

Chapter 5

Spiro's Pancake House

Elliot heard about Barbara Baker from Olympia, who ran Spiro's Pancake House. She hadn't seen it happen, but she had heard the ambulance and the commotion, and she had taken out the binoculars from under the cash register. She'd seen Astrid cross the street, and thank god, Olympia said to Elliot, thank god, your mother is the perfect person for that type of thing. Everyone knew that Astrid was capable in trying circumstances. Then Olympia had watched the EMTs lift Barbara's body onto the gurney. Elliot stared out the window as Olympia spoke, imagining the scene.

"And my mother was right there?" He pointed with his fork. "Right there?"

Olympia nodded. She was Spiro's granddaughter and had babysat for the Strick children, which meant that she always asked personal questions and lingered too long after pouring coffee, but Elliot liked the food at Spiro's better than anywhere else in town and so he came anyway. Why were there binoculars under the cash register? Elliot wasn't surprised—Clapham was that sort of place, entirely too small for even

the semblance of privacy. “Right there. She probably felt the breeze, you know, of the bus going so fast. You know that feeling? When you’re sitting there, and a truck goes by, and the whole street rumbles?”

Elliot felt his body give an involuntary shake. “God,” he said. “It could have been her. It could have been my mother.”

Olympia tucked her lips into her mouth and bowed her head. “It’s a tragedy.”

“I would be an orphan,” Elliot said.

Olympia put her free hand on his shoulder and left it there for a few seconds before turning her attention to her other customers.

At least twice a week, Elliot pretended to have early-morning site meetings so that he could leave home sooner and eat breakfast on his own. Meals at home were often a disaster, with chunks of oatmeal on surfaces that weren’t even remotely close to where the oatmeal had been ingested, and wet bits of scrambled egg floating in his coffee. And that was on days when the twins were more or less well behaved. He had never screamed the way Aidan and Zachary screamed, never—if he had, Astrid would have put him out on the front step. Elliot and Wendy were clearly doing things wrong, but he didn’t know how to fix it. Wendy had the patience in the family. It wasn’t sexist to say that. Surely the boys would grow out of their insanity eventually, and Elliot would again be in awe of them, as he was when they were first born and he was sure that their birth was the crowning achievement of his life, having had a part in their creation, even if it had taken a few doctors’ assistance and, of course, Wendy’s body to hold and carry and deliver. Maybe it was a blessing of childhood that most people couldn’t remember much before they were five—what good would it do to remember life as a savage toddler, totally divorced from societal norms? It was as if each human evolved from being a chimpanzee in a single lifetime. No one wanted to remember the jungle.

Even when he came for lunch, like today, Elliot always sat at the counter and he always ordered the same thing—eggs over easy, extra bacon, wheat toast, no potatoes. Olympia filled and refilled his water glass every time he took a sip, the cold silver pitcher sweating drops onto the stack of paper napkins next to him. WCLP was playing over the diner’s radio, as always, and had just switched from *Local News with Wesley Drewes* to *Clap If You’ve Heard This One*, the trivia show hosted by Jenna Johansson, one of his younger brother Nicky’s former girlfriends. Clapham was like that—everyone was someone’s high school love, or someone else’s mother, or your cousin’s best friend from camp. Elliot liked where he was from, and *being* where he was from, almost always, but he did occasionally have daydreams that were just like his own life only with no wife or kids and he went through an entire day without bumping into six people he’d known since childhood, without knowing exactly where and when he would run into them. In general, though, he thought that the longer he’d known someone, and whether they knew his family, increased the chances of people hiring him and so Clapham seemed like the best place to be.

“Large hazelnut coffee, four sugars, lot of cream,” Olympia said. “That was Barbara. For a little while, maybe ten years ago, she was into the egg whites, but not anymore. My brother said they stopped the bus just past the country fairgrounds. They set up two cop cars, and he could have crashed right through them, but he didn’t. He just slowed right down.”

“It was the actual bus driver? The school bus driver?” Elliot dragged some bacon through the yolk on his plate. He was still thinking about how many times he and his mother and his wife and his sister parked on the roundabout every week, how easily it could have been his mother,

just now, flattened into oblivion. When his father died, Elliot had been too young to have accomplished anything—he'd been a larva, still full of limitless potential. That had been the tragedy, all the things that his father wouldn't see. But if his mother died, now, today, it would be a tragedy of another kind. What more had he become? Sure, he had a wife, he had children, he had a business, a house, but Elliot thought that by the time he was in his forties he would have *more*. The cruelest part of becoming middle-aged was that it came on the heels of one's own youth, not some other, better youth, and that it was too late to start over.

"Who else would it have been?" Olympia's grandfather had come from Greece, but she was born in Clapham. She was older than Elliot by ten years and had children of her own, one of whom had just graduated from high school, which Elliot only knew because her cap-and-gown photo was thumbtacked just behind Olympia's head. At least he thought it was Olympia's daughter. They were a huge family, and Olympia had a couple of sisters, Elliot knew—the graduate could belong to any of them. He should know, but he didn't.

"I thought it was someone who just wanted to take a joyride, you know, a kid. A drug addict, I don't know! I didn't think it would be the actual bus driver." Elliot shoveled half a piece of toast into his mouth. "That's fucking scary, excuse my French. My niece is going to be on that bus in a few weeks, my kids are going to take that bus someday. I took that bus."

Olympia crossed herself airily and then kissed her fingers. "They'll have a different driver by then," she said. Someone shouted from the kitchen, and Olympia looked at Elliot's plate. "Want more toast?" He nodded, and she pushed through the swinging door back into the kitchen.

Spiro's was fifty years old, maybe more. Some years ago, after her grandfather died, Olympia had replaced some of the booths in the back, and a few years after that, she'd replaced the stools at the counter and the counter itself. The jukebox was the same one that had been there since

Elliot's childhood, as was the ancient silver milkshake machine, which looked like a giant metal toilet plunger but made the town's best shakes and floats, hands down. Wendy, Elliot's wife, had never particularly taken to Spiro's, because she thought it was grungy, but most people acknowledged it as one of the main centers of town life, and it was where Elliot often met clients, to prove that he was Clapham through and through.

Some people wanted to get out of their hometowns, in order to prove themselves. That was the old-fashioned way, to set out for the big city on foot and drive home in a Rolls-Royce. Elliot felt exactly the opposite. What would success matter, if it happened somewhere else? He wanted witnesses. That was why, when the building on the corner came up for sale again, he'd bought it. Him, Elliot Strick. He'd bought it with every penny of his money and he'd routed it through a corporation and an address that belonged to Wendy's parents in California. It was his to figure out, his to build. And when he did, everyone would know it. It made his stomach hurt to think about it.

Elliot swiveled around on his stool, the same way he had as a kid. Unlike some of the other babysitters, who had been inattentive and careless, more interested in the snacks in the pantry and the cable TV, Olympia had been tough. In some ways, it was a relief, knowing that she had boundaries, and rules, just like their mother. Some of Elliot's friends had had mothers who went barefoot, mothers whose silky bras were slung over the shower rod, mothers who left candles burning after they went up to bed, and they made Elliot so nervous that he couldn't go to their houses anymore.

His phone buzzed on the counter, and Elliot flipped it over. His sister, Porter. *Just checking in, are you coming to see Cece today? Also hi you smell like poop.* Elliot rolled his eyes and chuckled, despite himself. He typed back: *Are we required to go to the Big House to welcome her? I have a meeting, boys have jujitsu. Wendy is bugging me.*

Elliot watched the three little dots appear and disappear, as if his sister was starting and restarting whatever she had to say. They weren't particularly nice to each other; were any adult siblings? They saw each other when their mother told them to. Elliot didn't care, it was fine. Finally Porter wrote back: *She's a teenage girl and I promise does not give a shit if you show up. This weekend is fine. If you wait longer than that, Astrid will murder you in your sleep.*

Elliot didn't respond. Olympia pushed back through the swinging door and slid another neat pile of buttered toast beside his mostly empty plate. Once, when he was probably seven or eight, Olympia had caught Elliot cheating at Monopoly, and she had banished him to the backyard like a dog with fleas. He'd had a bit of a crush, then.

"I heard that the building on the corner got sold again, did you hear that?" Olympia craned her neck to look over her patrons' heads, out the window, and across the roundabout. "I wish whoever it was would just get it over with. What's the point, you know? Buy it, turn it into a bank, whatever, just do it, you know?" She shook her head.

"You don't want it to be a bank. What do you think it should be?" Elliot asked.

"I'd like a really good Mexican restaurant, I guess. Or Japanese. But I'd settle for anything, as long as it wasn't another diner."

"We don't need another diner," Elliot said.

"We sure don't," Olympia said, and winked.

Elliot finished his coffee and sat. His meeting didn't start for another half hour, and Wendy was in charge of getting the boys where they needed to go that afternoon. Traffic was moving normally outside. It was only hours ago, Barbara and the bus. Elliot watched the cars go around and around, himself with no particular place to go.