

To Sleep Gently

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This one is for Mike and Serge,
who can still find it in their hearts
to put up with me.

A man is not old until regrets take the place of dreams.

—John Barrymore

And the darkness of our bedroom is soon
Full of the fallen shadows of our failures.

—William H. Gass

Sleep,
Those little slices of Death
How I loathe them.

—Edgar Allen Poe

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Chapter One

"Spare some change?"

Whirlwinds of common everyday activity now uncommon, difficult to comprehend, and swirling about his every side like dreams one can't awaken from. Surrealism painted in realism or the other way around or some such thing.

The world was still going. Just like clockwork. It hadn't stopped five years ago, as he'd wondered at times. Almost as he'd hoped. It just moved along, not giving a moment's thought to whether he was in it or not. The world at large didn't care and it especially didn't give a rat's ass about someone like him.

"Spare some change?"

Dempster regarded the shaggy bum, pants in ragged threads, shoes like opened cans and a coat with the collar

torn and buttons missing. He smelled like raw fish and raw sewage, and the look in his eyes annoyed Dempster, who reached into his pocket, fumbled around for a few seconds, came out with nothing, and placed the emptiness into the man's grimy hand. As he walked away, he heard the bum call him something that sounded like French but wasn't.

Hell with him. Dempster tuned out the fading vulgarities.

A minute later, at the other end of the block, a recent Lincoln Town Car, black and clean and shiny, with heavily tinted windows and a man emerging from the driver's side, caught Dempster's attention. The man, dressed nice and wearing sunglasses, waved at him.

Dempster did not wave back. He was still too far away to recognize whoever it was, and still overwhelmed by everything around him. The hustle and bustle of the outside world still had him entranced. Even a little disoriented.

When the man found that he wasn't acknowledged, he removed his sunglasses, walked around the car, and met Dempster on the sidewalk with an extended hand.

Dempster studied the hand but didn't take it. He looked into the man's familiar eyes as he searched his memory, trying to place him.

"I've been looking all over for you," the man said. His

voice was light-hearted, as friendly as his wave had been. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to meet you, but you know how it goes. You plan on doing one thing, and ten other things get in the way to make sure it doesn't happen."

"No one was supposed to meet me," Dempster said. "Who the hell are you?"

"Don't you remember me?"

Dempster didn't answer, just held a level stare on him.

The man laughed, but unlike when he spoke, it wasn't genuine. It was guarded, covering something beneath it. "You haven't changed much since I last saw you," he said, and took a step back and the smile dimmed. "Throw some more hair on this face," he said. Then he made what Dempster realized was the man's signature double clack of the tongue.

It all came back then, like watching a movie one used to have memorized but hasn't seen in years. "Aw, hell," he said with a growing smile, "Charlie Powers." This time it was Dempster who initiated the handshake. "It's been over five damn years since I saw your sorry ass. How the hell are you?"

"Terrific. I'm doing just fine."

"You shaved your beard."

"My wife didn't like it."

"And I guess you got married."

"Yeah, to a woman named Willow. We met at a mutual

friend's party, but she was involved with some guy. Told me that night she was pretty sure he was about to get rid of her. Two weeks later I ran into her at a drugstore and it turned out he had. The rest is history."

"Congratulations."

"A year and a half late, but thanks." Charlie looked around the busy sidewalk, then gestured to the car. "Come on," he said. "This is no place to catch up. Hop in. I wanna talk to you. Freddy wants to talk to you, too."

"What about?"

"We'll chat in the car. Don't you have a bag or a suitcase or anything?"

"I was traveling light when they picked me up," Dempster said. "And the warden hasn't even started building the shopping center he promised us."

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Charlie pulled the Lincoln into a long brick driveway. The architectural design of Freddy Skeele's new place—7200 square feet of luxury situated on just over five acres—was hard to pinpoint. Postmodern for sure, but it also rang

subtly of Mission Revival. The overhanging eaves and exposed rafters almost seemed out of place but weren't. They somehow managed to fit perfectly. It was the lake and the ducks bobbing about in it that grabbed Dempster's full attention.

"That's right," Charlie said as he switched off the engine. "The guy even has ducks now."

"Looks like he's been doing pretty well for himself."

"Freddy's always done well for himself," Charlie said. "Now he's just doing better."

They walked up the pathway. Dempster took the opportunity to take in the beauty of the land around him. It was nice to know that trees still grew, water still ran, and ducks hadn't been a figment of his imagination.

"Some say a duck's quack doesn't echo," Dempster said.

"What's that?"

"A duck's quack doesn't have much high frequency, and high frequencies bounce better."

"I'll trust you on that," Charlie said.

The front door opened before they reached it. A tall, portly, good-looking man with gray at the sides of his head beamed a warm smile and opened his arms.

"Jack Dempster, goddamn it's good to see you."

"Hey, Freddy. How are you?"

"Come in, come in." He moved to the side, and when

Dempster entered, Freddy put his arm around his shoulders.

"You look good. I mean that, you really look great. Prison obviously wasn't entirely bad to you."

"It wasn't anything other than dull," Dempster said.

"Well, welcome back, my friend."

"Thanks." A swift head gesture to the room. "Nice place."

"Bought it not long after Charlie's wedding. Hired someone to do some renovations. Took them longer than I would have liked, but they did a nice job. Finished just a little over a month ago."

"That how the Mission Revival stuff came in?"

"Get out." Freddy Skeele beamed again. "I didn't know you knew architecture."

"Not a lot," Dempster said, "but I had five years to read about things."

"I'm glad you took advantage of the time to educate yourself."

"Not much choice. There wasn't anything else to do. I don't go for basketball, and most of the other inmates were assholes, so I pretty much kept to myself. Thanks for those paperbacks, by the way."

"My pleasure. Least I could do. Glad you read them. Hope you enjoyed them."

"I did."

"Good. Well, let's settle down. Take a load off. I bet you could use a drink."

He led Dempster down an impressive corridor to a large living room with natural cherry floors, walls of windows overlooking the lake, and two skylights. Beneath one skylight was a full bar, where Charlie was already fixing drinks.

"What would you like?"

"How about some bourbon."

"You got it."

Freddy offered him a seat. The chairs were high class too, as was the cherry coffee table in front of him, which Charlie set Dempster's bourbon on.

From times long past he knew that Freddy only bought the good stuff. He sat and contemplated the booze for a good long while before picking it up. Half a decade had gone by since he'd last had a real drink, and he felt something very important about the moment. Freddy and Charlie sat quietly, patient, giving him the peace and time he needed for whatever ritual it was he was doing in his head.

Dempster raised the glass and took a sip. It burned his throat, slashed down through his innards like fire. Damn but it was good. Instantly his body relaxed. He felt calmer. A wonderful experience. One he'd waited five years too long

for.

Drawing the glass from his lips, he looked at it and smiled, then took a larger sip, and looked at Freddy. "So how'd you know I was getting out today?"

"Demp, I might sometimes be out of touch, but I don't forget about friends. You think I had no concern for your well being?"

"I never said anything of the sort."

"I pay attention to what's important. A buddy of mine is being released, you better believe I got that marked on my calendar."

Dempster took another sip. He eased back in his chair, nodded to acknowledge what Freddy had said, then gestured with his glass to Charlie. "Charlie tells me you might be interested in hiring me for a job."

Freddy nodded. "You have anything lined up yet?"

"Not a damn thing. But to be perfectly honest, I've been torn for some time now if I really wanna get back into the same line of work I was in before."

"Oh?"

"Maybe it's because I'd finally blundered and gotten picked up, I dunno. But it occurs to me sometimes that maybe I should do something like go back to school, get myself a degree and get a normal, less erratic job. Maybe blundering

was an unconscious way of telling myself to get out of this stuff."

"Come on, Demp, you're one of the best there is. How seriously do you think about this?"

"Eh, here and there. I'd first have to get my high school equivalency, and for whatever reason the thought of that makes me sick."

"How old are you now?" Freddy asked.

Dempster sneered in jest. "You know it's not polite to ask people that."

"Come on, what, thirty-four, thirty-five?"

"Sure, somewhere in there will be fine."

"And you didn't finish high school and you've never held a legitimate job in your life."

"I think you might be overrating the everyday workforce, Freddy."

"And now," Freddy went on, ignoring him, "in addition, you're also an ex-con. Five years for armed robbery. A felony."

Dempster drew another sip from his glass, then another and drained it. He turned the glass upside down to prove to himself that it was truly empty, then asked, "Mind if I fix myself another?"

"Help yourself."

"Thanks." He got up from his seat. "And while I do," he said, "why don't you tell me about this job you have in mind."

"Sure," Freddy said. "You ever been to Santa Fe?"

"New Mexico?" He filled the glass practically to the top. "Can't say that I have. A friend of mine lives there, though. Haven't seen him in years."

"It's a lovely city. Not a big city, but a lovely one. I'd like you to go there."

"What's the deal?" He returned to his chair.

"About six months ago," Freddy said, "I was there on vacation. Remember Paul Obledo? Short guy with the thick glasses? Used to do a lot of driving for me? Well, he'd spent a good amount of time there, used to go there nearly every summer, gave me tips on where to go and what to do."

"You have a good time?"

"It was nice, yes. Like I said, a lovely city." He paused and contemplated his drink, then looked at Charlie, who was sitting quietly watching the ducks outside. He looked back at Dempster and went on. "We stayed at a hotel right down in the historic area. The Eldorado, just off the Plaza. Beautiful place. Pueblo Revival architecture, which you might appreciate, and an extensive collection of New Mexican art. Great Southwestern style. But I have to say that a little pizzazz was missing. The service was professional, but lacked

a certain something a top class hotel should have. We had a room right over their bandstand. One night a band played extremely loud until about two a.m. and it was impossible to sleep." He paused again, chuckled to himself, then said, "Anyway, the Eldorado is of an incredible class. Everyone from the biggest names in business to the biggest names in Hollywood stay there. Top notch, and within its guts is, shall we say, an abundance of wealth."

"I think I know where you're going with this," Dempster told him.

"I imagine you do. We've already got a guy on the inside. Man by the name of Gardner. Doug Gardner. Been there a long time and knows all the ins and outs. Knows the vault, keeps track of the safe deposit boxes. The figures fluctuate, but not as much as you might think. During the summer it's usually higher." Here he leveled his gaze at Dempster. "It's summer now."

Dempster leveled his gaze right back at the man. "I know."

That night Dempster slept in one of Freddy Skeelee's guestrooms. Though he was tired as could be, and the bourbon he'd had encouraged him even further down that dark tunnel of sleep, he found his eyes roaming through the darkness, observing the various shadows and shapes around him. A black square on the wall that he knew was a painting of Mosquito Creek Lake. The desk on his right, now just a dark crooked box. A tall bookshelf on his left, a series of potted plants on top of it like hair, which turned the entire form into one giant face. A lamp on a reading table, the only thing in the room directly catching moonlight. All of these things swimming around in not a large room, but considerably bigger than what he was used to. All of it circled, closed in on him, pressed against him until he shook his head and set things right.

It was odd to think that for the past five years, even just yesterday—hell, earlier today—he had been locked up in a cold, dingy, claustrophobic cell, trying to pass the time by reading paperbacks and wishing on falling stars he couldn't see. And while he was doing this, trying to keep his sanity, Charlie was getting married, Freddy was building himself a new house right here in Ohio that included Mission Revival architecture as well as a lake with ducks.

The world had kept on moving, just like clockwork, and it

was going to continue to do so, whether he wanted it to or not—whether he was in it or not.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture Santa Fe, but all he came up with was an image of endless desert. Dirt, weeds, mud, and sun like in those old western films, and every once in a while there was a small line of adobe huts, maybe a mule or a coyote trotting about, or someone looking weathered and wearing a pancho.

Bullshit, he thought. It isn't a hundred years ago and you're not Clint Eastwood, Gary Cooper or Gregory Peck. You're a convicted felon in the 21st century, just released after a five-year stretch, not even out an entire day and already agreed to a job that could send you right back for God knows how long...

No, strike that; God probably doesn't even know.

Based on Freddy's description, he tried picturing the Eldorado hotel. Try as he may, he couldn't conjure a thing. Only swirling blackness behind his eyes.

Get some sleep, he told himself, and rolled over. You'll have plenty of time to think about all this tomorrow.

But do I wanna think about all this? Do I really wanna get involved? Do I even know how to do this kind of shit anymore? Am I really gonna just jump right in after all this time, like nothing ever happened? Like the last job I did was

yesterday? Hell, I don't even know any of the people I'll be working with. Could be a bunch of psychopaths. Like what about this Gardner guy? Never pulled any kind of job before in his life. Suddenly Freddy suckers him in and he's willing to throw away his entire career and risk facing jail time. For what? What kind of percentage is he gonna get? Probably more than he makes in a year, sure, maybe a lot more, I dunno—but this isn't like skimping a little off the top, clipping a buck here and there. This is a serious high-risk business. Guy must be part shit-for-brains to wanna get involved with something like this.

Come off it, man. Gardner won't be a problem, you know he won't be a problem, not if Freddy says he's on the level. Freddy's a good man. You've never had any issues with him, he's never done you wrong and you've been friends a long time, now drop it and get some sleep, turn off your mind and think about something else, because you'll be hell tomorrow if you don't, and you've got a long drive ahead of you. You're driving all the way to Santa Fe, New Mexico. So think about something else, just like you've done for the past five years. Think of something that will help you get to sleep.

Okay, let's think about all the paperbacks you read while you were locked up. Let's see. How about Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*? Brilliant, discusses the drama of

bullfighting and its rigorous combination of athleticism and artistry and takes on a sort of metaphysical aspect. Okay, *House Made of Dawn*? N. Scott Momaday? Brilliant use of traditions from both Kiowa and Jemez cultures; the passages are written with loving care and expert style. Okay, all right, and what about *Gold Coast* by Elmore Leonard? Not quite sure about that one. Also not sure why Freddy is sending me in on a job like this with a bunch of guys I've never even heard of. Damn, he even mentioned they were young and fairly new to the game. Probably barely out of the rookie stage, if barely out of high school, not that I'd know anything about that. But that's why he needs me. Yes, that's why he needs me. He needs someone in there who knows what he's doing, right? To make sure everything goes smoothly?

Oh, for fuck all's sake, man, go to sleep.