

## PART ONE

### CHASING A GHOST

#### Chapter 1

On a gray Friday morning in spring, a blue and nondescript windowless panel van sat in wait, patient as a hearse outside a church. Dirty brown puddles spotted the grocery store's parking lot, the final traces of winter snowmelt. It had taken less than thirty minutes for the chemist to spot his victim. A young woman—twenty-two, maybe twenty-three—exited her green Honda Civic and walked toward the store's entrance. She was blond and dressed in a purple jogging suit. From her gait and demeanor he calculated she would not be inside for long.

A worn leather medical bag sat on the van's passenger seat. He opened the wings and withdrew a squeezable plastic bottle filled with clear liquid. The wording on the bottle read “Compact Disc Cleaning Fluid.”

Gazing out the van's front windows, checking all directions, the chemist exited the vehicle. He was a picture of calm as he strolled around his van under the pretense of checking tire pressure. He wore black jeans and a dark navy peacoat, collar turned up to the cool spring breeze, and his hands were covered in paper-thin lambskin gloves.

No actor in Hollywood could have feigned interest in Goodyear Polytreeds with greater aplomb. From the corner of his eye he watched a handful of people as they moved toward the store's front entrance. As far as they were concerned, he might as well be invisible.

Wandering from the van he slipped between the rows of parked cars. He sidestepped a bumper, then a wayward shopping cart. Withdrawing the plastic bottle from his coat pocket, he doused the driver's-door handle with a clear, slightly viscous fluid, employing practiced casualness.

Back inside his van, he could barely keep his heart from galloping. His forehead was damp

near the hairline; his shirt was clammy at his lower back. The trap was set. Now it was time to sit and wait.

It was beginning to mist outside the van. Though the precipitation was mild, it concerned the chemist. Dilution might affect the solution's effectiveness. He stared out the window of the van and watched the automatic doors of the store open and close. Dark tortoise-shell glasses framed the eyes of a predator. Patience, he reminded himself; skilled hunters had patience. Wait for the trap to be sprung. Wait.

And while he waited, his gaze fell again on the medical bag sitting beside him. The liquid concoction inside was his finest discovery. It had, quite simply, transformed him. Set him on his course of...liberation? Yes, that was accurate. Thanks to his invention, he had never felt so free. A simple chemical compound, yet its discovery had turned him from a casual dreamer into a catcher of dreams.

"Dream catcher," he said aloud, his voice low. The chemist smiled. He liked the way that sounded.

The doors to the store slid open again, and the girl in the purple jogging suit emerged and moved in his direction. Or, rather, in her own car's direction.

His gloved hands gripped the steering wheel. He could discern the narrow lines of her body as she walked, dodging muddy puddles in her white cross trainers. Perfect balance. Lean and graceful as a dancer.

Lost in thought, she paid little attention to any of the meandering people who moved around her, much less the blue van parked three slots down from her car.

The chemist turned the key in the ignition.

# # #

Cindy Hulbreth tucked the grocery bag under one arm and fished in the pocket of her sweatpants for her keys. She popped the door locks of her Civic with the remote, grabbed the door handle, and opened the door. The handle was damp with what she decided must be mist. Or rainwater. She stared at her hand, rubbed her fingertips together, sniffed at them. It felt weird,

but there was no odor. She smoothed the dampness off on her pants, deciding it shouldn't stain.

Cindy placed her groceries in the small backseat. She slipped inside, pulling the door closed after herself. As she fumbled with her keys, she glanced in her rearview mirror. Some idiot in a blue van had pulled out behind her, blocking the way. She exhaled, sliding the key in the ignition but not turning it. Another glance in the rearview showed the van still sitting there.

Turning in her seat, staring out the back window, Cindy wondered what the hold up could possibly be. The van remained in place. Waiting for someone up ahead? Some other car? An elderly pedestrian with a shopping cart? A walker?

She considered leaning on her horn. She didn't want to be rude, but her sweats were still damp from her workout and there was a hot shower waiting at home.

Cindy ran her tongue over her teeth. Her mouth felt cottony. She licked her lips for moisture and rummaged through her pocketbook for a piece of chewing gum. She crumpled the wrapper in the ashtray and then took another glance out the back window.

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One forty-six. One forty-five, one forty-four...

The chemist glanced at his wristwatch, just above the edge of his lambskin glove. The silent countdown in his head matched the precise time on the onyx dial.

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Becoming vexed, forehead growing warm and her neck flushed, Cindy continued to watch the van sitting behind her like a lump.

"For chrissake!" she cursed out loud. "Move your fat, blue butt!"

She blinked. Through widened eyes she stared out the front windshield—at nothing, really: cars, the parking lot, the gray April sky. Small auburn blotches, web-like, bloomed at the periphery of her vision. Shaking her head, the blotches failed to dissolve.

Should she be amused? Brown kaleidoscopic patches were now spreading across her entire visual field. Sparkles were shooting off at the edges. Jesus! If she didn't feel so rotten, all of a sudden, wouldn't this be entertaining to watch? Fireworks going off inside her eyeballs?

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Thirty. Twenty-nine, twenty-eight...

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Cindy felt her chin droop against her chest in the manner of a weary prizefighter between rounds. Rubber Leg Street, she remembered her dad calling it once while watching some boxing match on TV. She remembered laughing at the term. She'd been ten, maybe eleven, at the time. This moment was hardly as humorous; her head felt heavy as a concrete block.

A rush of panic made her cry out. Only a rasping sound escaped her blubbery lips.

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The chemist watched the girl inside the car keel sideways in her seat, restrained by her seat belt. She reminded him of a fighter pilot who'd crash-landed.

Checking his mirrors, front and behind, he slipped the van into gear. He eased slowly forward and pulled into an open slot just up the row. Exiting the van, hands tucked inside the pockets of his peacoat, he moved forward. In the open, exposed, head down, he walked between the cars, heading toward the Civic.

He opened the passenger door and leaned inside. Three times previously, a year ago, he had learned that the passenger-side door provided best access to the seat belt clasp. And it was easier to pull an unconscious person toward you than push one away.

He quickly unlatched the seat buckle, and the blond-haired girl toppled toward him onto the passenger side. Grasping her beneath one arm and the opposite shoulder, he pulled her into the vacant seat.

Seconds ticking off in his head, the chemist closed her car door and edged around the vehicle to the driver's side. Employing the hem of his dark coat, he wiped the door handle clean of residue. Then he opened the door and slipped inside.

Silence.

Save for the roar of his pulse in his ears. His heart was tom-tomming against his sternum, but damn if he didn't feel *alive*. With a gloved finger, he felt the girl's neck. Her pulse, unlike his

own, was steady. Her heart-shaped face was pretty, even without makeup. After a workout, rained upon, and face slackened from her stupor, he doubted she'd consider herself attractive at the moment. How wrong she was. How very wrong.

In the distance, a dozen people could be seen walking from different directions, moving with apparent purpose. With bored looks on their faces they were headed toward, or away from, the store's sliding main doors.

Key already in the ignition, he started the car and eased it from the parking spot. Cautious, careful, mindful of fender benders. He cast a sidelong glance at the sleeping beauty next to him. Seeing her peaceful face, he started to relax.

Moments later the small green car turned out of the parking lot and accelerated up the road, moving steadily away from the scene.