



It was raining the night he found me. Traffic had slowed on Massachusetts Avenue, and the wan light of street lamps reflected off the pavement. I was hurrying on without an umbrella, distracted by the chirp of a text message on my phone, trying to shield its illuminated face from rain and the drizzle off storefront awnings. There had been a mistake in my schedule, an appointment I didn't recognize and I had stayed late at the office for—until six forty-five—just in case. Our office manager was texting me from home now to say she had no idea who it was with, that the appointment must have belonged on Phil's calendar, that she was sorry for the mistake, and to have a good night.

I flipped the phone shut, shoved it in my bag. I was worn out by this week already, and it was only Tuesday. The days were getting shorter, the sun setting by six o'clock. It put me on edge, gnawed at me, as though I had better get somewhere warm and cheerful or, barring all else, home before it got any darker. But I was unwilling to face the empty apartment, the dirty dishes, the unopened mail on the counter. So I lowered my head against the rain and walked another two blocks past my

turnoff until I came to the Bosnian Café. A strap of bells on the door announced my entrance with a ringing slap.

I liked the worn appeal of the Bosnian Café with its olfactory embrace of grilled chicken and gyro meat that enveloped me upon every arrival and clung to me long after leaving. That night, in the premature darkness and rain, the café seemed especially homey with its yellowing countertops, chipped mirrors, and grimy ketchup bottles. Cardboard shamrocks, remnants of a forgotten Saint Patrick's Day, draped the pass-through into the kitchen, faded around their die-cut edges. A string of Christmas lights lined the front window, every third bulb out. On the wall above the register, a framed photo of the café's owner with a local pageant queen and another with a retired Red Sox player had never been dusted. But no one, including me, seemed to mind.

I stood in the entry waiting for Esad, the owner, to notice me. But it was not the bald man who welcomed me.

It was the dark-haired stranger.

I was surveying the other tables, looking for inspiration—chicken or steak, gyro or salad—when he beckoned. I hesitated. Was I supposed to recognize him, this man sitting by himself? But no, I did not know him. He waved again, impatient now, and I glanced over my shoulder. There was no one standing in the entryway but me. And then the man at the table stood up and strode directly to me.

"You're late." He clasped my shoulder and smiled. He was tall, tanned, with curling hair and a slightly hooked nose that did nothing to detract from his enviable Mediterranean looks. His eyes glittered beneath well-formed brows. His teeth were very white.

"I'm sorry. I think you have the wrong person," I said.

He chuckled. “Not at all! I’ve been waiting for you for quite some time. An eternity, you might say. Please, come sit down. I took the liberty of ordering for you.”

His voice reminded me of fine cognac, the Hors d’Age men drink aboard their yachts as they cut their Cohibas.

“You have the wrong person. I don’t know you,” I insisted, even as he steered me toward the table. I didn’t want to embarrass him; he already seemed elegantly out of place here in what, for all practical purposes, was a joint. But he would feel like an elegant fool in another minute, especially if his real appointment—interview, date, whatever—walked in and saw him sitting here with me.

“But I know *you*, Clay.”

I started at the sound of my name, spoken by him with a mixture of familiarity and strange interest. I studied him more closely—the squareness of his jaw, the smoothness of his cheek, his utter self-possession. *Had* I met him before? No, I was certain I hadn’t.

One of Esad’s nephews arrived with a chicken sandwich and two cups of coffee.

“Please.” The stranger motioned to a vinyl-covered chair. Numbly, stupidly, I sat.

“You work down the street at Brooks and Hanover,” he said when the younger man had gone. He seated himself adjacent to me, his chair angled toward mine. He crossed his legs, plucked invisible lint off the fine wool of his trousers. “You’re an editor.”

Several thoughts went through my head in that moment, none of them savory: first, that this was some finance or insurance rep who—just like the pile of loan offers on my counter at home—was trying to capitalize on my recent divorce. Or, that this was some aggressive literary agent trying to play suave.

Most likely, though, he was a writer.

Every editor has stories to tell: zealous writers pushing manuscripts on them during their kid's softball game, passing sheaves of italicized print across pews at church or trying to pick them up in bars, casually mentioning between lubricated flirtations that they write stories on the side and just happen to have a manuscript in the car. I had lost count of the dry cleaners, dental hygienists, and plumbers who, upon hearing what I did for a living, had felt compelled to gift me with their short stories and children's books, their novels-in-progress and rhyming poetry.

"Look, whoever you are—"

"Lucian."

I meant to tell him that I was sure we didn't publish whatever it was he wanted me to read, that there were industry-accepted ways to get his work to us if we did, that he could visit the Web site and check out the guidelines. I also meant to get up and walk away, to look for Esad or his nephew and put an order in. To go. But I didn't say or do any of these things because what he said next stopped me cold.

"I know you're searching, Clay. I know you're wondering what these late, dark nights are for. You have that seasonal disease, that modern ailment, don't you? SAD, they call it. But it isn't the disorder—you should know that. It isn't even your divorce. That's not what's bothering you. Not really."

I was no longer hungry. I pushed away the chicken sandwich he had ordered and said with quiet warning. "I don't know who you are, but this isn't funny."

He went on as though he hadn't heard me, saying with what seemed great feeling, "It's that you don't know what it's all for. The hours and days, working on the weekends, the belief that

you'll eventually get caught up, and on that ultimate day *something* will happen. That everything will make sense or you'll at least have time to figure it out. You're a good man, Clay, but what has that won you? You're alone, growing no younger, drifting toward some unknown but inevitable end in this life. And where is the meaning in that?"

I sat very still. I felt exposed, laid open, as though I had emptied my mind onto the table like the contents of a pocket. I couldn't meet his gaze. Nearby, a couple—both of their heads dripping dirty blond dreadlocks—mulled over menus as the woman dandled an infant on her lap. Beyond them, a thickset woman paged through *People*, and a young man in scrubs plodded in a sleep-deprived daze through an anemic salad. Had any of them noticed my uncanny situation, the strange hijacking taking place here? But they were mired in their menus, distractions, and stupor. At the back counter a student tapped at the keypad of his phone, sending messages into the ether.

"I realize how this feels, and I apologize." Lucian folded long fingers together on his knee. His nails were smooth and neatly manicured. He wore an expensive-looking watch, the second hand of which seemed to hesitate before hiccupping on, as though time had somehow slowed in the sallow light of the diner. "I could have done this differently, but I don't think I would have had your attention."

"What are you, some kind of Jehovah's Witness?" It was the only thing that made sense. His spiel could have hit close to anyone. I felt conned, angry, but most of all embarrassed by my emotional response.

His laughter was abrupt and, I thought, slightly manic.

"Oh my." He wiped the corners of his eyes.

I pushed back my chair.

His merriment died so suddenly that, were it not for the sound of it still echoing in my ears, I might have thought I had imagined it. “I’m going to tell you everything.” He leaned toward me, so close I could see the tiny furrows around the corners of his mouth, the creases beneath his narrowed eyes. A strange glow emanated from the edge of his irises like the halo of a solar eclipse. “I’m going to tell you my story. I’ve great hope for you, in whom I will create the repository of my tale—my memoir, if you will. I believe it will be of great interest to you. And you’re going to write it down and publish it.”

Now I barked a stunted laugh. “No, I’m not. I don’t care if you’re J. D. Salinger.”

Again he went on as though I’d said nothing. “I understand they’re all the rage these days, memoirs. Publishing houses pay huge sums for the ghostwritten, self-revelatory accounts of celebrities all the time. But trust me; they’ve never acquired a story like mine.”

“Look,” I said, a new edge in my voice, “You’re no celebrity I recognize, and I’m no ghostwriter. So I’m going to get myself some dinner and be nice enough to forget this ever happened.” But as I started to rise, he grabbed me by the arm. His fingers, biting through the sleeve of my coat, were exceedingly strong, unnaturally warm, and far too intimate.

“But you *won’t* forget.” The strange light of fanaticism burned in his eyes. The curve of his mouth seemed divorced of their stare, as though it came from another face altogether. “You will recall everything—every word I say. Long after you have forgotten, in fact, the name of this café, the way I summoned you to this table, the first prick of your mortal curiosity about me. Long after you have forgotten, in fact, the most basic details of your life. You will remember, and you will curse or bless this day.”

I felt ill. Something about the way he said *mortal*. . . . In that instant, reality, strung out like an elastic band, snapped.

This was no writer.

“Yes. You see,” he said quietly. “You know. We can share now, between us, the secret of what I am.”

And the words came, unbidden, to my mind: *Fallen. Dark Spirit*.

Demon.

The trembling that began in my stomach threatened to seize up my diaphragm. But then he released me and sat back. “Now. Here is Mr. Esad, wondering why you haven’t touched your sandwich.”

And indeed, here came the bald man, coffeepot in hand, smiling at the stranger as though he were more of a regular than I. I stared between them as they made their pleasantries, the sound of their banter at sick odds with what my visceral sense told me was true, what no one else seemed to notice: I was sitting here with something incomprehensively evil.

When Esad left, Lucian took a thin napkin from the dispenser and set it beside my coffee cup. The gesture struck me as aberrantly mundane.

He sighed. “I feel your trepidation, that sense that you ought to get up and leave immediately. And under normal circumstances I would say that you are right. But listen to me now when I tell you that you are safe. Be at ease. Here. I’ll lean forward like this, in your human way. When that couple over there sees my little smile, this conspiratorial look, they’ll think we’re sharing a succulent bit of gossip.”

I wasn’t at ease. Not at all. My heart had become a pounding liability in my chest.

“Why?” I managed, wishing I were even now in the emptiness of my apartment, staring at the world through the bleak window of my TV.

Lucian leaned even closer, his hand splayed across the top of the table so that I could see the blue veins along the back of it. His voice dropped below a whisper, but I had no difficulty hearing him. “Because my story is very closely connected to yours. We’re not so different after all, you and I. We both want purpose, meaning, to see the bigger picture. I can give you that.”

“You don’t even know me!”

“On the contrary”—he slid the napkin dispenser away, as though it were a barrier between us—“I know everything about you. Your childhood house on Ridgeview Drive. The tackle box you kept your football cards in. The night you tried to sneak out after homecoming to meet Carrie Kraus. You broke your wrist climbing out of the window.”

I stared.

“I know of your father’s passing—you were fifteen. About the merlot you miss since giving up drinking, the way you dip your hamburgers in blue cheese dressing—your friend Piotr taught you that in college. That you’ve been telling yourself you ought to get away somewhere—Mexico, perhaps. That you think it’s the seasonal disorder bothering you, though it’s not—”

“Stop!” I threw up my hands, wanting him to leave at once, equally afraid that he might and that I would be stuck knowing that there was this person—this *thing*—watching me. Knowing everything.

His voice gentled. “Let me assure you that you are not the only one. I could list myriad facts about anyone. Name someone. How about Sheila?” He smirked. “Let’s just say she didn’t return your message from home, and her husband thinks she’s working

late. Esad? Living in war-torn Bosnia was no small feat. He—” He cocked his head, and there came now a faint buzzing like an invisible swarm of mosquitoes. I instinctively jerked away.

“What was that?” I demanded, unable to pinpoint where the sound had come from.

“Ah. A concentration camp!” He looked surprised. “I didn’t know that. Did you know that? And as for your ex—” He tilted his head again.

“No! Please, don’t.” I lowered my head into my hand, dug my fingers into my scalp. Five months after the divorce, the wound still split open at the mere mention of her.

“You see?” he whispered, his head ducked down so that he stared intently up into my face. “I can tell you everything.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve made a pastime of studying case histories, of following them through from beginning to end. You fascinate me in the same way that beetles with their uncanny instinct for dung rolling used to fascinate you. I know more about you than your family. Than your ex. Than you know about yourself, I dare say.”

Something—some by-product of fear—rose up within me as anger at last. “If you are what you say, aren’t you here to make some kind of deal for my soul? To tempt me? Why did you order me coffee, then? Why not a glass of merlot or a Crown and Coke?” My voice had risen, but I didn’t care. I felt my anger with relief.

Lucian regarded me. “Please. How trite. Besides, they don’t serve liquor here.” But then his calm fell away, and he was staring—not at me but past me, toward the clock on the wall. “But there”— he pointed, and his finger seemed exceedingly long—“see how the hour advances without us!” He leapt to his feet, and I realized he meant to leave.

“What? You can’t just go now that you’ve—”

“I’ve come to you at great risk,” he hissed, the sound sibilant, as if he had whispered in my ear though he stood three feet away. And then he strode to the glass door and pushed out into the darkness, disappearing beyond the reflected interior of the café like a shadow into a mirror. The strap of bells fell against the door with a flat metal clink, and my own stunned reflection stared back.

RAIN PELTED MY EYES, slipped in wet tracks through my hair against my scalp, ran in rivulets down my nape to mingle with the sweat against my back. It had gotten colder, almost freezing, but I was sweating inside the sodden collar of my shirt as I hurried down Norfolk, my bag slapping against my thigh, my legs cramped and wooden, nightmare slow.

The abrupt warmth inside my apartment building threatened to suffocate me as I stumbled up the stairs. My ears pinged to painful life as I fumbled with my keys. Inside my apartment at last, I fell back against the door, head throbbing and lungs heaving in the still air. I stayed like that, my coat dripping onto the carpet, for several long moments. Then a mad whim struck me.

With numb fingers I retrieved the laptop from my bag and set it up on the kitchen table. With my coat still on, I dropped down onto a wooden chair, staring at the screen as it yawned to life. I logged into the company server, opened my calendar.

There—my six-thirty appointment. It was simply noted: *L.*