

PROLOGUE · · ·

“So, there’s this guy who’s hunting my daughter,” McVie said, “and I don’t know what to do about it.” He looked around the therapy group, his square face imploring, his eyes narrow and perplexed. Larry Klinger dropped his gaze to the floor and crossed his arms over his bulging gut. All he truly knew about McVie so far was that the man had lost a daughter to leukemia sometime earlier, some three or four years previously, if Klinger was recalling the sequence correctly, and that he had another girl who was younger than the daughter he was talking about now, the third girl in high school, Klinger thought, while the older surviving daughter was a young adult, 24 years old or something like that. The daughter who had died was the middle child. Klinger tried to recall the correct ages as men shifted in their seats, cleared phlegm, moved their heads as if their necks were stiff, and in other ways avoided responding, avoided eye contact, just as Klinger had. Not an atypical response from a group of men, Klinger thought, even a therapy group.

Despite his own mild confusion about the ages of McVie’s surviving children, Klinger nonetheless felt he knew the man, felt the closeness of the group not only with McVie but with all five of the men, six if he included the group leader, Nelson. They shared the knowledge that they had suffered the worst emotional blow anyone can endure and that none of them would ever entirely heal from it. Klinger glanced at

the faces of the group members as they homed in on the implications of McVie's announcement. Despite the great differences in their appearances, from the sheer mass of the sole Black man, Armstrong, to the annoying smirk of Stanczak's shaved head, and personal histories coded into the lines around their mouths and eyes, each face revealed the weight of a long burden of lonely sorrow. McVie was unique among the "patients" in that he remained married to the mother of the dead child. All of the other fathers of dead children were divorced. Klinger continued to study the floor through the overlong silence that followed McVie's plaint. Klinger had a good idea of what was coming, and he found himself dreading the specifics.

"What do you mean by 'hunting'?" one of the other men, Carson, asked at last. To Klinger's eye, Carson and McVie were fairly close. They often arrived and left the group meetings together, one of those pairs of friends who actually carried themselves in the same way and wore similar clothing, seeming to differ mainly in the length and style of their haircuts and color of their eyes. Even their winter parkas were the same brand though different colors. But clearly McVie's announcement was news to his friend. From the tone of Carson's voice, Klinger concluded that the middle-aged man was sincere—Carson couldn't tell if McVie was being dramatic, or if he had it wrong somehow, or if he had misspoken in some way. Klinger flattened his thin hair with his meaty right palm and exhaled slowly through his nose, waiting.

"I mean a guy she dated a while ago is hunting her," McVie answered.

There it is, Klinger thought.

Carson sat up, straightening himself in his chair. "What does that mean?"

McVie shrugged miserably.

"Seriously," Carson continued. "What does that mean?"

Nelson intervened. "It can mean that this guy is a stalker who thinks he has a right to Dan's daughter. It can mean the guy might try to harm her." The group leader nodded but tried to smile reassuringly. "Or he wants to. Or something like that."

There's the heart of it, Klinger thought. He suddenly felt even older and more tired than was always the case these days. *That's the bitch.*

McVie looked around at the sympathetic faces. Men nodded and scowled. Klinger kept his eyes on the linoleum floor of the Chicago Park District building's basement meeting room, his thick chin resting on his thicker neck, moving only his eyes to watch the other men, using his peripheral vision. In his years on the police force Klinger had never handled the front end of this kind of case, but he had been forced to deal with the back end a few times when he was part of the homicide division. He tried to think of a good scenario but came up with nothing.

"I mean, what do I do about a guy who won't take 'no' for an answer?" McVie asked.

Carson shrugged. Armstrong said, "I dunno," muttering and shaking his head. The big man lifted a hand to stop anyone else from responding and impressed Klinger by saying simply, "Tell us what's going on."

McVie shook his head in confusion and spread his hands. "I ain't sure how to say it," he began. "Seems so odd. But it's here."

All of the men leaned forward in their folding chairs. Even Nelson seemed completely focused, listening intently and doing nothing to divert the discussion back to the usual group topics. Klinger watched the counselor's face to see if they had already come to the same conclusion.

"There's this guy. Marco's his name. Marco Bala. He went out with my girl a few times, or for a couple of months, what-

ever, maybe longer, I really don't know the details, but Andrea says he started to give off a vibe she didn't like. I don't know exactly what she's talking about, but for whatever reason, she says she broke it off with this dude. I never really met the guy. Just saw him one time, and that wasn't all that long ago."

"Who is he?" Carson asked.

"Just some guy Andrea went out with, I guess. Like I say, she broke it off with him."

"Where'd he come from?" Armstrong asked.

"Beats me," McVie answered with a shrug. He paused to think about it. "I don't think it was at work. Probably some dating site, you know? That's how they meet these days. I don't think they went out for more than a few months or so," he repeated. "Definitely didn't get heavy enough for her to bring him home to mama, if you know what I mean. But then she put an end to it, and it's only since then that I've heard the guy's name a lot. It's like suddenly he's a much bigger deal than when they were dating. I mighta heard about him three or four times while they were going out, and now, like for the last few weeks, we're hearing about him, like, daily."

Almost in unison Klinger and Nelson sat up a little straighter, not a dramatic response, just an involuntary manifestation of confirmed expectations, greater attentiveness, a slight forward tilt of their torsos. Each acknowledged the other's reaction with a glance. Klinger spoke first.

"What do you mean? Every day? More than once a day? What?"

"Well," McVie shrugged again, his sloping shoulders rising almost perpendicular to his thin neck, "I don't know how often she hears from him, but I hear about it at least four, maybe five times a week. Prob'ly every day, actually. Or my wife hears about him every day."

"What does he do?" Nelson asked.

"I think he's a tech guy of some kind," McVie said, drawing a laugh from Evans. "Oh," McVie muttered, glancing to the side to frown at Evans. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Klinger answered for Nelson, "He means, does he call, email, text? Is he waiting outside her place or where she works? What do you mean when you call it 'hunting'?"

"I think he's doing all of the above," McVie answered.

Klinger bit the inside of his cheek, cursing himself for injecting a question. Nelson took up the slack. "That sounds like stalking, Tim," he said. "Is he threatening?"

McVie tried again to touch his ears with his shoulders. "Andrea hasn't said. But the fact that I hear about him so much makes me think she's feeling nervous, if you know what I mean."

"How long has this been going on? The stalking, I mean," Nelson asked.

"From what I can tell, it started a few weeks after she broke up with the guy for good, like August or September or whatever. But I guess it has gotten worse."

Armstrong offered a suggestion. "Can't you just talk with him, explain that this isn't going to work or something?"

"Or offer to break his legs for him?" Stanczak threw in. He grinned, glancing from side to side, his shaved head tan from a brief but sun-soaked Columbus Day trip to Puerto Rico.

Nelson leaned back into his chair with a frown, but when he failed to answer immediately the other men looked toward Klinger, as if a retired police officer might have an answer in this sort of situation.

"What?" he asked. "You can't expect me to endorse *that*, no matter how satisfying it might be. 'Sides, that prolly wouldn't work, you follow?" When Armstrong and Carson looked dubious, Klinger went on, "Reasoning and threatening don't work with stalkers. That's, like, the worst thing to do. 'Specially threatening. Least, far as I understand it." He glanced

at Nelson and continued when the counselor nodded in agreement. “See, here’s what you’re dealing with,” Klinger explained, setting his Styrofoam coffee cup on the floor. “You think this Marco dude is just another kind of obsessed guy, maybe an angry guy, who has the idea that your daughter—Andrea, right?” He glanced at McVie to confirm the man’s nod before he continued, “You think he figures Andrea’ll see the light if he maybe just don’t go away. She’ll know he truly loves her or something like that, right? But that ain’t what’s happening. He’s not trying to win her over—he already figures she *owes* him something or other, like he has a right because he’s a man and she’s a woman, and they went out for a while, and that’s the end of the story. And take it from me, that’s true of a lotta guys. Maybe not like this Marco, maybe not scary like this seems to be, but it ain’t like he’s completely unusual. Least, not in my experience.”

Armstrong snorted. “Come on, man. Not every guy thinks it’s all his call.”

“Of course not,” Nelson said. “It’s not even a large minority.”

“But it’s still plenty of guys,” Klinger grunted.

“True,” Nelson agreed. “And Larry’s right about what to do. Your daughter should completely break off contact with the guy.”

“I think she already told him it’s over,” McVie replied.

“And the guy kept coming back?” Stanczak asked.

“I guess.”

“Happy fucking Halloween,” Carson muttered.

“What the hell kind of a name is ‘Bala’ anyway?” Evans asked, drawing a smile from Klinger—it was such a Chicago question.

Stanczak answered, “Polish. Like me. He’s a Polack.”

“Named Marco?” Evans persisted.

“Maybe his mother’s Italian or something,” Stanczak snapped. “What the hell difference does it make?”

Evans shrugged.

“What makes you afraid of him?” Nelson wondered. He adjusted his glasses on his nose and leaned forward.

“I can’t put a finger on it,” McVie said after a pause. “I never had a conversation with the guy. It’s hard to say. I guess it’s just that Andrea seems nervous, like he frightens her somehow. Something about the guy. I don’t know. I haven’t seen him or talked to him, except one time about a month ago, so who the hell knows?”

Klinger returned his attention to the floor as Stanczak, Armstrong, and Carson shot ideas back and forth, and Nelson tried to ride herd on the questions and speculative answers. Voices rose, and McVie started to sound defensive, like his daughter was under attack by the other men, like they were suggesting she had done something wrong, had been loose with sex with a psycho or something. *There’s the bitch of it*, Klinger thought again.

1.

The process that would eventually lead Larry Klinger to concern himself with Marco Bala and Andrea McVie began as he stood on the shore of Lake Michigan at sunrise in the early spring, shivering on the concrete spit that jugged out into the water at the south end of North Avenue Beach as the dawn sunlight slid down the Gold Coast condominium buildings across from the Concrete Beach next to Lake Shore Drive. The breeze gliding across the surface of the lake was still cold, even late in April, and for some reason he was particularly aware of the distinctive fishy odor of the huge lake's water. He pulled his jacket a little higher on his shoulders and hugged himself, shivering slightly in the early glow. To his back small whitecaps curled into the sandy beach, but the water inside the breakwater was smooth. Klinger kept his face turned away from the glare of the sunrise on the lake because the flash of the low light was painfully intensified by the tears in his eyes.

"Okay," he whispered into the cool air. "I've gotta figure this out."

He adjusted his bulk so he faced west and wiped his cheeks with the back of his right hand. He slapped his round gut through the taut fabric of his jacket and marched away from the splash of the waves, briefly pretending to be in basic training, back in 1963, forty-seven years and perhaps ninety pounds ago. He followed the beach walk past the kayak and

paddle board rentals and the pavilion shaped like a ship that had always amused him, on past the expanse of sand to the pedestrian bridge over Lake Shore Drive. Each step, it seemed, reminded him that he had never shown any of these interesting things to his son, because Mattie had not lived long enough to see them. Everything lately gave him that same mournful sense, but it felt particularly acute whenever he noticed Chicago landmarks that had been part of his life forever.

He paused on the bridge to study the rushing river of cars. At dawn there were plenty of vehicles passing beneath his feet, but they were moving fast. It would be another hour before traffic slowed with volume, the stream choking as if a hydrant were steadily closing down. From the north the cars swept beneath him in an almost balletic flow, some exiting to LaSalle, others jockeying westward to slide onto Michigan Avenue, many accelerating toward the curve past The Drake and out around Streeterville. The sound was oddly like the waves on the lake, the even noise of tires on the pavement interrupted by the metallic groan of a heavy engine in a bus or garbage truck, the hiss of displaced air like wind across Oak Street Beach. Glancing at the sand in the distance past the Concrete Beach, Klinger had a brief flash of memory, teen-aged fantasies before he joined the Army, sitting in summer heat and amazed by the svelte sophisticated career-oriented women in their twenties wearing swimsuits that were daring for the early 1960s as the sun moved behind the buildings on the inland side of the Drive. The thoughts retreated before an onslaught of job-related memories.

Klinger shook his head. Even out here, above the commuters, buses and cabs, when he glanced around, back at the North Avenue beach, down toward the ball fields at the south end of Lincoln Park, in the direction of the Benjamin Franklin and Lincoln monuments on opposite sides of the seven

lanes of LaSalle, what he saw first, instead of the beauty of Chicago and the sheer wonder that people with money and power had once upon a time reserved so much of the lake-front land for public parks, was a series of crime scenes he had investigated back when he was still on the force—all those years of corpses, all of those stupid killings. He descended the west side of the bridge and turned alongside the softball fields toward the pedestrian underpass beneath LaSalle. He had measured an area near the northern end of the underpass three times to be sure of the dimensions around the body of a stabbing victim, he recalled, thirty-two years earlier. The bloody corpse was a better thing to think about than Mattie.

Yet thoughts of his dead son were impossible to avoid, even in the mid-Spring chill. He glanced at a grassy area beneath the trees to his right as he emerged from the underpass and was suddenly reminded of a May morning in 1971, when Mattie was five, when a field with a different shape in essentially the same location had been an arresting panorama of blue violets and short yellow dandelions. The boy had collected dandelion blooms one at a time for his mother. Klinger almost cried again.

He had a healthy distance to walk still, and he trudged purposefully past the Fountain Girl statue at the Willard Fountain and along the bike path to the History Museum and the Children's Fountain, enjoying the early-morning quiet beneath the trees. He was distracted from fresh sorrow about the sights his lost son had never known by a very small homeless camp, sufficient for no more than two, nestled in a slight hollow just east of the flower beds that led to the Lincoln monument. A pale blue plastic tarp was anchored on one end by a shopping cart that held a jumble of plastic bags, some clear, some white, and some black, humped together like a pile of rotting grapes. The tarp covered a shape or shapes that could have been one or two people. Klinger's lips pursed.