

"It's Nora. Did Lorelei ever go to that address? The one on the postcards?"

There's a pause and I can hear the rustle of the sheets as he gets out of bed. A door opens, then closes. "No," he says, his voice barely a whisper. "She wrote a few letters back in college but never got a response. She didn't have enough money to check it out herself . . . and then she let it go. Are you thinking of making a trip?"

"I don't know," I say, after a moment. "Thanks. Keep doing you." And then, on that positive note, which the first time I heard it I believed it to be a supportive statement about masturbation,

I hang up. It's always good to leave people a little confused. Keep them guessing, so they'll answer the next time you call.

When Seb asked what was bothering me, I talked around it. But it's as simple as this: When a bullet hits a skull, blood and brain matter are expelled forcefully. It tears through cranial bones, connective tissues, and membranes. Depending on how close the muzzle is, there is the chance of burning on the outer layer of skin from the smoke and gunpowder. The end result of a bullet to the brain is death, unless you are unspeakably lucky. My father was not.

What matters to me now, though, is why the trigger was pulled in the first place. Why two young children were abandoned to the system is heavy in my mind. When it comes to fucking over someone's life completely, the motivation is important. And maybe Seb is right. Maybe Detroit holds the answer.