

1

When they were children, Richie had adored the sisters. They made the air electric with their shining hair and calmed him with their lavender and rose tee shirts. Colors a boy could love only from afar. Even now that the bullies worked for him, he would never wear pink. Now he had a helicopter pad and a safe room, an organic vegetable garden, a team of ex-militia patrolling the boundaries of his property, and a security system created by former Mossad operatives.

He had all this, but there were still rules. One rule was that he must never appear weak. He must avoid using his cane. When he did use it, he intimated to his employees that his lameness was from a youthful brawl or sometimes an adventure in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Whatever. Poke and Bobby Mack didn't fact-check.

He picked up Poke and Bobby Mack after the collapse of the ramshackle Mountain Militia plot to blow up the FBI fingerprint headquarters. He bought property from the National Alliance just as it was disintegrating. Had he time enough, he might have done something with all the inchoate energy and melodramatic plotting of those right-wing hangers-on, not that he ever believed any of their racist nonsense. There was no evidence he had ever observed that white men were smarter, stronger, or in any way superior to other kinds of men. All men, as Richie saw it, were venal, and most were stupid.

What interested him about all these little groups was how they needed someone to follow. He had wanted to be that one. The one who scanned the horizon with cool objectivity and made what he wanted to happen happen. He was good at strategy. He had some money, what his father left and what he had invested. He might have been a power. He might have used the Mountain Militia and even leftovers from the National Alliance. But there wasn't enough time, at least not enough time when he

1

would be physically strong enough to manage them.

He was good at managing people, he believed, although he did better with people he hired than with people he married. He had not been heartbroken or particularly surprised when his third wife left, reminding him that Thai wives were no more loyal than Americans, but it was clear that he should buy what he wanted. So he paid for and managed his sex workers just as he paid for and managed his doctors and his majordomo/cook Enrique, who had the bottomless supply of putative cousins in Mexico.

His only faith was that there was no such thing as altruism, with a handful of exceptions, outliers in the universe, particularly Dinah.

When he was small, Richie carried quarters and candy bars for the big boys. They would stop shoving him long enough to stare in wonderment, take the candy and coins, and then go back to pushing him or maybe pulling his pants down to see if he was a boy, or, equally likely, ignoring him. Being ignored was the worst. As a child, he always preferred battery to loneliness.

His mother bought him expensive clothes, not appreciated by the other kids. When his glasses got broken and his knees bruised, she sent him to private boarding schools as if there were no bullies there.

His mother never learned the money lesson, that it has limits. She married his father when he was already sick, and Richie had been born in the first year of their marriage. They all knew that she was waiting for his father to die so they could live with his money but without him. Richie felt that he and his mother had both been pathetic in their dependence on money. She used money to buy friends, and he used

Thus, when he was treated kindly by Dinah and Grace for absolutely no reason, it was a great widening of the mysteries of the universe. Thirty-five years later, he still didn't believe in altruism, but he did believe in Dinah and how she had refused his quarters and only accepted one candy bar for

herself and one for Grace.

Once he had been inside Dinah's warmth, when they were in their teens, at a time when she was welcoming everyone, without checking the cost, out of generosity and, he thought, because none of them could really touch her. All he ever wanted, all he wanted now, was to feel Dinah's warmth.

The way it worked when they were small was that Richie played with Grace while Dinah gave instructions. Usually they started with action figures and dolls, sometimes board games, sometimes building forts or digging holes in the garden. The garden was at Lockwood, which was Richie's father's property. Sometimes they played in the Lockwood carriage house where the girls lived. From time to time, quietly, they played in the big house.

In the big house, they always went to the train rooms, which were next door to his father's bedroom and dressing room. The trains were the only pleasant thing he ever associated with his father. Richie understood better now how being ill can make you resentful, irritable, and full of rage, but it didn't mitigate his hatred for his father.

His father had loved trains as a boy and insisted that Richie love them too. What Richie liked was turning on the power and the spotlights, and the engines whirring and running through two whole rooms, everything in Richie's power, the villages with lights, the train bridges, the signal arms that went up and down, the hooting engines.

After his father died, he had parties and his mother had parties, and she redecorated, and he liquidated the trains for capital to invest in pills and marijuana that he sold at school. But back when he was seven and eight and nine, the best thing in his life was to have Dinah and Grace in the train rooms. Dinah liked saving the toy people from disasters. Grace and Richie liked making the disasters: train wrecks and volcanos and tornados and tidal waves.

Dinah would say, "Okay, the volcano finished erupting. Now it's time to save the people."

Grace would lay out the wounded in rows. "This one is burnt to a crisp," she would say, "but this one is only half-burnt. This one is dead and this one is alive."

Richie ran around the train tables moving things and making explosion noises. He could still feel that incredible freedom, the explosions low in his throat, rumbling through his body. Every once in a while he would stop and stare at the sisters for a long time: he remembered every detail of them. Grace had a small white face and a lot of thick brown hair. Dinah had dark honey hair just a little darker than her skin.

"Okay Richie," Dinah would say. "Your job is to set up the hospital train that has to bring all the wounded people over the mountains for me to fix up."

"Can we have a funeral for the dead ones?" said Grace.

"No," said Dinah. "None of them died."

"Yes they did!" cried Grace. "They really did die!"

"My father is going to be dead soon," Richie said. "We're going to have the biggest funeral in the world and limousines for everyone and you're invited."

"No," said Dinah. "No funerals. Some of them are hurt very very badly, but no one is going to die."

Sometimes, though, she did let them have a funeral, a dump car full of plastic bodies and a burial in one of the train tunnels, and then, miraculously, just as they were thrusting them deep into the mountain, Dinah would declare them alive again. Grace struggled to keep them dead, and Dinah brought them back to life. When all the dead were alive again, Grace would burst into tears and laughter because she was actually glad that Dinah could do this, and really only wanted to be sure that Dinah was powerful enough to make it happen. Then Dinah would hug her, and if Richie was lucky, him too.

Once he smacked Grace when she was being particularly stubborn. He immediately started to run away for fear of Dinah's anger. "I'll fix it! I'll fix it!" he remembered yelling as Grace cried and Dinah

moved toward him. “Hit me back! I’ll do anything!”

What he meant was, he’d do anything just so they didn’t leave.

“No more hitting!” said Dinah, hugging Grace. “No more hitting allowed.”

“Okay okay!” cried Richie.

“Say you’re sorry, Richie.”

“Okay okay! I’m sorry Grace! I’m totally sorry! I’ll kill myself!”

“Stop that, Richie,” said Dinah. “We don’t talk like that,” and he felt so much better. Grace rolled her eyes at him and snuggled against Dinah so he would know who Dinah loved best and who she took care of first.

“We need bandages for the hurt people,” said Dinah. “Do you think there are bandages?”

Richie knew exactly what to do. He sneaked out into the hall, to the back entrance to his father’s bathroom and from there to the dressing room where his father had special thin drawers in the bureau for the monogrammed handkerchiefs he never used. Richie opened a drawer and stole two handkerchiefs, watching the door to the bedroom all the time, expecting his father to rise there huge and vengeful.

Dinah approved, and sent him after the scissors to finish the job—oh, that was a feeling that ran from his collarbone to his toes, stirring all the way through him. He remembered that above all, the feeling of her approval, down his spine deep into his butt crack, starting back along the center line of his balls and up his penis.

He wanted that feeling so much, he had wanted it for his whole life. He wanted it now.

He understood very well that he was trying to recapture something that he never really had. He understood that it was a long shot, to get her back, but he was making his plans carefully. He would give the long shot his best shot. He prepared a house for her and her family, a Craftsman-style cottage with a stone foundation. There was a space for an herb garden already turned over and ready for planting.

Bedrooms for the whole family, a schoolroom with a miniature laboratory for teaching her children science, high-speed internet, beautiful blue and green globes with interior lighting.

It was the one thing, he believed, that would save him. To have Dinah.

