

# BLUE LIMBO

**Terence M. Green**

**PHOENIX PICK**

*an imprint of*



Rockville, Maryland

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For my father  
*Thomas Matthew Green*  
1904-1995

&

For my brother  
*Dennis Matthew Green*  
1949-2008

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And to Daniel: Welcome Aboard!



## *Prologue*

**AS** the copter lost altitude, Mitch Helwig, encased inside the prototype Honda skimmer that hung below it, suspended on steel cables like a spider dangling from some nightmarish hummingbird, donned his night goggles. Then he tripped the switch on the dashboard radio, opening the line to the copter above.

The pilot's voice came out of the dashboard. "That's it, straight ahead."

Peering ahead and down into the rivers of light, Mitch finally made it out.

The warehouse. Herrington Storage.

"Got it."

It was big enough to provide the illusion of a small runway from the air. They dropped farther, staying well above the power lines, angling toward the long roof.

"I'll let you know when," said Mitch.

They dropped lower, still maintaining a steady forward motion. This must be, thought Mitch, what it's like to try to land on an aircraft carrier.

"Just don't signal for release if you figure you're more than eight or ten meters above the rooftop. Too dangerous."

"Right."

They were flying low over residential Leaside, the houses dark.

Maintaining speed.

Lower.

Lower.

Laird Drive.

*Now.*

He fired the skimmer's engines. They caught and idled.

"Release."

Mitch felt the clamps open, felt himself drop, then glide downward. He pumped the corner thrusters, waiting for the familiar ground-effect sensation, and angled the horizontal tail planes for maximum braking. There was a moment of remote cold as he thought that it wasn't going to work—the instant between his adjustments and the tactile sensation of the skimmer's action upon the surface of the roof below him.

For a moment there was nothing.

He dropped.

Then he felt it, and relief flooded through him. It had taken hold. He was hovering.

He was down.

The Sikorsky HH-90B Blackhawk was already dwindling into the night, out across the Don Valley, before swinging around and heading back into the city. Mitch had to hope that any eyes on the ground, or within the warehouse, would have followed the copter's noise. Since the whole operation had transpired without visible lights, the hope was that the skimmer had not even been seen. And why would anyone have been looking for it? The operation he had just taken part in had been a first. They hadn't even been sure it would work.

But it *had* worked. And he was here—inside the security fence—having avoided detection. And hopefully, with a way out over the fence, once the job was done.

He cut the engines, and the skimmer settled onto the roof. Popping the door open, he let it float upward.

And he listened.

He heard what he wanted to hear: silence.

Stepping out into the night, he listened again. Still nothing.

Bending, he brought out the leather satchel from the floor behind the driver's seat, grasping it in his left hand. His right hand reached into his duffle bag on the passenger seat and withdrew the Bausch & Lomb hand-laser. Crouching, he ran toward the nearest edge and peered down.

There was no activity. Nothing.

He pressed the light on his watch: 2:20 A.M. Reaching into the satchel, he withdrew the twelve RDX bombs and placed them carefully in a row on the roof in front of him, like a mason examining a dozen imported bricks. Each one had been set for a ten-minute countdown, once activated. All Mitch had to do was press the buttons. After he'd told him what he needed to do, Berenson, the force's mobile equipment manager, had assured him that these were what he wanted. RDX, Hexogen, T<sub>4</sub>, Cyclonite—it went, he had been told, by several names. Plastic explosive, four times more powerful than any dynamite. Then Mitch reached into the satchel and withdrew the dozen plastic propane gas cylinders—each one about fifteen centimeters in length, shaped like bloated Polish sau-

sages. *Gas-enhanced RDX*, he thought. It had been used to assassinate the Israeli prime minister last year.

He extracted the roll of adhesive tape from the satchel and spent the next two minutes carefully “bonding” each brick to its own cylinder. This done, he sat back on his haunches and breathed deeply.

For maximum effect, he knew they all had to go off within seconds of one another.

He checked his watch again: 2:25 A.M.

It was time.

As rhythmically as a clock ticking off the seconds, Mitch pressed the starter button on each of the dozen bombs in sequence, so that at 2:25:12 A.M. he had nine minutes and forty-eight seconds until they began to erupt, just as rhythmically.

His hands felt sweaty.

The digits on each bomb blinked away, counting off the seconds.

Mitch left the first one where it was, but gathered the others carefully into the satchel, stood up, and scanned the vast rooftop. Then he began to walk briskly, stopping and placing them in widely separated spots.

Six. Seven.

Another fifty meters. Eight. Nine.

Fifty more meters. Ten.

Then it happened.

The laser beam lit the night, slicing through the shoulder strap, burning through his jacket, his shirt, stopping only upon encountering the Silent Guard body armor. Mitch’s hand darted for the broken strap of the bag, catching it before it could hit the roof and send him unceremoniously into eternity.

He made his decision at the same instant.

Lowering the satchel carefully to the roof, he clutched his shoulder as if he had been hit fully and slumped forward in feigned death.

For a minute there was no sound—nothing. Then, through the night goggles, he saw the torso of a man appear over the edge of the roof, hauling himself up via the rungs of a fixed metal ladder.

He waited until the man had stepped onto the roof before rolling quickly to one side and aiming his Bausch & Lomb. The needle of light flared to life, tracked onto the figure at the roof’s edge. There was a muffled oath of anger and shock. The man slumped forward heavily on his face.

Mitch breathed in ragged gasps, all his senses alert. There was no doubt in his mind that the man was dead. The only question was whether or not he was alone.

He lay perfectly still. Listening. Watching.

Beside him, the digits ticked away relentlessly.

Satisfied that the man had been alone, Mitch sprang to a crouch and scuttled across the intervening space to see for himself. The man was lying face down. Mitch turned him over with a shove of his foot, bent, checked his pulse, then went to the ladder and peered down.

Empty.

A lone watchman, it seemed.

Then he checked his watch again: 2:31 A.M.

*Christ.*

Running back to the satchel, he carefully pulled out the remaining two bombs and hurried off to place them strategically.

He checked again: 2:32.

He broke into a run, heading back along the roof in the direction of the skimmer. The run took him the better part of a minute. Gasping, he swung himself into the driver's seat and fired the engines. They hummed into life and the skimmer rose up on its air cushion. Now, thought Mitch, we'll see whether this baby can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Because if she doesn't...

He ran it down the length of the roof as if he were preparing for takeoff at an airport. The roof's edge loomed rapidly closer.

Closer.

He pumped the corner thrusters and she leapt out into the void. He flipped the switches for full lighting. There could be no secrecy now. He had to know where the ground was. *Had to.*

He was coming down. About seven meters to go.

He angled the horizontals.

Yes...yes...there...

He had it! He could feel the ground. The skimmer's nose tilted forward awkwardly, scraping briefly along the asphalt, and then it righted itself and Mitch opened the throttle.

At the same time, three large field lights erupted to life, bathing the yard with glaring illumination.

Mitch accelerated across the yard, heading straight for the fence. It had been his intention to slow if possible and burn his way out with the skimmer's laser. But there was no time for that now. There was no time for anything.

He revved it to maximum. The skimmer screamed across the asphalt. When he got to within twenty meters of the fence, he pumped the corner thrusters with a sudden, wrenching spurt, then turned them on full, and the revs whined far past the red line as the skimmer rose off the ground, higher, higher, straining at three meters, groaning at four, shuddering violently at five—

—and then floated over the top of the fence, and angled down toward the ground, until it was back in touch with its normal physics and capabilities.

Mitch risked a glance at his watch: 2:34.

But how many seconds?

The skimmer was running full down Commercial Road when it began.

Mitch executed a horizontally sliding turn onto Laird as the second explosion went off. Then the blasts rocked the night at one-second intervals for the next ten seconds. At Eglinton Avenue, Mitch stopped, got out, and watched the volcano of orange and blue and white and red flames as they roiled upward, howling with crackling rage at the cold night sky, belching clouds of expanding, boiling black smoke with the fury of a sleeping giant suddenly awakened.

Within seconds, the night was alive with the sound of sirens. Karoulis, he thought, had kept them offstage nicely, until just the right moment.



# ***ONE***

We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have.  
Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task.

—Henry James, *The Middle Years*





“YOU’RE going to be suspended.”

Mitch Helwig stared at his superior officer, Sam Karoulis, without expression.

It had been coming.

Still, when it came, he was surprised at how he felt: like a depth charge had been detonated nearby.

“I think I’m next,” Karoulis added. “There’s going to be a complete overhaul.” He walked to his desk, took a cigarette from the top drawer.

Mitch watched, still silent.

“Not supposed to smoke these things in here, you know. Smoke-free zone.” He struck a match on the cardboard package he took from the same drawer, held it to the cigarette’s tip, inhaled deeply. He let the smoke expel slowly. “Fuck it,” he said.

“Captain—”

“That’s another thing,” interrupted Karoulis. “There was even talk of going back to the way it used to be. Twentieth-century stuff. Superintendents, inspectors, constables...No more captains.” He paused. After another deep draw on the cigarette, he met Mitch’s eye. “They want me too.”

“Names, titles, structures,” Mitch said. “Big fucking deal. We know what’s happening.” He put his hands in his pockets.

Karoulis stared hard at Mitch. “Yes,” he said. Then he nodded. “We do. Indeed, we do.”

Mitch Helwig of the Toronto Police Force remembered it all.  
All.



Mario. It had started when he had been killed. His partner, his best friend.

And with Karoulis's help, Mitch had ended it all. They had done what was necessary, used what was necessary, broken the rules.

But they had been right. And they had made a difference.

The Archangel was gone. Herrington Storage—the warehouse cover for it all—was gone. Closing his eyes, Mitch could see the flames blossom, smell the sulfurized smoke as it mushroomed into the darkness; he could still feel the explosions rocking him in his skimmer as the night swallowed him, drawing the poison from his heart.

Karoulis. The man had finally crossed the line to Mitch's side. The war could not have been won any other way. It had gone too far.

And now a new enemy. It was not over.

"Who?" Mitch asked. "Who's giving the order to suspend me?"

Karoulis met his eyes.

"Will it come from the top? From the chief of police?"

Karoulis shook his head. "Close, though," he said. "Galecki. He's the one."

Mitch was only mildly surprised. So, he thought. At last. One of the jackals steps from the shadows, sidles into the twilight. Joseph Galecki, one of the three deputy chiefs, was going to champion reform within the ranks, for his own dubious purposes.

Or was Mitch wrong? Was Galecki simply a bureaucrat?

"What do you think?" he asked Karoulis.

The captain shook his head. His eyes slid around the walls and ceiling of his office, deep in the core of Station 52 on Dundas Street, then back to Mitch's face. This, he implied, is no longer a place where such opinions should be aired. The world is more devious than we can imagine.

Mitch understood. He asked another question. "What do I do now?"

"You go home. You wait. I'll be in touch."

Go home, Mitch thought. Karoulis didn't know.

It was no longer that simple.



Huziak watched as Mitch Helwig left Karoulis's office. Everyone in the station, it seemed, could feel the vibrations—like aftershocks following the earthquake,

"Mitch."

Mitch turned to meet the face of the staff sergeant.

"You okay?"

Mitch nodded, smiled. "Thanks."

"What happened?"

Mitch was quiet for a moment, weighing words that he would never say. He studied the man behind the desk, listened to his somewhat asthmatic breathing, saw the buttons of his shirt pulled tight at the girth above his belt, and thought how he didn't know him as well as he should after so many years. Then he said, "I'm going to be suspended."

Neither of them said anything.

Mitch broke the silence. "What's new with you, champ?"

Huziak smiled softly. He shook his head, ran a hand through his thinning hair, and shrugged at the paperwork covering his desk. "All this stuff, I still got to wade through, and they want to take a good man like you out of service." He shrugged again. "Why don't they give you to me to use? I could use you." His hand passed over the clutter in front of him. "Help me clear up this stuff."

Unsure what to say, Mitch forced a smile again. "What's the big item today?"

"Big item," Huziak muttered. "Big fucking items." His big hands shuffled through the papers. "First it's lasers. Now it's zappers."

Mitch watched him, half listening, half lost in the tangle of his own thoughts.

"Guy who manages three Swiss Chalets in the downtown core has just armed his entire staff with zappers." He held a sheet of paper at arm's length. "One of his waitresses complained—isn't sure it's legal." He looked up. "Or," he continued, "there's the betting pool we've uncovered, which tries to predict the date of Toronto's next police slaying. Vice searched a house in Parkdale, found about five hundred grams of marijuana, and a pool chart with several names and eight columns numbered one to thirty-one. What do you think of that one?"

"Christ."

"My sentiments exactly. Organized crime here and in the States nets more than two hundred billion dollars profit, costs more than seven hundred thousand jobs, is bigger than the paper, rubber, and tire industries, and we've got zappers in our Swiss Chalets. Guys are betting when we'll get iced. And they come down on guys like you in their never-ending battle against the Bad Guys. Go figure."

Huziak seemed to have gotten it all out. They said nothing for a few seconds.

"If I can do anything, Mitch..."

Mitch nodded. "Thanks. I just might have to take you up on it."

"What do you do now? Go home for a while?"

Without answering, Mitch turned his gaze very slightly toward the wall behind Huziak. His eyes focused on something very far away, something not in the room or the building, something he had lost and did not know how to find.

# 2

**PHIL** Huziak waited fifteen minutes before taking in the morning's latest to Karoulis. He knocked gently.

"Yes?"

Huziak opened the door slightly and stuck his round head in. "Me, Cap'n."

"Formal this morning, aren't we?"

"Saw Mitch coming out earlier."

Karoulis nodded. Even with his mind elsewhere, he understood the necessity of maintaining routines. "C'mon in."

Huziak ambled in. "You want to do this now?"

"Sure, sure. Sit down. It doesn't matter. Coffee?"

"Yeah. I'll get it." Huziak walked over to the ancient Mr. Coffee maker in the corner. There was still lots left in the carafe. "You too?"

"Thanks."

"Got one you'll like, Captain." He poured into two Styrofoam cups.

"I never shoot the messenger."

"Says you."

Karoulis smiled, weakly. "What is it?"

Huziak handed him his coffee and sat down. "Bomb squad cleared the bus station on Bay Street this morning. Six A.M. Ticking sound from a trash can spooked everybody."

"And I'm going to like this one?"

"Well, the squad's used to finding clocks and stuff, but they tell me it's the first time they ever found an abandoned vibrator." He chuckled.

"Jesus."

"They were having a ball filling out the report when I came in this morning."

"Should get them through the day."

"And," Huziak hitched his pants over his stomach, rolled his eyes back in thought, "I've asked DeMarco, C.O.B., Homicide, to look into a rifle found wedged into a Goodwill box on Church Street. Some guy called last night. Was stuffin' clothes in and noticed it."

"What kind of a rifle?"

"Sanyo. Laser."

"Christ." No ballistics possible, he thought. As usual.

"We'll check it for prints. See if we can trace it."

They both knew it would most likely prove futile.

"And we picked up three teenagers last night. Tip came in. Frightening kids. We were able to lay sixty-four charges. One kid's charged with

fifty-one counts of breaking, entering, and theft, four counts of robbery, and four counts of possession of stolen goods. They're responsible for dozens of break-ins, mostly in Riverdale. One of them had this on him." He reached in his pocket, took out what looked like a car key that had been honed to a point, and put it on Karoulis's desk.

Karoulis looked at it. "What is it?"

"A master key, for Japanese cars. It opens doors and starts ignitions as fast as the owner can with the proper key."

Karoulis had heard of them. Cars could be gone in thirty seconds. This was what was assumed to have been used in fifty percent of the thefts of Toyotas, Datsuns, Nissans, Mitsubishis, and Hondas in the greater metro area. It looked so simple, he thought. In the age of the microchip, everything could look so simple.

"I borrowed it from Evidence to show you. Thought you'd like to see one."

"Mmm." Karoulis held it at arm's length, thinking. It reminded him of something else he'd never seen. "The new zappers."

"What's that?"

"The new zappers. I've never seen one of them either."

"You're kidding. They aren't all that new."

"I'm a little slow sometimes, Huziak." He put the key down on the desk. "Sometimes I think it's all passing me by."

"I've got one tagged in my desk outside. Want to see it?"

"Sure." Karoulis started to get up.

"I'll get it, Captain. Don't get up."

"I want to get up. I'm a little restless."

Huziak smiled wryly, nodding. "Sure. C'mon." He led the way.

When they reached the desk, Huziak reached into a lower drawer and produced the item. Karoulis lifted it from his hand, turning it over curiously.

"That one's a Nova XR One Thousand. Weighs about two hundred grams. Uses a nine-volt battery. You hold it up against someone, it sends them sixty thousand volts. Manufacturers claim no permanent injury, unless you hold it against a person for several minutes. Stuns the muscles. Leaves the person conscious but immobile for about twenty minutes."

Karoulis knew that there was no decision yet on their legality. "Sixty thousand volts. Christ. Isn't that a lot?"

"The current generated is only point two or three or five milliamps, or something like that. It's slightly misleading, as I understand it."

Karoulis was studying it in his hand when the explosion shattered all the windows around them and blew them over the desk.

Seconds of silence followed, while smoke billowed and curled through the room. Then there were coughs, curses, a couple of shouts, as plaster and glass began to shudder loose from weakened moorings.

Karoulis lay on the floor, half on top of Huziak. It came to him slowly what had happened. At least, he thought, I'm alive. But he hurt everywhere he tried to move. Then his eyes began to sting.

Blood, he thought. And he could taste it in his mouth.

Huziak coughed. Then: "Christ."

Karoulis rolled off the sergeant, onto his side, lay there with his heart pounding. Part of his hearing seemed to be gone. Everything was ringing. With a concerted effort, he focused on Huziak. The sergeant's face was covered in blood.

*Jesus*, he thought. *Jesus Christ*.



Karoulis and Huziak sat in chairs, watching the team of officers and plainclothesmen sift through the rubble. Karoulis smoked a cigarette openly. Nobody said anything to him about it.

All the blood covering both of them had been caused by superficial cuts from the exploding glass.

Simply put, it looked worse than it was. Karoulis had bitten his tongue badly when the blast's concussion bowled them over. The cut on Huziak's cheek indicated that he hadn't missed losing an eye by very much.

Two officers had not been so lucky.

Karoulis eyed the body bags, inhaled deeply on his cigarette.

Evans and Lim. In the wrong place at the wrong time. It could have been anybody. It could have been me, he thought. He closed his eyes, imagining the horror of telling their families.

My office, Karoulis thought. It was in my fucking office. It was meant for me. Those poor bastards were just standing by the door, talking. If I hadn't come out with Huziak...

There was a man standing in front of him. It was Polonich from the bomb squad. From a vibrator to this, he thought. A full day.

"Semtex, Captain," Polonich said.

"I'm listening." He exhaled a stream of smoke.

"Odorless, orange-colored plastic explosive, almost impossible to detect."

"Where was it?"

"Taped to the bottom of your desk, I'd say right now."

"How'd it get there?"

Polonich shrugged. "That's the million-dollar question. We'll need a list of everyone who was in and out of your office the past few days. Maybe the past few weeks, if that doesn't pan out."

“Is the stuff common? Easy to get?”

Polonich shook his head. “State of the art. Manufactured by the Eastern Bohemian Works, a state-owned arms factory in the Czech Republic. It’s the only substance that defies detection by bomb-sniffing dogs, X-ray machines. Government officials and terrorist experts claim Syria and Libya have used it. This is the first domestic use I’ve heard of. These guys knew what they were doing.”

“Under my desk.” Karoulis stared at the remains of his office.

“It can be placed in a suitcase and appear as a dense mass on an X-ray machine. It can also be shaped to resemble innocent-looking objects. It also has the advantage of being stable, meaning it does not go off in uncontrolled circumstances.”

“Meaning that it went off exactly when someone wanted it to go off.”

Polonich nodded. “I’d say so.”

Karoulis turned to Huziak. “I’d like to thank you.”

From beneath a long bandage over his left eye, Huziak squinted at him.

“I have a new fondness for zappers.”

They stared at the body bags on the floor.

# 3

“**THE** king of England got his annual six percent raise.” Paul Helwig, Mitch’s eighty-four-year-old father stared at his son as if the money had come out of his own pocket. He swiveled his head from the TV set, which was his constant companion, and held Mitch steadily with his weakening eyes. “His annual salary’s now fifteen point two million dollars. Not bad for an old guy with a crown.”

Mitch noticed that his father’s sweater was buttoned up incorrectly.

“The whole family of inbred imbeciles have now got twenty million dollars a year to polish their crowns with. Wonder they can get ‘em on their heads, the way they must be swellin’ up.” He shook his own head in disdain. “He’s nearly as old as I am, for God’s sake. Where did I go wrong? Eh? Where?” He continued to shake his head at the imponderable.

“Maybe next time you’ll get it right.” Mitch smiled at his father.

“Next time. Yeah. Right. Next time. I’ll hold my breath.”

Mitch sat down in the worn, green, cloth-covered chair in the corner of the apartment opposite to where his father was sitting. It was a chair that had been a fixture in the home in which he had grown up—the home that had been sold only last year. Paul Helwig had lasted less than a year in the house after Mitch’s mother had died. Mitch’s parents had been married for fifty-two years. His father still didn’t know where he was. It had all happened too fast.

Mitch knew how he felt.

“How’re you doing?”

The older Helwig gazed at his son. “This is a strange place. I guess it’ll take some gettin’ used to.” He paused. “I know I’m old. But everybody here’s old. Makes me feel weird. Don’t think it’s natural.”

“You wanted to come here. You said you’d researched it, that it was the best spot.”

“I know. And it is. Still—”

Mitch nodded. He understood.

“A ninety-nine-year-old Japanese guy reached the top of Mount Fuji yesterday. A record. Forty-five hundred meters. Guy used a cane. The other climbers all shouted ‘Banzai.’” He gestured with his hand. “Nobody around here’s doin’ anything like that.”

“Where do you get stuff like that?” Mitch asked.

“Where I get everything. Goddamn TV.”

Sandy Zwolinski, the talk-show host with the exquisite white hair, blossomed to life on the screen as they sat there. It was ten A.M.

“Guy on *Canada A.M.* this morning confirmed what I always knew. Bald guys are sexy.” He smiled under his shiny dome. Mitch smiled too.

“Scientists have found the missing molecular link. It’s all tied to over-active male hormones.”

“That one’s been kicking around for years.”

“It’s confirmed. Scientists said so.”

“Scientists where? Who?” Mitch continued to smile as he felt himself getting drawn in further. His old man could do it to him every time.

“University of Miami. Oil glands in the scalps of guys with pattern baldness...”

“Pattern baldness?”

Paul Helwig stopped for a second, stared, then continued. “They got molecules, called receptors, with fifty to one hundred percent greater capacity for binding the ingredients of testosterone. Receptors catch the hormones as they enter the scalp, convert ‘em to testosterone, then pass ‘em on to the gene structure in the cell’s nucleus.”

Mitch knew that he was getting exactly what his father had heard on TV. The old man’s mind and short-term memory were as good as ever.

As his eyes faded, the world came to him, as it did to so many others, via the Tube.

“Guess the babes around here better look over their shoulders when you come strolling down to dinner.”

“Be like shootin’ fish in a barrel. Couldn’t even give me a good chase anymore. It’s ninety percent women here, you know.”

“I know. You’ve told me.”

“Most of ‘em are Baptists, though. They subsidize the place. Don’t know what to make of ‘em yet.”

“Just don’t ask them to dance.”

A corner of the old man’s mouth finally smiled.

Fellowship Towers it was called. Senior citizens’ apartments, right on Yonge Street, north of Bloor, right near the revamped Canadian Tire Store. It was a good spot. There was a considerable waiting list—much longer for women than for men, as they tried in vain to balance their numbers. The facts were, simply, that women outlived men.

Paul Helwig, as usual, was the exception.

There was a dining room on the second floor, along with an elaborate, tasteful sitting and social area. His father had opted for the three-meal-a-day plan, freeing him from most shopping and cooking. With his fading eyes and his fading strength, and his lack of familiarity in the kitchen in general, it was a good deal.

Mitch had listened for years about what a loner his father had considered himself to be. Sometimes, when Mitch would phone, his father would ruefully admit that he had been the first person in three days that he had talked to. In bad weather, in winter, that had not been unusual.

Sandy Zwolinski, resplendent beneath his full, white hair, was holding forth into his trademark microphone, his piercing blue eyes twinkling with life—the Dean of Daytime TV.

The older Helwig jerked his head in Zwolinski’s direction. “Guy’s got too much hair.” He smiled. “Poor bugger.”

Mitch watched the thin profile that was his father, wondering what to tell him, wondering where to start.

Paul Helwig began again. With his eyes riveted on the tube, he said, “News last night said they’d found a guy, a World War One soldier, found him in a glacier.” He turned and looked at Mitch. “Guy spent more than a century in a glacier. Can you imagine? Glacier moved down the Italian Alps. They said his uniform was still in good condition. Found a note in his pocket that said: ‘In the event of my death, notify my mother, Fifth District, Vienna.’ Poor bastard.”

Mitch didn’t know what to say.

“Hundred and somethin’ years in a fuckin’ glacier.”

“What’re they doing with him?” Mitch asked.

“Guy had a tag around his neck. Born in 1874. Didn’t release his identity.” He swiveled back to Sandy Zwolinski. “They’re gonna look for next of kin.” He breathed out heavily. “Good luck.”

Then he mumbled it again. “Poor bastard,” he said.



“Zwolinski’s got one of them Revivalists on.”

“Who?” asked Mitch.

“Revivalists. You know. Those guys. Scientists.” His face crinkled. “Blue Limbo. That stuff.”

They watched.

—guest today is Dr. Victor Heywood, a physiologist at the Stanford Medical Center in California. He’s going to tell us more about Revival, what it is, what it can do. And maybe,” he paused, “he can tell us what it all means. I know I could use a little enlightenment on it all,” Zwolinski said with the proper touch of humility.

It was big news lately. Mitch was more than a little curious too. He glanced at his father. The old man’s concentration assured him that he was not alone in his interest.

He slouched back, listening.

“Doctor,” Sandy Zwolinski said the word slowly, defining its proper parameters, “can we really bring people back from the dead? That is the question, isn’t it, in a nutshell?”

“I believe that is the question, Sandy.” The doctor was fortyish, personable; he had obviously done the circuit successfully to end up on Zwolinski’s show. Information with panache: *Sesame Street* for adults, thought Mitch.

“The answer,” said Heywood, “is yes and no.”

“Yes and no,” repeated Zwolinski, smiling.

The audience chuckled in response to his orchestration.

Heywood smiled too. “Sounds ambiguous, I know. But like most things in life—and death—it is ambiguous, in many ways.”

He paused. Zwolinski didn’t interrupt him this time. Nobody said anything.

He continued. “When someone dies, if the body, especially the head, is still in good condition—not crushed, mangled, etc.—we can now normally Revive the person for a maximum of four weeks.

“How, Doctor? How can this be done?”

Heywood took his cue. “The dozen major blood vessels carrying blood into and out of the head are attached to a heart-lung machine, which in turn pumps and oxygenates the blood.”

Zwolinski, out of his depth, listened intently.

Mitch Helwig was fascinated.

Paul Helwig, at eighty-four, had his own reasons for wanting to hear every word.

“Artificial kidneys are used to remove metabolic wastes. The liver is replaced by glass columns filled with absorbent chemicals to remove poisonous elements. Nutrients are also added to the blood, in addition to substances that balance the blood’s acidity. Brain fluid is also maintained. An electrode, a tiny chip, is implanted in the skull, where the bone resists electrical interference from muscles; this chip is outside the dura, the tough membrane that surrounds the brain. It can send signals from the cochlea to a computer for analysis, synthesis and translation, which can then, in turn, be received by someone operating the computer. In this way, communication is possible.” He paused. “People can now communicate with the dead.”

The last sentence was followed by several seconds of absolute silence. The idea dwarfed the words.

“But are they dead? Isn’t that the question?” asked Zwolinski finally.

“That’s certainly one of the questions. It would appear, now, to be more a matter of definition than ever.”

“You mean, how are we to define ‘death’?”

“Exactly. Do we now mean the first time one dies? Or the second—and so far, final—time one dies?”

“Sounds like a combination of science fiction and voodoo mumbo-jumbo.”

Heywood smiled. “In a way, it does. But,” he added, “electrical signals produced in the visual cortex of the brain and picked up underneath the skull have been used since the late 1980s to drive word-processing software, or a speech processor. It was one of the methods used to treat amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease—a degenerative disease which affects the nerve connections in the cortex. Used quite successfully, too, I should add. And,” he plowed on, realizing that much of his information was too technical, searching for touchstones that would make it seem less incredible, “little known to most of us, a patent was applied for and received by a St. Louis lawyer way back in 1988, describing a machine that could keep a severed head alive. Most of the equipment necessary for all of this has existed for fifteen or twenty years. We’ve just finally put it all together.”

“Scientific synthesis, piercing the ultimate barrier.”

Heywood smiled. “If you like. Grandiosely phrased, but not essentially incorrect.”

“Are there not,” asked Zwolinski, leading his guest, “a couple of steps toward death, in medical terms?”

“In both medical terms and in legal terms, up till now there appeared to be two stages. A person could be brain-dead without being legally

dead. The body had to die as well. But the area of the brain-dead, the realm of the comatose, has always been a gray area. None of this has been clear. As long as the body could hold together without deterioration, hope always existed. We've tapped into that."

"By hope always existing, you mean—"

"I mean that there have always been cases of someone drowning—especially with children—where they may be submerged at the bottom of a pool or something for fifteen or twenty minutes, and for all intents and purposes are dead. But we have the occasional miraculous revival. In 1989, in a small town in Ontario, Canada, a seventy-nine-year-old man, who had been diagnosed as brain-dead ten weeks earlier, was taken off life-support systems and given the last rites of the Catholic church. His two-year-old grandson shouted 'Grandpa!', and the man sat up in bed and stretched out his arms to the boy. A month later, he bought a new car and was driving around visiting family members. It's all documented at Ottawa Civic Hospital. The man's doctors have no medical explanation for his recovery. Brain scans showed no activity after he'd had heart surgery, leading to the conclusion that he'd suffered irreparable brain damage."

"And cryogenics?" asked Zwolinski.

"Cryogenics assumes the same basic sense of boundless optimism: that as long as the body can be kept in good shape, perhaps someday the mind can be revived. We've been waiting for years for science to catch up to Death. Well, we're getting there."

Mitch watched his father. He had not moved.

The TV faded to a commercial.

"Tell all that," his father said finally, "to the guy in the glacier."



"Why only four weeks?" Sandy Zwolinski asked.

Heywood shrugged. "Not sure about that yet. It's something like heart transplants used to be—a form of rejection sets in. We're working on it."

"And there've been how many done?"

"Up to last week, over six hundred in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Free trade." He smiled. "Europe is beginning to equip its hospitals. Australia too. It'll spread rapidly."

"Why, though, Doctor?" Zwolinski leaned forward so that the camera could capture his earnestness. "*Why* would we really want to do this thing?" He spread his hands elaborately. "What's the point?"

Again, the man from Stanford, California, shrugged. "There are as many reasons as there are people, Sandy. The extra four weeks can be used to finalize personal relationships the way most of us would like them to be finalized. Business can be more effectively transferred. Both

the military and the police forces have expressed considerable interest. The ability to Revive—albeit temporarily—a person who has suffered a violent or criminal death, to have them explain how they were killed, who killed them...well, you can see for yourself where all this could lead.”

“I’m not sure you’re right, Doctor. I’m not sure we can see where it will all lead.”

“It leads right into the future, Sandy. We’re all headed there, whether we want it or not.”

The camera shifted from Zwolinski, to Heywood, then back to the celebrity host. The audience watched silently. Then: “Tell us about the subjective effect reported by the subjects themselves,” said Zwolinski. “The one the media has picked up on. The color.”

He waited. They all waited.

Heywood smiled. “Yes,” he said. “That is interesting. All the senses seem to disappear. The mind works, and memory exists. The only sense that seems to operate even partially is something that tricks the optical path to the brain. Those Revived report, consistently, to a person, that they see a world of Blue, nothing but Blue. They describe it as an endless void, an ethereal space.” He shrugged again.

“Blue Limbo,” said Zwolinski.

Blue Limbo, thought Mitch Helwig, watching in Fellowship Towers. It’s the twenty-first century, and we’ve got Blue Limbo. He looked at his father, thought about Elaine, Barbie, Mario, Karoulis, and everything that had happened, everything that would happen.

“Tell it,” Paul Helwig said again, “to the guy in the glacier.”



“Why aren’t you at work?” The old man clicked the TV into silence with the remote.

Now it was Mitch’s turn to pause. “I’ve been sent home. Things are changing. My status is up in the air.”

His father waited for more. When it didn’t come, he asked, “You still getting paid?”

“For now.”

“You in trouble?”

Mitch shrugged. In spite of being almost forty years old, he was beginning to feel like a kid. “There are a lot of questions to answer downtown. The warehouse explosion. Last fall.”

Paul Helwig nodded.

“I was involved. I spoiled a lot of parties. It cost powerful people a lot of money.”

His father continued staring at him for a while, then put his hand to his chin and stared at the dormant TV set. “I heard,” he said, “that every

sort of filth was going on in that place, that its demise was a blessing to civilization.” He glanced at Mitch. “That true?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” he said, “piss on ‘em. You did the right thing. Can you hold your head high?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck ‘em, then. They want to play their little political games, you step aside. There’s more to life than a lunch pail and a job, if you can’t hold your head up.”

Mitch rose up out of the chair, put his hands in his pockets, and walked to the window nine floors above Yonge Street. He stared down in silence.

Then the old man asked him, “Why don’t you go home?”

Mitch turned and stared at him.

The answer was too long in coming. Mitch knew that even through half-blind eyes, Paul Helwig could see the truth etched on his son’s face, for he saw his father sag visibly.



Dreams are woven on looms of illusion. There’s no other way.

How a dream dies can be impossible to chart. The dream that had been Mitch Helwig’s marriage had been unraveling for longer than he had understood, longer than he cared to admit.

It was still dying, scuttled in canyons of memory, in fragments of broken routines.

But he remembered the turning point. He remembered when he finally understood what was happening.

Barbie had just turned nine. Mitch had traded his evening shift with Evans in order to be at home for her birthday party.

*Nine years old*, he thought, *and we’re still living in an apartment*. They would never, he knew, own their own home. That was another dream that had died, many years earlier, another impossibility that they had slowly let go. For them—Elaine and him—life had become constant compromise, and the truth was that in this they were no different than anyone else in their apartment complex. No different than most others anywhere.

But Mitch had only seen the tip of the iceberg gliding in the calm seas before him.



“Can Lottie sleep here, Daddy?”

“We promised her mother she’d be home by nine. It *is* a school night.”

Barbie had felt the urge to try just one more time. Lottie Patel was, after all, her best friend.

It was 8:30. Mitch was watching the two of them with amusement and something akin to nostalgia—something more like wonder, tinged with deep pleasure. It was one of the rewarding moments of parenthood, these glimpses into innocence: to live in a world where candles on a cake can light the world with magic.

He had read *The Catcher in the Rye* in high school—because he had had to—in what seemed to him now like a completely different life. He remembered Holden Caulfield watching his little sister, Phoebe, going round and round on the carousel, remembered how Holden had cried while he watched her. He remembered his English teacher trying to get the class to understand the incident, and how they had shrugged it off.

He understood it now.

Like so many other things.

The V-phone beeped beside him.

Elaine came in from the kitchen as he picked it up.

“Hello.”

The video portion remained blank. Then the line went dead.

Mitch caught Elaine staring at him, clutching a handful of birthday napkins. Then she dropped her eyes and went back into the kitchen.

“Daddy?”

Turning his gaze to Barbie, he hung up the cool plastic receiver. He smiled at her, “It must’ve been a wrong number.”

In the kitchen, a drawer shut heavily.



Outside his apartment door, in the hallway, Mitch looked down at Barbie and Lottie, scarcely seeing them. He hadn’t moved from where he stood. They both looked up at him expectantly.

“You two run down and press the button for the elevator. I’ll be along in a minute.” He forced a smile.

“Okay.”

He pretended to be checking for keys in his pocket. The girls scurried down the threadbare carpeting of the hallway in a swirl of woolen coats and ponytails, vying for the thrill of pressing the button first.

Muted, but still audible through the door, he heard the beep as Elaine activated the V-phone. Then he heard her muffled voice—the actual words undistinguishable—as she spoke to the person on the other end.

He stood for a few seconds longer, frozen in place, his mind numb. Bits of information, previously disparate, clattered in his head like ice cubes dropped onto a tile floor.

Down the hall, the elevator chimed its arrival. The kids turned to look at him puzzled.

“Dad!”

He hesitated.

The voice, insistent on the far side of the door, the children, waiting for him at the elevator, pulled him in different directions, stretching him until he felt faint.

*Nine years old*, he thought,

He could hardly breathe.

Then, slowly, moving his feet forward, with a conscious, light-headed motion, he walked toward the children.



Mitch swung his feet over the side of the bed and sat up. Elaine stirred beside him. Wearing only his undershorts, the cool air of the apartment at night gave him goose bumps.

He stood up.

Barbie was asleep. Lottie was safely home, tucked into her own bed. He glanced back down at the inert form of his wife.

It was 1:40 A.M. The birthday party was over.

His daughter was nine.

Pulling on his robe, he shut the bedroom door behind him, listening to its soft click. From the hall closet, where it was stored in its obsolescence, he took down the small, cheap cassette recorder that no one used anymore, along with one of the blank cassettes beside it. On his way to the living room, he popped the cassette into the recorder and unfurled the extension cord.

Sitting down on the sofa, he plugged it in and set it beside the V-phone.

He lifted the plastic receiver from its cradle, gripping it with unnecessary pressure, breathing deeply and steadily. Making sure it was off video, he flicked the switch from Tone to Pulse. Then he pressed the Redial button, placed the receiver by the recorder's microphone, and activated the Record button.

The last number dialed was activated. It clicked its memorized ticks into the cassette turning lazily beside it.

For Mitch, they were as loud as thunderclaps.

It rang twice before being answered by a groggy male voice.

"Hello?"

Mitch went cold.

"Hello?"

As if in a dream, Mitch softly hung up the phone, switched off the recorder, unplugged it, and carried it back to its resting place on the top shelf of the hall closet. As he stored it there, he popped the cassette out and dropped it into the pocket of his robe.

Then he went back and sat down on the sofa in the living room. He sat there for half an hour, in the dark, in the silence, his face a mask. The

cold of the apartment made him shiver finally, and fighting an impulse that made no sense to him, an impulse to kneel on the floor for no reason that he could think of, he drifted back to bed, careful to stay on his own side, and pulled the covers up to his neck.

He had still been shivering when the alarm went off to tell him that he had to go to work.



And now, standing in his father's apartment, the memories draining away, like raindrops sluicing off oilskin, Mitch focused on the question: *Why don't you go home?*

"Elaine and I aren't living together right now."

Paul Helwig could make no response.

"I've moved out. At least for now."

Still nothing.

"It's been about a month now. I've got a small place—top floor of a house in the Queen and Pape area."

"Barbie?" The word was a mumble, a confused invocation.

Mitch dropped his eyes. "She's with her mother. For now." He paused. "We'll work it out."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you come to me?"

Mitch shrugged, still unable to meet his father's eyes. "Couldn't." The word hung between them.

His father nodded. Mitch felt like a toddler with a scraped knee.

"Do you need anything? Money?"

Mitch shook his head.

But it was not true. He needed a lot. And he felt helpless.

## 4

**MITCH** felt a sense of relief as he drove south on Yonge Street after leaving his father. He had stayed for lunch at noon in the second-floor dining room with him, fascinated by the array of senior citizens around them, the number of people with walkers and wheelchairs. Everyone who went by the table had stopped and spoken to them. In a way, his visit to his father was a visit to all of them as well, and they all savored as much of it as they could.

His father was right. It was strange.

He had enjoyed the lunch. He was with survivors. These were people who had made a peace with life and what it had dealt them. They had come to terms with their own flaws, their bodies, their families. Life could make, you crazy, Mitch knew; You had to hang on.

He was trying to hang on.

It was 1:30 P.M. Mitch took in the street scene of joggers in luminescent suits, wired to their Walkmans; a swarm of Asian kids with safety helmets and their new striped roller blades were legging it out in the inside lane a few car lengths ahead of him; and when he crossed Bloor Street, he drove slowly past a group of black and white kids, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, their heads shaved up one side, the steel toes of their boots glinting in the afternoon sun, idling under the Uptown marquee, waiting for the theater to open for the first showing of the latest splatterpunk film in town.

He could never figure why they weren't in school. How did their parents stand them? Could it happen to him? He thought of Barbie and weakened at the image.

He had to see her again. Soon.



Mitch eased his aging Chev to the curb on Queen East at Broadview. The 7-Eleven store had an automatic teller inside, and he needed some cash. His father had been good, he thought as he sat behind the wheel, thumbing through his wallet for a quick inventory. The old man never passed judgment, Mitch realized. At least, he never had on Mitch. He certainly had opinions about everything else. Looking up and through the windshield at nothing, the power of the bond that had been forged silently between him and his father hit him suddenly.

They were both alone. They were both disenfranchised from the mainstream.

There was nothing left except their children.

Every man became his own father, every woman her own mother, to varying degrees. He understood that. It was the speed with which it had happened to Mitch Helwig that surprised him. That, and the clarity of his life that it produced, made him sit where he was for an extra minute.

A bit of commotion at the end of that extra minute caused him to refocus on the external world with equal clarity.

It was the middle of the afternoon. The woman getting into the cab some twenty meters ahead of him was Chinese and matronly. Her purse hung on a long leather strap over her left shoulder. Mitch watched without knowing what he was seeing until it was happening.

Two youths, a Chinese male about seventeen and a blond Caucasian who seemed slightly younger, appeared from the 7-Eleven behind the woman. In a movement that was both precise and deft, betraying much

practice, almost elegant in its smoothness, the Chinese boy cut the shoulder strap of the woman's purse as she leaned forward into the cab and tossed it to the other boy. It had all transpired in a second. Then the two youths sped around the corner on foot, running south on Broadview.

The woman stood stunned.

Mitch felt adrenaline begin to pump. They had probably watched the woman withdraw cash inside the store, knew exactly what they were doing, had done it many times before in many places.

The engine was still idling. But it was more than instinct or training that made Mitch pull out into the traffic and go around the cab and the shocked woman, make a right at the corner and sight the two miscreants running ahead of him. It stemmed from a quiet outrage against all that had happened to him and all that was still going to happen. Instead of making his brain blur, it calmed it into a cold steel.

He thought of his father. The woman getting into the cab would lose enough in life. She didn't need to lose this as well.

He felt under the seat beneath him to make sure it was still there.



The sun-face painted high on the side of the gaudy Caribbean restaurant smiled down on him as he watched the two snatchers run past the chain-link fence on his right and head west up the alley beside the five-storied redbrick factory. Mitch pulled up to the mouth of the alley, gazing down its length through the passenger window. There was another chain-link fence at the far west side, with the plastic pennants of a used-car lot fluttering aloft above it. They turned left, heading south, out of his line of vision, behind the factory.

Mitch cruised slowly down Broadview, along the front of the factory, to the lane which bordered the south side of the building. The lane ran around the factory in a squared-off U, surrounded by wire fence on all sides. Directly in front of him, along the south border, the entrance ramp for the Eastern Avenue expressway across the Don River isolated the spot even more.

The youths had not reappeared here. They were at the back of the building, or they were inside. There was no place else they could be.

Mitch looked at the signs on the structure:

GATEWAY AUTO COLLISION  
DUBOIS MARINE INSURANCE  
M. CUTRARA & SON  
WHOLESALE FRESH PRODUCE.

And in spite of the blue, diamond-shaped sign that read FOR LEASE, there was definitely business transpiring inside. It certainly was not abandoned.

They were at the back, then.



The Chev moved slowly down the north alley. Ahead of him, the red-and-white plastic pennants, time-worn and weathered, fluttered at the edge of the wire fence, announcing rows of gray, assembly-line Toyotas, the dust from the nearby expressway covering them like urban delta silt.

Mitch made a left, along the building's rear.

They were there.

Turning, they watched him come, defiantly.

On an abandoned loading platform, the two youths had dumped the purse's contents, spreading it out: wallet, coins, credit cards, a few bills, comb, small makeup kit. Their arrangement of the contents was in itself an affront.

Mitch pulled up about ten meters away, staring at them through his opened driver's side window. He let the car idle for fifteen seconds before shutting it off, while the two youthful felons studied him silently.

Approaching age forty, Mitch thought, gave a man many second thoughts. One of them was the uncertainty regarding just what one was and was not still capable of doing physically. As he eyed the two young and seemingly fit males, this thought did flit across his mind.

He reached under the seat and extracted the bag that he kept stored there. Clutching it in his hand, he opened the door and stepped out.

The two thieves straightened, unblinking.

Mitch reached into the bag and pulled out the Barking Dog. It had been a while since he had used it. In fact, he remembered having sworn to try to avoid using it. But then, he thought, these things happen.

Their eyes narrowed as they watched him attach it. They knew what it was: the ultimate in modern lie detection technology. Not even the police were supposed to have it, and they knew this too.

*Who was this guy?*

Mitch Helwig snapped the pocket-sized silver trinket to his belt where it could gaze unhindered at the faces before him. He then attached the sticky electrode to the bare flesh of his rib cage under his shirt.

The two young jackals watched him.

"What's that?" The blond Caucasian spoke first.

The Chinese lad turned a disdainful gaze on him for breaking the silence in any way.

Mitch smiled. The smile was cold. "Easter Bunny left it." He focused the eye. The Dog's microcomputer would cross-reference voice pitch, body odors, face temperature, pupil and retina response; the microwave respiration monitor would measure stomach palpitations caused by rapid breathing under stress; and the video input would scan for the spontane-

ous, subcortical facial expressions that could register with the machine's coding system.

If either of these two told even the slightest lie, the Barking Dog would howl by sending a jolt of icy sensation to Mitch's side, where the electrode clung to his flesh.

The Oriental picked up a knife from the loading platform behind them—the same knife, Mitch assumed, that had originally severed the purse's shoulder strap. The sun glinted hotly from its surface. Mitch also noted the look in their eyes: like distant thunder.

Then he noticed something else about the two. The hand that held the knife also flashed in the sun, its metal fingers twisting the light. The blond lad sidled a meter or so to the left of his cohort, his silver foot creating the slightest trace of a limp as it sparkled lightning from the rubble around it.

Bionic limbs, Mitch realized.

These two were well on their ways to whatever technological future awaited them. Piece by piece, they were ceding their humanity, tying motor and sensory nerve impulses to an electronic, computerized control system.

Mitch was struck by the irony of the confrontation. The human-machine interface was all about them. The Barking Dog. The limbs. Even the automatic teller that had complied with the Chinese woman's electronic commands. And it was just the beginning.

The Chinese boy apparently had been thinking. "If you're a cop," he said, "then you'd better read us our rights. If not," the silver hand clutching the knife remained poised aloft in the sunlight, "then you'd better fuck off."

Nobody moved.

Mitch could not tear his eyes from the hand, the foot. Individual nerve fibers, axons, regenerated through holes mere microns in diameter, like string beans growing through chicken wire, he thought. Commercial plasma-etching technology. Iridium microelectrodes, coated with silicon nitride to protect them from degradation caused by bodily fluids.

One day cops, he had been told at a criminology seminar, might be able to plug their nerve impulses directly into their skimmer's control system.

Silicon nitride versus bodily fluids.

He thought of Elaine, Barbie, Karoulis, Mario, his father. He thought of Blue Limbo and the light-speed at which they were all approaching it.

The planet seemed to tilt, sliding the two steel-enhanced creatures dangerously near to him. He observed them with a brilliant clarity, suffused by the surrounding heat and cinders.

Mitch licked his lips. "You stole that purse." The Barking Dog waited, infinitely patient.

The Chinese youth stepped forward. He tried to assess Mitch Helwig, the Barking Dog. Mitch saw the knife more clearly now—a simple Arkansas toothpick, polished carbon steel, twenty-four centimeters overall. The other boy took a Ni baton from his belt, pressed the release bar and automatically extended it from its closed twenty centimeters to its fully extended fifty-two centimeters. Mitch knew all about them. The Taiwan Provincial Police still used them. Steel tubing, light. Capable of delivering stunningly painful blows.

"You made a mistake coming here," the blond one said.

Where did creatures like this come from? Mitch wondered. From under what rock? And we patch them up with new and better limbs, so they can continue. He remembered the story of the so-called Crocodile Man in the recent news, the name the health experts had given to a particularly brutal punk who had been apprehended while dismembering his latest victim. They said the "crocodile" brain condition was brought on by the assailant's having been born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. The Crocodile Man, so went the contention, operated hyperactively, unhindered by functions of that portion of the brain governing emotions, morals, or the ability to judge reality.

Moral imbeciles. Egocentric instead of ecocentric. How many of them were out there? What else caused that portion of their brains to cease functioning?

"You stole that purse," Mitch repeated.

"We found it," said the blond boy. His silver foot ground into the cinders as he shifted his weight.

The cold of blatant fabrication froze Mitch's side. It began to freeze Mitch in other ways too. He could feel his anger rising and tried to control it

Fuckers, he thought.

They began to move apart from one another, leaving the purse forgotten between them, never turning from the still figure of the man confronting them.

Mitch immobilized them again. "Are you two a pair of morons? You think I'd just waltz in here and submit to a pair of assholes like you?"

They stared without comprehension. The sun was at the stranger's back, making them squint, outlining him incandescently.

"I guess you figure you're a pair of real bad guys. Tough guys. Guys who'd kill for nickels and dimes." Mitch was taunting them, waiting to hear their voices.

"We never killed nobody," said the blond boy.

But it was a lie. The Barking Dog told Mitch Helwig so.

The Chinese boy glanced at his cohort. He was sharp enough to at least determine that the stranger now knew something more about them than that they were a couple of minor purse snatchers. What he didn't know was what this man would do about it. The guy wasn't following any of the patterns that they'd seen before, and this new scenario wasn't computing smoothly in his jangled synapses. The Barking Dog wasn't any legal threat. Its data was inadmissible. The courts hadn't figured out what to do with it yet.

So what was this all about?

It was about Mitch Helwig's anger, his frustration. He felt it bubbling to the surface, beginning to smoke silently.

They began to move toward him. As they did so, he reached once again into the bag from which he had taken the Barking Dog. He aimed the small laser that he pulled out in their general direction.

They stopped.

"The bag of goodies is surprising, isn't it?"

They said nothing. The lightweight plastic Sanyo could burn a hole in them as neat as a pin.

Mitch gestured casually toward them with the laser. "Put those things down and relax."

"Suppose we don't," said the older one.

Mitch shrugged. "You only look stupid, is what I figured." He waited. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I'll have to kill you." He straightened his arm, targeting.

They lowered their weapons to the ground.

"You two little pigs stole that lady's money. I watched you. Then you ran like little pigs back here to your pigpen to play with it. And now," he took a breath, "you tell me that you're killers."

"We never told you nothin'."

Mitch eyed them steadily. "You boys are all confused. You're all mixed up."

The staring contest continued.

"Consider me your new social worker."

The darker, older boy tried one last bit of bravado. "Don't mess with us. You don't know what you're messin' with."

Mitch smiled slowly, chillingly. "Lines from old, bad videos. It's your stock in trade, all you know." He stepped closer to them. He was no longer a cop. He was no longer even Mitch Helwig. He didn't know what he was or how this had happened to him, but it happened more and more often of late. His job as cop was so limited, his desire to make a difference overwhelming. Maybe he was going crazy. In fact, he knew that it was partly true. It was as he had thought while driving from Fellowship

Towers on Yonge Street: the world could make you crazy; it was making him crazy. There seemed to be no end to it all.

“As your new social worker,” he said, “I think we’ll start with basic Pavlovian conditioning. You do something mean to somebody else, you break the law, and you pay.”

“What about if you break the law?” The question came from the Oriental boy and hung in the air like a storm warning.

A cloud of memories, of dark perceptions, billowed up behind Mitch Helwig’s eyes. “I pay,” he said. The swirl of knowledge eddied away. “Everybody pays.”

There was a sheen of sweat on the blond boy’s brow now. The hot afternoon sun was a very small part of it.

“You pay me. I’m the reason you’re going to try real hard to behave from now on.”

They waited.

“First lesson,” Mitch said. “Empty your pockets. Now.”

Coins, billfolds, pocket combs tumbled out. Each of them had one more weapon as well—the blond, a Black Stallion knife, with solid brass liners and buffalo horn handle; the Chinese lad dropped a more conventional folding trench knife with built-in knuckle duster.

“Over there.” Mitch gestured to the fence with a wave of the laser. They made their way across the cinders, the blond’s silver foot an eerie, alternating glint. “Now,” he added, “you, flashfoot, over there.” He motioned to a spot some ten meters away.

The boy obeyed.

“Both of you,” Mitch said, “lie face down.”

“You could kill us,” blurted the younger one.

“I could kill you now, as you stand there.” Mitch held the laser steady. “A sweep of this across the area would cut you both in half.” He paused. “Any doubts?”

They both knelt down, then spread themselves forward on their stomachs.

“Maybe this is what your victims always feel like,” Mitch added.

Glancing over at their sprawled forms, an image of the walkers and wheelchairs that he had seen at lunch surfaced, superimposing itself on the reality of the bionic limbs in front of him. The stark injustice, the skewing of balance was not lost on him.

Leaving them there for a moment, Mitch went over to their pocket contents and picked up their billfolds. Briefly, he flipped each open to assure himself that there was some form of ID inside, then popped them into his own pocket.

It was in this moment of inattention that it happened. The Chinese lad must have had it inside his sleeve, and Mitch Helwig later chastised

himself for his uncustomary lack of thoroughness, his distracted focus. It took a slice of skin a half centimeter thick from his left shoulder as it passed by, finally thumping numbingly into the wooden door atop the loading platform.

The pain, he knew, would follow in seconds. By all rights, he should be dead by now.

The hilt of the ballistic knife remained in the youth's hand. Good to a range of about ten meters, the weapon was capable of being fired silently and accurately; the penetration was more than five times that of a forceful manual stab. In close quarters, it was merely a knife. He'd seen them for sale on Yonge Street for fifty-nine dollars.

With the onset of pain, he felt the warm trickle of blood down both his back and chest.

Mitch moved quickly toward the prone figure, the sudden pain alerting his primal instincts. The youth lay frozen, fear in his eyes, with the knowledge a big-game hunter might have after a failed shot had turned a rhino in his direction. Mitch kicked him full in the face, swiveling in one fluid motion to face the blond, the Sanyo quivering in his tensed fist, his mind trying to regain total control. He bit down hard on the pain and anger, the laser trained like a cobra on the remaining youth.

"Don't," the boy said.

Mitch remained silent, his glare like ice.

"Don't kill me."

A wave of pain from his shoulder unsteadied him momentarily. The blood from the wound began to flow past the Barking Dog's electrode, gathering at his beltline. In his eyes, Mitch felt the sting of saltwater, uncertain whether it was sweat or tears.

The Chinese youth was unconscious at his feet, his nose and mouth bleeding. Alternately glancing between his two prisoners, Mitch Helwig came to a decision. The bionic hand of the boy at his feet—the hand that had missed taking Mitch Helwig's life by centimeters—lay sprawled open like some metal spider creeping from its black sleeve.

He bent to pull the sleeve back, exposing the silver forearm.

The other boy watched with wide eyes.

Training the Sanyo at the middle of the steel forearm, Mitch cut the hand off.

Even in the stupor of unconsciousness, the youth's feet jerked spasmodically. Bionic limbs, unlike simpler prosthetics, sensed heat and cold.

And pain.

Mitch kicked the hand away dramatically. Then he turned toward the blond boy and, gritting his teeth at his own pain, focused the laser on the boy's foot.

"Don't." The boy was terrified now, his eyes wild.

“You guys should think about this,” Mitch said. “What it feels like.” He continued to aim the Sanyo.

“Please.”

Mitch was shaking now, a combination of rage, fear, and massive jolts of adrenaline. The blood loss was increasing too, making him light-headed, mistrusting his own anger. He tried to steady his hand.

“Please.”

Mitch walked slowly toward the prone boy. “You shouldn’t hurt people. You should leave people alone who don’t bother you, who don’t deserve to be treated the way you treat them.”

The boy had a real, deep fear etched on his face. His voice quavered. “I’ll try,” he said.

Mitch halted as the Barking Dog registered the statement. There was a drop of cold attached to the phrase; but there was also the tremor, the shiver of uncertainty.

There was hope, even if it was born of fear.

Mitch lowered his laser. He stared at the metallic foot. Then he met the young man’s eyes. “You’ll never know,” he said, “how close you came.”

The boy was crying now.

Mitch left him there. He gathered up the contents of the lady’s purse and refilled it. Then, returning to the unconscious Oriental’s form, he bent over and picked up the silver hand and attached half-triceps. Sliding behind the wheel of his Chev, he tossed his own weapon and utility pouch, along with everything else, into the backseat.

Touching his right hand to the searing pain of his left shoulder, he tore the shirt away, baring the wound, twisting his neck for a glimpse. Blood was all he could see.

Starting the engine, he stared through his own tears at the crying blond boy.

# 5

**BESIDES** hurting all over, Phil Huziak was scared. Even though he had put in twenty-two years as a cop, he had never before suffered any form of assault. In fact, he had only drawn his gun twice. The second time—to force a suspect from a car—had shaken him up so badly that he had set his sights on getting off the streets and into an office job with a concentrated determination.

That had been twelve years ago. The job of staff sergeant, which he had held since then, suited him perfectly, and he had no higher aspirations. He liked organizing the reports, setting the schedules. He liked being efficient. He prided himself on oiling all the gears that needed attention, on keeping tabs on the week's procedures.

Let's face it, he thought. I'm a desk man. And glancing down at the bulk of stomach above his belt showed him just how well he had come to fill the mold.

But this shit, he thought. Karoulis and Helwig. Fucking bomb blasts. Evans and Lim. How, he thought, did I get into this?

The hospital had sent him home. He would certainly live. And now, sitting in his own living room, waiting for Norma to come home from work, he found that he was afraid.

I could have died, he thought. I could be Evans or Lim. This is nuts. This morning they were alive, laughing, joking.

What had Karoulis and Helwig brought on him? What had they brought on them all?



The phone beeped and he looked at it. Norma, he thought.

"Hello?"

"Phil Huziak, please?"

"Speaking."

"Phil, it's Joseph Galecki."

Huziak was mildly surprised. "Sir," he said. He flicked on the video, and the face of the deputy chief appeared.

"I'm calling to make sure everything's okay, Phil. Is there anything I can do?"

Huziak sighed, not knowing what to say. "I guess I'm okay. Shaken up, though."

"Of course you're shaken up. I can't tell you how glad I am that that's the extent of it for you. It is, isn't it?"

"Seems to be, sir."

"Sam Karoulis isn't with you, is he?"

"No, sir. He isn't."

"He hasn't gone home yet. I called. You know where he is?"

"I haven't seen him since the hospital."

"Hmm." Galecki's face became pensive.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?"

Galecki seemed to be thinking. "We should be doing things for you, Phil. But these are the kinds of crises that test us." It was Galecki's turn to sigh. "Can I ask you to do something for me, Phil?"

Huziak had a bad feeling. "I guess so."

"It's really Karoulis's job. But since I can't find him, and we can't let this go on much longer..."

Huziak's heart sank.

"Somebody has to tell Evans and Lim's families. And I don't think it should come from some cop on a motorcycle or in a black-and-white."

"I understand."

"I'd do it myself, but I've got the chief of police, the mayor, and three TV crews waiting outside for me."

And what's more important? thought Huziak. "I understand."

"You're okay with it, Phil?"

"No problem, sir."

"Thanks a million. I owe you. Take care."

"Don't worry about it."

The screen went blank.

Don't worry about it. Why should he worry about it? Huziak began to simmer. He hasn't just been blown around a room by a bang that still has his ears ringing. And now he doesn't have to face the families. I do. Good old Huziak. *Me.*

Fuck, he thought. Fuck me.



Joseph Galecki rubbed his forehead with his right hand, tracing his fingers along the hairline as he tried to tie together the day's loose ends in his mind. Helwig. Karoulis. Huziak. Evans. Lim.

Helwig.

It started and ended with him. As before.

And he would have to try to find answers for everybody. They would expect it of him.

He ran a pocket comb through his tinted hair, formulating what he would say to the press, waiting like hounds outside his door. Then he arose and went to meet them, appropriating the correct, precise facial expression for a moment before stepping out into the hall.

## 6

**MITCH** closed the door of his third-floor apartment behind him and leaned against the wall. His shoulder, bleeding freely, needed to be treated. Having lived there for only one month, there wasn't much in the

place that he could think of using to stem its flow. His medicine cabinet didn't even have a bottle of aspirin in it yet.

He began unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it from his belt. The pain was intense and accelerated sharply whenever he made any movement that affected the shoulder. Moving into the kitchen area, he finally shrugged out of the shirt, winced anew, then tossed the blood-soaked garment into the sink. He leaned forward on the edge of the counter, breathing deeply through his mouth, trying to control both his thoughts and the constant throb and sting of the wound.

He gritted his teeth as a new wave of pain stabbed at the open cut. "Shit." The word echoed in the empty apartment.

He threw back his head and bit on his lower lip. Tilting his eyes sideways, he glanced into the living area to his right. The single item of furniture in his range of vision was a wicker chair that he had borrowed from the woman on the second floor.

He had left his previous life behind.

He was alone.

And he wasn't sure that he liked that very much at all.



With his one and only dish towel tied as tightly as he could manage, with one hand, around his shoulder, Mitch began to take stock more rationally. What came next?

He wasn't sure.

He'd live. He knew that. The quality of that life was what he didn't know.

He looked around the place that was now his home. In a previous generation, this had been the attic of the house. He had his own entry up the house's side stairs—a circular, wooden stairway—that ended in the small landing outside the unit's door. It had been advertised in *The Globe and Mail* as a studio apartment, with one bedroom, a den, a galley kitchen and living room combo. It measured all of about fifty square meters, Mitch guessed. Big enough for what he was bringing with him: nothing.

In the center of the apartment where he was standing, it was fine. But as you moved toward the walls, the ceiling sloped and the headroom disappeared. He'd hit his head a number of times, and doing the dishes without stooping was impossible, so the landlady had left him a stool to sit on for that purpose. The bathroom door didn't open all the way because it opened inward and hit the wall sink. But his options had been limited, as had his finances. And he couldn't beat the rent.

His glance strayed into the bedroom. He had been sleeping on a ten-centimeter-thick piece of foam that he had purchased at Sears in Gerard Square. On it was the sleeping bag that had been his since he was

a kid. Not much was going to be able to be transported up that winding stairway.

Except Barbie. She was the only thing from the past that he wanted. And needed.

The sound of the door buzzer startled him. He knew that it was his buzzer because he had tested it and heard it, but this was the first time that anyone else had pressed it. Opening the door, he went out onto the small landing outside his entranceway and opened the window there, peering down into the driveway.

The face of Karoulis, his captain, turned to look up at him.



Inside the apartment, Sam Karoulis and Mitch Helwig stared at each other.

“Jesus,” said Karoulis, taking in Mitch’s shoulder.

Mitch surveyed the cuts on Karoulis’s face. “You need a new blade in your razor, Captain.”

Karoulis shook his head, smiled wryly, and looked away. Then he asked, “What happened to you?” His eyes were scanning the apartment.

“What happened to *you*?”

Karoulis looked back at Mitch. “That’s what I came here to see you about.” He shrugged. “Stuff you should know.”

Mitch waited.

Karoulis looked around the apartment again. “I’m sorry, Mitch. I didn’t know.”

Mitch said nothing.

“I phoned your place to talk to you. Elaine answered. She gave me your phone number. I thought about it a bit, then I called her back and asked for your address. Thought I’d come and see you, see how you’re doing.”

Mitch shrugged. “So how’m I doing?” He looked around his own apartment. The two men continued to stand opposite one another awkwardly.

“You know Mitch, I’ve been there.”

Mitch frowned.

“Separated. Divorced. I remember this.” His hand gestured casually, indicating the apartment.

“I didn’t know.”

“It was a long time ago.” Karoulis was quiet for a moment. “But you don’t forget.” He studied Mitch’s face with a measure of compassion. “You never forget.”

Mitch nodded. It rang true. He knew that he would never forget.

“You know,” Karoulis said, “in Nebraska, they call someone who saws a man in half a magician.” He looked at Mitch. “Here, they call him a divorce lawyer.”

Mitch smiled.

Karoulis shrugged. “It’s the job,” he said. “Destroys you. Destroys your family. Happens more and more.” He took out a cigarette. “Mind?”

Mitch shook his head.

Karoulis flicked a lighter and inhaled deeply. He held the smoke in his lungs for a moment, savoring the effect, then exhaled in a steady stream toward the ceiling. Mitch strode into the living area and opened the swivel skylight.

“Nice touch,” said Karoulis, walking over under it and motioning upward. He inhaled again, this time blowing the smoke up and through the opening. “I must be the last guy in North America to be doing this. The rest of them have all been hunted down by the Citizens for a Better Everything. I’m a dinosaur.” He looked at Mitch. “Maybe you are too.”

Mitch nodded. “Maybe I am.” He continued to nod without meeting Karoulis’s eyes.

“Let’s see,” said Karoulis, thinking. “When the next chief of police is gone, how’ll they word the ad?” He squinted, as if visualizing it. He motioned in the air with his cigarette hand for emphasis. “WANTED: Police chief for multicultural city, population umpteen million. Must administer annual budget of less than a billion dollars and manage enough employees to fill a medium-sized town, including six thousand police officers. Preferred candidate must uphold traditional law enforcement principles, and satisfy public demand for greater accountability.” He looked at Mitch. “Pay: one hundred sixty-five thousand dollars a year. Non-negotiable. That’s more than the premier of the province. There’s guys who’ll line up for that”

Mitch just watched him, silent.

“On the other hand,” he continued, “criminals make more money from the sale of illegal drugs alone than the total interest on the world’s debt. Drug dealing is second in annual profits only to armaments and slightly ahead of the oil business.” He inhaled more smoke. “And here we stand, all bandaged up. With one fuckin’ chair between us. I’m not sure I get it.” The smoke streamed out of his mouth and nose as he finished.

Mitch put his hands in his pockets. He wasn’t sure that he got it either. He looked over at Karoulis, seeing him differently. “When were you divorced, Captain?”

Karoulis expelled a bit more smoke as he collected his thoughts. “Fourteen years ago.” He paused. “I’m fifty-four years old, Mitch.” Then he smiled. “And I feel every one of those years.” He looked over at Mitch. “You’re what? Thirty-eight? Thirty-nine? Forty?”

Mitch just nodded.

“That’s when it happened to me. I remembered it all when I talked to Elaine. I remembered what it felt like.”

What it felt like, thought Mitch. What it still feels like.

“Keepin’ a marriage together today. Two people workin’. All the bullshit around you.” Karoulis shrugged helplessly. “I sometimes don’t know how the fuck anybody does it. You factor into all that the fact that you’re a cop, and, well...I’ve seen the stats.”

Mitch just listened.

“At least fifteen percent of the force has drinking problems. We got a program in place now to try to deal with it. Six out of every ten marriages involving police officers are breaking up. National average is four out of ten. I’ve seen a couple of studies that indicate divorce is twice as high among police as in other occupations.”

Mitch knew that Karoulis was repeating the stats out of kindness, as a sedative. He hung his head and let him continue, understanding the gesture.

“Average life span for a cop here is fifty-seven years,” Karoulis went on, battling his own self-consciousness. “National average for a male is in the mid-seventies—over eighty for a woman. Every time a cop swallows his gun, the party line is ‘he didn’t commit suicide because of a police problem; it was a personal problem and had nothing to do with his job.’” He shook his head. “It always has to do with the job, because a cop is a cop. Marital, alcohol, drug abuse, medical, financial—Christ, you name it, we got it. And *how* we got it. We even got an International Law Enforcement Stress Association for Chrissake, and a magazine called *Police Stress*.”

“Maybe the answer to my problem is in the magazine’s letter column.”

Karoulis arced his cigarette out through the skylight with a flick of his finger. He glanced at the blood-soaked dish towel wrapped around Mitch’s shoulder. “Yeah. Right,” he said. “So what’s that all about?” he asked, indicating the wound. “I send you home, and you take a detour through a shooting range or something?”

But Karoulis had opened the door to his own personal life, and Mitch deflected the conversation back. Seeing Karoulis from this new vantage point gave him a clearer perspective on his own situation—a perspective that he needed badly,

Karoulis knew this. It was why he had come.

“Fifty-seven,” Mitch said.

“It’s the average,” said Karoulis.

“I’ve never felt particularly average.”

Karoulis met his eyes. “Me neither,” he said.



“So what do you do? Eat standin’ up?”

Mitch smiled. “I’m not doing a lot of cooking yet.”

“I got a patio table and chairs. Plastic stuff—but good. You can have ‘em. Till you get set up properly.”

“Okay.” Mitch nodded. “Thanks.”

“I got a lot of shit you can have, actually. You can clean out my basement. It’d be a fuckin’ blessing. Helen’d write you into her will if you’d do it. She’d write me into her will if *I’d* do it.”

Mitch’s mind was assimilating Karoulis’s offers, while at the same time derailing casually and often through the various domestic corridors that had been cast open between the two men. “When did you marry Helen?” he asked. Somehow, this interested him more than the acquisition of furniture. Even as he asked it, though, he knew that it betrayed some fundamental social lapse, some revealing shift of priorities. I need a table and chairs, he thought suddenly.

Karoulis put his hands in his pockets and frowned up through the skylight. “We’ve been married ten years,” he said.

“And your daughter?” Mitch persisted.

“Maria.”

“Maria. You’ve mentioned her, but I’ve forgotten.”

“She’s twenty-five years old. Doing graduate work at McGill. Studying geography.”

“So she was eleven when you were divorced.”

Karoulis could see what Mitch was thinking. “How old is Barbie?”

Nine, thought Mitch. She’s nine years old.

But he couldn’t say it out loud.



“Your shoulder,” Karoulis asked finally to break the silence. “What happened?”

“It was personal.”

“Personal, my ass.”

“I was doing a little community work with some local teens. I felt that they needed a strong...,” he hesitated, “...father-figure. They disagreed.” He paused. “We worked it out. It’s all square now.”

“You should see a doctor. Get some stitches.”

Mitch looked at his shoulder. It was true. He should see a doctor.

“What the hell am I going to do with you, Helwig?”

Mitch shook his head. “What happened to you, Captain?”

Karoulis produced another cigarette. He got it going before he began. Then he told Mitch Helwig about the zapper, about the Semtex, and about Evans and Lim, while the storm clouds of understanding rolled into Mitch’s brain. In a flash of sheet lightning, Mitch glimpsed

the larger picture, saw outside the shattered confines of the office being described.

“They wanted me,” Mitch said.

Karoulis stared at him, then nodded.

“And,” he added, “they wanted you too.”

Karoulis blew a cloud of smoke fiercely through the skylight. “No question,” he said. “We were to be terminated together.”

Mitch went cold.

“You expected otherwise?”

Mitch shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I do. These aren’t teenagers, and this isn’t community work. This is for all the marbles. This is for keeps.”

“For keeps,” Mitch mumbled. “Everything’s for fucking keeps.” He walked to the front dormer and looked down at the street below. Two boys were playing road hockey. “Evans and Lim.” He felt empty inside. “You spoken to their families?”

“No,” he said. His voice had a tinge of shame in it. “I’m sort of AWOL right now.”

Mitch closed his eyes. But the sounds of the sticks on the asphalt and the shouts from below only got louder.

# 7

**HUZIAK** sat in his car outside Mike Evans’s home. Because he had phoned ahead, he knew that Donna Evans was inside with the two kids.

Good old Huziak. Give him the shit work.

He felt angry. He felt angry at Galecki, angry at the cretin who had placed the bomb, angry at himself for always letting himself get pushed into these things. And he wasn’t feeling too kindly towards Helwig or Karoulis either just now. In fact, everyone and everything pissed him off immensely as he sat there simmering.

Evans and Lim were dead. Evans was a guy everybody liked—a good guy, willing to be the butt of the joke. He was twenty-seven years old, a kid from Scarborough who had grown up in the suburbs, a pretty straight shooter. Eddie Lim was thirty-one years old. He had grown up on Gerrard Street, in the Chinese community. He and his wife had a little girl eighteen months old. Huziak had met Lim’s father, a man who had done well and worked hard to make the restaurant he owned prosper,

and who, when he had met him, was clearly proud of Eddie's acceptance onto the force.

Huziak also remembered the chat he had had with Eddie Lim about a month ago. Ironic now, he thought. Over coffee, they had read an article in the *Sun* about the Blue Limbo machine.

"No way," Eddie had said. "No fuckin' way they'd put me in that thing."

"It depends," Huziak had said.

"On what? What could it depend on?"

Huziak hadn't been able to articulate it. "Just depends."

"On what?" He remembered Eddie grinning. Pearly white teeth. Eyes smiling too.

"Stuff," Huziak had said. "Lots of stuff." He tried to imagine the vast sea of blue nothingness, the zone where you might make amends. He had thought of things he might tell Norma.

"No fuckin' way," Eddie had said, life brimming from him like a wave. Smiling that smile.

Well, Huziak thought, his hands still resting lightly on the bottom of the steering wheel in front of him, don't worry, Eddie. You've been spared.

And then Donna Evans came out of the house and stood on the front porch, waiting for him, clearly distressed.

*Good old Huziak.*

Fuck you, Galecki. Fuck you good for this.

He stepped out of the car.

Donna Evans was wringing her hands.

## 8

MITCH Helwig had read about black holes in space. A massive star evolves, exhausts its nuclear fuel, then explodes as a supernova. If the star is massive enough, the core will collapse, forming the profound and awesome place where there is nothing.

Mitch felt like he had been there.

After Karoulis had left, his glance fell upon the phone sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, and his memory pulled something else into that great emptiness.

*The phone. The tape recorder.*