

Prologue

The man stood, alone, hands in the pockets of his dark suit, gazing down into the earthen maw that had just swallowed his wife.

He was a tall man, stooped at the shoulders. Slim, with a pinched nose, prominent ears, and thin lips. He had fine hair the color of dry sand, which was parted to the side in a precise and solemn manner that made him appear much younger than his forty-odd years, like a boy made up for a school picture. His hair twitched in the warm breeze. The grass he was standing on was even and green; the headstones were silver and white.

He looked up and squinted into the brilliant sky.

Isn't it supposed to be raining?

In movies, and on TV shows, it always seemed to be raining during burials. But today, sun, sky, clouds, and breeze had colluded to produce a day breathtaking even by Southern California standards.

I wish the weather had been this nice on my daughter's wedding day he'd overheard one of the mourners murmur to her companion right before the start of the brief ceremony. One of Jenny's friends. The CEO of a local biotechnology start-up. A very promising one. He was even considering acquiring a silent majority stake in it. She was an avid triathlete with brown, sinewy arms, mirrored sunglasses, and tiny breasts.

The triathlete was, he admitted, a shrewd businesswoman. He found it unlikely that her initial meeting with Jenny at a local gym, involving some

sort of misunderstanding over a yoga mat, had occurred by chance. She had no doubt cultivated a relationship with Jenny to advance her company's agenda with him. He'd voiced these suspicions to Jenny shortly after the friendship began.

Jenny, for whom glasses had never been half-empty, had laughed, and had told him to lighten up because he wasn't *that* important, after all, and it wasn't *always* about him.

She'd touched her forefinger to her lips, and stood on her tiptoes, and pressed her finger to his lips, the way she often did to signal that a particular topic was no longer open for discussion. That was that. Debate was closed, and he'd never again questioned, out loud, at least, the triathlete's motives.

Her finger on his lips.

How he'd adored that simple gesture. The memory of it, its tactile echo—the gentle pressure on his skin, the slight ridges of Jenny's fingertips catching faintly on his bottom lip as she pulled her finger away—was almost enough to make him smile.

Almost.

He personally couldn't abide the triathlete. It wasn't a female thing. He did business with women all the time. To a certain extent, he even preferred dealing with women rather than men. Or at least disliked it less. He appreciated the fact that most women weren't fixated on some asinine alpha-male ritual du jour. Like kite surfing. Or rock climbing. Or golf. Even the fat ones played golf and boasted about it like it was some monumental athletic achievement. What a colossal waste of time.

So.

He didn't like the triathlete because she was a woman. He simply didn't like her. Which was of little consequence. There were lots of people he didn't like. Besides, to make that kind of comment today, not ten feet from where Jenny lay . . .

Well.

He'd bitten his lip and ignored her.

For Jenny.

She'd been well liked. Most of her friends, and there had been a good many of them, had attended the service, greeting him with handshakes, and sympathetic shoulder pats, and a few stiff hugs.

How are you holding up? Such a tragedy. Taken before her time. She was so loved. She touched so many in the short time she had. She'll be sorely missed.

He'd accepted their ministrations graciously enough, in his opinion. But he'd kept his distance during the service, standing alone, several feet away from the main group. He wanted nothing more to do with any of them. They were Jenny's friends, not his. They'd attended the burial for her sake, certainly not out of any genuine concern for him. Their relationships with him were gossamer and transitive, established and maintained through Jenny. The same went for Jenny's parents and brother, with whom he'd been cordial but who'd never known quite what to make of him. Now she was gone.

He himself didn't have many friends. Not close ones. It was a truth that didn't disturb him in the least. He viewed it with the objectivity of a scientist observing a squirming microbe under a laboratory microscope.

He withdrew his hands from his pockets and turned his attention from the sky back to Jenny's grave.

Like a black hole, its darkness seemed to defy the shimmering day, sucking in the surrounding sunlight. Or perhaps repelling it. He stared hard into the opening, peering into the dimness. He could just make out his wife's coffin, which gleamed the dull silver of a bullet.

He was seized with a wild urge to throw himself into the hole and grab the coffin; to pound on its cold, unyielding shell and scream his throat raw; to wrap his arms around it and hug it to his chest and wait for the indifferent earth to bury them both.

Because, really, what else mattered now?

Something moved in his peripheral vision.

A man, bald and short and thick, inched forward from a gleaming black Town Car parked on a nearby road. He cleared his throat.

"Mr. Finney?" His voice was reedy yet carried clearly. He and the tall man were the only living souls now remaining in this section of the cemetery.

The tall man lifted his chin and inclined his head to one side.

The thick man coughed. "Mr. Finney. You have that, ah, meeting. In forty-five minutes. At the Salk." He tapped his wristwatch. "Just wanted to, uh, remind you."

Finney did not turn around, or speak. He kept his head tilted toward

the horizontal, as if he were in the aisle of a supermarket, casually holding up a cereal box to inspect its list of ingredients.

The man reeks of cigarettes, Finney thought. *He was specifically instructed that I hate cigarettes.*

Finney watched him out of the corner of his eye. The seconds ticked by. Perspiration gathered across the thick man's bare skull and glistened in the sun. The man cleared his throat, as if to speak again, then seemed to think the better of it. He retreated to the car, wheezing.

Finney straightened his head back to the vertical, so that his chin was once again aligned with his neck. Although he'd never been predisposed to quick anger, or rash thoughts, Jenny's death had kindled in him an emotional brittleness, worsened by his hopeless incapacity to process the cauldron of feelings that had simmered deep in his psyche since she'd been taken from him. Rage, raw as an open wound, bubbled over from inside him and threatened to consume him.

He drew a deep breath and held it.

Finney was not given to cliché. He, in fact, hated cliché. So he was surprised when the first coherent thought to pop into his mind as the thick man waddled away was *I'm going to kill him*: a sentiment that was, of course, a cliché.

He forced the air out of his lungs and seized that thought. Flipped it around in his mind. Mentally hefted it, turned it this way and that, considered its substance.

I'm going to kill him.

In an instant, his anger over the thick man's stupendous idiocy had turned to curiosity.

I'm going to kill him?

People casually uttered that phrase all the time, without thought or conviction. As in, *if he shows up late again for work, I'm going to kill him*. It was a sitcom catchphrase or a throwaway line for cheap villains in summer movies. It meant nothing. No substance. All cliché.

But was it really, at this moment? For him?

Because Finney knew, with the absolute certainty of a man who had grown rich from being absolutely certain about things, that at this moment he really *did* want to kill the thick man.

This insight fascinated him. He was a law-abiding citizen, after all. Well, *mostly* law-abiding. Certainly not given to thoughts of premeditated homicide. From what dark corner of his mind had this urge sprung?

The immediacy of his conviction, its vividness and power, intrigued him. Finney didn't believe in the existence of God. But if he did, he would at this moment invoke God to witness the fact that he wanted nothing more than to wrap his fingers around the man's fat throat and squeeze, really *squeeze*, until his fingers disappeared into the folds of skin, as if they'd slipped beneath fleshy quicksand; and he felt the man's windpipe crack, and heard the gratifying, high-pitched gasp of his final, foul breath.

It was an odd sensation. Not simply rage, anymore, or indignation over the man's appalling disrespect, even as Jenny was about to disappear into the ground forever.

No.

It seemed to him something greater, far more consequential: as if the mere existence of this squat, nicotine-addled creature had somehow tipped the universe out of balance, and it was Finney's mission—no, his *burden*—to right the order of things.

Finney's emotions were something that he'd always experienced from a distance, from the outside in, like they were fish in an aquarium, and he was viewing them from the other side of thick-paned glass; so it was rather like he watched, instead of felt, the murderous urge slip away, disappearing beneath the murky surface of his subconscious. It did so slowly, as if reluctant to give up its grasp on him.

He sighed.

Order.

Or a lack thereof.

Maybe that's what it was that was bothering him so much, that had been eating away at him, chewing on his insides, at all times of day and night over the last week. He hadn't slept in days, and he was exhausted. Jenny's death had set askew the natural order of things, and he sensed the unbalance in the universe around him. Newton's Third Law at work: Her death was the action, and cosmic disequilibrium the reaction.

He would have to settle for firing the thick man, who had only recently started working for him, and ensuring he never again achieved any

professional rank above that of graveyard-shift janitor. The man otherwise wasn't worth the mental effort: not a single additional electrical impulse fired in a single neuron of Finney's brain.

Besides, as much as he repulsed Finney, the thick man was not responsible for Jenny's death.

That distinction belonged to another.

Because, really, what else mattered now?

The grief crashed over him without warning. It was as if his grief were a dense, poisonous liquid, and he was drowning in it, tumbling and spinning, helpless and sick. The familiar feeling, the *hated* feeling, rose in his throat.

He was going to cry.

He closed his eyes and balled his hands into fists, fighting the tears, as he had done repeatedly since her death. Even so, he felt them pooling in the corners of his eyes. Soon, here in the bright sunlight, in front of the thick man and the world, he would be sobbing like some pathetic child.

He could not, he *would not*, let that happen. He squeezed his eyelids and fists together harder.

Morgan.

He stirred.

It was Jenny, her voice as distinct and clear as if she were standing right next to him.

Jenny told him it was okay to cry.

He knew that it was the kind of thing that in life she would have encouraged him to do. Out of the mouths of lesser women, such advice would have sounded trite—the pedestrian psychobabble of daytime talk-show hosts and banal self-help books. But not from Jenny. Never from her.

It's okay, she whispered.

He thought it over. Should he cry? Do what she'd empowered him to do when she was still alive? Acknowledge all of his emotions: the good and the bad? As she would surely want him to do now if she were standing here at his side?

But Jenny wasn't here. Not really. And as much as he loved her—*had* loved her, he corrected himself—he was finished with these foolish

sentiments. For good. He would no longer wallow in self-pity, as if he were some pig rooting through the foul muck of its pen.

No.

He *had* to be done with them. Because emotions were weak. Because acknowledging them meant he would never escape the searing pain of her loss. He needed to purge himself of this ridiculous mawkishness.

His fingernails had grown long and firm during the distraction and grief of the past several weeks, through her illness and its bleak finale, and they bit into the soft skin of his palms. It hurt.

It hurt a lot.

Good.

He made slight scraping motions with his fingers to force the nails deeper, drawing blood as he felt them break the surface of the skin, and concentrated on the physical pain to distract himself from the psychological.

Morgan.

She sounded more distant now.

In a way, it should be straightforward. Like closing a business deal, or solving an engineering problem. He just needed to approach things analytically: think it through with the precision, the elegance, of a mathematical equation. He would refocus his energies, redirect these irritating emotions into more meaningful and productive pursuits. But what kinds?

Scrape, scrape, scrape. His fingernails sunk into the compliant flesh. His clenched hands shook. He could feel his palms becoming slick with blood. He pictured it oozing through the gaps between his fingers and dripping onto the ground beneath him. Red dew drops on green grass.

The revelation came to him in a moment of sudden, perfect clarity.

Of course.

The answer was simple.

The grief receded, limping away like a wounded animal.

He relaxed his fists and opened his eyes. The urge to cry was gone. He examined with indifference the four crimson streaks running in series across each of his palms: the eight fingernail-inflicted stigmata trickling tiny red rivulets. He drew a handkerchief out of his pants pocket, wiped his hands clean of the blood, and dropped the soiled handkerchief on the ground, not knowing, or caring, who would pick it up.

He listened for Jenny.

Nothing.

Because, really, what else mattered now?

There was, actually, one thing.

A singular task that required his attention.

A task to which he would bend every fiber of his psyche until completed.

He removed a small notebook from his suit-coat pocket. It was old, with a worn, black-leather cover. Most of its pages were covered in writing. Some had been carefully scotch-taped to preserve their integrity. He flipped toward the back, to the first blank page, and drew a mechanical pencil from the same pocket. He clicked the pencil three times to extend the thin cylinder of lead beyond the tip of its sheath.

He began to write.

He bore down hard. Twice, the pencil lead snapped. Twice, he replaced the leading edge with three sharp reports—*click, click, click*—of the mechanical pencil. He wrote slowly and with exacting penmanship. When he was finished, he inspected the name he had written.

Dr. Rita Wu.

He stared at it for a moment, then drew an empty box next to her name, as if she were an entry on a *to-do* list. He closed the notebook and returned both it and the mechanical pencil to his coat pocket.

I'm going to kill her.

And he knew, with absolute certainty, that he would.

But first he would make her suffer.

The way Jenny suffered.

And he would rob her of something precious.

The way I've been robbed of something precious.

And balance would return to the universe.

Finney turned and walked back to the car, beside which the thick man waited.

He did not look back.