

PART ONE:
THIEVERY



ONE

—into the brilliant sun-wrecked air and the parking lot between the cars of teachers and the older students, the world stinking of diesel and the fumes of buses where my moms waits in our smoldering station wagon, cigarette smoke curling around her perm and looking at me sadly, still in her uniform, name tag, and apron as coach williams places me like some block of wood or dumb inert thing in the backseat where it is warm and the vibrations of the car soothe me even though she's talking

—shit I can't be taking off work every time you got yourself a goddamned snuffle she says but her tone's not angry just tired and weary and bloodshot as her eyes

she leans into the backseat as she drives and touches my cheek, my forehead, with a terribly cold hand as I watch the trees pass overhead in the sliver of sky visible from where I lie and says my lord I could feel your fever before I even touched you, shree, turning back to the wheel and ashing her smoke out the cracked window

I can hear it, feel it, without even opening my burning eyelids when the car enters the holly pines trailer park and the sensation of pulling into our trailer hits home like a dropped piece of bologna slapping on the floor. I let myself spill out of the car and walk like an untethered balloon into the trailer and back to my room and onto the bed into darkness where I shiver and pass in and out of consciousness like some sort of ghost until her cold hands return, pulling off my shoes, tugging off my jeans, holding a cup of water to my mouth

—my sick little man she says, cold hand on my cheek, as she lies down, arm thrown wide over me and snuggling down into my comforter, closing her eyes, facing me, and I raise one trembling and hot feverish hand looking into her white face, lined with care and eroded by the tides of alcohol and place my palm on her cheek, feather-light. I stay still—so still—so she'll stay here with me, sleeping, sleeping and quiet, moms and her sick little man who'll never ever let her go, never let this moment end never let it—

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Once upon a time Casimir was safe, part of an everyday rhythm to a song I knew by heart, every phrase familiar, every verse comforting. But that's all gone. The world spun into uncertainty.

Jack is with Quincruux now, and I'm stuck here, alone. Waiting. Wondering.

Watching for Riders.

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The television displays thirty frames of video in a single second. Each image hits your eyes in a wave of light, incredibly fast, like breakers scraping at a rocky shore, and your brain cannot interpret the light as a still image before the next wave crashes on the beach and the next, giving you the illusion of motion. This is called the persistence of vision.

What Warden Kay Anderson is concerned with is just five frames. Just a fraction of a second, a part that your brain would barely even notice.

She turns in her chair and fiddles with the controls of the VCR on the pushcart. On the outside, there are HD TVs and

PS3s and DVD players. On the inside, there's a cart with a wobbly wheel, stenciled with the words *Property of the Pulaski County Juvenile Detention Center Audio/Visual Department*. We're not quite in the twenty-first century yet.

The screen shows a classroom. The camera is up high, in a corner. Everything is black and white, a little fuzzy. Six boys in jumpsuits stand locked, flies in desaturated video amber. Two stand tight together, facing the other four, outnumbered and desperate. One of the aggressive pack is a massive pile of meat locked in midstride.

Ox is his name. The rest of the punks watch him.

You can see the tension in the two boys who face the greater number. The smaller one, his hands are tight at his sides, balled into fists. He looks angry. The other kid, the good-looking one—the absolutely gorgeous one—his shoulders are drawn tight, like he's about to get hit by a falling sack of bricks.

And he is.

“Okay, Shreve.” Warden Kay Anderson grins at me. When I first came into her office, she looked at my fading black eye and said, “Ah, I see you're getting along *famously* with the rest of the general pop,” and chuckled.

Booth sits nearby, staring at her. He doesn't glance at me. His shirttail's untucked, and he needs to shave. Once upon a time, Assistant Warden Horace Booth was concerned with his appearance. Seriously concerned.

The warden mashes the play button, and on-screen Ox shambles forward to stand in front of the really handsome kid. Ox lumbers like a zombie.

They stand there, no one moving, and for a moment, I think she might've paused the video again. But then you can

see the good-looking kid saying something, his jaw moving up and down—saying something stupid most likely, but there’s no audio on the security tape. Ox glowers above him. Then the big kid moves, pulling back his arm, fast as a snake striking, and whips his massive hamhock across the good-looking kid’s face, knocking him sideways. It’s just a slap, but it’s a monstrous slap, an open-handed bomb right across the side of the boy’s noggin, twisting his head sideways as if his neck would break and knocking him headfirst into some desks.

I touch my cheek, remembering.

The warden rewinds the video a few seconds to where Ox pulls back his arm.

She giggles a little. “This is my favorite part.”

She plays it again, slower. You can see my head twist as Ox’s hand hits my face and my body flies sideways.

It’s weird watching getting my ass handed to me on television. For a moment, I feel like I’ve shucked off the meatsuit and I’m looking down at my own gorgeous self from a remove. But the moment passes.

We’re all incarcerated, trapped in our own bodies. Everyone except me.

She rewinds it once more, mashing buttons on the remote, stepping through the video, frame by frame. Ox drawing back his hand. Bringing it forward. Forward. Point of impact. My head wrenching to the side. Face turning toward the camera. Body flying forward.

She pauses the video, letting it hang on my expression less than a second after my senses were batted from my brain. With the grainy video, it’s hard to make out all of my features, but one eye is shut and the other is wide with surprise. My face has

this lopsided look like a water balloon warping in flight, and my mouth is open as if I was caught midsentence, saying something really stupid. Which I was.

“Oh, I love this one,” she says and taps the screen with a long, lacquered fingernail. “I’ve asked the guys in AV to enhance this image so I can print it out and get it framed, but they say you can’t do that. Enhancing images from television. That’s only on TV shows.”

“You probably can’t take pictures of us for your own pleasure, either. That’s kinda creepy, honestly. There’s got to be some law against that. But I’m glad to see you’re still *so* concerned about the welfare of us prisoners.”

Without turning to look at me, Booth says, “Wards.” For some reason, they don’t like calling us “prisoners.” No mention of “cells” or “lockup.” Technically—because we’re minors—we can’t be prisoners. We are wards of the great state of Arkansas.

The warden looks like she’s been stung by a bee. “Yes,” she spits. “Not prisoners. Wards.” She frowns and runs her tongue across her teeth, like she’s trying to clean them of lipstick.

“Have you been sleeping?” Booth asks, apropos of nothing.

“What do you think?” she says and throws her bony hands into the air, exasperated.

“Folks aren’t sleeping. It’s happening.” Booth isn’t selling his words, though. He sounds washed-out and distracted. Like he’s not getting any sleep, either.

“Um, I’m right here, guys. Prisoner, front and center!”

They ignore me.

“The wards in the D Wing are seriously getting restless. Up all night, howling at the ceiling. Spitting. Cursing.” Warden

Anderson clears her throat uncomfortably. “Masturbating frequently. And publicly.”

“Damn,” I say.

Booth says, “Obviously, we’re swamped here. Crime rate in juveniles is up a thousand percent in the last month, and the judges, because it’s an election year, are taking the hard line.” He shakes his head. “I’ve ordered all guards on watch with Tasers. Any incident of public masturbation will be dealt with extreme—”

“Creepiness?”

“Shut up, Shreve,” Booth says, not even glancing at me. “With extreme prejudice.”

The warden looks exhausted. But she sets her shoulders and straightens the jacket of her sharp-cut suit, remembering why she’s in a room with Booth and me. “However delightful this part is,” she gestures again at the screen, “it isn’t what we’re here to discuss, is it?”

We’ve done this before. Many times before. But she wants to go over it again. She lets the video play at full speed. I carom across the room headfirst into a tangle of desks with my arms crossed in front of my face.

Ox comes to lurk above me. One of the other punks says something, moves closer to the smaller kid.

To Jack. My roommate. My friend. My brother in all but name.

The warden’s claw of a fingernail jabs forward and pauses the video.

“Here we are.” She nudges the scene forward a frame. “Here it comes.”

One of the punks steps forward, raising his arms. Jack moves, raising his own in response.

He puts out his hands, and even through the fuzziness of the security footage, you can make out that there are too many fingers for his hands.

His body goes rigid.

The warden nudges the video forward. “Here.”

First frame, the boy approaching Jack begins to fly backward, and Ox teeters over me.

Second frame, Jack seems to compress. The punks are off the floor now, lifted right off their feet, and one of the kids who had been approaching Jack, his shoes sit on the ground. Knocked right out of his shoes.

“That.”

Third frame, Ox is down and on top of me, and the desks are totally destroyed.

Fourth frame, the punks are vertical and windmilling arms and the desks behind them are beginning to move backward, but it’s very blurry.

Fifth frame, the camera shows a blurry image of the wall, the camera knocked loose in its mounting.

Next frame? Static.

“Tell me again what happened here.”

“Right here? Nothing happened here.” I look around the office like I’m seeing it for the first time.

She puts her hand on the Taser at her waist.

I could pop in, look around and see if she was truly going to Tase me or if it’s just a habit. I could go in, maybe tinker with some things, make her forget all this. Maybe make her not *want* to know what happened.

She jabs a button and stabs the remote at the TV screen like she’s stabbing someone with a knife. The screen flickers, and

she's back to where Jack's hands are up.

"Right *there*," she says. "Something happened. You were there."

"Knocked on my ass."

Booth says, "Language, boy."

"I didn't see nothing."

Booth's not looking at me; he's staring out the Admin window at the light streaming in, a slanted pillar teeming with dust particles like silt in a glass of river water. There's gray at his temples, lightening his Afro and creeping around the crown of his head. He has his big hands clasped in his lap, staring with this faraway look in his eyes like he can't be bothered with all the grit of administration, interrogation, and audio *slash* visual fun and games. He's gone beyond all that now. He can't be bothered to make his pencil-thin bristle into an angry caterpillar. He can't be bothered to press his slacks. He can't be bothered to wake up and assemble the parts that in total become Booth.

Warden Anderson snaps her fingers and glares at me. "Shreve, let me explain something. There are liars in this world. There are good liars. Liars like politicians and priests and murderers."

And wardens, I think.

She leans forward. "You are not a good liar. You're just a petty thief and candy dealer who got lucky once and was in the right place at the wrong time or the wrong place at the right time—"

"I wouldn't call it getting lucky. I spent a month in the hospital crapping in a bag." I peer at her bloodless face. The makeup and lipstick do the exact opposite of their intended

purpose. She's rapacious, all jagged bone and sinew held together by Revlon. Maybe she's not Warden Anderson at all. Maybe she's got Quincruix in her right now. Or worse. The Witch. Ilsa Moteff.

Crap.

It's like I always come to this place. They say that just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

I have to know.

Before I make my run at her, I look at Booth. He's still staring at the light pouring through the window. I wonder if he'll be able to sense what I'm about to do. Possessing someone has to cause ripples, at least.

I look at the warden, and she's looking back at me, beady eyes steady and dully reflective.

It's like this, but it's not *always* like this: You hold a snake in your hand, a tiny infant thing, wet and new. It squirms and writhes and wants to get free as if your hand is an egg. The snake is you; your body is the hand. And it thrashes and writhes and forces its snout into the crack of flesh, the space between fingers, and with a great wrench, it slips through. It's free. To fall. To find *another* cupped hand to enter.

I close my eyes. Somewhere, I hear a voice saying, "Shreve, you can shut your eyes, but you can't shut me out . . . Answer me! Tell me what happened—"

I can shut you out just fine, Warden Anderson. But can you shut me out?

No longer incarcerated, I find her and look at her defenses. I don't want to push her out and take over her body. I just want to get in. I just want to get in enough to rummage around in her closets, look in her medicine cabinet. Peek under the bed. And

that, sometimes, is harder than just kicking in the front door and evicting the tenant.

I'm lucky. Getting in is easy. I'm in and there's a moment of dislocation as I look upon my body—feeling such anger at me—and I see how thin I've become. Back when I was dealing candy, I wasn't fat, but there was meat on those bones. Now I look like some emo rocker, rail-thin, with a shaggy mop of brown hair and a sneer. I really sneer like that? All the time?

No wonder adults are always so cranky.

In and down.

It can be a mansion of the mind; it can be a motel. Some people's noggins are like a photo album; some are like a movie. Some are like *being* in a movie. Others are like panning for gold. And some are like jumping into deep waters with fast currents. Warden Anderson's head is full of echoes. She's focused, so very focused on the present and the future that it brings her awareness to a point, like some fire-hardened stake, and the rest of her memory and consciousness is like a long hall filled with wraiths and ghosts and collapsed into a single dimension, as flat as a razor. There is no physical space in someone's head, but it's easier to think of it that way, even for me.

I race down hallways, if there were hallways. Back and back and down and through, and dammit, she was really considering using the Taser on me, and only Booth's presence stopped her. Farther back and down, past the recent memories and down into the basement where she keeps her older ones, there's a moment that's ringing like a bell, sending out a tone—a *frequency* I seem attuned to. I'm being washed with the vibrations and images and feelings. Not long ago and in this same office, a nice, bland man in a black hat and severe suit crosses his legs and sits

delicately across the desk from her and says, "I'm from Health and Human Services and would like to interview—" He shifts and pulls some papers from his briefcase. Ruffles the papers. "A Mr. Jack Graves, aged thirteen."

His sound, his scent—the *feel* of the man—is all over her. If I was incarcerated, I would shiver. His passage inside her rings, echoing, like the moments after a gigantic bell tolls, the air still vibrating. He got in her head. He came in and did exactly what I'm doing now.

She thinks about this incident more often than she'd like, and she can't remember why. It puzzles her. It's sent tendrils out into her awareness, this memory. It's such an invasion, what Quincru and I do.

God help us, we're monsters.

I almost pull out of her then. But she *wanted* to Tase me. Like a fat kid wants a slice of chocolate cake.

I move on, back and back, running through her mind. She's done the usual evils—cheated on her husband, on her taxes, on tests. She shot a man who broke into her house, killing him, and instead of remorse, she felt a great joy at her accomplishment and bragged about it to her friends. She boxed in college and *oh . . .* here's something interesting, another woman she loved with all her heart. A fellow student. And they screwed like rabbits for a month until they fought, over money of all things, and Kay struck her lover in the face. And that's the image burned into Kay's memory of her Jill. They're in a bedroom somewhere in Chicago, and the sounds of the city hum and rattle and clank and honk through the open window while Jill, naked, sits heavily on the bed and stares wide-eyed at Kay. Jill's mouth is open, and her hand's at her cheek.

Kay knew in that moment that she'd destroyed something wonderful in a fit of rage. But she hardened and resolved to live with it. To *use* it. Just like that. With her knuckles still stinging from the blow—just seconds after—Kay's righteousness solidified in her at that moment, like a hand covered in Krazy Glue strangling a human heart.

I go beyond that, further into her history, when she was a girl and, strangely, she wasn't such a tremendous bitch. The time before the blow that sent Jill reeling, she was different. She was sweet and insecure and confused at her attraction to both men and women, and maybe that point when she struck Jill changed her life forever in a direction she never wanted to go.

There's one last ringing moment, and I enter it. It's bright like an overexposed photograph, fuzzy around the edges, and the light is hazy and she's on the beach, suffused with joy. Just a girl. Waves fall sluggishly on the shore and the sun is bright but not too hot and her father is holding her in his brown arms and tossing her *high* in the air, so high she feels like she's flying but not scared, not scared at all, because her father would *never* drop her. Never ever. She's laughing and giggling and he's throwing her high and that memory is so bright and full of love and pain and joy it's almost impossible to bear. He would be dead in months, her father. But she has this memory.

Something in me twists and suddenly her joy is mine and washing over me, and it feels so good, like cool water on a brutally hot day. Like the morphine drip they had me on in the hospital. I never want it to end, this memory of Warden Kay Anderson's. I want it to go on forever.

I live in it and have no awareness of time, because I could stay here until the world ends. Beyond the end of all things.

“What the hell are you doing?”

It's like being yanked out of a wonderful dream, or splashed with water. It's like being Tased.

Booth stands over me, furious. I glance at the warden, and her eyes are open; she's got the thousand-yard stare. Her hands twitch. Her lips are parted, mouth open, facial muscles slack.

He grabs my arm and yanks me up. My body is loose and uncoordinated, and I'm having a hard time getting it under control. There's part of me, a very important part of me, that still hasn't figured out where I am. And Booth is unimaginably strong, it seems. He sets me on my feet and roughly shoves me toward the door, but I manage to stop the movement and watch him.

He approaches the warden, checks her pulse. Then he rushes out of the room, knocking me to the side of the door with his passage. In a moment, he's back, holding a first-aid kit. He breaks the packet of smelling salts under her nose. She twitches, starts, and then shudders awake. She sits upright, blinks heavily. Glares about the room until her gaze settles on me. She looks as though her mouth has flooded with lemon juice.

“Get off me, Horace,” she says to Booth, pushing him away. “I must've nodded off.”

“I hardly think—”

“You're not paid to think,” she says. “You're not good at it, anyway. But if you must know, I've been sleeping poorly, like everyone else in this damned country. The insomnia epidemic. So. I must've—” She looks at me, eyes narrowing. “I must've nodded off.”

Something is different about her now. She looks . . . older? Meaner? She's all teeth and tits and gristle.

“You.” She jabs a clawed finger at me. “Saturday privileges revoked until further notice. Computer privileges suspended.” She looks at her desk calendar. “July tenth is the next family visitation day. If you have not spilled everything you know about the incidents on that video by then, you can tell your mother and brother not to bother showing up.”

“Warden,” Booth says. “I don’t know if that’s—”

She shifts her gaze to him and then runs her tongue over her teeth in an unconscious gesture. “Zip it,” she says, very distinctly. He does.

“You are trouble, Shreve. You have always been trouble.” Kicking her feet, she rolls her chair away from the TV and back to her desk. “Take this cart back to AV.”

She straightens her papers on her desk as I unplug the cart and Booth helps me to move it into the hall. I can feel the pressure of her gaze on my back.

I push the cart into the hall and let the door swing shut behind me.

“What have you done?” Booth asks, his voice empty. It’s beyond disappointed. It’s almost as if he expected it.

What have I done?

I don’t know.

Something horrible.

—flooding my mouth with saliva at the sight of mince pie with ice cream and mounds of peanut brittle—food covers the table while the Christmas tree flashes blue and white and red in circuits and patterns as momma pulls one beautifully wrapped present from beneath the tree and smiling hands it to me saying “only one present on Christmas Eve, honey” and I unwrap it with trembling hands and inside there’s the dolly we saw at the five-and-dime, rosy-cheeked and unwinking, and I love her love her love her love love

daddy takes my hand and we go out into the hard-frozen night and look at the nativity, the baby Jesus nestled so snug in his cradle, the dead grass crackling under my feet and a familiar smell in the air and I can feel the rough texture of daddy’s hand from planing boards all day at the mill but so gentle and kind and he looks up and I follow his gaze to the heavens and something soft and cold lands on my cheek and I realize it’s snowing, fat snowflakes and then the air turns white in a million flakes like a storm of blessings in the mind of God and daddy whispers, “A white Christmas. O, lord, what majesty, a white Christmas,” and holding me up in his arms and his breath on my face like peppermint and tobacco and I can only breathe and cry and wish this feeling could go on forever, forever and ever go on—