

"CLEVER, ENGROSSING, AND VERY SCARY.
I WAS UP UNTIL ONE IN THE MORNING."

—STEPHEN KING

A T H R I L L E R

INDIGO

— AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR —

GRAHAM JUEL



INDIGO

G r a h a m J o y c e



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This one's for the incomparable Tam and Jo Tansey

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ask scientists how many colors comprise the visible spectrum and they will answer: six. Ask any artist, and he or she will answer: seven. In seeking to resolve this conundrum, I plundered some extraordinary books along the way, including Aldous Huxley's *The Art of Seeing*, Steve Richards's *Invisibility*, Mahendra Solanki's *What You Leave Behind*, and Christopher Hibbert's *Rome*. A thank you also to members of the Indigo Society for opening my eyes; even to those of you who remain implacably opposed to the publication of this book.

Graham Joyce
Rome, 1999

PROLOGUE

OSPEDALE SAN CALLISTO, ROME, OCTOBER 31, 1997

A WHITE GRECO-ROMAN WEDDING CAKE OF A BUILDING, THE Ospedale San Callisto commanded spacious grounds in the suburbs some fifteen miles to the west of Rome. Jack parked his rented Fiat, courteously opened the passenger door for Louise, and together they walked through the avenue of slender cypress trees to the portico of the building.

As they climbed the marble steps, Jack said, "You know, you don't have to come in. You can wait in the car."

"It's my business as much as yours," she answered. It was true: It was why she had come back to Rome with him, and why she'd left Dory looking after Billy back in Chicago.

Their footsteps echoed over the immaculate polished floor of the admissions area, and after presenting themselves to the white-uniformed receptionist they were invited to sit on hard plastic chairs. Sunlight flooded through a floor-to-ceiling window, flaring on sterile marble surfaces. They waited in silence.

A doctor carrying a clipboard emerged from shadows at the far end of a long corridor. His approach was interminable and his shoes

squeaked at every step. He greeted them rather solemnly, motioning them to follow him all the way back along the immense corridor and up an impressive flight of marble stairs. The doctor sniffed once or twice as if trying to clear one of his nostrils. A couple of patients who were chatting on the stairs stopped conversing abruptly and stared at the visitors.

Guessing Jack's thoughts, the doctor said, "It's not a secure hospital. We don't restrict the patients. We have a kind of solarium, a sunroom. She likes to sit there. All day if we let her."

At last he opened a door to the sunroom. At first Jack thought the room was empty. The south-facing window was a gallery-style fretwork of decorative iron and glass. White wicker lounge chairs were scattered around the room. Then Jack noticed the young woman. She sat in one of the wicker chairs, on the edge of the seat, peering out the window, wearing Levi's jeans and a white T-shirt. Perhaps he'd expected her barefoot and in a straitjacket.

"*Buon giorno*, Natalie!" the doctor called, suddenly jolly. The woman didn't stir. He approached her, stroking her hair lightly from behind. "Today we got some visitors!" She glanced over her shoulder at them, and stood up. "I'll leave you alone," said the doctor, retreating. "I'll be around."

The young woman stepped forward. "Tim?"

She was skeletally thin, and her eyes were permanently narrowed, as if to shield herself from too much light. Her brown hair was tied back at the nape of her neck, though she freed it and shook it loose as she faced them.

"No, I'm not—" Jack started to say, but she pressed a finger to her lips and hissed loudly. She moved across the room and, taking Louise's hand, slowly and luxuriously sniffed the back of it. Then she bent down and began sniffing at Louise's knee. Louise didn't flinch as the woman sniffed the length of her thigh and around her

crotch, keeping her nose just an inch from the fabric of Louise's skirt. Satisfied, she moved over to Jack, sniffing at his waist, then his flank, and, finally, almost but not quite nuzzling his armpit. Jack could only glance at Louise in desperation.

"My name is Jack Chambers. Tim was my father. This is Louise, his daughter."

"You're drenched in it," the woman said.

"In what?"

"Indigo. Wolf gland. Both of you. Mostly you. Is he coming? Is Tim coming?" She began circling Jack, very slowly.

"Tim died," said Jack. "He died a while ago. Anyway, he left you some money. I'm here to see that you get it."

"Do you know where they all went?"

"Who? Where who went?"

"All of them. There were lots of us. Then there was only me. I thought you'd come here to tell me where they all went. It's been such a disappointment. To be the only one." She blew gently, steadily, on Jack's face. Then she moved over to Louise, and began circling again.

"Natalie," said Louise, "do you know where you are?"

Natalie recoiled slightly, seeming to find the question patronizing and stupid. "Of course. I'm in Indigo. Which is why you can't see me."

ONE

O'HARE AIRPORT, CHICAGO, ONE MONTH EARLIER

A NERVOUS FLYER, JACK CHAMBERS WAS ON HIS FIFTH SCOTCH AND soda when the plane began its descent to O'Hare. Stewardesses made scissor-like strides up and down the aisles, too fast to be asked for another scotch. Jack drained his plastic cup, wiped his corrugated brow with a tiny lemon-scented paper towel, and settled back to fret about the Birtles matter.

It was a good time for all this to happen, he decided. He'd left behind in London only one outstanding case in a frankly declining business. He had instructed his secretary, Mrs. Price, a lady of pensionable years, to take on any new cases but to stall while he was away, and to process the Birtles case. He had neglected to tell her the circumstances under which he'd left things.

Chicago, then, early October, sunlight like salt and lime outside the terminal. Jack shivered in the crisp, cold air, feeling a little lost. Before the taxi stand was a row of curious kiosks, inside which earmuffed female attendants stared dead ahead, bored into narcosis. Like the cab drivers, they had a chopped, bruised look, as if smart-

ing from the sharp wind. Jack would soon find that all Chicagoans looked as though they'd taken a few jabs in a boxing ring. He tapped on the tough Plexiglas window of one kiosk and a woman minimally inclined her head toward a waiting yellow taxi.

It was a long drive into Chicago, with the taxi meter ticking away to doom. A great canyon, but of glass, steel, and prestressed concrete instead of sedimentary rock, rose gradually on either side; glinting, mercurial traffic formed the riverbed. Instead of caves and hemp ladders in the canyon walls, there would be elevators and carpeted lobbies. In one of those lobbies on West Wacker Drive he met Harvey Michaelson, the man who had originally telephoned him in England.

"When I called, I wasn't aware that you didn't know. I didn't expect to be breaking news."

"We hadn't seen each other in over fifteen years. We were not close," Jack told the lawyer.

—Michaelson ushered Jack into his plush, oak-paneled office. He offered him fresh coffee, sandwiches, and pastries, asked about the flight, the weather in England. He treated Jack to an account of his visit, when he was a student, to London. His largesse was so great and his manner so relaxed that Jack calculated he must be paying handsomely for Michaelson's time. He stole a glance at his watch, just to let the attorney know he knew.

Michaelson wore gold cufflinks. "As I told you on the phone, you're more of an executor than a beneficiary." In England, no one wore cufflinks anymore, neither aristocrat nor underclass; here they seemed to signal a status that went with perfectly capped teeth, smooth hair, and a polished beech nameplate on the office door. "Oh, you do get something, conditional on you overseeing the will. There's a lot to sort out."

"Bet I don't get as much as you out of this," Jack said, and Michaelson laughed, even though they both knew it wasn't a joke.

Despite being forthright about the money coming to him, Jack wasn't a callous person. He just hated his father. He didn't have a psychological complaint about this. He couldn't understand why Freud made such a fuss. Jack hated his father and assumed that his father had in turn hated his.

Michaelson said, "Extraordinary man, your father."

"He was a shit."

Michaelson laughed again, but let it die when he saw Jack wasn't rolling with it. "Not the easiest man to get along with," he conceded. "Did he give you a rough time?"

With the lawyer's eyes opened wide in anticipation of an answer Jack saw that the sockets were just a little too red: late nights in dark places. "I don't want to talk about it." Not at these prices he didn't.

But Michaelson wasn't slow. "I can relate to that. Let's check out the paperwork, shall we?"

The paperwork, when it was laid out, was considerable. Jack's role as executor of the will was complicated. In order to receive a handsome executor's fee, he had to dispose of assets and deal with some curious provisions. There was an obscure manuscript to be published with funds made available. The will also required Jack to trace someone called Natalie Shearer, who was the main beneficiary.

"I've made some initial efforts at tracking down Shearer. Want me to keep on it?"

"Please. It's too much like the work I do at home."

"Oh? What is that?"

"I'm a process server." This was close enough to the legal world for Michaelson to understand, but far enough down the ladder for him not to want to ask any more. Jack wished he hadn't mentioned it. It was like a sandwich-board man hinting to an advertising executive that they were in the same line of business.

"Interesting. This is a set of copies of all the paperwork. You'll

want to go over them in your own time. Where are you staying in Chicago?"

"I came directly from the airport. I thought you might recommend an inexpensive hotel."

"The hell with that. I'll have my assistant check you into the Drake. You get to draw your expenses from the will. It's provided."

"But if I read this correctly," said Jack, "anything left over after these provisions goes to me. So it may be my money after all."

Michaelson smiled indulgently. "Then you've got to pay inheritance tax, not to mention . . . look here." The lawyer then explained to Jack how he could actually make money by staying in a more expensive hotel, and Jack saw why his father had employed the man in the first place.

"And if I fill the room with call girls do I make still more money?"

Michaelson blinked.

"I'm kidding," said Jack. "Really I am." That's lawyers for you, he thought: If you don't laugh at their fees, they won't laugh at your jokes.

TWO

FOLLOWING MICHAELSON'S SUGGESTION, JACK CHECKED INTO THE opulent Drake on North Michigan Avenue. The Drake had a palm court centerpiece lobby and an air of grande dame gentility reminiscent of a film set. The ghosts of a tuxedoed four-piece orchestra played invisibly and the receptionist treated him like a VIP. Flaking from jet lag, he dined alone in the hotel. The waiters were so attentive he thought they must have him confused with a celebrity guest.

He showered, wrapped himself in a hotel bathrobe, and poured a glass of Dalwhinnie. He left the TV on quietly in the background, comfort against loneliness, and spread Michaelson's papers across the emperor-sized bed. The old man's will was professionally drawn, brief, and relatively uncomplicated. The file also contained a bound manuscript and a collection of typed essays, all awaiting publication. There was a further portfolio of assets drawn up by Michaelson. Jack's father had owned an apartment on Lake Shore Drive, which Jack already knew about, and a house in Rome, which he didn't. There were investments in both U.S. and Italian companies and a decent amount of capital. Jack smacked his lips at the

Dalwhinnie, aware that none of this was coming his way. Perhaps he should have been more persistent, or even patient, with the old man.

But no proportion of the money would have been worth it. It suddenly occurred to Jack that he hadn't even asked Michaelson how the old man had died. That was how much he cared.

. . .

Jack had last seen his father in New York almost twenty years ago, when Jack was twenty-one. Some months before that, having abandoned Jack's mother when their son was just five years old, Tim Chambers had turned up bearing gifts appropriate for a young man's coming-of-age. Jack, studying geology at the University of Sheffield, was crossing the campus shortly before his final exams. A tall man in a pale suit and wearing a turtleneck sweater had stepped from a doorway. He was carrying a bottle of champagne, a book of poetry, and a sealed envelope. He said, "Jack Chambers?"

"Yes."

"I'm your father."

Jack had blinked at the man. He *might* have been the gray figure Jack remembered from when he was five. In some ways he looked too young. His hair was unfashionably long for a man approaching fifty, silvering, swept back in a leonine mane. The Mediterranean tan suggested a social standing beyond anything Jack's mother experienced. There was something else. Though otherwise expensively attired, he was wearing neither shoes nor socks. Jack looked at the bare feet and said, "I've got an exam in half an hour."

The man looked sadly at the champagne in his hand. "Timing. Never a strong point with me. Can I meet you afterward?"

Jack arranged to meet him on the steps of the examination hall. He completed his exam in a kind of dream. It was as if his head were a helium-filled balloon, floating upward and looking down on the scribbling figure below. Later, he would blame his father's dramatic

intervention for his poor results, but at the time he thought he'd done rather well.

When it was all over he came out of the exam room and his father said, "How did it go?" Jack had the distinct impression that the man had been waiting on the steps, champagne and gifts in hand, for the entire duration of the exam. Three hours. Barefoot.

"Not bad."

"Splendid. Spot of lunch?"

Tim Chambers led him to a sporty Alfa Romeo, laid the champagne and gifts on the back seat, and drove them to a French restaurant. Jack couldn't help glancing at the bare feet as the man toed the pedals. The maitre d', too, noticed the bare feet, but chose to say nothing. Jack fingered the heavy silver cutlery and tried to take his cues from the man frowning into the menu. His eyes also fell on a small bone-colored disk hanging from his father's neck like some kind of amulet.

"Bad luck," his father said.

"What?"

"Having an exam on your birthday."

"They've got to fall on someone's birthday."

"How philosophical of you. Geology, did you say? Should have studied philosophy."

"Do you feel guilty? Is that why you've suddenly appeared?"

The wine steward arrived before an answer. Expertly, Tim Chambers ordered. "Guilt is an utterly useless emotion; one that I've cleared from my life. You might think about doing the same." Another waiter hovered, pen poised over his writing tablet, but Chambers ignored him. "Curiosity and concern: the first, naturally, to see what sort of a man you've made, and so far I like what I see; the second to perform at least a vestige of paternal assistance if I can, and if at all you'll let me. Tell the waiter why we shan't have pheasant in almond sauce."