

CHAPTER I

He switched off the lights, but they continued burning brightly.

Odd, he thought. What do you know about that?

He took a second swipe, but his hand raked air—the switch was gone. Not only the switch, but the green vinyl partition separating his office from the showroom floor. The office furniture, the office, the showroom—all were gone, all but the lights, which now glowed more brightly than before. Glowed, heck. White hot, they seared his retinas, and he slammed his eyelids.

Darndest thing.

Eyes jammed tight, Bridges denied everything. This isn't happening; that's all there is to that. In another moment, he should open his eyes to find the dealership intact, previously owned models gleaming outside on the lot beneath the web of raw globes, latest models—newly delivered '74s—secure within the showroom.

Traffic on Old Deerfield would continue hissing past.

What the hey, he thought. While my eyes are closed, and since I'm dreaming anyway, why not have some fellow wander in and order up a fleet of Skylarks or Electras or whatever? Not necessarily a big fleet; a modest fleet would do. But then, Buicks never were too big a fleet type of vehicle, God alone knows why. With your Buick, Bridges ruminated, it's strictly your old one-at-a-time.

And in normal times, one-at-a-time was enough.

But these were not normal times.

He opened his eyes, then shut them again quickly. Everything was the same, which is to say everything was different.

The dealership was still plainly missing.

There was only harsh, blinding light.

Even with his eyes tightly sealed, however, Bridges could take comfort in the meager available data. First off, this isn't blindness. Blindness is darkness, blackness, and this is the opposite of that.

This is all white, pure linen white.

That's first off.

Second off, as he allowed one eye to open the narrowest slit, he could see that he could see. And what he saw was not merely light but lights.

He saw the word *Sylvania* and the number *100* followed by the letter *W*. Land sakes alive, here was a light bulb, plain as day.

And here was another, and another and another, all of them forming a too-bright rectangle framing an image of a face—a familiar face—squinting back at him. What was familiar about the face, Bridges realized after studying it for a generous beat, was that it was his own. Its features weren't similar, they were identical—strong, straight nose, high cheekbones, close-set gray eyes.

A distinguished American face.

There was only one difference.

Dwight Bridges was achingly, glaringly bald. Here and now, however, he sported a glorious tangle of locks. Obviously a wig,

Bridges figured. He reached up and tugged at the follicles in a futile attempt to liberate the contrivance from his scalp. Must be glued solid to the skin, he thought. Bridges ran his fingers through the mop, picking the strands apart. He concluded this was the goods. Somehow he had acquired an authentic head of hair.

What's more, his drab cord pants were gone, also his folksy flannel shirt and ratty lambswool crewneck sweater. Instead, he wore a maroon tuxedo, black bow tie, and a powder-blue ruffled silk shirt.

As his gaze migrated to his reborn hairline, which featured a modest widow's peak, one of the bulbs flickered, then blew with a gentle metallic ping. This is a mirror, he realized. A God-blessed mirror with lights all around the perimeter, like backstage at a theater in some backstage-at-a-theater movie like, say, *All About Eve*, which he'd caught late one night on Hoggzswallow Hollow's one and only TV station—foggy, fuzzy UHF Channel 34.

He had paid scant attention to the movie, actually dozing during the brief snatches of drama separating commercials. It was the commercials, after all, that interested him. He would perk up wide awake as they flashed across the screen. On his ruled yellow pad, he would take notes as he monitored his competition, gloating but also despairing over the woeful nature of the ads.

Fair is fair, and Bridges appreciated his adversaries were churchgoing Christians, but as to whether or not they were sincerely God-fearing, well, he had his doubts. Now and again, most notably in their commercials with their clowns, costumes, and confetti, they operated very much in the manner of your typical Hebraic merchant.

And why not? They were crafty businessmen, Bridges acknowledged. You had to give them that. Where your Israelite went, so went his influence; there were millennia of testimony to the fact.

The problem was that they had no sense of honor.

He could hold his own against honorable competition, but cutthroat Jewish-style was a different story. Sure, this gasoline crunch, this purported recession, all these factors had to account at least in part for the sales slump at Bridges Buick. But there were, Bridges knew, deeper, darker reasons too. These concerned the waning of faith, the swarthy, brooding influence of a mentality and culture in its essence alien to your Free Enterprise System, your American Way.

To say such things out loud these days was hardly politic, so Bridges confined himself mainly to muttering.

And right here and now he muttered, dipping a powder puff into a cylindrical box of flesh-colored dust, neutral pancake make-up, patting his cheekbones and forehead, trying to dampen the hot spots gleaming back at him from the mirror in such a fashion as to remind him of his unsold cars.

Lord in Heaven have mercy on my soul, he said to nobody. I'm painting my face like some sort of queer.

He would have jumped up and exclaimed "What the hey!" but was distracted by a heavy pounding at the door and an anxious voice.

"Five minutes, Mr. Ritchie! Five minutes!"

What in holy heck is going on here? he wondered.

As his irises adjusted to the up-close bulbs on the dressing-table mirror, he was able to scan the rest of the chamber. Sink. Shower. Metal folding chair on which he sat. Easy chair nearby against one cinder-block wall. Comfy old overstuffed couch against another.

In a minute, Rod Serling shows up, right?

The door flew open and in strode a man distinctly not Rod Serling.

Unlike Serling, for example, he was short and squat. Unlike Serling, he spoke in an anxious, raspy Nu Yawk twang infused with a profound deeze/demz/doze bias. Unlike Serling, he did not offer his customary *Twilight Zone* intro.

Bridges and his mother had caught scattered episodes the previous year, rerun in syndication on Channel 34.

“Yaw most ready, Rich?” the visitor said.

Bridges looked around the cramped quarters in an attempt to discover this Rich fellow, but besides himself, there was nobody.

“Are you talking to me?”

“No, not at all,” the man said. “I’m talking to Tricky Dick Nixon. I’m talking to King Fucking Farouk. I’m talking to the man in the moon.”

This is getting crazier all the time, Bridges thought. I’ve simply got to wake up out of this, and in some kind of hurry.

“New?” the man said to Bridges.

Bridges would have said something if he could have thought of something to say, even just a couple of words. In the silence, he became aware for the first time of extraneous, distant sounds, mainly brass. Golly, he thought, there’s a band, a pretty hot band, he had to admit, featuring among other instrumentation horns, reeds, and percussion.

These guys sounded darned professional, no doubt about that. Bridges had to hand it to them, whoever and wherever they were.

“Don’t play no games with me, please, Richie? No games with your old buddy, Buddy, correct? You got—what?—two minutes before your fanfare, yes? What is it you want? A little eye-opener? A little pick-me-up? A quick snort? Sure, why not? You don’t look so hot. You look like you could use a toot.”

The man ducked back to the door and threw the deadbolt, sealing—forever, Bridges feared—the two of them in the room. From a pocket inside his jacket he extracted a diminutive glass phial.

He unscrewed the cap.

With a tiny spoon attached to the phial by a delicate silver chain, he dipped into the vessel, withdrawing a tidy hill of fine powder.

Next, he thrust the spoon directly under Bridges’s left nostril.

To say this all struck Bridges as curious would constitute the grossest sort of understatement, but it was nothing compared to what the greasy, pockmarked character did next: with his own finger, he clamped shut Bridges's remaining nostril.

"Go!" he commanded.

Bridges brushed the man's hands from his face, sending the spoon and bottle and all of the powder flying.

"Holy Jesus in freaking fucking Heaven, what the freaking fuck are you fucking freaking doing?" the man raged, as if Bridges had run over his wife and kids with an eighteen-wheeler. "Schmuck!" he added. "That was three-hundred bucks' worth of Ecuadorian primo!"

"Now see here," Bridges said. "Just one little moment, if you don't mind." There comes a time in the affairs of men, he reasoned, where no matter how precarious, no matter how perilous the circumstances, a fellow has to assert his authority, stand up for himself, and take responsibility for his actions. This simple precept had resulted in the sale of a heavily loaded Riviera not four months earlier, he recalled.

To be fair, that was before the embargo.

"One little moment is all you got, Rich," Buddy Scheib said to Dwight Bridges, "cause if my ears don't deceive me, that refrain emanating down the hall is your intro."

Bridges could make out the band playing something upbeat and lusty.

There was a rattling of the doorknob from the other side, and a voice called out, "Time. It's time, Mr. Ritchie. There's your fanfare. You're on."

"Let's just take this one step at a time, Mr. Ritchie," Bridges said to Buddy Scheib.

"Cute, that's cute, Rich. Sure, one step at a time, that's fine by me." Bridges could see that the man—he could only be this Ritchie fellow—was seriously stressed. "One step, and then the next, right?"

Is that it? Great. Okay.” He yanked back Bridges’s chair and, with it, Bridges. “But you can’t take a step—can you?—unless first you stand up on your own two feet, yes or no? Yes?” He thrust his arms beneath Bridges’s shoulders, attempting to haul him erect.

Never altogether comfortable with physical contact, especially among men, Bridges shoved Scheib back. “Keep your hands off me,” he warned.

“Well, for Christ’s sake, Richie. Well, for Christ’s sake.”

“I don’t know who you are or what sort of crazy game you’re playing,” Bridges said. “And I don’t even know, for that matter, how I come to be here, wherever ‘here’ may happen to be. Nevertheless, I’m certain there’s a logical explanation that will make itself known presently. Until such time, you shall refrain from touching me. Do you understand?”

“What is this? New material? Save it for your act, Richie. Save it for the paying customers. For now, get your fucking buns on stage. Your worshipful public awaits.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oy gevalt,” Scheib said to the ceiling. “Guttenyu!”

In the background, the band was now anxiously marking time, vamping, stalling.

The man began signaling with his fingers and hands, eagerly gesticulating in the manner of American Sign Language, the visual-gesture code designed for the hard-of-hearing, with its own semantic and syntactic structure.

Bridges looked on in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t recognize the band out there playing your theme? I figured maybe you’ve gone deaf.”

“What the fuck’s going on?” came a new voice from outside. “Richie? You in there? Scheib?”

Acutely distressed, Buddy Scheib wobbled over toward Bridges. Through a sea of saliva he whispered, “You roused Mr. Big himself, putz. The guy has this funny idea that for his quarter-mill a week,

he's entitled to, maybe, an appearance from you, that's all, that you flash your popular punim in front of the paying customers, so they'll know the colossal billboard out front on the boulevard isn't stone bullshit."

"Is anybody in there, goddamnit?" came the voice. The door now rattled so violently that Bridges expected it to disintegrate in a shower of sawdust.

"Right, right, Mr. Avakian," Scheib called out. "Richie's here, ready to roll." He shot a frantic glance at Bridges, then twisted the deadbolt. The door flew open, and a broad-shouldered man in an immaculate custom black tuxedo, virtually identical to Bridges's maroon version, burst into the chamber.

"If this is some kind of cheap-ass scheme to hold me up for more money, you got another think coming, the both of you," he said.

Bridges addressed the man directly. "Excuse me. You are Mr. Avakian, I take it? Do I have that right?"

Avakian stared at Bridges, then turned to Scheib. "He was a bum, a nobody, playing toilets. Who was the first idiot to book him into a big room? Tell me that. What is he trying to pull here? Are you in on this?"

"Nobody's pulling nothing, Mr. A.," Scheib said. "Richie likes to clown around. Right, Rich?"

"Mr. Avakian—I trust I'm getting the pronunciation correct—I wonder if I could have a word with you privately." If only he could ditch this intruder for two seconds, Bridges was certain he could straighten everything out.

"Sure, a word. We'll have plenty of words, privately or on network television or however you like, but after your goddamn set, not before. What about it? In another minute I'm gonna have a fucking riot on my hands. We're talking pitchforks and torches."

I've got to get away, Bridges decided. I've simply got to get out of here. This one's Avakian. That one's Scheib. Who's this Richie

character they keep talking about? It's some kind of conspiracy, and they're all in on it. What's clear is I've got to get out of here.

"All right, you scum-humping, thieving, lowlife motherfuckers," Avakian surrendered. "You got me over a frigging barrel, I admit it. I'll give you a thousand a night more. Just get on stage. Now."

In the distance, beyond the thumping, thundering band, was the sound of hands rhythmically clapping, feet stamping, and voices chanting: "Richie! Richie! Richie! Richie!"

"Thousand a set," Buddy Scheib shot back. "Not per night. Per set." He looked over at Bridges. "Right, Rich?" He turned back to face the big man. "That's two thou per night, three each Fridays and Saturdays."

"Right, right," Avakian grumbled. "A set."

If I'm going to get out of here, Bridges reasoned, the first step is to get out of this chair.

He rose to his feet.

"Wait," Scheib admonished Bridges, pushing him back down. This struck Bridges as curious since until now Scheib had been urging him—via moral suasion and sheer physical force—to stand.

"Cash," Scheib said. "My client requires cash. Now."

"Sweet, dear, precious baby Jesus," Avakian said, reaching into his pocket. "For this upcoming set," he groaned, peeling off ten crisp one-hundred dollar bills. He handed them to Scheib, who stuck one in his shiny jacket and tucked the remainder inside Bridges's vest pocket.

"All right, move it now," Avakian said.

Grateful to vacate the premises, Bridges stood up and followed Scheib out the door and into a dark, narrow passage.

At least I'm getting out of here, Bridges thought as they moved toward a wall of light at the end of the corridor. Anything to get out of here. With each step, the music grew louder. It was evident that beyond the brightness there were people, lots of people. And

where there were people, Bridges reassured himself, there was help, no doubt about that.

Popping in and out of focus against the light stood a stagehand in shirtsleeves. He looked back toward the approaching trio and shrugged anxiously.

Avakian nodded.

Shirtsleeves seized a telephone wired to a control panel on the wall.

“Cue Richie’s theme,” he said into the phone, grabbing a fistful of switches, levers, and knobs, flicking, sliding, and rotating them. The light wall fluctuated in intensity and hue. The band quit its endless vamp and retreated to its original motif. As the party arrived at Shirtsleeves’s side, Bridges could hear past the music to a burgeoning roar, a sound at once familiar and strange, like surf, like fire, like wind.

Bridges now recognized it as applause.

Both Avakian and Scheib came to a halt at the edge of the light. Neither objected as Bridges sailed past them, out into the luminescence. “Break a leg, Richie,” Scheib called after him.

“Lucky I don’t break his fucking head,” Avakian grumbled under his breath.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” oozed a voice as rich as gelato from a thousand loudspeakers.

The applause grew still more spirited, the reception more clamorous.

Bridges could barely see beyond the harsh light beaming down on him.

Shading his eyes with his hand, he made out various members of the orchestra, in particular the horn players and trombonists, their instruments glinting gold, off to one side of the raised platform on which he found himself standing.

In the harsh glare, squinting, he could hardly see the audience.

In the first row, occupying an upholstered V.I.P. banquette, he spotted Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Queen Farah, and several members of their security detail. To Bridges at this time, of course, the Shah and his bride were total strangers.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the voice boomed again, nearly inaudible above the commotion. “The fabulous Starshine Dome of the phenomenal Desert Goliath Hotel, Country Club, Resort, Spa, and Casino proudly presents ... Richie Ritchie!”

Ritchie, this Ritchie character, Bridges thought. In a moment he would actually have a look at the guy. Still shading his eyes, Bridges made his way carefully toward the platform’s edge. Applause washed over him, accompanied by wild cheering, whistling, hooting, and stamping feet.

The ovation drowned out even the amplified music.

Bridges arrived at the edge of the stage, then moved laterally up and back several steps in each direction, trying to elude the spotlights tracking him wherever he turned. The beams found their target, settling upon all five foot eight inches of him. He dodged left, fainted right, but the light clung to him like Velcro. The scene resembled one of those over-the-wall black-and-white prison-break-out movies from Warner Brothers with actors like James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson, maybe *Angels with Dirty Faces*, which he and his mother had caught one night on Channel 34.

Now, mixing into the cacophony, he could hear a new sound: laughter. Scores of people, hundreds of people, were howling with laughter.

Laughter, of all things, seemed inappropriate to Bridges’s predicament, but if there were hundreds, make that thousands of people laughing just beyond the blackness, there also had to be solid citizens who could surely assist him, enlighten him as to what was going on, and advise him as to how he might extricate himself from this most dreadful of nightmares.

“Excuse me, please,” he said to the darkness seething before him, but his voice was swallowed by the commotion. “Please, excuse me, please,” he said more loudly but still not loudly enough. Even if he cupped his hands and shouted at the top of his lungs, he realized, there was no way to be heard above the din.

He noticed now for the first time, just beyond the circle of light following him everywhere, a gridded cylindrical metal object, a microphone mounted atop a chrome pole. He moved over to it, and the light moved with him. As Bridges stepped up to the mic, the band suddenly ceased playing.

Not quite so abruptly, the cheering and applause subsided.

Bridges tapped the microphone and scratched tentatively at the grid. The tapping crashed like timpani; the scratching resounded like machine-gun fire.

Now, all at once, the room was filled with a gaping, yawning silence.

“Hello, hello,” Bridges called into the microphone. His voice screeched back at him at a trillion decibels, causing him to recoil. Reacting to his surprise, there arose among the crowd a mass chuckle.

“I don’t know exactly how to explain this,” Bridges said, “but something very strange appears to be going on.”

There was the thump of a bass drum, a flurry of snare, a cymbal crash, and a rim shot.

“I suppose I should introduce myself,” Bridges said.

Already he was becoming adept at working the mic. He knew better now just where to position his lips. He was also becoming accustomed to hearing his voice thunder back at him, even as he spoke in a near whisper.

“My name is Bridges,” he explained, trying to sound at once casual and concerned. As if on cue, the laughter swelled, frothed, and licked at his ankles like breakers at the shore. “Dwight Bridges.” And then, inexplicably, with his next utterance, the audience

commenced talking along with him, in virtual unison, as if they already knew what he would say. "I'm an automobile dealer from Hoggzswallow Hollow, West Virginia."

"...obile dealer from Hoggzs Hoggzswallow zswallow wallow, West Virginia, gin ya, gin ya ya ...," the audience echoed in the cavernous showroom.

Now there was a rising crescendo of laughter and a storm of beating palms. The audience rose to its feet, five thousand cheering acolytes. Their affection rained down upon Bridges in a monsoon of adoration.

The clamor made it impossible for Bridges to continue, even with the microphone, so he stood there, feeling strange, feeling awkward, waiting for the tide to ebb, wondering what in holy heck to do.

Notwithstanding the crowd, he felt wretchedly alone.

As the screams quieted to murmurs, Bridges said, "I don't get it." Even so simple, so natural a sentiment appeared to incite among the congregation a renewed demonstration of approval.

Bridges remained at the microphone.

A numbing calm now settled over him like fog over the West Virginia hill country at night.

"Now listen," he insisted. "I don't know what's going on here, but I'll say this: I'm a human being, and as a human being I'm entitled to a certain amount of courtesy, a modicum of respect, the plain and simple, day-to-day good manners individuals provide one another in a civilized society."

Not a bad little impromptu speech, Bridges thought.

With his fans rocking the room in reborn adulation, Bridges experienced the slightest rush of pleasure.

Humanity, when you get right down to it, is humanity. There's goodness in the worst of us, Bridges reassured himself. A man alone, a man in difficulty, doesn't have to go very far before somebody shows up to offer a helping hand.

Acknowledging, perhaps even welcoming the balmy shelter of the audience's affection, Bridges prattled on in this fashion, stuttering and stammering in fits and starts for another fifteen minutes.

At last, running low on language, unable to invent anything else to say, he turned and headed toward the wings. As he retreated, the band launched an upbeat vamp with the brass blaring double time.

"Gorgeous!" crowed Buddy Scheib upon Bridges's arrival backstage. "Beautiful!"

Scheib! The ordeal had been almost endurable, perhaps even enjoyable these past several moments, if only for allowing Bridges to forget this rodent. He pushed past Scheib but ran flat into Avakian. The big man grasped Bridges's collar with an outstretched arm, a maneuver that reminded Bridges of a deep-water-rescue approach he had learned in Red Cross Senior Lifesaving at the Hoggzswallow Hollow YMCA's indoor pool.

"Listena the crowd," cheered Shirtsleeves. "Never heard nothing like it. Not Wayne Newton. Not Tony Orlando and Dawn bring down the house, create such a racket. Ain't that the truth, Mr. A?"

"They want another look," Avakian said. "We gotta give them another look, or they'll burn the joint to the ground." He seized Bridges's shoulders, pivoted him, and shoved him back out again into the light.

Dwight Bridges, Hoggzswallow Hollow car dealer, stumbled back onto the stage.

The band stepped up the tempo. On sight of him, the audience rose once again to its feet. As Bridges made his tenuous way center, the reception's intensity threatened to rend the very walls.

Even the Shah and his entourage stood, smiling broadly, eagerly applauding.

With the band sprinting, the audience whooping and whistling, Bridges could not help but proffer a half smile.

For a moment he let the safe, salty love rain down upon him.

And then he surprised himself completely.

He took an awkward little bow.

CHAPTER

2

Bridges switched off the lights, and Old Deerfield went dark. Not all of Old Deerfield, naturally, just that portion fronting the dealership. The streetlamps still hummed—at least every third one, since in compliance with national policy, the township had cut back. Said policy was a dad-blamed mistake, Bridges believed, and Hoggzswallow Hollow’s complicity lamentable.

There was even talk of establishing a federal speed limit.

Just imagine some bureaucrat in Washington telling a guy in, say, Idaho, how fast—more accurately, how slow—he could drive. What’s more, rumor had it they planned to set the cap at fifty-five.

Fifty-five, for your basic Buick, was like driving in reverse.

Heck, they were making noises about prohibiting merchants from utilizing exterior lighting, at least until the so-called crisis passed. But is not life, Bridges wondered, one ongoing crisis? You don’t stack the odds in your favor shunning risk, playing your hand

too close to your chest. Isn't that just a fancy way to describe cowardice? The Ay-rabs want to keep their fuel all for themselves? Let's burn ours ten times more brightly. Let them see the beacon of our spirit shining. You certainly don't move automobiles, or any other commodity, if the purchasing public can't tell you're open for business.

Normally an apprentice salesman, one of his commission people, accompanied Bridges on this final inspection tour, shutting down the dealership for the night. It had been something of a ritual, a ceremony, maybe even a Sacrament. Now, however, by necessity having taken the fellows off salary, with compensation based exclusively upon sales, no one stayed past eight.

Bridges couldn't blame them. For several weeks he had moved only a handful of "transportation" vehicles, clunkers well past their prime, secondhand jalopies held together by duct tape and Elmer's Glue.

Didn't they have families to support?

Still, Bridges was disappointed.

What had become of old-fashioned perseverance?

And how about loyalty?

Bridges left a single forty-watter burning outside. Within the showroom, a lone fluorescent cast a pall the color of skim milk. He picked up his battered leather coronet case and went out back to his LeSabre. He climbed in and rolled away.

Even at this hour it looked like at least a ninety-minute wait at the only open station, Bull Donner's Sohio Service, junction of Old Deerfield and New Old Deerfield. Bridges glided slowly past the long line and shook his head woefully. He turned right and continued toward his destination.

A mile or so down the road, he passed Dale Dixon's Datsun Depot. Bridges ruefully observed the dealership's lights burning brightly. Passing the showroom, in his rearview mirror Bridges

could make out sales personnel mingling with customers as they scrutinized the merchandise.

After another couple of miles, Bridges pulled up in front of Ezra Convy's pitch-black Mobil.

There was not a soul in sight.

He tapped a quick, quiet honk.

After a moment, the service panel door rose.

Ezra hurried out. "Can't fill you," he said. "Are you empty? Can't fill you."

"I drove up here, didn't I? I'm almost empty, but obviously I'm not empty."

"Kill your lights. Let's get this over with quick enough, okay? We don't want folks looking on, getting suspicious. We don't want to call attention to ourselves, most especially tonight." He unscrewed the cap, shoved in the nozzle, and squeezed the handle.

"What's so special about tonight?" Bridges asked.

"Sell you five gallons," Convy said, ignoring the question. "Call it a quarter tank."

"Ez, I'm grateful."

"God helps those what et cetera."

"You scratch my hand," Bridges said, "I'll wash your back, or however that goes."

"Exactly." Convy pronounced it *egg-zackly*.

The sound of fuel sloshing into his tank soothed Bridges at the same time as it troubled Convy. One was getting, the other giving. "There's five," Convy said to Bridges as the wheels spun on the gas pump's gauge. Surprisingly, Convy did not shut it off, but kept pumping. "Give you six, Dwight, and we'll use your car tonight."

"Use my car for what?"

"You'll know soon enough," Convy whispered conspiratorially, as if someone might overhear, as if the two of them were not alone in the West Virginia night.