

Chapter 1 **Smile**

Orange lights were flashing up ahead, and as the car pulled nearer, Jonathan Wilson realized what it was. A detour. He knew there would be some work on this stretch, but it made no sense that it had to start now. It was a Wednesday, and late at night. This sort of thing should only happen in the summertime. It was October.

“What are they up to?” asked his wife Elaine, sitting in the passenger seat. She was half awake, and mostly-buzzed from sipping nearly half a bottle of white wine.

“I dunno,” Jonathan answered. “This is weird. But I know a way.”

Jonathan considered himself to be a backroads warrior. He knew every little two-lane country highway in the entire state of Maine, and some of the logging roads, too. To him, the detour wasn't a setback. It was a challenge. He loved finding the most effective way to do anything, whether it was managing his company or driving his car from one place to another.

Jonathan was a successful entrepreneur. He and Elaine had built a small chain of bookstores that covered much of the state. Elaine was his full partner, in their marriage as well as in business. She had heard him say “I know a way” many times, and she knew enough to sit back and let him find it.

Jonathan steered the dark blue Buick Regal down the exit ramp, and started looking for the road that followed the river. That was the best way home.

“How was the steak?” Elaine asked.

Jonathan paused, still focused on the road signs that would lead him to the road he was looking for. “Oh,” he finally said. “Ribeye was great tonight. How was the chicken?”

“Kinda rubbery.”

“I thought you liked that chicken teriyaki dish.”

“They did something different. Just not as good as usual,” she sighed.

Jonathan turned onto the river road, and sat back. It would be miles before he had to worry again about their route. “That’s too bad. I wanted everything to be perfect.”

Elaine looked at him and laughed. “Everything is perfect, Jon.”

“Yeah,” he said. He squinted at some faraway headlights in the rearview mirror, and flicked the mirror down to reduce the glare.

“What do you think we’ll do with this farm?”

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked. “I thought we were looking into the horses. We can talk to Cunningham, now.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to. You know, it could be a huge garden, or a B&B, or just fields.”

“I thought you were bent on these horses,” Jonathan said with surprise.

“I just like knowing we can do whatever we want with the place,” she said wistfully. Elaine was a dreamer. She was young, at just under fifty. She saw herself as having already done so much, as an activist, an economist, a tennis pro, an entrepreneur, and a mother. She still had so much time left to do whatever she wanted.

Jonathan was more than ten years older than her, and had a much more conservative outlook. He was not an adventurer so much as a protector. He saw it as his role to protect his stores, his home, his wife, and his son. Even if he was more than three thousand miles away.

“Have you called Doug yet?” Elaine asked.

“No, when we get home. It’ll be, uh, 7PM there right now.”

“Then you won’t get him tonight,” she said.

“What? It’s Wednesday. He’ll be back from dinner and studying in his suite.”

“You won’t get him,” she said with a grin.

“What? He’s not some kind of animal house flunky,” Jonathan said.

“You won’t get him.”

Doug was their son, who had just started graduate school in California. He was going to be an MBA. He would be the first, as far as Jonathan knew, in the family.

“It would be nice, though. We haven’t really celebrated his getting into Stanford,” Jonathan said.

“No, that was tonight, too,” Elaine said. “That and the farm.”

Jonathan grinned. The farm was great news. They had been in a bidding war for some farmland in Northern Maine, an hour or so from their home in Bangor, and they learned on this late October day that they had won. When they opened the bookstores twenty years earlier, they never imagined being as successful as they found themselves now.

But some kind of dream had always been in the back of Jonathan’s mind. Retiring to this new farmland and raising horses was pretty close to what he imagined. Having a son in business school was another. He had even considered picking up cigar smoking, as a way to validate his success. Elaine killed that idea when he first mentioned it to her. She had doubled over in laughter.

Jonathan squinted at the headlights in the mirror again. They were closer. “Someone’s in a real hurry,” he said.

Elaine turned around. “Well, let ‘em pass. I’m in no hurry.”

The narrow road dropped down the hill to the river level, and this was the part Jonathan considered the most fun. It wound back and forth, closely following the bank of the Penobscot River. It was usually a wide expanse of blue-green water on the passenger side of the car. At this hour, nearly 10PM, it was just a black void beyond the guardrail.

Jonathan looked at the mirror again. The car behind them was obviously speeding. He rubbed his eyes.

“Are you alright?” Elaine asked him.

“Yeah. I didn’t drink nearly as much as you, dear.”

She laughed. Jonathan was just being himself, to worry about his capacity to drive after one flute of wine. “You’re fine,” she said.

“No, it’s not me. It’s this guy,” he said, nodding to the mirror. A large vehicle was speeding up behind them, and within seconds was riding their bumper. The headlights shone right into the back window.

“Jeez!” Jonathan yelled.

“Just let him pass,” Elaine said angrily. Jonathan knew she was pissed at the truck behind them, not him.

“Okay, okay,” he said. He slowed down and set the turn signal. There was no shoulder next to the car. Just a yellow stripe, a guardrail, and a cold river.

The lights behind them switched to high beams, and Jonathan waited for them to switch back. They didn’t.

Jonathan rolled down the window and waved the truck around. The truck stayed behind them, inches from the rear bumper. It matched their speed exactly.

“Oh, no,” Jonathan muttered under his breath.

“What? Oh, no, what?” Elaine asked him.

Jonathan looked at Elaine, with a chilled expression. There was so much she did not know, and now was a terrible time to start a conversation about it.

“Nothing. Just, this guy’s obviously got some kind of problem.”

He should have slowed down even more, he knew. Maybe the truck would pass him and speed away. But Jonathan knew there was another possibility if he let it pass. The truck might skid to a stop to block the road. Then, there would be less than a second to spin the car around and speed away. The bulky 4-door sedan would never be able to pull it off.

But there was one thing its V-8 engine could do. It could speed. And he was sure he could keep it on this narrow road. It was dry. He wasn’t drunk. There were only a couple of miles before he had a chance to get off of this road.

As they rounded a bend, Jonathan scanned the road ahead of them. It looked like it was clear. No telltale headlights. The truck behind them began to take the initiative, and veered into the right lane, but he had stayed with them too long. Jonathan was sure he could not let the truck near them. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

“What are you doing?” Elaine screamed. Jonathan saw the truck sputtering behind them. It hesitated, but began to pick up speed.

“Sorry, dear, there’s a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“If we can get to the village a few miles away, we can lose this guy.”

Elaine looked behind the car. The truck's headlights could be seen rounding a bend a hundred yards behind them. "Don't play with people like this," she yelled. "You don't know what people might do!"

"Elaine, no. I do know. That's the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I think these guys are somebody I know."

"What? C'mon! This is not some stupid car chase! Who could you know who would-"

"Elaine, you know them too!" he yelled.

The truck caught up to them, and its high-beams were glaring right into the back window again. They were nearing ninety miles per hour, and Jonathan felt like the car had more juice. The road was getting difficult to handle at this speed. He figured the car had a weight advantage. Ahead, a long straightaway went up a hill. This was where he could get some separation.

Elaine gripped the bar above the passenger seat, and put her other hand on the dashboard. Her mind was flying. Who could be after them? Who had Jonathan made an enemy of?

"Jon, I don't understand. Who do you think this is?"

"The Army."

"The Army," she muttered. Jonathan had never been in the military. There was only one other organization he had been involved with that was called an Army. She had been in it too. It was how they met. But that was so many years ago. Decades. Since then, the group disappeared.

At least that was what she thought. A few weeks ago, when she found airline tickets to Washington, DC. Jonathan said it was for a business symposium. But she knew better. He didn't take part in any of those things. He called them roundtables of psychosis. People trying to make themselves believe their own bullshit.

For a businessman, he was fairly atypical. Jonathan was a realist.

She had also seen that he was getting letters from one of Maine's senators; a senator who she knew served on an investigative committee dealing with counter-terrorism. She learned that only this morning, while flipping through the cable channels.

And she knew it was investigating a man whose name she remembered. Jonathan knew this name as well. Much better than her.

The Army.

"Drive!" she yelled.

The Buick took off up the straightaway. With the momentum they carried along the flat, the car quickly outpaced the truck behind them. It flew up the hill at nearly 100MPH. Jonathan saw the headlights fall away. He knew if the road was close to straight on the other side, they had a good chance to get away for good.

"Why did you get involved with these folks again?" Elaine demanded.

“I didn’t. It’s just that we are getting close, and they wanted testimony,” Jonathan told her.

“But you could have stayed out of it!” she yelled. “And what do you mean ‘we’?”

“Shit,” Jonathan thought. He had not told her about the work he was doing. It was better to leave her out of it.

“There’s more, ‘Laine, there’s too much to tell you right now.’”

“You’ll be talking later,” she said, looking behind the car. The truck had disappeared behind the lip of the hill.

The car started to shudder. “That’s it, that’s all she’s got,” Jonathan said. The Buick was doing 110MPH. The hill flattened out and started back down toward the river, and it looked like it was going to start winding again.

“Slow down!” Elaine screamed.

Jonathan tapped the brakes and brought the car back under a hundred. This was still too fast to take the downhill. He hoped the truck would have a lot more trouble.

He rode the brakes trying to get the car back under control. Through the open window, they both started to smell the acrid, burning brake pads. The car was getting easier to handle down the hill as it got down to about sixty. Still too fast. This was a 40MPH road. A tight curve was coming up, and Jonathan jammed on the brakes.

Nothing. The brakes went to the floor.

“Fuck!” Jonathan yelled.

“What?” Elaine screamed back at him.

“No brakes.”

They both watched the front end of the car scrape into the guardrail. Jonathan cut the wheel to the other side, knowing that whatever he did, he had to keep the car going forward and down the hill.

Even if he spun it to a stop without rolling the thing, they were dead.

The car glanced off the guardrail and careened across the road toward the brushy embankment on the other side. There was a mild ditch, and Jonathan spun the wheel back, to try to ride it like a track. The road started to flatten out here, as it dropped back down to the river level.

Jonathan never knew it, but the truck appeared at the top of the hill and was able to watch the Buick pinballing back and forth. It slowed down.

The ditch slowed the car down to about forty, and Jonathan stepped on the gas again to try to get back on the road. Suddenly, there was a huge bang, as the car’s front wheel dropped into a culvert. The entire front end hit the ground, and threw the engine off its mounts. The steering wheel suddenly spun to the right, breaking Jonathan’s thumb. He yelled and let go.

The car bounced out of the ditch and careened across the dark two-lane highway, with no brakes, and nobody steering. Jonathan and Elaine screamed as they saw the guardrail approach in the headlight beam. They hit it dead on, and it gave way.

The car left the road and cleared the broken riprap separating it from the river. It landed in the river with a massive splash, and came to a complete stop. The airbags shot out, and the steering wheel centerpiece bruised Jonathan's face and chest. Elaine's bag didn't push any plastic parts at her. Immediately, the water started pouring in through Jonathan's open window. The two of them didn't even realize it yet, but the water was almost freezing.

The car sank instantly to the bottom, at least twelve feet down. The car had already drifted a few feet south due to the river's powerful current. The lights shone on the rocky river bottom, and silvery fish could be seen swimming through the beam.

Jonathan struggled with his seat belt. He got the button off and realized he had hardly any breath left. He took a large gulp from the small pocket of air still in the cabin, and started to try to get Elaine's seat belt off.

Elaine was also struggling with her seatbelt button, but it would not press. She was almost out of air. Jonathan could not get the seatbelt to release. The water was sucking all of his strength. By now, both of them had realized how frigid it was. He went up for another breath, and knew the pocket would be gone the next time he tried.

Jonathan tried to think quickly. His mind was addled by cold and pain, and he could not think of what to do. His mind was a complete blank. He kept mindlessly struggling

with the seatbelt, when Elaine calmly grabbed his arm. He stopped and looked at her, and she simply smiled.

Jonathan tried to think of something. Anything. But he was out of breath, and so was she. Suddenly, he realized what she was doing. He smiled at her, and took her head in his hands. She gasped, and bubbles of air left her mouth. Jonathan had no more time. He backed out of the car and swam to the surface.

Jonathan took a large gulp as he reached the air. Now that he was soaked, he realized just how cold the air was on this late October night. Its chill seared his throat, and the water's cold curled his muscles as he swam to the nearest rock. It seemed like a hundred yards. When he finally got to the edge of the river, he looked up at the broken guardrail. The current had already carried him dozens of yards downstream.

Jonathan suddenly noticed the glare of headlights on the guardrail. He looked back at where the Buick must have been. He could see no light coming from the river. Whether the car's lights burned out, shut off, or he just couldn't see it, he did not know.

He looked up at the road again. A man was standing there at the break in the guardrail. The silhouette was of a rotund man, bearded, as far as he could tell. He was wearing a long coat and a hat. A fedora. An odd hat, but the man he knew was odd himself. It was more likely than not that this was exactly the man Jonathan thought it was.

He climbed out of the river and crouched behind the riprap. The man stood there at the guardrail, watching the river. He was there for a long time, it seemed. Jonathan was surprised that nobody else had come by yet. He chose this road because it was fun to drive, went the way he was going, and was relatively free of cars. He started to hope somebody would come by soon.

Jonathan could hear a large truck in the distance, somewhere down the river. It was grinding gears as it climbed a hill. The silhouette of the bearded man turned and went back to his truck, and backed away from the edge. He turned and continued up the road. Within a few minutes, he was gone.

Jonathan looked back out at the river. Everything was pitch black now. He was soaked and freezing. The only sounds were the rushing of the river's current and a truck grinding gears in the distance. It was getting closer.

Elaine had been with him since the beginning. Jonathan was a raw, ragged, radical man when she met him. He loved her almost from the first moment. For her, it took a lot longer. First, she had to tame him. Everything he was, and everything he had, was because of her guidance. Without her, he would still be that lost renegade.

Just like the bearded one driving away up the river.

Jonathan kneeled and wept as he thought of the last thing she said to him. It was silent, but he knew what it meant. It was her smile. She had infinite courage and presence of mind to smile at him like that. Every time he thought of her, it

would be that smile. He saw it when she was placing books on the shelf, teaching Doug how to serve, or riding the horses at Cunningham's ranch. Then he saw it in the last seconds of her life, when she wanted to tell him everything she could in one instant.

Now he would never see it again.

Before long, he wasn't weeping any more, he was screaming out loud toward the sky.

Later, after the arrival of the logging truck, the calling of the police, the tow trucks, and the recovery of Elaine's body, Jonathan was at the police station, where he decided to reach out to the one person he could talk to. The one thing in this world he could still help.

He left a message on an answering machine more than three thousand miles away. "Doug, please call me."