

Chapter 1

I hate to admit it, even to myself, but after meeting Grigori Dyzwala I realize I am an ordinary man trapped inside an extraordinary imagination. If that weren't enough, meeting his wife, the enchanting temptress, Phoebe, swept away all traces of my ego.

The total annihilation of the ego is at once exhilarating and depressing. I have become a shadow of a man. Being a shadow, I am able to lurk about unnoticed. But once in awhile, I like to step out of the shadows, I like to get noticed. And thoughts of her are always lurking about. I can't get her off my mind. I try because I know thoughts of her will lead me into danger. Is she worth the risk? Yes, she is. But it doesn't matter because I have no choice.

Everything happens quite by chance. I try to believe otherwise, but I can't. I just can't believe in destiny. Or things happening for a reason. I wish destiny had brought Phoebe and me together, but it had no part in our meeting. None.

I met Grigori first. The eccentric Grigori. The mad Ukranian, this is how I think of him. But herein lies the danger. Grigori is not someone I want to mess with. Another thing I have had to admit to myself is that I am not made for this. But time and time again I am pulled back into my dreams of her. When I'm not thinking of her, time seems to stand still.

Time. Another wonderment. Time and chance. These are the hollow things that inhabit my world of shadows. When I'm not dreaming.

My story begins before I meet Grigori and Phoebe. It begins with an obsession with the footsteps. Belle's footsteps. When I first become aware of the footsteps, I am not aware of Belle. She comes to me later. Out of the shadows...

Early morning. In the darkness, the footsteps awaken me from my trance. I don't know how long I've been staring up at the eerie pattern of light and shadow cast on the ceiling by the

streetlight below, but when the footsteps come, I half expect to see ripples in the ceiling as she moves across the floor above me. I wonder who she is, my upstairs neighbor. She is a woman, I'm sure of this, the sound of her high heels across the hardwood floor in the apartment upstairs tells me this.

Why does she insist on wearing high heels inside her apartment? And why so many trips back and forth from her bedroom to the kitchen?

Back and forth, back and forth, what is she looking for? Did she forget something in the bedroom or from the bedroom does she rush to the kitchen to rescue something boiling over on the stove? Whatever compels her, she moves about her apartment more than I move about mine. But then I think, she is a working woman. I picture her bending in close to the bathroom mirror to put the finishing touches on her lovely face. Ah, what a lovely face. Dark hair, dark mysterious eyes, eyes that will swallow me up with one glance. And then she has to rush around to put everything else in order before rushing off to work.

In the mornings, I swing my bare feet out of bed to go to the bathroom to pee, to the kitchen to put on coffee, and then to my writing desk. When the coffee is ready, I walk back to the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee. I am a writer. Every day I spend five or six hours here at my desk, while my upstairs neighbor rushes to get ready for a job that requires her to get up at an ungodly hour to rush about her apartment. When I settle in at my desk, I listen for her footsteps. She is gone.

One day I'll rush upstairs, knock on her door, and as she stands in the doorway, grab her by the throat and choke her until her eyeballs pop out of their sockets. But I wouldn't do that, I am not a violent man.

Instead, I'll rush upstairs, knock on her door, and before she has a chance to react, throw her down on the nearest table and make wild, passionate love to her – until her eyeballs pop out of their sockets. Afterward, we'll fall madly in love, and after a month or two, she'll ask me to move in with her, where I will continue to write, now happily in love, but only after I throw *all* her high heels out the apartment window.

Since our apartment overlooks one of the main streets in town, some passerby, some oppressed woman on her way to her dreadful job in a downtown office building, will scoop them up, and with arms overflowing with treasure, rush home to exclaim to her groaning husband, clutching his throbbing head between his hands as he sits on their seedy living room couch, “Henry, you won't believe what I found!”

And then I think about the hunter, the wolf, hunting noiselessly, never giving away anything, until he finds what he is looking for. He pursues with a single purpose: to kill his prey. This is what he does, this is his sole purpose in life, this is what warms his blood.

After I am established in her heart, and in her apartment, ours will be a life of laughing and making love and writing and enjoying the pleasures of life, pursuing our pleasures as the wolf pursues his prey.

The sun is barely up and I peer into the semidarkness of my small apartment. The novel I'm working on has come to a standstill, I just can't seem to move forward with it. As I move farther and farther from its center, from *my* center, everything speeds up, everything begins to whirl out of control until it tears apart. I have reached a point in my novel where I must make some major decisions. For one, I have to do something with Dunbar, and even though I know that he needs to die because he's a scoundrel and an incurable womanizer, I enjoy his company.

Even before I began writing the novel, I knew Dunbar would have to die because his nature drives him to that inevitable end. But still, I hate to forsake him now. Maybe I can figure out a way to save him. Besides, Rebecca, his wife, isn't as pure as she pretends to be. She is secretly in love with Tomas, the priest. And Tomas, although he sees her only in the confessional and, on occasion, during Mass, feels a scurry of pleasure whenever he is around her and must fight his strong and amorous feelings for her. I haven't brought Tomas out of the confessional yet, but he is about to make his entrance. All the reader knows so far is Rebecca has an unnatural infatuation with the church and spends much of her time in confession. Tomas has remained hidden behind the veil of the confessional, but for Dunbar's sake, the time has come to expose him to the light of day.

Men and women of God, clinging to a deep sense of devotion, are still human beings, plagued by the same human emotions and conflicts plaguing the rest of us. As a fatalist, Dunbar deserves some degree of redemption.

I need to think this through. Whenever I get stuck, it is best to get away from it, and my preferred means of escape is running. Some people turn to their faith, some to their addictions, I turn to long, monotonous miles of running. In this way, I quiet my unrest.

Stepping out onto the narrow balcony, the gentle sunlight touches my face. Once back inside my cramped apartment, my mind is set on a run. Running tights, long sleeve shirt, pullover, running shoes, wool cap. Grabbing my sunglasses and GPS watch from the nightstand, I hustle down the stairs to the lobby and out into the winter sunshine, my breath coming in quick bursts of steam in the January morning. The short walk to the corner traffic light is all the warm-up I need and I check to make sure my GPS watch is set.

Three and a half miles to McIntosh Lake through the bitter cold. As I approach the lake, the mountains appear abrupt and snow-capped in the breathless sky, and for a moment I believe I can reach out and touch them although they are miles away. McIntosh Lake is located on the northwestern fringe of Longmont with a spectacular view of Longs Peak for which Longmont is named. A lot of people refer to Longmont as Boulder's ugly stepsister, but I don't see it that way at all. As Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, I say of Boulder, "there is no there there." The red flagstone buildings at the University of Colorado have a place, but the rest of the city, hurled against the Flatirons like pancake batter, oozes onto the valley floor below.

Even in early January, the sun is intense along the front range of the Rocky Mountains. The sun spreads its warmth, bringing out several people to walk the pathway around the lake.

In the white stillness, through blasts of my own breath, I wonder about the lives of the people I pass along the way. *What inspires or frightens them, what occupies their minds, what do other people think about?* Thoughts shuffle in and out at rapid-fire pace. Is this true of everyone? Does everyone wonder about the other people who pass quite unexpectedly in and out of his life? Or am I alone in this? I wonder if I am alone in everything I do (or don't do) in my life.

Recalling my childhood, I wanted to be someone else, *anyone* else. I envied all of my childhood friends because their lives seemed more interesting than mine. Or less tormented. Why were my early years filled with so much torment and anguish? What was I looking for? And still today, I continue to ask myself unanswerable questions. Certainly not out of any belief that answers to these questions will bring me relief from my anguish. Everyone clings to something, to some kind of hope. In my experience, settling on an answer to an unanswerable question is the worst kind of compromise and, in all honesty, brings about even more perplexing questions.

But I don't have time to analyze my childhood. Not now. I need to come up with a believable way to get Rebecca and Tomas together. Besides, recalling my childhood always disrupts the quiet rhythm of my footsteps along the frozen path around the lake. Rebecca and Tomas. She sees him almost every day in the confessional, but how can they get together outside of church?

It shouldn't be that difficult, but yet Tomas *is* a man of God, and as such, he's held in high regard by the people inside the church and, in many ways, by people outside the church. After all, the Catholic Church casts a wide net into the ocean of man.

On the other hand, it is only a matter of God. Why are so many of us not only in awe but in fear of God, and in a lot of cases, fearful and suspicious of His most loyal followers? They aren't invested with some higher power. As far as I can tell, they aren't any different than the rest of us.

After my son's death, I had felt godlike. I had lost the one thing that meant more to me than anything else in the world, so I believed there was nothing else to lose. For a time, I felt as if I *were* God: invincible and indestructible, totally in control of the universe, a universe that I had created, and yet, in control of nothing, since that universe had spun out of control. Why shouldn't I be God? I had as much right to this authority as anyone else. Besides, who among us really knows who God is? Since none of us knows who He is, who has the right to argue against the notion that I am God? No one. I had as much right to be God as anyone else. And if I weren't God, who was I? And why go on? This was the one question I had to put to rest, the one question I had to force out of my mind: why go on?

As in a trance, one foot in front of the other, I push on, moving monotonously around the quiet lake, until it occurs to me, if a Supreme Being does exist, who I shall call God, and if He actually created the world in which I exist, I could no more know and understand Him than

Dunbar, Rebecca, and Tomas (and the God that Tomas believes in), who exist wholly in a world I have created, could know and understand me. I didn't create them so they would worship me, nor from any false hope they would come to understand me, but rather I created them simply because I have this urge to create, that's all. If not through what I imagine, since everything that used to make sense to me is gone, how else will I find the will to go on?

After giving this some thought, it occurs to me the simplest solution is for Rebecca to confess her love to Tomas. Since she only sees him in the confessional, it must take place there. Therefore, one crisp spring morning, when outside the birds were signaling the beginning of another beautiful day, inside the dark, cold confessional, after absolution is given, after she gives thanks to God for His mercy, but before Tomas draws the curtain between them, before she leaves the quiet solitude of the confessional, Rebecca slips a carefully folded note to Tomas. He reads it, quickly refolds it, slips it into the sleeve of his cassock, and closes the curtain. Rebecca stands, kisses her crucifix, crosses herself, kisses her crucifix again, and leaves the confessional without looking back.