

Chapter 1

Look up at the Plaza Regent, Blink, in the shivery morning light. Count the floors—take your pick.

You're wearing the Blessed Breakfast Uniform: the Adidas, sparkly white; the tan Gap cargos; the yellow Banana Republic polo; the red cotton hooded full-zip. Lifted, all of it, from a gym locker at Jarvis Collegiate, where the posh children drift down from Rosedale on shining bikes or are disgorged from BMWs. You picked a boy about your size. You followed him to school one day, which was against the rules. It's never hard to find a locker room; your nose shows you the way. These fine clothes of young master Rosedale were doused with Eternity when first you put them on, though that fragrance has been lost with repeated wear.

The BBU lifts you up. You are no street punk now. Just look at your fine self: your hair plastered down, your hands clean. Curl your fingers up, boy, so they don't see the nails, ragged from scratching out an existence in this anxious city on the edge of winter. You're uptown and hungry. Farther uptown than you have ever ventured before, driven to this new hunting ground. The edge of winter, the edge of the world. The brink of something. Because that's what edges are.

Wear the uniform like you own it, Blink. Walk like you mean it. No gazing at the ground as though there's a dime there with your name on it. Nothing in this whole wide world has your name on it.

Shoulders back now, so that the lobby guys say, *Good morning, sir*, like you just stepped out for a morning walk to get your appetite up to speed. He's opening the door for you, the tall fella in the long black coat with the red stripes on the shoulders and the little red monkey hat. Smile nice now, Blink, but not so much that you look like the monkey holding the door.

There's another one inside, with cheeks so shiny pink you'd swear his mama just scrubbed them with a toothbrush. He tips his hat like you're a king, and you acknowledge him with your chin, as if you'd say, *Good morning*, right back at him if you weren't so busy being rich.

You're on your way, Blink, you clever monkey, you.

You've played this breakfast game for a month or so, but it only ever lasts a few days. The smiles soon dim; the *good mornings* wither; then some suit strides your way wearing his good-bye face, and out you fly through the revolving door, quick as a wink.

But not this day, Blink. You're good to go.

Just don't hurry and, Christ, don't gawk like you've never seen the inside of a hotel before.

But, oh, look at this lobby, will you? Drink it in. You want to skate across it, so shiny wide. Look at those urns with the exotic plants stuck in them and those chairs just sitting around on the thick carpet discussing important matters. Keep the jitters pressed way down in your empty belly. Stroll like you're heading up to room . . . pick a number—with your left hand holding on to an imagined key.

No one asks. No one cares. In the Blessed BU, you are a *guest*.

The elevator doors shine like they've been through the car wash.

Ding.

There's a camera in this thing, but resist the urge to wave. Look steady at your reflection in the golden door; comb back that sandy-brown hair sprung loose over your brow. Convince those brown-as-hot-tea eyes to calm themselves. You're here to eat—that's all. A boy's got to eat.

Blink. Blink. Blink. A blink for every floor.

Ding.

The carpet is like the floor of an enchanted glade, as if the sun has somehow found its way into this windowless place and seeps down the walls in thin streams. Little green bags hang from every morning doorknob, with a newspaper inside, like it's Christmas. But you aren't here for the news, my friend.

Do you remember the fairy tales Granda told you? Enchanted glades can be a problem. This one here is not as wide as the

Westin, or as long as the Sheraton, where you could see trouble coming a mile away. It feels more like you have stolen your way into someone's house.

You round the corner, and—ah!—a black tray with domes on it like some tiny silver city sits outside a sleeping doorway. There's a wilted carnation and a bottle lying on its side. What your stepdaddy calls a dead soldier.

What have we here? Half a gnawed pork chop, mashed potatoes with a cigarette sticking out the top like a chimney on an igloo. Hell, you can do better than this.

There—two doors down. See it, boyo?

You feel the luck oozing up from those one-size-too-small track shoes. You're just full of fairy dust, Blink. It comes on like that sometimes, the good feeling on the heels of the bad. Someone might even fall in love with a boy like you on a day this lucky.

Then you hear your stepdaddy's voice, and you wilt like last night's carnation. You shake him out of your head. You hang on to that sunny disposition, boy. You hang on tight.

Kneel silently before tray number two, like it is a prayerful thing. And, yes! Your prayers are answered. Scrambled egg, hardly touched, a couple of sausages, home fries, and—*jiggle, jiggle*—coffee still hot in the thermos. Amen.

Then the crash.

You're up off that floor like some wild thing on the Discovery Channel, eyes looking every which way, claws out, listening to . . . nothing. Nothing. You brush your knees off, like you might've picked up some enchantment, kneeling there, sniffing at the tray. You listen closely. There's talk somewhere behind a door. Not this one, the next.

But no one comes out. There's just you and this seven-a-empty hallway. Your breath returns to normal.

Then — *thump*—something big falls over. Something real.

What are you waiting for, child? The next shoe to drop? An invitation to the party?

You're stiff with un-motion. But you're not brain-dead, are you? There's no shouting. No one's calling anyone a liar. No one's saying, *Why, you no-good thieving—I oughta* . . . There's no slap.

Everything you expect as a side dish to Crash and Thump—there's none of it. The Captain's listening. Down inside you in his cabin in the hold of you. For a full ticking minute there, you feel him stir in his sleep. Captain Panic. Hold him down. You're good. You can do this.

Somebody had a bad night is all. That's what it is up there, up the hall in room 16-whatever. Somebody stumbling around looking for his dick. Pick up the tray, nice and quick and quiet, and find the little room. There's always the little room with the ice machine and the soda machine, a place where a boy can eat in peace. First thing in the morning, who's going to need ice? And there it is right across the hall from the room of strange noises: 1616.

You perch the tray on the ice machine and go straight for the sausage, but before you get it halfway to your hungry mouth, you see out the side of your eye the napkin. The napkin from hell. It's all scrunched up; white linen on the outside, but inside—what *is* that? Mucus? Yellow streaked with blood. Jesus, but that's disgusting!

Your throat just bunches up at the sight of it. You want to throw up, though there's nothing in you to heave. You close your eyes—they're twitching like nobody's business.

Open them, Blink. Look straight at that sausage, eye to eye. Forget the damn napkin. Oh, sure, and while you're at it, try not to think of this guy sneezing all over his breakfast. . . .

You put the fork down. Can't do it. What was that about your lucky day? You lean against the wall, exhausted from the act of holding yourself together. You got off at the wrong floor, my son—that's all. The wrongest floor of all. You don't know that yet, but you're never far from the feeling.

Shake it off, Blink. Shake it off.

Better? Good. Maybe the seventeenth? It's not like there's anywhere else you were heading today. No big appointments.

Forget about what happened at the Sheraton—put it out of your mind. That was yesterday. That's all over. Yes, one of them got a hand on you, but there's not much of you to grab, is there, and you can twist and turn when you need to—the dance of flight when the jig is up. And the thing is, you've got a day's worth of grazing to catch up on to put something on those bones of yours.

Oh, there's this fire in you that gets blown out so easy but flickers right back up again. That's my boy! Just leave the tray on the ice machine. There are more sausages in the world.

You open the door of the little room, and the door of 1616 clicks open like a mirror image directly across the hall. You step backward—fall backward—like you've been hit, fall into the low rumbling of the ice making, but you don't quite let go of the door, because something in you says that letting go is going to make more noise than holding on.

So there you are. And you hear what happens. And you see some of it, too. Three men: the big one, the wiry one, the little tough one. You name them: the Moon for the cratered round-

ness of his face; the Snake for the rattler coiling up his forearm; the Littlest Hulk for his green eyes and a chest that threatens to pop the buttons of his denim shirt. Not one of them belongs here. They are no more Plaza Regent than you are the Gap. They are the Three Billy Goats Gruff coming out of the room of Crash and Thump.

The Moon rolls plastic gloves off his hands—the kind they wear at Subway so they don’t have to touch your Santa Fe chicken. They’re all in plastic gloves. They wait in the almost-silent morning hallway with the news hanging from every door and music that never comes to an end floating down from the ceiling. What are they waiting for?

And what are you waiting for, your hand frozen to the door? In the knife-blade of your vision, there is only the Littlest Hulk left now, leaning against the yellow wall, flexing his plastic fingers. “Come on,” he grumbles, his voice all edgy with nuisance. “Come on,” he calls back into the room. He holds the door open with a ragged black-sneakered foot.

“Watch it, Tank,” grumbles the Moon.

“Yes, massah,” mutters Tank, rolling his eyes.

Then the one they’re waiting for appears. No Billy Goat, this one. He’s in a shirt like a new snowdrift and gray trousers that might be cut from silk. There are tassels on his shiny black shoes and a shiny black briefcase with a gold combination lock, grasped in his right hand. There’s a clean scent coming off him. He’s got a trim beard and hair laced with silver. There’s a bit of belly on him, like he eats regularly but takes that belly to the gym.

His type sails by you down on Bay Street all the time, like their eyes don’t even register the cap in your hand. His type strides across hotel lobbies, with the future tucked tightly under

their arms. He stands there filling your narrow vision, and you take in the coolness of this man with his eyes the color of water off the coast of some place people sail to in a yacht.

Has he forgotten something?

No. He shuts the door. He sails out of your sight, sweeping his hand through his hair so that his wristwatch flashes gold against skin he must have had room service iron during the night.

“Ready?” says the Moon.

“Ready,” says the Suit.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” says the Snake.

Tank just says, “Ready, massah,” under his breath with this scowl on his halfway-to-a-monster face, like he’s been ready for twelve hours or something.

And you, Blink, in there with the ice machine, not breathing for fear of being sniffed out, snuffed out—are you ready? You cannot let go of that door now. So are you prepared for what comes next? Because you just stumbled into this thing, and you will need a thicker skin than the Blessed Breakfast Uniform to get to the end of it.

Chapter 2

A cell phone goes off in someone's pocket. The men in the hall play patty-cake. Tank is the winner. Except, from the look on the Suit's face, Tank just won another lap around the playing field. The Suit doesn't say a thing, just looks at the Moon, as if Tank were the Moon's little pug dog and he just peed on the Suit's tasseled shoes.

"What'd I tell you?" says the Moon, flapping his big mitts resignedly against his side, though he keeps his voice low and grave. They're all huddled together outside the door.

"You ever hear of GPS, Tank?" says the Suit.

Tank looks at the instrument in his hand like he's wondering how it got there. Like he's wondering should he answer it

or just let it meow like a cat looking for a lap. Then it stops and the spell ends, and his chin falls to his chest.

“Ditch it,” says the Moon, and the Suit hands Tank the room key, which is just a card, and Tank takes it in his plastic-covered fingers and sticks it into the little ATM on the door. He steps in the doorway just far enough to hurl the cell phone and leave again, stepping lively to catch up.

The Littlest Hulk is a wiseass, and this is his last foolish act—you know the type: he flicks the key card over his shoulder, and it flutters through a long slow arc to the floor at the foot of the ice-machine-room door.

You remember the first time you saw a key like this, Blink? You were with your dad, your real dad. He told you that the hotel charged in-and-out fees on the room, and you should make up your mind whether you were coming or going. You push it in, arrow first, and hear the buzz inside.

The room looks like a terrorist pajama party. There’s bedding strewn every which way, a blood-colored stain on a torn sheet, a chair on its back, a lamp in shattered pieces on the floor. Magazines and newspapers have been flung from here to Sunday. The flat-screen television lies facedown on the carpet, like it’s burying its head in the sand. You stand over it. Sounds come from it. “In other breaking news . . .” says a muffled voice.

You look around, waiting for a corpse to fall out of somewhere. But there’s nobody—no body. Not even one floating in the tub, which is what you’d have placed bets on, if you had anything to bet with.

It’s wet in the bathroom, foggy, hot. You turn to the gold-framed mirror above the sink. You can’t see yourself in it. You

clear a spot with your hand, and there you are, looking even more spooked than usual. And then there's the wallet. You see it as a blur in the haze on the mirror, before you see the real thing on the counter. It's leather, shiny from rubbing against a rich backside, and sitting beside a toothbrush with paste on it, ready to go.

It's a trap!

The Suit comes back for his wallet and—*bang!*—you're toast. There you are, about as far from a way out as the Lord Jesus on Good Friday. You stand there unable to move, squeezing that fool card that got you into this mess, until finally it dawns on you. The card. You're the one with the key. There could be other cards, but you don't know that. Just as well.

Breathe, okay? You know what happens when you forget to breathe.

Six hundred dollars of fresh new bills: four hundreds, the rest twenties.

There are credit cards, too, and you know that down at the squat on Trinity, there's a freak named Wish-List who messes with credit cards. For one long second, you think maybe you'll hand these cards to Wish-List—get on his good side, if he has one. Then you ask yourself why you'd want to make nice to a psycho like Wish-List.

Jack Niven.

That's the name on the cards, the license. Jack Niven is the Suit. Jack Niven of 240 Livingston Lookout, Kingston, Ontario. And there's a picture. An ash-blond woman, a honey-blond girl. You stare at the girl with her father's Bahamas-blue eyes and her mother's easy smile. They're standing on the front step of a limestone house with a wood door behind them studded like

the entrance to a castle with black-headed nails. A door you'd have to break down with a log.

And here she is again, the princess of the castle, standing on a lawn that slopes down to water, glinting in the sun, like someone hurled a million brand-new copper coins on the water. She's in a short white summer dress, looking back over her shoulder, the wind arguing over her long hair and lifting the hem of her dress, which she holds down as best she can with one thin hand, while the other keeps her blond hair out of her eyes.

She's a bit younger than you, Blink, by the look of it. Fifteen maybe. Long legs, small breasts, face shaped like a diamond. She's as slim as your chances of ever knowing such a girl. But for this one moment, she's smiling at you, Blink. And you smile back, like someone opened the curtains and it was daytime at last.

You shake it off. No one's smiled at you like that for a long time—maybe ever. It's her daddy she's smiling at, and he's not home: Left without his wallet. Left without brushing his teeth.

You slip the money out of the wallet and shove it into your pocket. You close the wallet and lay it down, just so, beside the loaded toothbrush. Then you breathe a bit, like you're remembering how. You pick up the wallet again and take out the picture of the girl with the lake behind her, so much lake it might be an ocean. You're greedy, son. Who can blame you? There is so much you want. You step out of the hazy air of the bathroom. You feel weak and hazy yourself. And now you lean against the door frame and look at the Crash and Thump room again closely.

You're back in your mother's place, out Queen Street East. It's night and you just got in from messing with your buddies, and your mother's standing in her ten-by-nothing living room—standing in the corner—like some piece of furniture, the only piece of furniture still

on its feet. Then he comes into view, between her and you, with a poker from the fireplace, drunk and smiling at you like he's real happy you're home and it's going to be a lot more fun whacking you with that wicked thing than wasting it on a piece of furniture like your mother.

"Go," she says. "Just go, Brent."

"Yeah," says Stepdaddy. "We're having a little discussion."

But you don't go. Then his eyes uncross a little, and he lowers the poker. Why is there even a poker in this house? The fireplace hasn't worked for as long as you can remember. The corpse of Santa is probably stuck up there, because he sure hasn't visited this house in a long time. You stare at that poker. You stand there and it's the bravest you've ever been, but it's really just that your feet are nailed to the floor.

He drops the thing and walks past you to the stairs. He heads up, slowly, like he has to make a special arrangement with each step to stay still long enough for him to pass. It's almost like you won, but no one's going to give you a prize. Not your mother, who just looks distressed.

So you go. But not before you take a long look around that wrecked and bleeding little ten-by-nothing room. Like you want to remember what a wrecked life looks like in case you ever think maybe things weren't so bad. In case you decide some cold night to move home again. You go, because in winning that little battle with Stepdaddy, you lost the war.

A phone buzzes.

You find it in the folds of a white comforter. ALYSON, it says on the screen. And there she is on the screen—the beautiful lawn ornament! You push Talk.

"Daddy?" Electric air. "Are you there?"

You hold your breath, Blink. You're getting way too good at that.

Now there's a voice behind Alyson in whatever room in the castle she's in. The woman, you figure, the mom. "I'm not getting through," she says to the voice. "Phone me," says Alyson to you. "Just wanted to know everything went okay. Love you."

Then click, it's over. But there's a message from before. You touch the screen and hold the phone to your ear. An automated voice asks you for your password. You push the button with a little picture of a red phone on it. Silence.

You steady yourself, try to think through the strangeness of this morning; try to think through a hunger that just got worse. Like this is the sixteenth floor of purgatory, the place your mother used to talk about all the time, where you get to wait until your sins get scrubbed away. Purgatory: one floor up from hell and a long elevator ride away from anywhere good.

You look at the face cupped in your hand. Different picture. Same girl. Alyson. You just met her, and you already know her name. You even know her phone number. Fast work, Blink!

You sniff, breathe in the clammy air drifting out from the bathroom. It smells of Niven, a smell of sun-drenched rock and lime and leather. You fish out the roll of money from your pocket, stare at it a bit, and then—you're not sure why—you head back into the fog and put one twenty back into the wallet, like you're paying for the picture. Or like you're trying to balance out some of that weirdness. You pause, trying to think your way through something. Then you shove another twenty into the wallet—angry now—like you're throwing good money after bad. You're so angry you crinkle the newness right out of those bakery-fresh, hot bills. One of them flutters to the wet bathroom floor. Leave it—get out of here. You don't know

what you're playing at, anyway. Then you place the wallet just so, beside the loaded toothbrush. Now you've got five hundred and sixty bucks in your pocket. And now you are truly a part of the weirdness. You bought your ticket.

Back in the bedroom, you sit on the bed and pick up the cell phone. It's a BlackBerry, slim and weighty in your hand, heavy with information. You wrap your fingers around its smoothness, then shove it in the pocket of your stolen cargos.

Time to come to your senses, child. Which is when you see the tray over on the windowsill. You step over the bedding, the toppled chair, the broken shards of lamp. You step around the mumbling television. "It'll be unusually warm in the metro area today. . . ."

You lean against the windowsill and look down at the street sixteen floors below, full of people heading to work. Dazzling car roofs glint in the October sunshine. There is a near-empty glass of orange juice on the tray, an untouched cup of coffee with cream, a banana skin, and the husks of a couple of strawberries. And one perfect golden muffin sitting on a white plate, untouched.

Breakfast at last, you think, but your eyes suddenly water and squeeze shut, as if someone turned a searchlight on you. You shield your face. You squint and look down onto the roof of the Royal Ontario Museum, across Bloor Street. The new wing—the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, people call it—it looks like an alien crash site from here. A collision of glass and aluminum planes, flashing. And one of those leaning walls has tipped a sunbeam right up at you.

"Him!" the light says. "He's the one you're after!"

And then it's as if the whole museum goes up in flames.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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