

**BILLY
SUMMERS**

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Thinking of Raymond and Sarah Jane Spruce

'I once was lost, but now am found.'

Amazing Grace



CHAPTER 1

1

Billy Summers sits in the hotel lobby, waiting for his ride. It's Friday noon. Although he's reading a digest-sized comic book called *Archie's Pals 'n' Gals*, he's thinking about Émile Zola, and Zola's third novel, his breakthrough, *Thérèse Raquin*. He's thinking it's very much a young man's book. He's thinking that Zola was just beginning to mine what would turn out to be a deep and fabulous vein of ore. He's thinking that Zola was – is – the nightmare version of Charles Dickens. He's thinking that would make a good thesis for an essay. Not that he's ever written one.

At two minutes past twelve the door opens and two men come into the lobby. One is tall with black hair combed in a 50s pompadour. The other is short and bespectacled. Both are wearing suits. All of Nick's men wear suits. Billy knows the tall one from out west. He's been with Nick a long time. His name is Frank Macintosh. Because of the pomp, some of Nick's men call him Frankie Elvis, or – now that he has a tiny bald spot in back – Solar Elvis. But not to his face. Billy doesn't know the other one. He must be local.

Macintosh holds out his hand. Billy rises and shakes it.

'Hey, Billy, been awhile. Good to see you.'

'Good to see you too, Frank.'

'This is Paulie Logan.'

'Hi, Paulie.' Billy shakes with the short one.

'Pleased to meet you, Billy.'

Macintosh takes the *Archie* digest from Billy's hand. 'Still reading the comics, I see.'

'Yeah,' Billy says. 'Yeah. I like them quite a bit. The funny ones. Sometimes the superheroes but I don't like them as much.'

Macintosh breezes through the pages and shows something to Paulie Logan. 'Look at these chicks. Man, I could jack off to these.'

'Betty and Veronica,' Billy says, taking the comic back. 'Veronica is Archie's girlfriend and Betty wants to be.'

'You read books, too?' Logan asks.

'Some, if I'm going on a long trip. And magazines. But mostly comic books.'

'Good, good,' Logan says, and drops Macintosh a wink. Not very subtle, and Macintosh frowns, but Billy's okay with it.

'You ready to take a ride?' Macintosh asks.

'Sure.' Billy tucks his digest into his back pocket. Archie and his bosomy gal pals. There's an essay waiting to be written there, too. About the comfort of haircuts and attitudes that don't change. About Riverdale, and how time stands still there.

'Then let's go,' Macintosh says. 'Nick's waiting.'

2

Macintosh drives. Logan says he'll sit in back because he's short. Billy expects them to go west, because that's where the fancy part of this town is, and Nick Majarian likes to live large whether home or away. And he doesn't do hotels. But they go northeast instead.

Two miles from downtown they enter a neighborhood that looks lower middle-class to Billy. Three or four steps better than the trailer park he grew up in, but far from fancy. No big gated houses, not here. This is a neighborhood of ranch houses with lawn sprinklers twirling on small patches of grass. Most are one-story. Most are well maintained, but a few need paint and there's crabgrass taking over some of the lawns. He sees one house with a piece of cardboard blocking a broken window. In front of another, a fat man in Bermuda shorts and a wifebeater sits in a lawn chair from Costco or Sam's Club, drinking a beer and watching them go by. Times have been good in America for awhile now, but maybe that is going to change. Billy knows neighborhoods like this. They are a barometer, and this one has started to go down. The people who live here are working the kind of jobs where you punch a clock.

Macintosh pulls into the driveway of a two-story with a patchy lawn. It's painted a subdued yellow. It's okay, but doesn't look like a place where Nick Majarian would choose to live, even for a few days. It looks like the kind of place a machinist or lower-echelon airport employee would live with his coupon-clipping wife and two kids, making mortgage payments every month and bowling in a beer league on Thursday nights.

Logan opens Billy's door. Billy puts his *Archie* digest on the dashboard and gets out.

Macintosh leads the way up the porch steps. It's hot outside but inside it's air conditioned. Nick Majarian stands in the short hallway leading down to the kitchen. He's wearing a suit that probably cost almost as much as a monthly mortgage payment on this house. His thinning hair is combed flat, no pompadour for him. His face is round and Vegas tanned. He's heavysset, but when he pulls Billy into a hug, that protruding belly feels as hard as stone.

'Billy!' Nick exclaims, and kisses him on both cheeks. Big hearty smacks. He's wearing a million-dollar grin. 'Billy, Billy, man, it's good to see you!'

'Good to see you, too, Nick.' He looks around. 'You usually stay somewhere fancier than this.' He pauses. 'If you don't mind me saying.'

Nick laughs. He has a beautiful infectious laugh to go with the grin. Macintosh joins in and Logan smiles. 'I got a place over on the West Side. Short-term. House-sitting, you could call it. There's a fountain in the front yard. Got a naked little kid in the middle of it, there's a word for that . . .'

Cherub, Billy thinks but doesn't say. He just keeps smiling.

'Anyway, a little kid peeing water. You'll see it, you'll see it. No, this one isn't mine, Billy. It's yours. If you decide to take the job, that is.'

3

Nick shows him around. 'Fully furnished,' he says, like he's selling it. Maybe he sort of is.

This one has a second floor where there are three bedrooms and two bathrooms, the second small, probably for the kids. On the first floor there's a kitchen, a living room, and a dining room that's so small it's actually a dining nook. Most of the cellar has been converted into

a long carpeted room with a big TV at one end and a Ping-Pong table at the other. Track lighting. Nick calls it the rumpus room, and this is where they sit.

Macintosh asks them if they'd like something to drink. He says there's soda, beer, lemonade, and iced tea.

'I want an Arnold Palmer,' Nick says. 'Half and half. Lots of ice.'

Billy says that sounds good. They make small talk until the drinks come. The weather, how hot it is down here in the border south. Nick wants to know how Billy's trip in was. Billy says it was fine but doesn't say where he flew in from and Nick doesn't ask. Nick says how about that fuckin' Trump and Billy says how about him. That's about all they've got, but it's okay because by then Macintosh is back with two tall glasses on a tray, and once he leaves, Nick gets down to business.

'When I called your man Bucky, he tells me you're hoping to retire.'

'I'm thinking about it. Been at it a long time. Too long.'

'Truth. How old are you, anyway?'

'Forty-four.'

'Been doing this ever since you took off the uniform?'

'Pretty much.' He's pretty sure Nick knows all this.

'How many in all?'

Billy shrugs. 'I don't exactly remember.' It's seventeen. Eighteen, counting the first one, the man with the cast on his arm.

'Bucky says you might do one more if the price was right.'

He waits for Billy to ask. Billy doesn't, so Nick resumes.

'The price on this one is very right. You could do it and spend the rest of your life someplace warm. Drinking piña coladas in a hammock.' He busts out the big grin again. 'Two million. Five hundred thousand up front, the rest after.'

Billy's whistle isn't part of the act, which he doesn't think of as an act but his *dumb self*, the one he shows to guys like Nick and Frank and Paulie. It's like a seatbelt. You don't use it because you expect to be in a crash, but you never know who you might meet coming over a hill on your side of the road. This is also true on the road of life, where people veer all over the place and drive the wrong way on the turnpike.

'Why so much?' The most he's ever gotten on a contract was seventy K. 'It's not a politician, is it? Because I don't do that.'

'Not even close.'

'Is it a bad person?'

Nick laughs, shakes his head, and looks at Billy with real affection. 'Always the same question with you.'

Billy nods.

The dumb self might be a shuck, but this is true: he only does bad people. It's how he sleeps at night. It goes without saying that he has made a living *working* for bad people, yes, but Billy doesn't see this as a moral conundrum. He has no problem with bad people paying to have other bad people killed. He basically sees himself as a garbageman with a gun.

'This is a very bad person.'

'Okay . . .'

'And it's not my two mill. I'm just the middleman here, getting what you could call an agenting fee. Not a piece of yours, mine's on the side.' Nick leans forward, hands clasped between his thighs. His expression is earnest. His eyes are fixed on Billy's. 'The target is a pro shooter, like you. Only this guy, he never asks if it's a bad person or a good person. He doesn't make those distinctions. If the money's right, he does the job. For now we'll call him Joe. Six years ago, or maybe it was seven, it don't matter, this guy Joe took out a fifteen-year-old kid on his way to school. Was the kid a bad person? No. In fact he was an honor student. But someone wanted to send the kid's dad a message. The kid was the message. Joe was the messenger.'

Billy wonders if the story is true. It might not be, it has a fairy tale fabulism to it, but it somehow feels true. 'You want me to hit a hitter.' Like he's getting it straight in his mind.

'Nailed it. Joe's in a Los Angeles lockup now. Men's Central. Charged with assault and attempted rape. The attempted rape thing, tell you what, if you're not a Me Too chick, it's sorta funny. He mistook this lady writer who was in LA for a conference, *feminist* lady writer, for a hooker. He propositioned her – a bit on the hard side, I'd guess – and she pepper-sprayed him. He popped her one in the teeth and dislocated her jaw. She probably sold another hundred thousand books out of that. Should have thanked him instead of charging him, don't you think?'

Billy doesn't reply.

'Come on, Billy, think about it. The man's offed God knows how many guys, some of them very hard guys, and he gets pepper-sprayed by a dyke women's libber? You gotta see the humor in that.'

Billy gives a token smile. 'LA's on the other side of the country.'

'That's right, but he was *here* before he went *there*. I don't know why he was here and don't care, but I know he was looking for a poker game and someone told him where he could find one. Because see, our pal Joe fancies himself a high roller. Long story short, he lost a lot of money. When the big winner came out around five in the morning, Joe shot him in the gut and took back not just his money but *all* the money. Someone tried to stop him, probably another moke who was in the game, and Joe shot him, too.'

'He kill both of them?'

'Big winner died in the hospital, but not before he ID'd Joe. Guy who tried to intervene pulled through. He also ID'd Joe. You know what else?'

Billy shakes his head.

'Security footage. You see where this is going?'

Billy does, absolutely. 'Not really.'

'California's got him for assault. Which'll stick. The attempted rape would probably get thrown out, it's not like he dragged her into an alley or anything, in fact he fucking offered to *pay* her, so it's just solicitation, DA won't even bother about that. With time served, he might get ninety days in county. Debt paid. But *here* it's murder, and they take that very serious on this side of the Mississippi.'

Billy knows it. In the red states they put stone killers out of their misery. He has no problem with that.

'And after looking at the security footage, the jury would almost certainly decide to give old Joey the needle. You see that, right?'

'Sure.'

'He's using his lawyer to fight extradition, no big surprise there. You know what extradition is, right?'

'Sure.'

'Okay. Joe's lawyer is fighting it for all he's worth, and the guy ain't no ambulance chaser. He's already got a thirty-day delay on a hearing, and he'll use it to figure out other ways to stall, but in the end he's gonna lose. And Joe's in an isolation cell, because somebody tried to stick a shiv into him. Old Joey took it away and broke his wrist for him, but where there's one guy with a shiv, there could be a dozen.'

'Gang thing?' Billy asks. 'Crips, maybe? They got a beef with him?'

Nick shrugs. 'Who knows? For now, Joe's got his own private quarters, doesn't have to get slopped with the rest of the hogs, gets thirty minutes in the yard all by his lonesome. *Also* meantime, the lawyer-man is reaching out to people. The message he's sending is that this guy will talk about something very big unless he can get a pass on the murder charge.'

'Could that happen?' Billy doesn't like to think so, even if the man this Joe killed after the poker game was a bad person. 'The prosecutors might take the death penalty off the table, or maybe even step it down to second-degree, or something?'

'Not bad, Billy. You're on the right track, at least. But what I'm hearing is that Joe wants all the charges dismissed. He must be holding some high cards.'

'He thinks he can trade something to get away with murder.'

'Says the guy who got away with it God knows how many times,' Nick says, and laughs.

Billy doesn't. 'I never shot anyone because I lost money in a poker game. I don't play poker. And I don't *rob*.'

Nick nods vigorously. 'I know that, Billy. Just bad people. I was only busting your chops a bit. Drink your drink.'

Billy drinks his drink. He's thinking, Two million. For one job. And he's thinking, What's the catch?

'Someone must really want to stop this guy from giving up whatever he's got.'

Nick points a finger gun at him like Billy has made an amazing leap of deduction. 'You know it. Anyway, I get a message from this local guy, you'll meet him if you take the job, and the message is we're looking for a pro shooter who's the best of the best. I think that's Billy Summers, case fuckin closed.'

'You want me to do this guy, but not in LA. Here.'

'Not me. I'm just the middleman, remember. It's someone else. Someone with very deep pockets.'

'What's the catch?'

Nick turns on the grin. He points another finger gun at Billy. 'Straight to the point, right? Straight to the fuckin point. Except it's not really a catch. Or maybe it is, depending on how you feel. It's time, you see. You're going to be here . . .'

He waves his hand to indicate the little yellow house. Maybe the neighborhood it sits in, as well – the one Billy will discover is called Midwood. Maybe the whole city, which sits east of the Mississippi and just below the Mason–Dixon Line.

‘. . . for quite awhile.’

4

They talk some more. Nick tells Billy that the location is set, by which he means the place Billy will shoot from. He says Billy doesn’t have to decide until he sees it and hears more. Billy will get that from Ken Hoff. He’s the local guy. Nick says Ken is out of town today.

‘Does he know what I use?’ This isn’t the same as saying he’s in, but it’s a big step in that direction. Two million for mostly sitting around on his ass, then taking one shot. Hard to turn down a deal like that.

Nick nods.

‘Okay, when do I meet this Hoff guy?’

‘Tomorrow. He’ll give you a call at your hotel tonight, time and place.’

‘If I do it, I’ll need some kind of a cover story for why I’m here.’

‘All worked out, and it’s a beaut. Giorgio’s idea. We’ll tell you tomorrow night, after you meet with Hoff.’ Nick rises. He sticks out his hand. Billy shakes it. He has shaken with Nick before and never likes it because Nick is a bad guy. Hard not to like him a little, though. Nick is also a pro, and that grin works.

5

Paulie Logan drives him back to the hotel. Paulie doesn’t talk much. He asks Billy if he minds the radio, and when Billy says no, Paulie puts on a soft rock station. At one point he says, ‘Loggins and Messina, they’re the best.’ Except for cursing at a guy who cuts him off on Cedar Street, that’s the extent of his conversation.

Billy doesn’t mind. He’s thinking of all the movies he’s seen about robbers who are planning one last job. If noir is a genre, then ‘one last job’ is a sub-genre. In those movies, the last job always goes bad. Billy isn’t a robber and he doesn’t work with a gang and he’s not superstitious, but this last job thing nags at him just the same. Maybe because

the price is so high. Maybe because he doesn't know who's paying the tab, or why. Maybe it's even the story Nick told about how the target once took out a fifteen-year-old honor student.

'You stickin' around?' Paulie asks when he pulls the car into the hotel's forecourt. 'Because this guy Hoff will get you the tool you need. I could have done it myself, but Nick said no.'

Is he sticking around? 'Don't know. Maybe.' He pauses getting out. 'Probably.'

6

In his room, Billy powers up his laptop. He changes the time stamp and checks his VPN, because hackers love hotels. He could try googling Los Angeles County courts, extradition hearings have got to be matters of public record, but there are simpler ways to get what he wants. And he wants. Ronald Reagan had a point when he said trust but verify.

Billy goes to the *LA Times* website and pays for a six-month subscription. He uses a credit card that belongs to a fictitious person named Thomas Hardy, Hardy being Billy's favorite writer. Of the naturalist school, anyway. Once in, he searches for *feminist writer* and adds *attempted rape*. He finds half a dozen stories, each smaller than the last. There's a picture of the feminist writer, who looks hot and has a lot to say. The alleged attack took place in the forecourt of the Beverly Hills Hotel. The alleged perpetrator was discovered to be in possession of multiple IDs and credit cards. According to the *Times*, his real name is Joel Randolph Allen. He beat a rape charge in Massachusetts in 2012.

So Joe was pretty close, Billy thinks.

Next he goes to the website of this city's newspaper, once again uses Thomas Hardy to get through the paywall, and searches for *murder victim poker game*.

The story is there, and the security photo that runs with it is pretty damning. An hour earlier the light wouldn't have been good enough to show the doer's face, but the time stamp on the bottom of the photo is 5:18 A.M. The sun isn't up but it's getting there, and the face of the guy standing in the alley is as clear as you'd want, if you were a prosecutor. He's got his hand in his pocket, he's waiting outside a door that says **LOADING ZONE DO NOT BLOCK**, and if Billy was on the

jury, he'd probably vote for the needle just on the basis of that. Because Billy Summers is an expert when it comes to premeditation, and that's what he's looking at right here.

The most recent story in the Red Bluff paper says that Joel Allen has been arrested on unrelated charges in Los Angeles.

Billy is sure that Nick believes he takes everything at face value. Like everyone else Billy has worked for over the years he's been doing this, Nick believes that outside of his awesome sniper skills, Billy is a little slow, maybe even on the spectrum. Nick believes the *dumb self*, because Billy is at great pains not to overdo it. No gaping mouth, no glazed eyes, no outright stupidity. An *Archie* comic book does wonders. The Zola novel he's been reading is buried deep in his suitcase. And if someone searched his case and discovered it? Billy would say he found it left in the pocket of an airline seat and picked it up because he liked the girl on the cover.

He thinks about looking for the fifteen-year-old honor student, but there isn't enough info. He could google that all afternoon and not find it. Even if he did, he couldn't be sure he was looking at the right fifteen-year-old. It's enough to know the rest of the story Nick told checks out.

He orders a sandwich and a pot of tea. When it comes, he sits by the window, eating and reading *Thérèse Raquin*. He thinks it's like James M. Cain crossed with an EC horror comic from the 1950s. After his late lunch, he lies down with his hands behind his head and beneath the pillow, feeling the cool that hides there. Which, like youth and beauty, doesn't last long. He'll see what this Ken Hoff has to say, and if that also checks out, he thinks he will take the job. The waiting will be difficult, he's never been good at that (tried Zen once, didn't take), but for a two-million-dollar payday he can wait.

Billy closes his eyes and goes to sleep.

At seven that evening, he's eating a room service dinner and watching *The Asphalt Jungle* on his laptop. It's a jinxed one last job picture, for sure. The phone rings. It's Ken Hoff. He tells Billy where they'll meet tomorrow afternoon. Billy doesn't have to write it down. Writing things down can be dangerous, and he's got a good memory.



CHAPTER 2

1

Like most male movie stars – not to mention men Billy passes on the street who are emulating those movie stars – Ken Hoff has a scruff of beard, as if he forgot to shave for three or four days. This is an unfortunate look for Hoff, who is a redhead. He doesn't look rough and tough; he looks like he has a bad sunburn.

They are sitting at an umbrella-shaded table outside an eatery called the Sunspot Café. It's on the corner of Main and Court. Billy guesses the place is plenty busy during the week, but on this Saturday afternoon it's almost deserted inside, and they have the outside scatter of tables to themselves.

Hoff is maybe fifty or a hard-living forty-five. He's drinking a glass of wine. Billy has a diet soda. He doesn't think Hoff works for Nick, because Nick is based in Vegas. But Nick has his fingers in many pies, not all of them out west. Nick Majarian and Ken Hoff may be connected in some way, or maybe Hoff is hooked up with the guy who is paying for the job. Always assuming the job happens, that is.

'That building across the street is mine,' Hoff says. 'Only twenty-two stories, but good enough to make it the second highest in Red Bluff. It'll be the third highest when the Higgins Center goes up. That's gonna be thirty stories high. With a mall. I've got a piece of that one, too, but this one? Strictly my baby. They laughed at Trump when he said he was gonna fix the economy, but it's working. It's working.'

Billy has no interest in Trump or Trump's economy, but he studies the building with professional interest. He's pretty sure it's where he's

supposed to take the shot. It's called the Gerard Tower. Billy thinks that calling a building that has only twenty-two stories a tower is a little overblown, but he supposes in this city of small brick buildings, most of them shabby, it probably seems like a tower. On the well-tended and -watered greensward in front of it is a sign reading OFFICE SPACE AND LUXURY APARTMENTS NOW AVAILABLE. There's a number to call. The sign looks like it's been there awhile.

'Hasn't filled the way I expected,' Hoff says. 'The economy's booming, yeah, people with money falling out of their asses and 2020 is going to be even better, but you'd be surprised how much of that is Internet-driven, Billy. Okay to call you Billy?'

'Sure.'

'Bottom line, I'm a little bit tight this year. Cash flow problems since I bought into WWE, but three affils, how could I say no?'

Billy has no idea what he's talking about. Something about pro wrestling, maybe? Or the Monster Truck Jam they keep advertising on TV? Since Hoff clearly thinks he should know, Billy nods his head as if he does.

'The local old money assholes think I'm overextended, but you have to bet on the economy, am I right? Roll the dice while the dice are hot. Takes money to make money, yeah?'

'Sure.'

'So I do what I have to do. And hey, I know a good thing when I see it and this is a good deal for me. A little risky, but I need a bridge. And Nick assures me that if you were to get caught, I know you won't but if you did, you'd keep your mouth shut.'

'Yes. I would.' Billy has never been caught and doesn't intend to get caught this time.

'Code of the road, am I right?'

'Sure.' Billy has an idea that Ken Hoff has seen too many movies. Some of them probably in the 'one last job' sub-genre. He wishes the man would get to the point. It's hot out here, even under the umbrella. And muggy. This climate is for the birds, Billy thinks, and probably even they don't like it.

'I got you a nice corner suite on the fifth floor,' Hoff says. 'Three rooms. Office, reception, kitchenette. A kitchenette, how about that, huh? You'll be okay no matter how long it takes. Snug as a bug in

a rug. I'm not gonna point, but I'm sure you can count to five, right?'

Sure, Billy thinks, I can even walk and chew gum at the same time.

The building is square, your basic Saltine box with windows, so there are actually two corner suites on the fifth floor, but Billy knows which one Hoff means: the one on the left. From the window he traces a diagonal down Court Street, which is only two blocks long. The diagonal, the path of the shot he'll take if he takes the job, ends at the steps of the county courthouse. It's a gray granite sprawl of a building. The steps, at least twenty, lead up to a plaza with blindfolded Lady Justice in the middle, holding out her scales. Among the many things he will never tell Ken Hoff: Lady Justice is based on Iustice, a Roman goddess more or less invented by the emperor Augustus.

Billy returns his gaze to the fifth-floor corner suite and once more eyes the diagonal. It looks to him like five hundred yards from the window to the steps. That's a shot he is capable of making even in a strong wind. With the right tool, of course.

'What have you got for me, Mr Hoff?'

'Huh?' For a moment Hoff's *dumb self* is on full view. Billy makes a curling gesture with the index finger of his right hand. It could be taken to mean *come on*, but not in this case.

'Oh! Sure! What you asked for, right?' He looks around, sees no one, but lowers his voice anyway. 'Remington 700.'

'The M24.' That's the Army classification.

'M . . .?' Hoff reaches into his back pocket, takes out his wallet, and thumbs through it. He removes a scrap of paper and looks at it. 'M24, right.'

He starts to put the piece of paper back in his wallet, but Billy holds out his hand.

Hoff hands it over. Billy puts it in his own pocket. Later, before he goes to see Nick, he'll flush it down the toilet in his hotel room. You don't write stuff down. He hopes this guy Hoff isn't going to be a problem.

'Optics?'

'Huh?'

'Scope. The sight.'

Hoff looks flustered. 'It's the one you asked for.'

'Did you write that down, too?'

'On the paper I just gave you.'

'Okay.'

'I've got the, uh, tool in a—'

'I don't need to know where. I haven't even decided if I want this job.' He has, though. 'Does the building over there have security?' Another *dumb self* question.

'Yeah. Sure.'

'If I do take the job, getting the tool up to the fifth floor will be on me. Are we good on that, Mr Hoff?'

'Yeah, sure.' Hoff looks relieved.

'Then I think we're done here.' Billy stands and holds out his hand. 'It was very nice meeting you.' It wasn't. Billy isn't sure he trusts the man, and he hates that stupid scruffy beard. What woman would want to kiss a mouth surrounded by red bristles?

Hoff shakes. 'Same here, Billy. This is just a squeeze I'm going through. You ever read a book called *The Hero's Journey*?'

Billy has, but shakes his head.

'You should, you should. I just skimmed the literary stuff to get to the main part. Straight to the meat of a thing, that's me. Cut through the bullshit. Can't remember the name of the guy who wrote it, but he says every man has to go through a time of testing before he becomes a hero. This is my time.'

By supplying a sniper rifle and an overwatch site to an assassin, Billy thinks. Not sure Joseph Campbell would put that in the hero category.

'Well, I hope you pass.'

2

Billy supposes he'll get a car eventually if he stays here, but right now he doesn't know his way around and he's happy to let Paul Logan drive him from the hotel to where Nick is 'house-sitting.' It's the McMansion Billy was expecting yesterday, a cobbled-together horror-show on what looks like two acres of lawn. The gate to the long curving driveway swings open at a touch of Paulie's thumb to the gadget on his visor. There is indeed a cherub peeing endlessly into a pool of water, and a couple of other statues (Roman soldier, bare-breasted maiden) that are

lit by hidden spots now that dusk is here. The house is also lit, the better to show off its wretched excess. To Billy it looks like the bastard child of a supermarket and a mega-church. This isn't a house, it's the architectural equivalent of red golf pants.

Frank Macintosh, aka Frankie Elvis, is waiting on the endless porch to receive him. Dark suit, sober blue tie. Looking at him you'd never guess that he began his career breaking legs for a loan shark. Of course that was long ago, before he moved up to the bigs. He comes halfway down the porch steps, hand outstretched, like the lord of the manor. Or the lord of the manor's butler.

Nick is once more waiting in the hall, one much grander than that of the humble yellow house in Midwood. Nick is built big, but the man with him is enormous, way north of three hundred. This is Giorgio Piglielli, of course known to Nick's Las Vegas cadre as Georgie Pigs (and also never to his face). If Nick is a CEO, then Giorgio is his chief operating officer. For them both to be here, so far from their home base, suggests that what Nick called the agenting fee must be very high. Billy has been promised two million. How much have these guys been promised, or already pocketed? Someone is very worried about Joel Allen. Someone who probably owns a house like this, or one even uglier. Hard to believe such a thing is possible, but it probably is.

Nick claps Billy on the shoulder and says, 'You probably think this fat-ass is Giorgio Piglielli.'

'Sure looks like him,' Billy says cautiously, and Giorgio gives a chuckle as fat as he is.

Nick nods. He's got that million-dollar grin on his face. 'I know it does, but this is actually George Russo. Your agent.'

'Agent? Like in real estate?'

'Nope, not that kind.' Nick laughs. 'Come on in the living room. We'll have drinks and Giorgio will lay this out for you. Like I said yesterday, it's a beaut.'

3

The living room is as long as a Pullman car. There are three chandeliers, two small and one big. The furniture is low and swoopy. Two more

cherubs are supporting a full-length mirror. There's a grandfather clock that looks embarrassed to be here.

Frank Macintosh, the leg-breaker turned manservant, brings them drinks on a tray: beer for Billy and Nick and what looks like a chocolate malted for Giorgio, who seems determined to ingest every calorie possible before dying at the age of fifty. He chooses the only chair that will fit him. Billy wonders if he'll be able to get out of it without help.

Nick raises his glass of beer. 'Here's to us. May we do business that makes us happy and leaves us satisfied.'

They drink to that, then Giorgio says, 'Nick tells me that you're interested, but you haven't actually signed on for this yet. Still in what could be called the exploratory phase.'

'That's right,' Billy says.

'Well, for the purposes of this discussion, let's pretend that you're on the team.' Giorgio sucks on the straw in his malted. 'Man, that's good. Just the ticket on a warm evening.' He reaches into the pocket of his suitcoat – enough fabric there to clothe an orphanage, Billy thinks – and produces a wallet. He holds it out.

Billy takes it. A Lord Buxton. Nice, but not fancy. And it's been slightly aged, with a couple of scuffs and nicks in the leather.

'Look through it. It's who you'll be in this godforsaken burg.'

Billy does. Seventy dollars or so in the billfold. A few pictures, mostly of men who could be friends and women who could be gal pals. Nothing to indicate he has a wife and kids.

'I wanted to Photoshop you into one,' Giorgio says, 'standing at the Grand Canyon or something, but nobody seems to have a photo of you, Billy.'

'Photos can lead to trouble.'

Nick says, 'Most people don't carry pictures of themselves in their wallets, anyway. I told Giorgio that.'

Billy continues to go through the wallet, reading it like a book. Like *Thérèse Raquin*, which he finished while eating supper in his room. If he stays here, his name will be David Lockridge. He has a Visa card and a Mastercard, both issued by Seacoast Bank of Portsmouth.

'What are the limits on the plastic?' he asks Giorgio.

'Five hundred on the Master, a thousand on the Visa. You're on a

budget. Of course, if your book works out like we hope it will, that could change.'

Billy stares at Giorgio, then at Nick, wondering if this is some kind of set-up. Wondering if they've seen through the *dumb self*.

'He's your *literary agent*!' Nick nearly shouts. 'Is that a hoot, or what?'

'A writer is my cover? Come on, I never even finished high school. Got my GED in the sand, for God's sake, and that was a gift from Uncle Sam for dodging IEDs and mujies in Fallujah and Ramadi. It won't work. It's crazy.'

'It's not, it's genius,' Nick says. 'Listen to the man, Billy. Or should I start calling you Dave now?'

'You're never calling me Dave if this is my cover.'

Too close to home, far too close. He's a reader, that's for sure. And he sometimes dreams of writing, although he's never actually tried his hand except for scraps of prose here and there, which he always destroyed.

'It'll never fly, Nick. I know you guys have already started this going . . .' He raises the wallet. '. . . and I'm sorry, but it just won't work. What would I say if someone asked what my book was about?'

'Give me five minutes,' Giorgio says. 'Ten, tops. And if you still don't like it, we all part friends.'

Billy doubts if that's true but tells him to go ahead.

Giorgio puts his empty malted glass on the table (probably a Chippendale) beside his chair and belches. But when he turns his full attention on Billy, he can see what Georgie Pigs really is: a lean and athletic mind buried inside the ocean of blubber that will kill him before many more years. 'I know how it sounds at first blush, you being the kind of guy you are, but it *will* fly.'

Billy relaxes a little. They still believe what they see. He's safe on that score, at least.

'You're going to be here for at least six weeks and maybe as long as six months,' Giorgio says. 'Depends on how long it takes for the moke's lawyer to run out the string fighting extradition. Or until he thinks he has a deal on the murder charge. You're getting paid for the job, but you're also getting paid for your time. You get that, right?'

Billy nods.

'Which means you need a reason to be here in Red Bluff, and it's not exactly a vacation spot.'

'Truth,' Nick says, and makes a face like a little kid looking at a plate of broccoli.

'You also need a reason to be in that building down the street from the courthouse. You're writing a book, that's the reason.'

'But—'

Giorgio holds up a fat hand. 'You don't think it'll work, but I'm telling you it will. I'm going to show you how.'

Billy looks doubtful, but now that he's over his fear that they've seen through the camouflage of the *dumb self*, he thinks he can see where Giorgio is going. This might have possibilities.

'I did my research. Read a bunch of writers' magazines, plus a ton of stuff online. Here's your cover story. David Lockridge grew up in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Always wanted to be a writer but barely finished high school. Worked construction. You kept writing, but you were a hard partier. Lots of drinking. I thought about giving you a divorce but decided it would be a lot to keep straight.'

For a guy who's smart about guns but not about much else, Billy thinks.

'Finally you get going on something good, okay? There's a lot of talk in the blogs I read about writers suddenly catching fire, and that's what happens to you. You write a bunch, maybe seventy pages, maybe a hundred—'

'About what?' Billy's actually starting to enjoy himself now, but he's careful not to show it.

Giorgio exchanges a glance with Nick, who shrugs. 'Haven't decided that yet, but I'll come up with someth—'

'Maybe my own story? Dave's story, I mean. There's a word for that—'

'Autobiography,' Nick snaps, like he's on *Jeopardy!*

'That might work,' Giorgio says. His face says *nice try, Nick, but leave this to the experts*. 'Or maybe it's a novel. The important thing is you never talk about it on orders from your agent. Top secret. You're writing, you don't keep that a secret, everybody you meet in the building will know the guy on the fifth floor is writing a book, but nobody knows what it's about. That way you never get your stories mixed up.'

As if I would, Billy thinks. 'How did David Lockridge get from Portsmouth to here? And how did he wind up in the Gerard Tower?'

‘This is my favorite part,’ Nick says. He sounds like a kid listening to a well-loved story at bedtime, and Billy doesn’t think he’s faking or exaggerating. Nick is totally on board with this.

‘You looked for agents online,’ Giorgio says, but then hesitates. ‘You go online, don’t you?’

‘Sure,’ Billy says. He’s pretty sure he knows more about computers than either of these two fat men, but that is also information he doesn’t share. ‘I do email. Sometimes play games on my phone. Also, there’s ComiXology. That’s an app. You download stuff. I use my laptop for that.’

‘Okay, good. You look for agents. You send out letters saying you’re working on this book. Most of the agents say no, because they stick with the proven earners like James Patterson and the Harry Potter babe. I read a blog that said it’s a catch-22: you need an agent to get published, but until you’re published you can’t get an agent.’

‘It’s the same in the movies,’ Nick puts in. ‘You got your famous stars, but it’s really all about the agents. They have the real power. They tell the stars what to do, and boy, they do it.’

Giorgio waits patiently for him to finish, then goes on. ‘Finally one agent says yeah, okay, what the fuck, I’ll take a look, send me the first couple of chapters.’

‘You,’ Billy says.

‘Me. George Russo. I read the pages. I flip for them. I show them to a few publishers I know—’

The fuck you do, Billy thinks, you show them to a few *editors* you know. But that part can be fixed if it ever needs to be.

‘—and they also flip, but they won’t pay big money, maybe even seven-figure money, until the book is finished. Because you’re an unknown commodity. Do you know what that means?’

Billy comes perilously close to saying of course he does, because he’s getting jazzed by the possibilities here. It could actually be an excellent cover, especially the part about being sworn to secrecy concerning his project. And it could be fun pretending to be what he’s always sort of wished he could be.

‘It means a flash in the pan.’

Nick flashes the money grin. Giorgio nods.

‘Close enough. Some time passes. I wait for more pages, but Dave

doesn't come through. I wait some more. Still no pages. I go to see him up there in lobsterland, and what do I find? The guy is partying his ass off like he's Ernest fuckin Hemingway. When he's not working, he's either out with his homeboys or hungover. Substance abuse goes with talent, you know.'

'Really?'

'Proven fact. But George Russo is determined to save this guy, at least long enough to finish his book. He talks a publisher into contracting for it and paying an advance of let's say thirty or maybe fifty thou. Not big money, but not small money either, plus the publisher can demand it back if the book doesn't show up by a certain deadline, which they call a delivery date. But see, here's the thing, Billy: the check is made out to *me* instead of to *you*.'

Now it's all clear in Billy's mind, but he'll let Giorgio spin it out.

'I have certain conditions. For your own good. You have to leave lobsterland and all your hard-drinking, coke-snorting friends. You have to go somewhere far away from them, to some little shitpot of a town or city where there's nothing to do and no one to do it with even if there was. I tell you I'm gonna rent you a house.'

'The one I saw, right?'

'Right. More important, I'm going to rent you office space and you're going to go there every weekday and sit in a little room and pound away until your top secret book is done. You agree to those terms or your golden ticket goes bye-bye.'

Giorgio sits back. The chair is sturdy, but still gives out a little groan.

'Now if you tell me that's a bad idea, or even if you tell me it's a good idea but you can't sell it, we'll call the whole thing off.'

Nick holds up a hand. 'Before you say anything, Billy, I want to lay out something else that makes this good. Everybody on your floor will get acquainted with you, and a lot of other people in the building, too. I know you, and you've got another talent besides hitting a quarter at a quarter of a mile.'

Like I could do that, Billy thinks. Like even Chris Kyle could.

'You get along with people without buddying up to them. They smile when they see you coming.' And then, as if Billy had denied it: 'I've seen it! Hoff tells me that a couple of food wagons stop at that building every day, and in nice weather people line up and sit outside

on the benches to eat their lunches. You could be one of those people. The time waiting doesn't have to be for nothing. You can use it to get accepted. Once the novelty of how you're writing a book wears off, you'll be just another nine-to-five who goes home to his little house in Midwood.'

Billy sees how that could happen.

'So when it finally goes down, are you a stranger no one knows? The outsider who must have done it? Uh-uh, you've been there for months, you make chit-chat in the elevator, you play dollar poker with some of the collection agency guys from the second floor to see who buys the tacos.'

'They are going to know where the shot came from,' Billy says.

'Sure, but not right away. Because at first everyone will be looking for that outsider. And because there's going to be a diversion. Also because you've always been fucking Houdini when it comes to disappearing after the hit. By the time things start to settle, you'll be long gone.'

'What's the diversion?'

'We can talk about that later,' Nick says, which makes Billy think Nick might not have made up his mind about that yet. Although with Nick, it's hard to tell. 'Plenty of time. For now . . .' He turns to Giorgio, aka Georgie Pigs, aka George Russo. *Over to you*, the look says.

Giorgio reaches into the pocket of his gigantic suit jacket again and pulls out his phone. 'Say the word, Billy – the word being the passcode of your favorite offshore bank – and I'll send five hundred grand to it. It'll take about forty seconds. Minute and a half if the connection's slow. Also plenty of walking-around money in a local bank to get you started.'

Billy understands they're trying to rush him into a decision and has a brief image of a cow being driven down a chute to the slaughterhouse, but maybe that's just paranoia because of the enormous payday. Maybe a person's last job shouldn't just be the most lucrative; maybe it should also be the most interesting. But he would like to know one more thing.

'Why is Hoff involved?'

'His building,' Nick says promptly.

'Yeah, but . . .' Billy frowns, putting an expression of great concentration on his face. 'He said there's lots of vacancies in that building.'

‘The corner spot on the fifth floor is prime, though,’ Nick says. ‘Your agent, Georgie here, had him lease it, which keeps us out of it.’

‘He also gets the gun,’ Giorgio says. ‘May have it already. In any case, it won’t be traced back to us.’

Billy knows that already, from the way Nick has been careful not to be seen with him – no, not even on the porch of this gated estate – but he’s not entirely satisfied. Because Hoff struck him as a chatterbox, and a chatterbox isn’t a good person to have around when you’re planning an assassination.

4

Later that night. Closing in on midnight. Billy lies on his hotel room bed, hands beneath the pillow, relishing the cool that’s so ephemeral. He said yes, of course, and when you say yes to Nick Majarian, there’s no going back. He is now starring in his own last job story.

He had Giorgio send the \$500,000 to a bank in the Caribbean. There’s a good amount of money in that account right now, and after Joel Allen dies on those courthouse steps, there will be a good deal more. Enough to live on for a long, long time if he’s prudent. And he will be. He doesn’t have expensive tastes. Champagne and escort services have never been his thing. In two other banks – local ones – David Lockridge will have an additional \$18,000 to draw on. It’s plenty of walking-around money, but not enough to twang any federal tripwires.

He did have a couple of other questions. The most important was how much lead time he could expect when the deal was about to go down.

‘Not a lot,’ Nick said, ‘but it won’t be “He’s gonna be there in fifteen minutes,” either. We’ll know right after the extradition is ordered, and you’ll get a call or a text. It’ll be twenty-four hours at the very least, maybe three days or even a week. Okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Billy said. ‘Just as long as you understand I can’t guarantee anything if it is fifteen minutes. Or even an hour.’

‘It won’t be.’

‘What if they don’t bring him up the courthouse steps? What if they use another door?’

‘There is another door,’ Giorgio said. ‘It’s the one some of the courthouse employees use. But you’ll still have a sightline from the fifth

floor and the distance is only sixty yards or so longer. You can do that, can't you?

He could, and said so. Nick lifted a hand as if to wave away a troublesome fly. 'It'll be the steps, count on it. Anything else?'

Billy said there wasn't and now he lies here, thinking it over, waiting for sleep. On Monday he'll be moving into the little yellow house, leased for him by his agent. His *literary* agent. On Tuesday, he'll see the office suite Georgie Pigs has also leased for him. When Giorgio asked him what he'd do there, Billy told him he'd start by downloading ComiXology to his laptop. And maybe a few games.

'Be sure to write something between funnybooks,' Giorgio said, half-joking and half not. 'You know, get into character. Live the part.'

Maybe he will. Maybe he will do that. Even if what he writes isn't very good, it will pass the time. Autobiography was his suggestion. Giorgio suggested a novel, not because he thinks Billy's bright enough to write one but because Billy could say that when someone asked, as someone will. Probably lots of someones, once he gets to know people in the Gerard Tower.

He's slipping toward sleep when a cool idea wakes him up: why not a combination of the two? Why not a novel that's actually an autobiography, one written not by the Billy Summers who reads Zola and Hardy and even plowed his way through *Infinite Jest*, but one written by the other Billy Summers? The alter ego he calls his *dumb self*? Could that work? He thinks yes, because he knows that Billy as well as he knows himself.

I might give it a try, he thinks. With nothing but time on my hands, why not? He's thinking about how he might begin when he finally drifts off.