

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS JUST THE TWO OF US, my mother and me, after my father left. He said I should count the new baby he had with his new wife, Marjorie, as part of my family too, plus Richard, Marjorie's son, who was six months younger than me though he was good at all the sports I messed up in. But our family was my mother, Adele, and me, period. I would have counted the hamster, Joe, before including that baby, Chloe.

Saturday nights when my father picked me up to take us all out to dinner at Friendly's, he was always wanting me to sit next to her in the backseat. Then he'd pull a pack of baseball cards out of his pocket and lay them on the table in the booth, to split between Richard and me. I always gave mine to Richard. Why not? Baseball was a sore spot for me. When the phys ed teacher said, OK, Henry, you play with the blues, all the other guys on the blue team would groan.



For the most part, my mother never mentioned my father, or the woman he was married to now, or her son, or the baby, but once by mistake, when I left a picture out on the table that he'd given me, of the five of us—the year before, when I went with them to Disney—she had studied it for at least a minute. Stood there in the kitchen, holding the picture in her small, pale hand, her long graceful neck tilted a little to one side as if the image she was looking at contained some great and troubling mystery, though really it was just the five of us, scrunched together in the teacup ride.

I would think your father would be worried about the way that baby's one eye doesn't match with the other, she said. It might be nothing more than a developmental delay, not retardation, but you'd think they'd want to have that child tested. Does she seem slow to you, Henry?

Maybe a little.

I knew it, my mother said. That baby doesn't look anything like you either.

I knew my part, all right. I understood who my real family was. Her.



IT WAS UNUSUAL FOR MY MOTHER and me to go out the way we did that day. My mother didn't go places, generally. But I needed pants for school.

OK, she said. Pricemart, then. Like my growing a half inch that summer was something I'd done just to give her a hard time. Not that she wasn't having one already.

The car had turned over the first time she turned the key in the ignition, which was surprising, considering a month might have gone by since the last time we'd gone anywhere in it. She drove slowly, as usual, as if dense fog covered the road, or ice, but it





was summer—the last days before school started, the Thursday before Labor Day weekend—and the sun was shining.

It had been a long summer. Back when school first got out, I had hoped maybe we'd go to the ocean over the long expanse of vacation ahead—just for the day—but my mother said the traffic was terrible on the highway and I'd probably get sunburned, since I had his coloring, meaning my father.

All that June after school let out, and all that July, and now just having ended August, I kept wishing something different would happen, but it never did. Not just my father coming to take me to Friendly's and now and then bowling with Richard and Marjorie, and the baby, or the trip he took us on to the White Mountains to a basket-making factory, and a place Marjorie wanted to stop, where they made candles that smelled like cranberries or lemon or gingerbread.

Other than that, I'd watched a lot of television that summer. My mother had taught me how to play solitaire, and when that got old, I tackled places in our house that nobody had cleaned in a long time, which was how I'd earned the dollar fifty that was burning a hole in my pocket, for another puzzle book. These days even a kid as weird as I was would do his playing on a Game Boy or a PlayStation, but back then only certain families had Nintendo; we weren't one of them.

I thought about girls all the time at this point, but there was nothing going on in my life where they were concerned besides thoughts.

I had just turned thirteen. I wanted to know about everything to do with women and their bodies, and what people did when they got together—people of the opposite sex—and what I needed to do so I could get a girlfriend sometime before I turned forty years old. I had many questions about sex, but it was clear my mother was not the person to discuss this with, though she herself brought it up on occasion. In the car, on the way to the





store, for instance. Your body is changing, I guess, she said, gripping the wheel.

No comment.

My mother stared straight ahead, as if she was Luke Skywalker, manning the controls of the X-wing jet. Headed to some other galaxy. The mall.



WHEN WE GOT TO THE STORE, my mother had gone with me to the boys' section and we'd picked out the pants. Also a pack of underwear.

I guess you'll need shoes, too, she said, in that tone of voice she always had when we went places now, like this whole thing was a bad movie but since we'd bought our tickets we had to stay till the end.

My old ones are still OK, I said. What I was thinking was, if I got shoes on this trip too, it might be a long time before we came here again, where, if I held off on the shoes, we'd have to come back. Once school started I'd need notebooks and pencils, and a protractor, and a calculator. Later, when I brought up the shoes, and she said, Why didn't you tell me when we were at the store last time?, I could point out the rest of the items on my list, and she'd give in.

We finished with the clothes part. I'd put the things I picked out in our cart and headed over to the section where they sold the magazines and paperbacks. I started flipping through an issue of *Mad*, though what I really wanted was to look at the *Playboys*. They sealed those up in a plastic wrapper.

Now I could see my mother across the rows of merchandise, wheeling our cart through the aisles. Slowly, like a leaf in a slow-moving creek, just drifting. No telling what she might put in the cart, though later I would learn: one of those pillows you





put on your bed so you can sit up at night reading. A hand-held battery-operated fan—but not the batteries. A ceramic animal—a hedgehog or something along those lines—with grooved sides where you scattered seeds that you kept moist until, after a while, they sprouted and the animal would be covered with leaves. It’s like a pet, she said, only you don’t have to worry about cleaning out the cage.

Hamster food, I had reminded her. We needed that too.



I WAS ENGROSSED IN AN ISSUE OF *Cosmopolitan* that had caught my eye—an article called “What Women Wish Men Knew That They Don’t”—when the man leaned over and spoke to me. He was standing in front of the section right next to the puzzles, which was magazines about knitting and gardening. You wouldn’t think a person who looked the way he did would want to read about these things. He wanted to talk to me.

I wonder if you could give me a hand here, he said.

This was where I looked at him. He was a tall person. You could see the muscles on his neck and the part of his arms that wasn’t covered by his shirt. He had one of those faces where you can tell what the skull would look like with the skin gone, even though the person’s still alive. He was wearing the kind of shirt that workers wear at Pricemart—red, with a name on the pocket. Vinnie—and when I looked at him closer, I saw that his leg was bleeding, to the point where some of the blood had soaked through his pants leg onto his shoe, which was actually more like a slipper.

You’re bleeding, I said.

I fell out a window. He said it the way a person would if all that happened to him was he got a mosquito bite. Maybe this was why, at the time, this didn’t seem like such an odd remark.





Or maybe it was that everything seemed so odd back then, this comment in particular didn't stand out.

We should get help, I told him. I was guessing my mother would not be the best one to ask, but there were many other shoppers here. It felt good, him choosing me, out of everyone. This wasn't usually how things went.

I wouldn't want to upset anyone, he said. A lot of people get scared when they see blood. They think they're going to catch some kind of virus, you know, he said.

I understood what he meant, from an assembly we had back in the spring. This was in the days when all people knew was, don't touch anybody else's blood, it could kill you.

You came here with that woman over there, right? he said. He was looking in the direction of my mother, who was standing in the garden section now, looking at a hose. We didn't have one, but we didn't have a garden to speak of either.

Good-looking woman, he said.

My mom.

What I wanted to ask is, if you think she'd give me a ride. I'd be careful not to get blood on your seat. If you could take me someplace. She looks like the type of person who would help me, he said.

It may or may not have been a good thing about my mother that this was true.

Where do you want to go? I asked him. I was thinking, they weren't very considerate to their workers at this store, if when they got injured like this, they had to ask the customers to give them a hand.

Your house?

He said it like a question first, but then he had looked at me like he was a character in *The Silver Surfer*, with superpowers. He put a hand on my shoulder, tight.



Frankly, son, I need this to happen.

I looked at him closer then. He did this thing with his jaw that made you know he was in pain, just trying not to show it—clenched down tight, like he was chewing on a nail. The blood on his pants wasn't that obvious, because they were navy blue. And even though the store was air-conditioned, he was sweating a lot. Now I could see there was a thin trickle of blood coming down the side of his head too, and clotted in his hair.

They had a closeout on baseball caps. Once he'd picked up one of those and put it on his head, you couldn't see the blood much. He was limping badly, but plenty of people did that. He took a fleece vest off the rack and put it over his red Pricemart shirt. I gathered, from the fact that he pulled off the tag, that he wasn't planning on paying for it. Maybe they had some kind of policy for employees.

Just a second, he said. There's one more thing I want to pick up here. Wait here.

YOU NEVER KNEW HOW MY MOTHER was going to react to things. There could be some guy going door-to-door with religious pamphlets, and she'd yell at him to go away, but other times I'd come home from school and there'd be this person sitting on our couch having coffee with her.

This is Mr. Jenkins, she said. He wanted to tell us about an orphanage in Uganda he's raising money for, where the children only get to eat once a day and they don't have money to buy pencils. For twelve dollars a month we could sponsor this little boy, Arak. He could be your pen pal. Like a brother.

According to my father, I already had a brother, but we both knew Marjorie's son didn't count.



Great, I said. Arak. She wrote out the check. He gave us a photograph—fuzzy, because it was just a photocopy. She put it on the refrigerator.

There was a woman who wandered into our yard wearing a nightgown one time. This person was very old, and she didn't know where she lived anymore. She kept saying she was looking for her son.

My mother brought her in our house and made her coffee too. I know how confusing things get sometimes, my mother told the woman. We'll straighten this out for you.

Times like this, my mother took charge, and I liked it, how normal she seemed then. After the coffee, and some toast, we had buckled the old woman into the front seat of our car—in fact, this might have been the last time my mother had driven it until now—and cruised around the neighborhood with her for a long time.

You just let me know if anything looks familiar, Betty, my mother told her.

For once, her slow driving made sense, because a man had spotted us, spotted Betty in the front seat, and waved us over.

We were going crazy trying to find her, he said, when my mother rolled the window down. I'm so grateful to you for taking care of her.

She's fine, my mother said. We had the nicest visit. I hope you'll bring her over again.

I like that girl, Betty had said, as the son came around the other side and unbuckled the seat belt. That's the kind of girl you should have married, Eddie. Not that bitch.

I had studied the man's face then, just to check. He was certainly not handsome, but he looked like the kind of person who would be nice. For a second I wished there was a way of telling him my mother wasn't married to anyone anymore. It was just the two of us. He could come over with Betty sometime.





Eddie looked nice, I said, after we drove away. Maybe he's divorced too. You never know.



MY MOTHER WAS IN THE HARDWARE section when we caught up with her. Now that we're here, she said, I should pick up lightbulbs.

This was good news. When a lightbulb burned out at our house, more often than not it just stayed that way. Lately, our house had been getting steadily darker. In the kitchen now, there was only one bulb left that still worked, and not a bright one. Sometimes, at night, if you wanted to see something, you had to open the refrigerator just to shine a little light.

I don't know how we'll manage to get these into the sockets, she said. I can't reach those fixtures in the ceiling.

That was when I introduced the bleeding man. Vinnie. I thought the fact that he was tall would be a plus.

My mother, Adele, I said.

I'm Frank, he said.

Not the first time a person wasn't who you thought they were in this world. Just wearing the wrong shirt, evidently.

You have a good boy here, Adele, he told her. He was kind enough to offer me a ride. Maybe I could repay the favor by giving you a hand with those.

He indicated the lightbulbs.

And anything else you might need done around the house, he said. Not many jobs I can't handle.

She studied his face then. Even with the hat on, you could see some dried blood on his cheek, but she didn't seem to notice that part, or maybe if she did, it didn't seem important.





We went out through the checkout together. He explained to my mother that he was paying for my puzzle book, though he would have to give me an IOU, since at the moment his funds were limited. Evidently he wasn't mentioning the baseball cap and the fleece vest to the cashier.

In addition to my new clothes and the garden hose, and the pillow and the ceramic hedgehog and the lightbulbs and fan, my mother had picked up one of those plywood paddles, with a ball attached on a piece of elastic, that you try to hit as many times in a row as you can.

I thought I'd get you a treat, Henry, she said, laying the toy on the conveyor belt.

I wasn't going to bother explaining that I hadn't played with something like that since I was around six, but Frank spoke up. A boy like this needs a real baseball, he said. Here was the surprising part: he had one in his pocket. Price tag still visible.

I suck at baseball, I told him.

Maybe you used to, he said. He fingered the stitches on the ball and looked at it hard, like what he had in his hand was the whole world.

On the way out, Frank picked up one of those flyers they gave out, featuring that week's specials. When we got to the car, he spread this out on the backseat. I don't want to get blood on your upholstery, Adele, he said. If I can call you that.

Other people's mothers would have asked him a lot of questions probably. Or not taken him in the first place, more likely. My mother just drove. I was wondering if he was going to get into trouble for leaving work that way without telling anyone, but if so, Frank didn't appear to be worried about it.

Of the three of us, it seemed as if I was the only one who felt concerned, actually. I had a feeling I should be doing something about the situation, but as usual, didn't know what. And Frank seemed so calm and clear about things, you wanted to go along





with him. Even though really, he was going along with us, of course.

I have a sixth sense when it comes to people, he told my mother. I took one look around that store, big as it was, and knew you were the one.

I won't lie to you, he said. It's a difficult situation. Many people would not want to have anything to do with me at this point. I'm going on my instincts here that you are a very understanding person.

The world is not an easy place to get along, he said. Sometimes you just need to stop everything. Collect your thoughts. Lie low for a bit.

I looked at my mother then. We were coming down Main Street now, past the post office and the drugstore, the bank, the library. All the old familiar places, though in all the times I'd passed this way before, it was never in the company of anyone like Frank. He was pointing out to my mother now that it sounded as if the rotors on her brakes might be a little thin. If he could get his hands on a few tools, he'd like to take a look at that for her, he said.

In the seat next to her, I studied my mother's face, to see if her expression changed, when Frank said these things. I could feel my heart beating, and a tightness in my chest—not fear exactly, but something close, though oddly pleasurable. I had it when my father took Richard and the baby and me, and Marjorie, to Disney World, and we got into our seats on the Space Mountain ride—all of us but Marjorie and the baby. Partly I wanted to get out before the ride started, but then they turned out the lights and the music began and Richard had poked me and said, If you have to barf, just do it in the other direction.

Today is my lucky day, Frank said. Yours too, maybe.

I knew right then, things were about to change. We were





headed into Space Mountain now, into a dark place where the ground might give way, and you wouldn't even be able to tell anymore where this car was taking you. We might come back. We might not.

If this had occurred to my mother, she didn't let on. She just held the wheel and stared straight ahead same as before, all the way home.

