

PART ONE

5 A.M.

The Jupiter C missile stands on the launch pad at Complex 26, Cape Canaveral. For secrecy, it is draped in vast canvas shrouds that hide everything but its tail, which is that of the Army's familiar Redstone rocket. But the rest of it, under the concealing cloak, is quite unique . . .

He woke up scared.

Worse than that: he was terrified. His heart was pounding, his breath came in gasps, and his body was taut. It was like a nightmare, except that waking brought no sense of relief. He felt that something dreadful had happened, but he did not know what it was.

He opened his eyes. A faint light from another room dimly illuminated his surroundings, and he made out vague shapes, familiar but sinister. Somewhere nearby, water ran in a cistern.

He tried to make himself calm. He swallowed, took regular breaths, and attempted to think straight. He was lying on a hard floor. He was cold, he hurt everywhere, and he had some kind of hangover, with a headache and a dry mouth and a feeling of nausea.

He sat upright, shaking with fear. There was an

unpleasant smell of damp floors washed with strong disinfectant. He recognized the outline of a row of washbasins.

He was in a public toilet.

He felt disgusted. He had been sleeping on the floor of a men's room. What the hell had happened to him? He concentrated. He was fully dressed, wearing some kind of topcoat and heavy boots, though he had a feeling that these were not his clothes. His panic was subsiding, but in its place came a deeper fear, less hysterical but more rational. What had happened to him was very bad.

He needed light.

He got to his feet. He looked around, peering into the gloom, and guessed where the door might be. Holding his arms out in front of him in case of invisible obstacles, he made his way to a wall. Then he walked crabwise, his hands exploring. He found a cold glassy surface he guessed was a mirror, then there was a towel roller, then a metal box that might be a slot machine. At last his fingertips touched a switch, and he turned it on.

Bright light flooded white-tiled walls, a concrete floor, and a line of toilets with open doors. In a corner was what looked like a bundle of old clothes. He asked himself how he got here. He concentrated hard. What had happened last night? He could not remember.

The hysterical fear began to return as he realized *he could not remember anything at all.*

He clenched his teeth to stop himself crying out.

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Yesterday . . . the day before . . . nothing. What was his name? He did not know.

He turned toward the row of basins. Above them was a long mirror. In the glass he saw a filthy hobo, dressed in rags, with matted hair, a dirty face, and a crazy, pop-eyed stare. He looked at the hobo for a second, then he was hit by a terrible revelation. He started back, with a cry of shock, and the man in the mirror did the same. The hobo was himself.

He could no longer hold back the tide of panic. He opened his mouth and, in a voice that shook with terror, he shouted: 'Who am I?'

* * *

The bundle of old clothes moved. It rolled over, a face appeared, and a voice mumbled: 'You're a bum, Luke, pipe down.'

His name was Luke.

He was pathetically grateful for the knowledge. A name was not much, but it gave him a focus. He stared at his companion. The man wore a ripped tweed coat with a length of string around the waist for a belt. The grimy young face had a crafty look. The man rubbed his eyes and muttered: 'My head hurts.'

Luke said: 'Who are you?'

'I'm Pete, you retard, can't you see?'

'I can't—' Luke swallowed, holding down the panic. 'I've lost my memory!'

'I ain't surprised. You drank most of a bottle of liquor yesterday. It's a miracle you didn't lose your

entire mind.' Pete licked his lips. 'I didn't get hardly any of that goddamn bourbon.'

Bourbon would explain the hangover, Luke thought. 'But why would I drink a whole bottle?'

Pete laughed mockingly. 'That's about the dumbest question I ever heard. To get drunk, of course!'

Luke was appalled. He was a drunken bum who slept in public toilets.

He had a raging thirst. He bent over a washbasin, ran the cold water, and drank from the tap. It made him feel better. He wiped his mouth, then forced himself to look in the mirror again.

The face was calmer now. The mad stare had gone, replaced by a look of bewilderment and dismay. The reflection showed a man in his late thirties, with dark hair and blue eyes. He had no beard or moustache, just a heavy growth of dark stubble.

He turned back to his companion. 'Luke what?' he said. 'What's my last name?'

'Luke . . . something, how the hell am I supposed to know?'

'How did I get this way? How long has it been going on? Why did it happen?'

Pete got to his feet. 'I need some breakfast,' he said.

Luke realized he was hungry. He wondered if he had any money. He searched the pockets of his clothes: the raincoat, the jacket, the pants. All were empty. He had no money, no wallet, not even a handkerchief. No assets, no clues. 'I think I'm broke,' he said.

'No kidding,' Pete said sarcastically. 'Come on.' He stumbled through a doorway.

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Luke followed.

When he emerged into the light, he suffered another shock. He was in a huge temple, empty and eerily silent. Mahogany benches stood in rows on the marble floor, like church pews waiting for a ghostly congregation. Around the vast room, on a high stone lintel atop rows of pillars, surreal stone warriors with helmets and shields stood guard over the holy place. Far above their heads was a vaulted ceiling richly decorated with gilded octagons. The insane thought crossed Luke's mind that he had been the sacrificial victim in a weird rite that had left him with no memory.

Awestruck, he said: 'What is this place?'

'Union Station, Washington, DC,' said Pete.

A relay closed in Luke's mind, and the whole thing made sense. With relief he saw the grime on the walls, the chewing gum trodden into the marble floor, and the candy wrappers and cigarette packs in the corners, and he felt foolish. He was in a grandiose train station, early in the morning before it filled up with passengers. He had scared himself, like a child imagining monsters in a darkened bedroom.

Pete headed for a triumphal arch marked 'Exit', and Luke hurried after him.

An aggressive voice called: 'Hey! Hey, you!'

Pete said: 'Oh-oh.' He quickened his step.

A stout man in a tight-fitting railroad uniform bore down on them, full of righteous indignation. 'Where did you bums spring from?'

Pete whined: 'We're leaving, we're leaving.'

Luke was humiliated to be chased out of a train station by a fat official.

The man was not content just to get rid of them. 'You been sleeping here, ain't you?' he protested, following hard on their heels. 'You know that ain't allowed.'

It angered Luke to be lectured like a schoolboy, even though he guessed he deserved it. He *had* slept in the damn toilet. He suppressed a retort and walked faster.

'This ain't a flophouse,' the man went on. 'Damn bums, now scram!' He shoved Luke's shoulder.

Luke turned suddenly and confronted the man. 'Don't touch me,' he said. He was surprised by the quiet menace in his own voice. The official stopped short. 'We're leaving, so you don't need to do or say anything more, is that clear?'

The man took a big step backward, looking scared.

Pete took Luke's arm. 'Let's go.'

Luke felt ashamed. The guy was an officious twerp, but Luke and Pete were vagrants, and a railroad employee had the right to throw them out. Luke had no business intimidating him.

They passed through the majestic archway. It was dark outside. A few cars were parked around the traffic circle in front of the station, but the streets were quiet. The air was bitterly cold, and Luke drew his ragged clothes closer about him. It was winter, a frosty morning in Washington, maybe January or February.

He wondered what year it was.

Pete turned left, apparently sure where he was

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going. Luke followed. 'Where are we headed?' he asked.

'I know a gospel shop on H Street where we can get free breakfast, so long as you don't mind singing a hymn or two.'

'I'm starving, I'll sing a whole oratorio.'

Pete confidently followed a zigzag route through a low-rent neighbourhood. The city was not yet awake. The houses were dark and the stores shuttered, the greasy spoons and the news-stands not yet open. Glancing at a bedroom window hung with cheap curtains, Luke imagined a man inside, fast asleep under a pile of blankets, his wife warm beside him; and he felt a pang of envy. It seemed that he belonged out here, in the pre-dawn community of men and women who ventured into the cold streets while ordinary people slept on: the man in work clothes shuffling to an early-morning job; the young bicycle rider muffled in scarf and gloves; the solitary woman smoking in the brightly lit interior of a bus.

His mind seethed with anxious questions. How long had he been a drunk? Had he ever tried to dry out? Did he have any family who might help him? Where had he met Pete? Where did they get the booze? Where did they drink it? But Pete's manner was taciturn, and Luke controlled his impatience, hoping Pete might be more forthcoming when he had some food inside him.

They came to a small church standing defiantly between a cinema and a smoke shop. They entered by a side door and went down a flight of stairs to the

basement. Luke found himself in a long room with a low ceiling – the crypt, he guessed. At one end he saw an upright piano and a small pulpit; at the other, a kitchen range. In between were three rows of trestle tables with benches. Three bums sat there, one at each table, staring patiently into space. At the kitchen end, a dumpy woman stirred a big pot. Beside her, a grey-bearded man wearing a clerical collar looked up from a coffee urn and smiled. ‘Come in, come in!’ he said cheerfully. ‘Come into the warm.’ Luke regarded him warily, wondering if he was for real.

It *was* warm, stiflingly so after the wintry air outside. Luke unbuttoned his grubby trench coat. Pete said: ‘Morning, Pastor Lonegan.’

The pastor said: ‘Have you been here before? I’ve forgotten your name.’

‘I’m Pete, he’s Luke.’

‘Two disciples!’ His bonhomie seemed genuine. ‘You’re a little early for breakfast, but there’s fresh coffee.’

Luke wondered how Lonegan maintained his cheery disposition when he had to get up this early to serve breakfast to a roomful of catatonic deadbeats.

The pastor poured coffee into thick mugs. ‘Milk and sugar?’

Luke did not know whether he liked milk and sugar in his coffee. ‘Yes, thank you,’ he said, guessing. He accepted the mug and sipped the coffee. It tasted sickeningly creamy and sweet. He guessed he normally took it black. But it assuaged his hunger, and he drank it all quickly.

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‘We’ll have a word of prayer in a few minutes,’ said the pastor. ‘By the time we’re done, Mrs Lonegan’s famous oatmeal should be cooked to perfection.’

Luke decided his suspicion had been unworthy. Pastor Lonegan was what he seemed, a cheerful guy who liked to help people.

Luke and Pete sat at the rough plank table, and Luke studied his companion. Until now, he had noticed only the dirty face and ragged clothes. Now he saw that Pete had none of the marks of a long-term drunk: no broken veins, no dry skin flaking off the face, no cuts or bruises. Perhaps he was too young – only about twenty-five, Luke guessed. But Pete was slightly disfigured. He had a dark red birthmark that ran from his right ear to his jawline. His teeth were uneven and discoloured. The dark moustache had probably been grown to distract attention from his bad teeth, back in the days when he cared about his appearance. Luke sensed suppressed anger in him. He guessed that Pete resented the world, maybe for making him ugly, maybe for some other reason. He probably had a theory that the country was being ruined by some group he hated: Chinese immigrants, or uppity Negroes, or a shadowy club of ten rich men who secretly controlled the stock market.

‘What are you staring at?’ Pete said.

Luke shrugged and did not reply. On the table was a newspaper folded open at the crossword, and a stub of pencil. Luke glanced idly at the grid, picked up the pencil, and started to fill in the answers.

More bums drifted in. Mrs Lonegan put out a stack

of heavy bowls and a pile of spoons. Luke got all the crossword clues but one: 'Small place in Denmark,' six letters. Pastor Lonagan looked over his shoulder at the filled-out grid, raised his eyebrows in surprise, and said quietly to his wife: 'Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!'

Luke immediately got the last clue – Hamlet – and wrote it in. Then he thought: 'How did I know that?'

He unfolded the paper and looked at the front page for the date. It was Wednesday, 29 January 1958. His eye was caught by the headline U.S. MOON STAYS EARTHBOUND. He read on:

Cape Canaveral, Tuesday: The U.S. Navy today abandoned a second attempt to launch its space rocket, Vanguard, after multiple technical problems.

The decision comes two months after the first Vanguard launch ended in humiliating disaster when the rocket exploded two seconds after ignition.

American hopes of launching a space satellite to rival the Soviet Sputnik now rest with the Army's rival Jupiter missile.

The piano sounded a strident chord, and Luke looked up. Mrs Lonagan was playing the introductory notes of a familiar hymn. She and her husband began to sing 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus', and Luke joined in, pleased he could remember it.

Bourbon had a strange effect, he thought. He could do the crossword and sing a hymn from memory, but

he did not know his mother's name. Perhaps he had been drinking for years, and had damaged his brain. He wondered how he could have let such a thing happen.

After the hymn, Pastor Lonegan read some Bible verses, then told them all that they could be saved. Here was a group that really needed saving, Luke thought. All the same, he was not tempted to put his faith in Jesus. First he needed to find out who he was.

The pastor extemporized a prayer, they sang grace, then the men lined up and Mrs Lonegan served them hot oatmeal with syrup. Luke ate three bowls. Afterwards, he felt much better. His hangover was receding fast.

Impatient to resume his questions, he approached the pastor. 'Sir, have you seen me here before? I've lost my memory.'

Lonegan looked hard at him. 'You know, I don't believe I have. But I meet hundreds of people every week, and I could be mistaken. How old are you?'

'I don't know,' Luke said, feeling foolish.

'Late thirties, I'd say. You haven't been living rough very long. It takes its toll on a man. But you walk with a spring in your step, your skin is clear under the dirt, and you're still alert enough to do a crossword puzzle. Quit drinking now, and you could lead a normal life again.'

Luke wondered how many times the pastor had said that. 'I'm going to try,' he promised.

'If you need help, just ask.' A young man who

appeared to be mentally handicapped was persistently patting Lonegan's arm, and he turned to him with a patient smile.

Luke spoke to Pete. 'How long have you known me?'

'I don't know, you been around a while.'

'Where did we spend the night before last?'

'Relax, will you? Your memory will come back sooner or later.'

'I have to find out where I'm from.'

Pete hesitated. 'What we need is a beer,' he said. 'Help us think straight.' He turned for the door.

Luke grabbed his arm. 'I don't want a beer,' he said decisively. Pete did not want him to dig into his past, it seemed. Perhaps he was afraid of losing a companion. Well, that was too bad. Luke had more important things to do than keep Pete company. 'In fact,' he said, 'I think I'd like to be alone for a while.'

'What are you, Greta Garbo?'

'I'm serious.'

'You need me to look out for you. You can't make it on your own. Hell, you can't even remember how old you are.'

Pete had a desperate look in his eyes, but Luke was unmoved. 'I appreciate your concern, but you're not helping me find out who I am.'

After a moment Pete shrugged. 'You got a right.' He turned to the door again. 'See you around, maybe.'

'Maybe.'

Pete went out. Luke shook Pastor Lonegan's hand. 'Thank you for everything,' he said.

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‘I hope you find what you’re looking for,’ said the pastor.

Luke went up the stairs and out into the street. Pete was on the next block, speaking to a man in a green gaberdine raincoat with a matching cap – begging the price of a beer, Luke guessed. He walked in the opposite direction and turned around the first corner.

It was still dark. Luke’s feet were cold, and he realized he was not wearing socks under his boots. As he hurried on, a light flurry of snow fell. After a few minutes, he eased his pace. He had no reason to rush. It made no difference whether he walked fast or slow. He stopped, and took shelter in a doorway.

He had nowhere to go.