

BEAUTIFUL THINGS

A MEMOIR

HUNTER BIDEN



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GOVERNMENT
EXHIBIT

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PROLOGUE

“WHERE’S HUNTER?”

As I began writing this book from the relative calm of my home office, in November 2019,

I'm also an alcoholic and a drug addict. I've bought crack cocaine on the streets of Washington, DC, and cooked up my own inside a hotel bungalow in Los Angeles. I've been so desperate for a drink that I couldn't make the one-block walk between a liquor store and my apartment without uncapping the bottle to take a swig. In the last five years alone, my two-decades-long marriage has dissolved, guns have been put in my face, and at one point I dropped clean off the grid, living in \$59-a-night Super 8 motels off I-95 while scaring my family even more than myself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CRACKED

Then, over Memorial Day weekend 2016, I flew to Monte Carlo to attend a meeting of the Burisma board. I felt strong enough by then to bring along my oldest daughter, Naomi, presenting the trip to her as a gift for graduating earlier that month from Penn.

The weekend quickly turned contentious—then disastrous.

That night, while Naomi went off with Zlochevsky's daughter, I wandered into the hotel nightclub and drank some more. Monte Carlo provides a temptation for any taste. When I went to the restroom, someone offered me cocaine.

I took it.

I regretted the slip immediately. When we returned to the States, I went straight to the clinic and confessed to my counselors what I'd done. I even discussed it at that day's group session. I saw my relapse as a troubling but hardly irreversible setback. I was still committed to recovery.

Then a counselor told me he had to inform Kathleen of what had happened—that was the deal cut when I started there. He also said I needed to take a drug test, even though I'd just admitted what I'd done. Kathleen and I had been separated for close to a year and our divorce was imminent. The drug test was not covered by the privacy guidelines in HIPAA and could be used in court against me. I felt ambushed. I refused to take the drug test while continuing to own up to what I'd done. I didn't want it on paper. I just wanted to get better.

The debate grew heated. A counselor at another clinic had already told my daughters months earlier that if they spoke with me they'd be complicit in my death—in my mind, an infuriating breach. So I was working with a short fuse anyway. That fuse was then lit by the clinic's stubborn insistence on a drug test to prove something I'd openly conceded.

I stormed out of the building. And like any proper addict or alcoholic, I embraced my resentment to stoke my addiction.

That, in a nutshell, is addict-think.

I jumped on the bike I'd ridden there and headed straight to an area near Franklin Square, at Fourteenth Street and K, a longtime drug bazaar blocks from the White House. It was a warm late afternoon and the streets were mostly cleared out. It didn't take me long to spot the person I was looking for:

Bicycles.

Almost anyone who lives or works in DC has at one time or another seen Bicycles – also known as Rhea, a homeless, middle-aged Black woman – weaving in and out of traffic or swerving around sidewalk pedestrians on a mountain bike that looks three times too big for her. She usually sports a backpack and a baseball cap, and has a sharp, piercing voice that can be heard a block away as she shouts for everybody to get the hell out of her way, which she does almost continuously. (Because I believe Rhea still lives on the streets, I'm using a pseudonym for her.)

I first met Rhea sometime around my senior year at Georgetown. I'd been out drinking with friends one night, got into a foul, to-hell-with-it mood, and broke off from the pack in the middle of the night to visit this same park. It was at the height of the crack epidemic, in the early 1990s, and with a fledgling addict's wrong-headed sense of misadventure, I decided to see what all the hubbub was about.

A crackhead seemed to spontaneously generate in front of me. He asked what I was looking for. I told him I wanted some

"hard," the street term for crack cocaine. He said sure, just give him \$100, he'd be right back. I called bullshit: I wasn't some naïve college bro, or at least that's what I tried to project. The guy said no problem, he'd leave behind one of his shoes to ensure his return. That made a certain 2 a.m. sense to me: Who'd take off without returning for his shoe? He assured me he'd be back with my request in no time.

I stood there in the pitch black, in a park you wouldn't want to loiter around in the middle of the day, let alone the middle of the night, and waited—gripping his ratty old shoe.

Ten minutes later, with the crackhead long gone, this tiny Black woman, a few years older than me but looking twice my age, rolled up on a bike with a shoe that matched the one I was still holding.

"You stupid motherfucker," she said in a loud, exasperated tone. "You fell for one of the oldest cons in the book. You stupid . . ."

"Who the fuck are you?" I shot back.

I tried to maintain my streetwise pose. It must have been laughable.

Bicycles then explained with a kind of world-weary patience that dealers often keep old, thrown-away shoes hidden nearby to rip off easy marks like me. To prove her point, she'd retrieved a shoe the crackhead had stashed away.

I stood there like the dumb, gullible college bro I was. Bicycles then sold me what little crack she had on her, and told me to get the hell out.

"You going to get hurt, boy."

* * *

Fast-forward two decades later:

After storming out of the clinic, I spotted Bicycles wheeling by, motioned for her to come over, and asked if she could get me some hard. Since my days at Georgetown, I'd handed her change or bills when I saw her on the street and we'd become passing acquaintances. Washington can be a small town like that. More recently, since I'd moved into my apartment, she occasionally rode by my second-story window and called out to see if I needed anything. She'd take whatever money I threw down, buy me cigarettes or whatever else I needed from a nearby 7-Eleven, and keep what was left for herself.

Bicycles's response to my request for "hard" this time was flat and knowing:

"You don't want to do that."

Bicycles is a decades-long user, not a dealer; whatever she sold she did only to make enough money to buy. But I persisted. She didn't require much convincing. She needed my money as much as I needed her access to drugs; she'd take my \$100 to buy ten dime bags, hand over eight, and keep two for herself. The relationship was symbiotic: we'd exchange money and drugs despite the fact that each of us sincerely wished the other didn't use. It was two crack addicts who couldn't find their way out of a paper bag.

A one-act crack farce.

After going through those ritual motions of concern, Rhea snapped the \$100 from my hand, pedaled off, and returned minutes later with what I wanted.

I'm not exactly sure of the sequence of events that followed. But I do remember that the first hits I took resulted in only a slightly better bang than I got that time back in college. Then, like now, I pushed the small rock of crack into the tip of a cigarette and lit it up.

Like most things one wants to become successful at, smoking crack requires practice and the right tools. I returned to the same spot the next day, and this time Rhea arrived with the works: crack, a pipe, and a screen. She also gave me a brief tutorial to make sure I took a proper hit.

I spotted a chair half hidden by a pillar in front of a closed coffee shop. I settled in, lifted the pipe to my lips, lit the rock, and inhaled. In an instant, I experienced what's called a "bell ringer"—crack's holy grail.

The sensation is one of utter, almost otherworldly well-being. You are at once energetic, focused, and calm. Blood rushes to every extremity; your skin ripples with what feels like bumblebees. Eyes get jangly yet stay alert. Eardrums compress to the point that every sound pours through with such intensity—like a shot through a rifle barrel—that you think you're having auditory hallucinations. You're actually just hearing with hypersensitivity—you're a field dog. You pick up the merest peep from a block away.

I chased that high, on and off, for the next three years.

I couldn't comprehend how people who weren't addicts didn't understand how great crack cocaine is. I mean, if you

knew how good it made you feel, maybe you wouldn't look at me like I had three heads.

Of course, it's all delusional and self-defeating—but not at the moment. At the moment, you can do crack around the clock, every day, and still make your meetings (sometimes), still return your calls (sometimes), still pay your bills (sometimes).

And when you can't do those things? There's always crack to make you feel not so bad about it.

Here's the thought you never have:

Put. The. Pipe. Down.

Crack is just an answer. It's not *the* answer, but it's the most obvious answer to the question non-abusers ask addicts all the time.

Them: Why do you do drugs?

Us: Because they make me feel good.

All that was ahead.

Mainly, however, we just planted ourselves on the couch and smoked a ton of crack. For endless hours, day after day, it was the same numbing ritual, over and over and over: pipe, Chore Boy, crack, light; pipe, Chore Boy, crack, light; pipe, Chore Boy, crack, light.

A world of previously invisible commonplace objects became indispensable accoutrements to our sacramental routine. The pipe we used most often, called a stem, was actually a made-in-China glass tube that comes with a decorative paper rose inside. Sold as a rchotchke and referred to as a "glass rose," it's used to smoke crack. The tube is the same length and width as a 100-millimeter cigarette, and so can be carried surreptitiously in a pack of cigarettes.

Chore Boy is a spun-copper scouring pad. Packaged in orange boxes displaying a cartoon boy wearing blue overalls and a backward-facing red cap, Chore Boy is designed to clean pots and pans. Addicts, who call it "choy," use it as a screen to hold the crack in their rose pipes. Rhea always lit the choy first to burn off any chemicals.

At DC bodegas frequented by addicts, clerks conveniently hand you a pipe and choy together when you order a "one-and-one."

Archmere Academy, Georgetown, Yale Law—and here I was, ecstatic with my new knowledge of rose pipes, Chore Boy, and one-and-one.

Smoking with Rhea was a master class in crackology. She had a million rules: Always know where your shit is. Always recook your crack if you got it from someone you don't know to burn off the trash some dealers mix in. Never stick your stem in your pants pocket, where it can break when you sit or fall out of your pants while you're ordering at Popeyes.

She often pointed out rites of passage in my crack addiction, even numbering and abstracting them, like a lecturer in an advanced independent-study course.

#37: Loses apartment keys whenever he goes out.

#67: Never picks eyes up from the floor more than thirty seconds at a time because always scanning floor for crack crumbs.

At one point, she said I'd graduated into crackology's PhD program. It was during the phase when it took me an eternity just to pack a bag for a trip. I'd have a flight in two hours, and two days later I'd still be sitting in the apartment, bag open and clothes strewn everywhere. Rhea would walk in and shake her head. "Are you fucking kidding me? Here," she'd say, and grab my clothes, stuff them in the bag, and push me out the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTO THE DESERT

In October 2016, I set out on a crack-fueled, cross-country odyssey.

That wasn't my plan. The plan was to get well. Until a couple of months earlier, I'd limited my crack use to once every three days. I believed I could quit it on my own, whenever I wanted, before it devolved into a full-time disorder. I was driving back and forth between DC and Delaware to see Hallie and her kids, our relationship still just a shared-grief oasis, and tried to keep my drug use hidden.

But I was also traveling for work constantly, mostly to generate new clients and trying to keep existing ones. My drug use accelerated in tandem with my stress. Smoking crack cocaine every three days soon became smoking every two days, then every other day—then every hour of every day. While still fairly new to the around-the-clock use of crack—and still learning how to be a functional abuser at that enhanced scale of addiction; still learning how to excuse

myself in the middle of meetings every twenty or thirty minutes to light up in the men's room—I knew I needed to do something before it spun out of control.

At least that's what I told myself.

The truth is, by my midforties, I had learned every lesson I needed to learn. Now I was learning how to ignore them. There were more pertinent matters for me to master: the most efficient ways to buy and smoke crack; how best to hide my use.

Those were the sorts of things I became hyperfocused on—not my failures at attempting to get clean but my successes in buying and using without getting caught or hurt or killed during some random drug-buy mix-up. Walking into a park in a high-crime neighborhood to buy crack at 4 a.m. was no different than playing Russian roulette with two shells in the chamber. In some places, it was like playing with five shells—and still, I was willing to spin the chamber again and again.

So off I went to see Puma St. Angel.

I arrived at Dulles International Airport at 7 a.m., three hours before my flight's scheduled departure, a nod to the ridiculous amounts of time it now took me to accomplish even the most mundane tasks. Before getting out of my car at the airport garage, however, I took a hit off a pipe to hold me over. Two hours later, I was

still sitting there, still smoking. I decided it didn't matter if I left a little later, that I wasn't on a strict timetable. I'd just take the next flight. When it was too late to catch that one, I resolved to take the next one. A few hours later, I resolved to take the one after that.

I never left my car. Stocked with what I guessed to be enough crack to last a couple of days, I finally missed the last flight of the night. By that point, crackhead wisdom kicked in big-time: I had always wanted to drive across the country, and now seemed a perfect opportunity to do just that. I pulled out of the airport garage around 10 p.m., pointed my car west, and headed toward Arizona, more than 2,200 miles away.

That was day one.

I drove through the night, finally stopping in Nashville a few hours after sunrise. I checked into a hotel and smoked away the rest of the day. By nightfall, I realized I was already running low on drugs. I rummaged through my car seats and floor mats for crumbs, then drove off sometime around midnight to score more.

By now, I possessed a new superpower: the ability to find crack in any town, at any time, no matter how unfamiliar the terrain. It was easy—risky, often frustrating, always stupid and stupendously dangerous, yet relatively simple if you didn't give much of a shit about your own well-being and were desperate enough to have an almost limitless appetite for debasement.

Crack takes you into the darkest recesses of your soul, as well as the darkest corners of every community. Unlike with alcohol, you

become dependent not only on a criminal subculture to access what you need but the lowest rung of that subculture—the one with the highest probability of violence and depravity.

Navigating that landscape required me to be absolutely fucking fearless. Almost everybody assumed I was a cop—flashy car, false bravado, white—so I'd often pull out a pipe first and smoke whatever I had in front of them, even if there was only resin left on the screen, just to show I was for real.

Then there was the matter of not getting ripped off. Like cold-calling clients, it was a numbers game of hit-and-miss. I'd either hand \$100 to someone to make a buy and wait outside a building as they went in the front door and out the back, or I'd find someone smart enough to figure out that I could be their crack daddy for as long as I was in town. Getting burned became an occupational hazard, a kind of repetitive stress injury: I'd get taken by the same guy, again and again, only to return to hand him money one more time, my desperation for another hit so encompassing that I literally could taste it.

The diciest time to buy was in the predawn morning, stepping into a place where it's inadvisable to be at 4 a.m. with a pocketful of cash and no weapon. You learn little things to protect yourself. You never approach someone before they approach you: You don't want to look too desperate—as if showing up anywhere at 4 a.m. doesn't look desperate enough—because anybody who's in the business of selling crack is in the business of ripping people off. They'll sell you actual rocks from a driveway if you look too needy. When I could, I tried to buy from a user instead of someone who was obviously a

dealer. Crack addicts usually came back with something of substance if I also gave them money to get some for themselves, and then promised them more. They had skin in the game. They'd be reliable right up until the point where they got all that they needed and then, almost invariably, they'd rip me off, too.

No honor among us crackheads.

In Nashville, I was a bloodhound on the scent. Like everywhere else I'd bought crack, I knew I could go there cold and in no time assess what highway to get on, what exit to get off at, what gas station to pull into, and what unsavory-looking character to choose as my newest, most trusted associate. I had done it everywhere I'd been the last few months—I could get off a plane in Timbuktu and score a bag of crack.

I followed my usual *modus operandi*. I headed for a commercial district in the sketchiest part of town and looked for a gas station or liquor store that served as a congregating spot for a quorum of homeless addicts. I'd pull in, stick the nozzle in the gas tank, lock my car, and head inside to buy cigarettes or Gatorade. It rarely took long before somebody out front asked if I could help him out with some change. I'd hand him whatever was in my pocket, then ask for a favor: "You know where I can buy some hard?" The key was finding someone who was homeless because he needed to support his habit, not because he was mentally ill, which was too often the case, and sometimes tough to distinguish.

I found my guy in less than an hour. He was about my age, maybe a little younger, but looked like he'd had a really hard life, at least recently. He was sinewy, had dirty nails but clean sneakers, and

wore a dark jacket that looked passable from afar but up close was tattered at the sleeves and hadn't been laundered in a while. He was down on his luck, not plainly homeless but likely on the verge of it.

Yet his eyes burned with the hard, voracious intensity that crack addicts carry into every encounter—and which I also carried into encounters like this one, despite my Porsche and law degree and childhood spent in a Senate sauna listening to the most powerful men in the country call out a hearty “Hey, boys!”

A crack addict's intensity can be intimidating. It feels distinctly predatory, which makes you feel unmistakably like prey. While the drug itself doesn't induce violent behavior, the desperation for more of it most certainly can. Unlike a heroin addict, who, comparatively, luxuriates for a while in his high, a crack addict is scheming shortly after using about only one thing: how to get another hit in the next thirty minutes.

The guy at the gas station that night in Nashville sized me up, too.

“I got Chore Boy. You know what I'm talking about?” he asked with a test in his voice. I told him I did and acted like I was put out by the question. We got in my car. I asked where we were headed.

“I'll let you know,” he said in a casual, sandpapery tone. “Just pull out of here.”

Our conversation from then on was confined to a series of blunt, robotic bursts.

“Turn right here . . . Now left here.”

“What's the address?”

“I don't know the address. I just know where it is.”

He told me not to smoke in the car. He told me to buckle my seat belt. "Cops are always up here. They'll arrest you."

He spotted my pipe on the console.

"Anything in here? I'll smoke the resin."

"You just told me not to smoke in the car."

"I know what I'm doing."

It was dark and, except for us, the streets were practically deserted. I had no idea where I was or where we were going. GPS became moot. I kept turning.

He told me to park in front of a run-down, putty-colored two-story apartment building. The way this scenario would usually end is that I would park, give the guy \$100 to buy crack, and tell him if he came back I'd give him another \$100 to buy for himself. Then I'd wait, like an idiot, at 2 a.m., in the most dangerous part of town. Seven times out of ten he didn't come back. Yet I'd keep waiting anyway, telling myself that it hadn't been all that long. Ten minutes would stretch into an hour, then into an hour and a half. I'd go through elaborate mental gymnastics to justify not leaving. I'd remember a guy I once bought from who came back two hours later.

But mostly they didn't come back: You get burned. You feel ridiculous, you feel pathetic, and then you feel desperate and start all over again, trolling the same gas stations and liquor stores and clubs until finally—at 4 a.m., or 7 a.m., or 10 a.m.—you find a guy who comes through, who actually brings back enough to hold you over for the next four hours, when you'll have to go through the same lousy routine all over again. The process can take thirty minutes or it can take ten hours.

This time, it took thirty minutes. Before I gave the guy my \$100, I'd told him to leave behind his Obama Phone—the free cell the federal government started giving to financially strapped Americans during the 2008 recession, under the Lifeline Act. Obama Phones are mocked by conservatives as another liberal scheme to redistribute wealth, yet the legislation was first passed in 1985 by President Reagan to give households access to communications and emergency services through home telephone hookup. That act was merely updated by Obama for a wireless world—to the delight of crack addicts and dealers everywhere.

My guy didn't want to give it up.

"You gotta trust people," he told me with a remarkably straight face.

I thanked him for the life lesson, then told him to leave his cell or there was no deal. He left the phone and ambled off, then returned not long afterward with \$100 worth of what he said was crack. You never know. Often it's baking soda or crushed-up pills that somebody has turned into rocks. You light it up and you're high before you even hear the pops—hear the "crack"—whether it's the good stuff or not. The anticipation knocks your socks off; studies have shown, and my experience verifies, that the fiercest rush occurs in the nanoseconds before your lips touch the pipe. It's not until a minute or so later that you can determine whether you're smoking the real deal, and by that time your connection can be out of the car and long gone.

In this case, however, what he brought back was damn good. I'd gotten his phone number off his cell while he was inside, and I

turned our late-night one-off into a four-day Nashville run. I called him three or four times a day over that period. He was a godsend for me, and I was the best thing that ever happened to him: over those three days I probably handed him \$1,500. The transactions became relaxed, almost matter-of-fact, like dropping in to buy vegetables from the same sidewalk grocer. We hardly ever exchanged a word.

And except for those brief excursions, I stayed holed up in my hotel room with my pipe and my lighter and my crack.

Even though my mind realizes that the peace I once got from taking a hit off a crack pipe was temporary

and ultimately self-destructive, it also understands that it felt better than the pain I experienced before I took that hit. Crack wasn't the only answer to my ache. But, again, it was an answer, and certainly the most expedient one to that age-old question people won't stop asking:

Why can't you quit?

Because, motherfucker, it feels too good!

So as I write this, I can still feel the hard, hot pipe on my lips, the heat ballooning inside my mouth, the smoke crisping my lungs. I still twitch with the muscle memory of the torch-blast rush that shot to every tip of every appendage of my body. Recalling the events of that night in Nashville, I still get a shiver down my spine.

I can still feel myself seated in my car that late night—the throb in my lower back from those countless hours on the road, the creeping hunch of my shoulders, the racing of my heart—as the guy with the dirty nails and clean sneakers came out of the apartment building with my bag. I can still remember how I fumbled around the side pocket for a lighter and a stem. I can see myself reaching for a new ball of Chore Boy to use as a filter, then deciding to use the old one instead, knowing it was covered in resin and thinking how much better the crack would be if I could draw the smoke through it. I still remember that there were three new stems in a paper bag in the back seat and that I considered reaching around the headrest for one of them. I stopped myself because I thought I'd be better off doling them out, one day at a time, during the rest of my cross-country journey.

I remember I planned to recook the crack back in my hotel

room. Then I tried to remember if I had a spoon to simmer it in, or if there was a microwave in the room I could use to heat it up.

I remember that I couldn't remember.

I still recall that I thought about stopping by a liquor store on the way back to the hotel. Then I realized I could call room service if I needed a drink but then thought about how much more expensive that would be than buying from the store. In the end, I ditched the whole idea, as if my decision not to drink that night was simply a matter of fiscal responsibility. I remember thinking about getting something to eat, too, then thinking, *Fuck it, I have more important matters to attend to.*

What I really remember is getting back to my room at two or three o'clock that morning and stripping off my jacket and settling into a soft chair and pulling out the fresh bag and feeling that first real hit—not the rushed test hit I took earlier in the car with that blazing-eyed stranger looking on hungrily from the passenger seat. And then I remember why I'm remembering all of this: the sensation of being instantly transported—at something like warp speed, as if riding bareback on a rocket ship—to some far-off, beautiful place.

Remembering all of those things feels like a terrible betrayal of where I am now. It induces an urge that's completely counter to how far I've come. When you realize the effect those recollections can have on your mind and body, causing them to work against your deepest desire not to be in that place, you fear their ability to lure you back in. They prompt feelings of shame and guilt that, to be honest, only stir an enhanced sense of hellish excitement.

Addict-think.

I hate it. I hate recalling it. I hate the damage it caused, to me and others. Most of all, I hate still longing for the peace it provided.

It was definitely not one of the beautiful things my brother talked about.

Folks at the wellness ranch in Sedona started blowing up my phone to find out when I'd be arriving. I ignored them. I finally got a call from Joey, who'd checked in days earlier and knew I'd pick up for him. He then put the Grace Grove people on, at their insistence. I minted a new excuse with each call: last-minute business complications, unforeseen family issues.

Joey knew the drill: he understood from his own experience what was going on without my having to tell him. He just stayed the course and waited me out. After four days, I'd already given up on the notion of driving cross-country and booked a flight from Nashville to Phoenix, with a short pit stop in Los Angeles. I'd leave my car in Tennessee and pick it up when I flew back.

I repeated the same sorry routine of smoking and rebooking I'd performed at Dulles. I cloistered myself inside my car at the airport, terrified I'd get busted going through security, or that I couldn't handle the four-hour flight without a hit. I missed one plane after another.

Finally, I boarded a late flight and made it as far as my two-hour layover at LAX. Desperate to smoke, I slipped out of the terminal with my carry-on and whatever drugs I had left and fired up in a parking garage stairwell. I knew I wouldn't make my connecting flight. I phoned Hallie briefly. She alone knew about my trip out

west, and I told her what I planned to tell everybody: I'd made it to Sedona and everything was fine.

I stayed that night at a hotel in nearby Marina del Rey, immediately calling a crack connection I'd made during a previous West Coast business trip. I'll call him Curtis here. I'd first found him by using an alternative MO to my superpower: browsing online escort service ads, not for sex but for slipped-in references of offers to "party," which meant, of course, they sold drugs.

Before long, Curtis arrived at the hotel with crack, his prostitute girlfriend, and Honda, a tall, gaunt, affable twentysomething who had been a professional skateboarder until he broke practically every bone in his body. He'd since transitioned to a second career boosting Hondas. During a later stay in L.A., inside a bungalow at the Chateau Marmont, Honda would patiently teach me how to cook my own crack.

My unscheduled pause turned into a six-day bacchanal. Curtis and his crew made my suite their party house, rotating in and out for hours at a time. They blared music, ordered room service, and cleaned out the minibar—all on my dime and with my consent. They took advantage of my largesse but not unreasonably so; I was totally, completely out of my fucking mind. They preferred booze and weed to crack, while I hit the pipe like there was no tomorrow, strolling around in my underwear and generally acting insane.

I never slept. Ever. I made a reservation each day on a puddle jumper from L.A. to Sedona, and each day I canceled it. I couldn't make myself get on a plane.

In time, even the night world's regulars became uneasy. During

I finally decided to rent a car and drive to Sedona. I left Marina del Rey around four in the morning, on no sleep and in a cavernous Lincoln Town Car, taking I-10 out of California to start the five-hundred-mile jaunt.

I made it as far as San Bernardino, seventy-five miles east. Snow-capped mountains emerged ahead in the breaking twilight.

Exhausted, I checked into a hotel. I still couldn't fall asleep, still couldn't stop smoking. After a while, I got back on the road.

And that should have been that—end of story, end of me.

Around 11 a.m., speeding east along the tabletop-flat highway that unspooled through the baked Sonoran Desert somewhere outside of Palm Springs, the temperature already closing in on ninety degrees, I nodded off behind the wheel. Waking up an instant later, I found myself in midair, the car having jumped a soft curb on the passing lane and soaring at eighty miles an hour into a cloudless blue sky, heading into the gulch that divided I-10.

Nanoseconds unreeled in a kind of stop-action slow motion. I had what seemed like an eternity to size things up and consider my alternatives, even though, of course, I had no time at all. As my car made its descent into the median, I resisted the urge to do what my reflexes were imploring me to do: jam on the fucking brakes! I knew that would cause the Town Car to barrel roll the moment the wheels touched down and then throw me or crush me.

Instead, I hit the gas the second the car landed in the gulch. I let it run for a moment until yanking the steering wheel to avoid a berm that serves as a turnaround for emergency vehicles and the police. The car spun into the westbound lanes—the same direction as the oncoming traffic. Miraculously, there was a gap in the traffic until my car stopped dead in the emergency lane, hissing and coughing. It rested on four flat tires, with cacti and scrub brush wrapped around the undercarriage.

I don't remember how long I sat there. It seemed like forever. I blinked behind sunglasses that had somehow stayed on my head. The luggage in the back seat was now scattered all over the front; the car's interior looked like a war zone. I was shaking, still amped up from being in the middle of my twelve-day roll. Two police cruisers whizzed by without so much as tapping their brakes, like I was somebody who'd pulled over to take a leak or a tourist who'd stopped to ponder the roadside's ceaseless, featureless panorama.

I called the rental company and told them that somebody ran me off the road. The tow truck didn't arrive for a couple of hours, and when the driver looked over the car, I told him that I'd wound up in the gulch. He shrugged.

"Happens all the time," he said before hauling me back to Palm Springs, where I climbed behind the wheel of another rental and continued on to Sedona.

Then things got weird.

I stopped for gas somewhere in the high foothills while driving north through Arizona, rolled back onto the highway, then didn't realize until two hours later that I'd pointed my new Jeep Cherokee in the wrong direction.

Back on the right track, I found myself navigating a winding mountain road beneath a moonless sky well past midnight. There were no lights anywhere. Some sections had guardrails, some did not. I was determined to keep moving rather than pull over and wait until morning. I had called Grace Grove before leaving Palm

Springs and arranged for Joey and Morgan, an ex-cowboy who managed the place with Puma, to pick me up at the rental car office in Prescott, an old western town about an hour and a half's drive from the wellness center.

As the high-desert wind rushed and whistled through the wide-open windows, I played an album of remixes by Mississippi bluesman R. L. Burnside as a kind of propulsive soundtrack. On one song, "It's Bad You Know," Burnside growls those words over and over. I played it almost continuously, like a gonzo incantation. I was out of my fucking mind.

To stay awake, I chain-smoked crack and cigarettes, kept the windows down, and leaned into the bracing night air whenever I felt myself nodding off. At some point, the crack lost its oomph, but I kept lighting up anyway, out of force of habit. Sometimes I just slapped myself in the face.

As I peered ahead into the pitch blackness, at times hunched so far forward my chest bumped against the steering wheel, an enormous barn owl suddenly swooped over my windshield, as if dropped straight from the inky night sky. I looked on in stunned wonder. It glided over the car's hood until it was caught in my high beams. I didn't know if it was real or a hallucination, but it sure as hell woke me up.

Then, as abruptly as it arrived, the bird swerved off to the right, just out of range of my headlights. I swerved with it to stay on the road, and it led me cleanly around a sharp bend. It disappeared for a few minutes after that, as the road straightened, before reappearing again with its massive wings tilting first one way and then the

other, guiding me through a series of tight, bounding switchbacks. I just kept following. It did the same thing four or five more times—disappearing, returning, gliding through dips and rises and hairpin turns at full speed, like a stunt plane at an air show, all but beckoning me to stay close behind. I'm not sure how long I followed the owl before it finally led me straight into Prescott. As it flapped off into the star-smeared sky, I shook my head and mouthed a soundless, still-disbelieving "Thank you," over and over and over again.

It was 3 a.m. Joey and Morgan had waited on me for hours. When I pulled in, they weren't amused.

"You won't believe what just happened," I exclaimed, still dumbstruck by what I'd witnessed.

I wanted to recount everything. How I shouldn't even be there. How I'd lucked out in Nashville with a crack dealer who didn't take everything I had at 2 a.m., including my life. How a hustling music impresario wannabe and his girlfriend looked after my best interests and pushed me to clean up instead of robbing me blind. How I didn't kill myself or anyone else after sailing over the highway near Palm Springs. And lastly, how a giant bird—or guardian angel, or figment of my addled imagination—took me under its wings only minutes earlier to keep me from spinning off a mountainside and deliver me here, to this spot, at last.

I wanted to tell them about all of it. But at that hour, in that place, my escorts made it clear they weren't interested in my bullshit.

"Whatever," one of them said, signaling for me to get in the van.

The car's interior was a train wreck; I'd been piloting that rental for ten hellacious hours—smoking, swerving, losing my shit—with

the contents of my bag scattered everywhere. Joey and Morgan, rushing to get the hell back, helped me clear it out as best they could. I hopped in the van with them and headed off to get well.

Again.

I didn't leave my bed for the next three days. Detoxing from crack isn't as dangerous as quitting alcohol or as painful as getting off heroin. But a nonstop fourteen-day binge like I'd just gone through leaves the body depleted and dehydrated. Every joint ached like I had severe arthritis; my knees nearly disabled me and I thought the crick in my neck would be permanent. I had a fever and chills and near-panic-level anxiety and on the third day began to continually cough up a disturbing black phlegm. Lying alone in the clean, rustic setting of Grace Grove, with Joey checking in on me every hour and Puma slipping me herbal remedies, the only thing I craved was a crack pipe—the heat filling my mouth, the smoke singeing my lungs, that bareback rocket ride.

I'd left my wallet in the rental car. It contained my brother's AG badge, which I carried everywhere, as well as a Secret Service business card I still had even though I'd canceled my security detail several years earlier. A Hertz employee cleaning out the car found some paraphernalia and a white-powder residue on an armrest. After googling my name and Beau's, the manager called the local police—who called the Secret Service, who called my dad, who, I presume, called Hallie, since she was the only person who knew where I was. I'd left my cell phone in the car, too, so Hallie got in

CHAPTER NINE

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY

I used my superpower—finding crack anytime, anywhere—less than a day after landing at LAX in the spring of 2018.

I drove my rental to the Chateau Marmont, in West Hollywood, where I checked into a bungalow and by 4 a.m. had smoked every crumb of crack I'd brought. The clubs whose bouncers had served as my primary sources were closed, my calls to Curtis went unanswered, and my valet connection was AWOL.

I remembered a small crew of panhandlers who perpetually hung around a row of stores across from another club, near the corner of Sunset and La Brea, about a mile away. Like any worthy crack haunt by this point, it set off my spidey sense. When I pulled into the parking lot, there they were: a handful of guys loitering around a dumpster near the back. They'd improvised a small encampment of sleeping bags. They were clearly users.

I walked up and asked if they had anything that they'd sell. They did not and, at that hour, had no interest in looking elsewhere. Another guy from the group stepped out of the adjoining convenience store. He said he was sorry, that he didn't have anything, either, but he knew where to get some. He said we'd have to drive downtown.

He was about fifty and looked like he'd just gotten out of jail—in fact, he told me he'd been released that day. He kept pulling up his pants because he hadn't gotten a belt yet, and he carried everything he owned in a plastic CVS bag. That made him just desperate enough to get in a car with a stranger who easily could have been a cop.

I was just desperate enough to invite him in.

We hardly talked during the twenty-minute drive. He told me his name and that he'd served in the Air Force. Once we got downtown, past Pershing Square, he directed me through the deserted streets of the city's flower and fashion districts. Office and bodega storefronts were locked up tight. In the predawn darkness, a vast homeless enclave bloomed along the sidewalks on both sides of the street. Bunched together, block after block after block: pop-up tents, leaning cardboard boxes, tarps.

The scene looked postapocalyptic—or at least post-American Century. The area seemed darker than the rest of the city we'd just passed through, almost de-electrified, like the primitive dwellings that covered so much prime real estate. Trash littered the streets and the heavy, warm air stank of garbage and rot and sweat. Random shopping carts were piled high with a lifetime's worth of pos-

sessions; most of their owners were passed out nearby. The only cars I saw were police cruisers. We slid by at least three in the first few minutes after we arrived. A spooky silence added an even eerier atmosphere.

It was a dangerous place to visit and a more dangerous place to live. There was no brotherly, down-and-out kinship at that hour: when two people encountered each other, both froze and stared until somebody walked away—*if* somebody walked away. There was no “Hey, bro” conviviality. There was no testimonial to the human spirit underlying the nihilism.

There was no fucking poetry to it at all.

“Pull over here.”

My guy got out with the \$100 I gave him and told me not to stay parked on the street—too many cops. I watched him disappear through a cut between two tents, then circled the area. I was starting to get nervous after my third pass—conned again!—when I recognized my guy waving at me, a specter in the shadows. He got in the car with \$100 worth of crack. I handed him another \$200 and told him to use half of it for himself.

This time I only had to circle once.

The guy asked if I could drive him back to Sunset and La Brea. I dropped him off at the encampment there, then sped to my bungalow, the sun barely peeking over the horizon.

I returned to that scene by myself a few more times during my five-month self-exile in Los Angeles—a death wish, really. I’d head there

after the clubs closed at four and the after-hours clubs closed at six and X, Y, or Z dealer had clocked out for the night. None of it would be up and running again until past noon. That was too long for me: I couldn't wait six hours for my next hit. The sun was up and I was still rolling, frenetic, jonesing.

Even in that crazed world, there's no master network available to someone who's up twenty-four hours a day, smoking every fifteen minutes, seven days a week. Nobody can attend to those needs. No matter how big a dispensation system somebody like me pieced together, there were always gaps in the service.

This downtown tent city filled in those gaps.

The first time I returned there alone I found the cut between the two tents that I'd watched my Air Force buddy slip through. As makeshift and chaotic as the layout seemed, there was a remarkable logic and consistency to it. I went through and stepped around people curled up on thin pieces of cardboard. Beyond them, I noticed a tilting, unlit tent. I pulled back a flap. It was pitch-black. All I saw was the gun pointed at my face.

I stood there unfazed: I assumed I was in the right place. If the guy squatting there had a gun, he had something worth protecting. Turned out I was right. I told him I'd been there before with Joe, or whatever name I gave him for the homeless guy who'd brought me there previously. His reply: "Who the fuck you talking about?" So I just asked if he had any hard. "Oh," he said. He lowered the gun, rummaged around, and pulled out a bag. He never even got up. I saw somebody else lying to his right, sound asleep, snoring softly. I only bought a little because

he only had a little, but it was enough to hold me over until the rest of the miserable, bloodsucking world I now belonged to was up and back to work.

I walked straight to my car and slipped inside. I was shaking and ashamed. Then I lit up.

Thirty seconds later, I was numbed and flying and no longer ashamed at all—until the next time.

For months and months afterward—for most of the next year—there was always a next time.

It sounds absurd now, given that first day, but I came to California for a fresh start. I wanted a new place to be lost in and a certain level of anonymity. I wanted to get away from Washington and every bad reminder and influence there. I wanted to go someplace that wasn't always gray. I wanted a do-over. I planned to find a rental, settle in, and stay.

Instead, I holed up inside the Chateau for the first six weeks and learned how to cook crack. At that point in my free fall, I was acutely aware of the hotel's more depraved history. It was part of the attraction. My bungalow was near the one John Belushi died in from a drug overdose. Not long after Jim Morrison supposedly leaped from a fifth-floor window at the Chateau, he died in a Paris hotel bathtub. I thought about those kinds of things a lot. The amount of alcohol I consumed and crack I smoked was astounding—even death-defying. Morrison was a fucking piker compared to my shenanigans.

Cooking crack took practice, but it wasn't rocket science: baking soda, water, cocaine. That's it. I'd decided I wanted to cut out the middleman who could dilute the stuff with God knows what. Besides, my bungalow had everything I needed: stove, microwave, glass jars, and a tutor who made house calls—Honda, the skateboarder-turned-car-thief.

The most critical parts of the process are procuring a proper jar to cook it all in, one that's not too thin (it'll break) and not too thick (it won't heat properly); and getting the proportions just right. I became absurdly good at it—guess that 172 on my LSAT counted for something—though I wasn't beyond the occasional major fuckup. I'd heat the mixture over the stove in a baby food jar that would splinter and ruin everything. Or—this was later, in a hotel room without a stove or microwave—heat it with a torch lighter, hold the jar too long so it didn't cool down too quickly, and burn the shit out of my fingertips.

It's less potentially toxic to buy from somebody who knows how to cook. But cooking my own opened new avenues to me: there were ten times more people who sold powdered cocaine than sold crack. Buying it was a more genteel process, relatively speaking. Except for my desperate forays into Tent City, I figured I could eliminate one layer of drug-world repulsiveness.

I was off to the races.

With a room right by the pool, I didn't leave the Chateau's lush hillside grounds for a week or more at a time. I cooked and smoked, cooked and smoked. Occasionally, I slipped out late at night and drove for hours through the Hollywood Hills—back and forth on

winding Mulholland Drive, up and down the switchbacking two-lane Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Even with LA's vast galaxy of lights twinkling below, it was like being dropped into a whole other world. It was wild and primordial and, except for the howl of a far-off coyote or some fierce avian screech, fantastically silent. I'd watch the sunrise from Runyon Canyon.

The extent of my human contact was hanging out with a bunch of Samoan gangsters. I was connected to them through Curtis and his girlfriend.

For the next four or five months, my orbit was populated by an opaque, sinister night world of interconnected lives that roamed L.A. between 2 a.m. and 8 a.m. It mainly consisted of Curtis and his extended crew of thieves, junkies, petty dealers, over-the-hill strippers, con artists, and assorted hangers-on, who then invited their friends and associates and most recent hookups. They latched on to me and didn't let go, all with my approval.

I never slept. There was no clock. Day bled into night and night into day. With the curtains always closed, there was no visible distinction between the two. It got so disorienting at one point that I demanded one of the hangers-on pull open the shades so I could see for myself—see if it was day or night.

I came to dread sleep. If I rested too long between hits on a pipe, I'd be thrown into a panic. I'd crash for a few minutes, come to, and the first thing I'd demand would be "Where's the pipe?" Other times I'd reach for rocks that I'd left on a bedside table and then find, to my horror, that they'd been blown all over the room—somebody left a window or door open. I'd get down on my hands and knees to scan the floor and comb through the rug with my fingers. Half the time I had no idea what I was picking up: *Is this*

a flake of Parmesan from the cheese platter we ordered last night? Or crack?

It didn't matter: I smoked it. If it was crack, great. If it wasn't, I'd take a hit, exhale, and exclaim: "Shit, that's not it—that's the fucking cheese!"

It got more pathetic. While driving around, I often snacked on white cheddar popcorn that I bought at convenience stores, eating it out of the bag. If I suddenly ran out of crack, I'd scrounge around my car's floor wells, cup holders, and door panels for any traces I might have dropped. Again, the crack crumbs were often indistinguishable from the spilled snacks. Safe to say I've smoked more cheddar popcorn than anybody on the face of the earth.

Over time, I trained my body to function on less and less sleep. After three days straight, I'd get droopy and zombie-walk everywhere. I'd push through it, though, and soon my body reset: I'd feel like I woke up at 8 a.m. after a weekend of lawn mowing and golf, ready for work. I'd smoke some more and be off to the races again for three more days, or six more days, or twelve more days.

My weekly sleep allotment usually topped out at about ten hours. Yet even that was irregular and mostly useless—definitely not REM sleep. I caught a few winks in my car while waiting on a dealer; on a toilet seat; on a chaise lounge by the hotel pool between hits. If I fell asleep there for too long, one of my room's misfit squatters was sure to shake me awake to cadge something new.

We've all been inside rooms we can't afford to die in. I put myself inside that room day after day, week after week, month after month.

I stayed in one place until I tired of it, or until it tired of me, and then moved on, my merry band of crooks, creeps, and outcasts soon to follow.

Availability drove some of the moves; impulsiveness drove others. A sample itinerary:

I left the Chateau the first time for an Airbnb in Malibu. When I couldn't reserve it for longer than a week, I returned to West Hollywood and the Jeremy hotel. There were then stays at the Sunset Tower, Sixty Beverly Hills, and the Hollywood Roosevelt. Then another Airbnb in Malibu and an Airbnb in the Hollywood Hills. Then back to the Chateau. Then the NoMad downtown, the Standard on Sunset. A return to the Sixty, a return to Malibu . . .

The scene was the same everywhere. I sometimes made sketches of the rooms' interiors but soon realized they all looked alike. I slapped a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door first thing; a maid never entered. By the end of a stay, in the soft golden glow of the luxury room's light, the high-cotton-count bedsheets were strewn across the floor, plates and platters piled high from room service, the bedside phone knocked permanently off the hook.

An ant trail of dealers and their sidekicks rolled in and out, day and night. They pulled up in late-series Mercedes-Benzes, decked out in oversized Raiders or Lakers jerseys and flashing fake Rolexes. Their stripper girlfriends invited their girlfriends, who invited their boyfriends. They'd drink up the entire minibar, call room service for filet mignon and a bottle of Dom Pérignon. One of the women even ordered an additional filet for her purse-sized dog.

When they finished, two or three days later, they'd walk out with the hotel's monogrammed towels and throw pillows and comforters and ashtrays. Minimum-wage bouncers with side businesses—drugs, girls, access to VIP rooms for tips—now had a new hustle: Me.

That's the business they were in. One night some women in my room started swapping stories they'd heard of a guy in the Hollywood Hills who'd created a social media platform, made millions if not billions, and now was addicted to drugs. They marveled at the stampede on his house to take his TVs and cars and the last dime in his bank account. They discussed it casually, almost professionally, like exchanging stock tips. Their takeaway: *I gotta get up there!* It was a way of life that revolved around feeding off people with money who have fallen into addiction.

I hardly held myself above them. I was just as much a part of the depravity as they were. I was smoking crack every fifteen minutes. They'd live off me until I said otherwise. As long as they didn't touch my drugs—or interfere with my ability to use, or create a scene that cut short my ability to stay at the hotel—I didn't give a damn.

Most of them came with their own drugs and focused on their own addictions: heroin, meth, drinking themselves to death. If I ran low on mine, I joined in with theirs. Misery really does love company.

I would get a room for one night. Then ask to keep it for another night. Then another. And another. When hotel management wanted me out, they'd refuse to extend my stay, politely but firmly telling me that someone else had reserved the room and there were no other

vacancies. Other times the front desk informed me that guests were complaining about the parade of ne'er-do-wells traipsing in and out of my room and asked me to leave. I saw it as blatant racism and let them know it.

Once in a great while, some tender, desperate soul would float into the room who still seemed to possess a trace of kindness or concern. I'd wake up and find all my clothes folded and put back in the chest of drawers. I'd think, "Wow, she really is sweet." Then I'd find out she folded my clothes after going through all my pockets, taking everything and anything she could find. Others did the same thing with my bags or my car—just cleaned them out.

I lost count of the stolen wallets and credit cards. Charges rolled in: Gucci loafers, an \$800 sport coat, Rimowa luggage. I'd trudge down to the Wells Fargo branch on Sunset to talk with one of the tellers about getting a replacement. They all knew me. They'd smile and send me to the same patient Armenian bank manager. Her usual first response: "We can't give you a new card without any ID."

But the more I came in, the more she took pity on me.

"Hunter," she would say with a sigh, "how can you keep losing your card all the time?"

The incongruity between the beauty I saw during my drives through the hills and the scummy subculture I willingly tapped into was demoralizing, depressing, defeating. It was so damn dark. I still feel a pit in my stomach when I think of how much money I dropped, how I allowed myself to think of any of those people as my friends. There wasn't a conversation that took place inside one of

those hotel rooms in which anything genuine or enlightening was ever spoken. Not once. I wouldn't recognize 90 percent of them if we ran into each other again.

Yet I was so lost in my addiction that I watched the crowd rob me blind and didn't care enough to stop them—not as long as the cycle of drugs, sex, exhaustion, and exhilaration repeated itself over and over. It was nonstop depravity.

I told family back in Delaware I was working on my sobriety—whatever the hell that meant at that point. Here's what it meant: nothing. I'd gotten good at telling stories like that.

Uncle

Jim has his own superpower: he gets things done. So he jumped on a plane to Los Angeles, pulled me out of a room in the Hollywood Roosevelt, and said, "I found a place. Let's go."

I went. He checked me into a rehab center in Brentwood, where I stayed clean for about two weeks. I then lived in a rental off Nichols Canyon, in the Hills, with a sober coach. It was great—the beauty, the peace, the support—right up until the moment I relapsed.

CHAPTER TEN

LOST HIGHWAY

My penultimate odyssey through full-blown addiction became a shabbier, gloomier, more solitary version of the chromatic tear I went on through Southern California.

I came back east. The trees soon were bare and the low slate sky seemed to hover inches above my head. In my mind's eye, I can't picture a single day during my months back there that wasn't gray and overcast, a fitting, ominous backdrop.

I had returned that fall of 2018, after my most recent relapse in California, with the hope of getting clean through a new therapy and reconciling with Hallie.

Neither happened.

For all the obvious reasons—my extended disappearances, my inability to stay sober, her need to stabilize and reorder her own life and family—Hallie and I called it quits.

I headed back toward Delaware, in no shape to face anyone or anything. To ensure that I wouldn't have to do either, I took an exit at New Haven.

For the next three or four weeks, I lived in a series of low-budget, low-expectations motels up and down Interstate 95, between New Haven and Bridgeport. I exchanged L.A.'s \$400-a-night bungalows and their endless parade of blingy degenerates for the underbelly of Connecticut's \$59-a-night motel rooms and the dealers, hookers, and hard-core addicts—like me—who favored them.

I no longer had one foot in polite society and one foot out. I avoided polite society altogether. I hardly went anywhere now, except to buy. It was me and a crack pipe in a Super 8, not knowing which the fuck way was up. All my energy revolved around smoking drugs and making arrangements to buy drugs—feeding the beast. To facilitate it, I resurrected the same sleep schedule I'd kept in L.A.: never. There was hardly any mistaking me now for a so-called respectable citizen.

Crack is a great leveler.

Just like in California—like practically anywhere else I'd landed since this long bad dream began—each new day looked exactly like the one before it. Nothing occurred on a traditional wake-up/go-to-sleep continuum.

If I knew my crack connection, meaning if I'd bought from that person before and had his phone number, I would start making arrangements to buy from him as soon as I neared the end of my stash. If I reached him, I had to figure out how to meet with him. If we agreed on a time and a place, it was almost always at the most random hour, in the sketchiest part of town.

Impossible to factor into all of this: the waiting. No dealer works off a user's urgent timetable. So you arrange to meet in front of a 7-Eleven on such-and-such street, then sit in your car and wait. And wait. An hour passes since the time he said he'd be there. He doesn't answer his phone. You start freaking out. People keep going in and coming out of the store, and the man or woman working behind the counter keeps glancing your way, wondering why the hell you've been parked out there for two hours.

By this point, you're also about to jump out of your skin—you need that hit. You feel wholly depleted and it gets harder to keep your eyes open, even a little bit. You call the dealer's number a couple of times. Then a dozen times more.

You keep calling. He keeps not answering. The store clerk keeps staring.

Hours later, the dealer shows. No explanation. Odds are he has arrived with less than you asked for, or he wants more money than you've already agreed to pay. It's never straightforward. It's always some bullshit negotiation. You finally take what he has and hope it's what he says it is. Chances are better than even that the product is so trashed with look-alike filler as to have hardly been worth all the effort.

You're back on the phone three hours later, or eight hours later, cycling through the same routine two or three times more. By then, you no longer care or can tell whether it's morning or night. There's no longer any difference between 4 a.m. and 4 p.m.

It's so clearly an unsustainable life. The monotony is excruciating. It's truly the same thing over and over—same movies on TV, same songs on the iPod. Your mind is devoid of any thought other than how to get your next hit.

The motels where I stopped were frequented by active addicts who needed to support their addictions and pay their room bills. They ranged in age from their midtwenties to their forties and fifties. They were easy to spot. They stared out their windows or slouched outside their doors to see who might be a possible connection. Our rooms all faced one another, or they looked out onto a common

parking lot. If you stared out your window long enough, you'd see who was going in and out of where, and who might have crack or information on where to find it.

Somebody would eventually come over to my room to sell me something directly, or pass along a connection, for a finder's fee. When we finished the transaction, the addict was usually out the door before I realized I was missing my watch or jacket or iPad—happened all the time.

More frustrating was when they told me they heard so-and-so had some good stuff, but he was in Stamford, about an hour away. I'd head to Stamford, wait in a parking lot there for an hour. A guy would finally show up with nothing, then make ten calls before telling me about someone else with something in Bridgeport, a half-hour drive back up 95, where I'd have to wait another hour outside a bodega. Sometimes it paid off, sometimes it didn't. There were a million wild-goose chases.

One time I watched someone step into a room, close the door, then leave fifteen minutes later and head for his car. In a world filled with ex-felons carrying suspended licenses or no licenses at all and constantly bumming rides, this dude stood out. He was clean, barbered, and confident. But not cocky. He exuded . . . *ownership*. I caught up with him just before he pulled out and asked what I always asked: "Any hard?" Interactions like that were usually the beginning of one of two things: getting completely ripped off or a steady connection.

That's how I met John, who was the beginning of both.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SAVED

By the time my plane touched down in Los Angeles in March 2019, I had no plan beyond the moment-to-moment demands of the crack pipe.

During the nearly four years of active addiction that preceded this trip to California, which included a half dozen rehab attempts, that's what I told myself after each failure.

My first call off the plane was to a drug connection.

I took an Uber to my car, which I'd stored in the garage of someone who managed a place I had stayed at. (Side note: this being an L.A. friend at that time, he had tried to sell the car.) I went straight from there to pick up some crack.

The next month and a half is a drug-befuddled blur. That's not a dodge or a lapse in memory. Everything that followed my return to L.A. was a genuine, dictionary-definition blur of complete and utter debauchery. I was doing nothing but drinking and drugging.