

# *Prologue*

*Five Years Ago*

A teacup exploded against the wall.

Martin Sayer ducked.

A saucer crashed.

“Please.” It was the first word he said to his wife in three months.

Entering the living room he saw that she was full into a manic phase. He needed no psychiatrist to explain that. He should have guessed she was off her medication.

Bev glared at him.

He began to apologize. It would have all the calming effect of pissing into a forest fire. His daughter Stephanie told him about the letters and phone calls from bill collectors. They shut the telephone off last month. From the newspaper Martin Sayer learned he missed his father-in-law’s funeral three days ago.

“Please,” he said. After three months of booze, cigarettes, and sleeping on a friend’s couch he felt queasy-weak, exhausted. He wanted to sit down, take Bev’s insults and accusations and then sleep for a week.

Bev uttered a high, whining sound. Her eyes bulged as she charged at him. Martin possessed all the reflexive grace of a fly with its wings torn off. Bev was at him in an instant, fists flailing. He raised his hands. She pummeled his abdomen and chest, landing punches on his chin and cheeks, boxed his ears and bashed him in the nose.

Martin’s lungs were aflame. He cried for help, but his throat was sealed. The burning in his lungs spread through his chest like a meltdown. Blood thundered in his temples, his vision grayed. He sank to his knees gaping at his Bev’s snarling countenance, grabbing at one of her wrists. She struck him on the chin, jerking his head back so hard Martin’s neck flared with pain. Then the world fell to blackness.

Hearing a car pull into the driveway, Stephanie wondered if it was her father finally returning home. She pushed her studying aside as the front door opened. She frowned. The family entered by the back—

A dish crashed outside.

“Dad?” she said.

Another crash.

She opened her bedroom door and entered the living room. She stared at the scene: her father kneeling on the floor, red-faced, gripping his chest, her mother thrashing him with her fists. When her mother bashed him on the chin, sending him sprawling onto his back, Stephanie lunged across the living room, tackling her mother from behind. They tumbled against the couch and onto the carpet knocking a lamp from a side table. Bev fought to free her arms. Stephanie grappled with her mother’s shoulders. Bev head-butted her in the nose, bringing tears to Stephanie’s eyes.

Her younger brother Adam came out of his room.

“*Get help!*” Stephanie shouted.

He stood there stunned.

“*Go!*”

He ran out of the house.

Bev writhed in Stephanie’s grip. Stephanie’s arms numbed with the strain. She wondered if she could hold her mother until the police arrived. Her father’s eyelids fluttered. He foamed at the mouth. Stephanie wanted to go to him, but she didn’t dare relinquish hold of her mother. She wrapped her legs around her mother’s thighs. Bev’s squealing guttural sounds became sobs.

Stephanie pressed her cheek against the back of her mother's fever-warm head. Stephanie closed her eyes, saying, "I love you, Mom. I love you. I love you."

## One

### Present Day

He felt like shit after a night of ruined sleep.

He made some instant coffee, and went to his desk wearing his usual writing raiment: gray boxer shorts and his green bathrobe hanging open. It was late August and the one-bedroom apartment was muggy in spite of the air conditioner laboring in its slip by the balcony door. He never wrote shirtless, he hated his skin sticking to the chair's vinyl seatback. He was a month in the new place, glad to be out of the bachelor apartment where he spent his first three years in Randham. This one-bedroom unit, with its month-to-month lease, would be home until graduation from RU in eight months. And then—

Setting down his coffee, the mug struck the edge of a picture frame. The photograph of his girlfriend toppled off the cluttered desktop striking the faded hardwood floor with the decisive sound of glass breaking.

"Shit."

Hugh Longford did not believe in omens, but this was not a sign of things improving.

It was ten o'clock on a Tuesday, Hugh's day off from the Helpful Hardware stockroom. He and Stephanie went to dinner at the Dalmatian Station last night, celebrating their third anniversary. They had planned to see a movie, too, then heading back to Hugh's place. All of which was derailed when they began arguing halfway through dinner. They quarreled in hushed voices, escalating only when they got outside. Stephanie didn't have to demand to be taken home—that's where Hugh was already headed. When she got out at her house, Hugh roared away.

All of that bullish indignation was gone this morning.

Hugh logged onto his e-mail. There were two new messages: one from his mother, the other from his good friend, Maninder Syngh. Manny moved away with his wife Rohini two months ago to do his MBA. Hugh read his mother's message, a quick hello with news about her new car and his father's rosebushes. Then, Manny's message:

Hugh:

You know you're in trouble when you're asking ME for advice. If you're going to ask Stephanie to move in, be sure to ASK her. Don't pressure her. Steph's a super girl and Ro and I've always thought you made a great couple.

Good luck,  
M.

"Thanks, old friend."

Hugh sipped his coffee, and clicked the *REPLY* button:

manny,  
thanks for the message/advice. wish i'd waited for it.

He stared at the blinking cursor.

i took the new place figuring stef would move in, but i never told you why. it's our third year together, i love her, and want us to be together. but there's another reason - something strange is happening with her mom.

Write it, Hugh thought. *This is Manny.*

i think mrs sayer is having a nervous breakdown. stef's brave, pretending nothing's wrong, but i've seen things that i can't ignore. frankly, i'm frightened for stef living in that house.

He was about to click the *SEND* button, but stopped, then closed the browser window without sending the e-mail message.

His thoughts swung back to the argument last night.

"I've got a bigger place now," he had said. "When do you want to move in?"

"What?"

"Don't you want to live together?"

"How long have you thought about this?"

"A few weeks. What? You haven't?"

"It's crossed my mind, but . . ."

"But what?"

Stephanie placed a hand on his. "What's wrong with how things are now?"

"Nothing's *wrong*."

"Then what's the hurry?"

"Why do you think I took the one-bedroom? For the view?"

"You hated the other place."

"I did this for *us*—"

"And you bring it up like this?"

"We've been together three years, for God's sake,"

"And you just announce that we should live together?"

"You make it sound like I'm asking you to amputate an arm."

"I don't like being pressured."

"What's keeping you at home, anyhow?"

"It's my home."

"So, you're going to live there forever?"

"Of course not."

"Then what?"

"I'm staying for Adam."

"Ah, come on."

"Things have been weird at home," Stephanie said. "I'm not leaving him there alone."

Hugh called for the check.

"Am I crazy?" he said, outside. "Presuming you care about me more than you really do."

"Don't start—"

"I'm serious." They got in the car. "You act like this is the most ridiculous thing you've ever heard."

"You don't usually bully me—"

"Don't *usually*? What the hell does that mean?"

"Nothing!"

They argued all the way to her house.

When Hugh returned to his apartment, he tried forgetting about the botched evening by working on a short story. It was no use.

"Stupid," he muttered to himself, now.

He went onto the balcony.

*What's wrong with how things are now?*

Hugh met Stephanie during Frosh Week at RU. She had grown up in Randham. He was from Benneville, a three-hour drive away. She was in the nursing program and he enrolled in English, certain he would write his Novel of Lofty Importance before graduating. With the start of their final two semesters only weeks away, he had yet to begin writing that novel, but Hugh

and Stephanie were still together. With graduation now within sight, he realized how little they had discussed their plans beyond it. In Hugh's mind, it was understood they would be together afterward. But he had also thought he would be helping Stephanie move into the apartment today.

For all of his affection for Stephanie, one reason he wanted her to move in eclipsed the rest: *I'm frightened for her*, he thought. There was no being demure about it, Mrs. Sayer was having a mental breakdown.

Until this summer, Hugh got on well with Stephanie's family. Sure, her father was a man of few words. A Randham City Transit driver who worked odd hours, Mr. Sayer always seemed distant, preoccupied. Hugh long ago concluded the man wasn't hostile or disapproving, just disinterested. Stephanie's brother, Adam, took after his father. He was a shy, lanky fifteen year-old who passed silently in and out of the house. Mrs. Sayer, however, was generous and outgoing, inviting Hugh for dinner at least once a week. She was a part-time cashier at Shopmart, who worked on her garden on days off and pampered her six year-old Pomeranian, Nipper. Hugh hated Nipper.

Months ago, as spring semester wound down, Hugh noticed a change in Mrs. Sayer. She was more talkative, always straining to make a point. Whether it was about the price of lettuce or the squirrels ravaging her garden, she would grab Hugh's forearm and plead her case at close range.

*She always sounds so desperate*, he thought.

By June Hugh knew something was wrong.

Then there was the night of Manny and Rohini's going-away party. Hugh brought Stephanie home around one a.m.. When he pulled up to her house they sat in the car, stunned, watching Mrs. Sayer mowing the front lawn. Robe-clad neighbors stood on porches, watching, too. After much coaxing, Mrs. Sayer allowed Hugh to put the mower in the garage, and she went into the house with Stephanie.

It wasn't as though Mr. Sayer was around to stop his wife.

As Hugh noticed the change in Mrs. Sayer, he also observed her husband's continual absence. A few nights after the lawn-mowing incident, Stephanie confided in Hugh. "Mom's manic depressive," she said. "She's been hospitalized twice after total nervous breakdowns. She misses the highs and lows of normal moods. The meds keep her level, but stability gets boring, so she stops taking her pills."

Around that time, the first strands of quiet resentment toward Mr. Sayer formed in Hugh. It had everything to do with his being absent from home, leaving Stephanie and her brother to deal with their mother.

He remembered Stephanie crying that evening. "It was a mess," she said. "Dad was at the Downs gambling every night. I don't know if Mom went off her meds to get back at him. There were letters from the utility company and the bank. In the middle of it all Grandpa had a stroke. He lived with us for nearly a month, waiting for a room in a nursing home. He should have been in a hospital, but he demanded we take him. The house was completely upside down.

"Grandpa died before he was placed. Dad didn't even go to the funeral. A few days later, he finally came home, and he and Mom had a huge fight." Stephanie wiped her eyes. "Dad had a heart attack that night."

Hugh was mystified, speechless.

*If she'd just move in*, he thought as the memory receded.

*I'm staying for Adam.*

*What can I say to that?*

"Nothing," he said aloud. He would call and apologize. No martyr apology, either. He felt terrible upsetting her, especially when it seemed things at home were souring.

He went into the apartment, cleaned up the broken glass, and set Stephanie's picture on his desk. A few bits of jagged glass poked toward her smiling face. He tried pulling one out and cut his thumb.

*Great Longford*, he thought.

After rinsing his thumb under the kitchen tap he logged onto his e-mail.

manny,  
thanks for the advice, but i didn't end up needing it. we went out for  
our 3rd anniversary last night, and i figured i would wait on asking stef  
to move in.

He clicked the *SEND* button.

## Two

Stephanie's shift at the Carlyle Retirement Home ended at three p.m.. Although it was only a twenty-minute walk home, she was perspiring as though she had sprinted the entire way.

*Next time we fight*, she thought. I'm *taking the car*. *This is nuts*.

She opened the back door and Nipper went into a spasm of yap-yap-yapping.

"All right, already," Stephanie said.

It was a long day made worse by a night of listless sleep. The only bright spot was Hugh calling just after lunch to apologize. There were times he made her angry enough to knock his head off, but there was no question he knew his way around saying sorry.

Stephanie dropped her shoulder bag and purse on the stairs leading to the kitchen and took off her shoes. She stopped after taking the first off. She drew in a deep breath, and frowned. Cigarette smoke. Faint, but unmistakable.

"Hello?" she called.

The dog began yapping again. Stephanie looked at him. "I know *you're* here."

She pried off her other shoe, her feet all but groaning with relief, and wondered if she was mistaken. *No*, she thought. She smelled cigarettes.

It was crazy. Not only did she dislike that odor, it actually ignited a faceless, free-floating anxiety in her. Even at bars with friends, when Stephanie breathed a waft of cigarette smoke something in her clenched.

She went into the kitchen and poured a glass of iced tea. *Is Adam smoking?*

"That little shit," she muttered, "I'll break his neck."

She went into the living room. The odor was fainter there. She went down to the basement. Halfway there, she paused. There was something on the stairs. She bent down and picked it up.

A book of matches.

Across the black cover, written in hyper-elegant gold script. It read *RANDHAM CITY DOWNS*.

"Oh . . ." she breathed. "Oh, shit."

## Three

The day crept by with its usual faltering pace at Shopmart. As the air conditioning hummed and Muzak droned, Bev Sayer wiped down her checkout counter for the third time since arriving an hour ago. Her friend and co-worker, Jeanette, stood at the next counter. It was four p.m.. They were on until nine o'clock close.

*So, Martin thinks he's got me fooled*, Bev thought, rubbing a speck on the counter that she knew was a scratch. *Thinks I'm stupid, that I can't smell cigarettes in the house. Nearly caught him today . . . and where was he last night?*

As she sprayed the counter with another cloud of Windex, her mind ricocheted to when she first met her husband at Randham City Transit. Bev was there seven months working in the office when Martin was hired. After a week on the job, he made a point of ducking into the office every day to say hello.

*So dapper in his uniform*, Bev thought.

*Something about a man in uniform*, her friend Mona would say.

And it was true. Bev recalled her father in his postman's uniform. He looked like a constable, a commander. She saw the same thing in Martin Sayer wearing his RCT khakis. Whenever he popped into the office, Bev pretended to ignore him. One afternoon, he asked for a date. Bev was so flustered she nearly said no. She'd never had a boyfriend. There were crushes and infatuations, but she was never one for dances or parties. Just as well, she was never invited to any. Bev spent the Friday and Saturday nights of her adolescence with Jeanette and Mona.

An image of Sean Corcoran came to mind. Recalling his blond hair, broad shoulders, his swagger through the halls of McNeil Collegiate, made something in her swoon. Sean was two years older than Bev. He was also captain of the football team. He stood taller than most teachers in the school, and threw a football further than anyone in his division.

*And how he looked in his uniform*, Bev thought. How she dreamed of him noticing her in the hallways or in the stands at one of the games. That he would take her aside and say he wasn't one for dances or parties, either. That he wanted a quiet girl.

A month into ninth grade, Bev found Sean's address in the telephone book. He lived four blocks away. One evening, after finishing the dinner dishes, Bev approached Daddy, who sat in his chair reading the paper.

"I'm going to Jeanette's," Bev said. She took his grunt as permission.

She walked to Sean's street, looking for his address. When she came to Nichols Park, she saw Sean outside his house, helping someone fix a car. His father or brother was hunched under the hood. Bev went in the park, into the shadows, to a swing set. Sean reached into a toolbox on the porch stairs, which gave off to the side, and handed a tool to the man under the car's hood.

Sean Corcoran had a girlfriend. They had been a couple for almost a year by that faded October—

Bev's reverie broke off as a striking young woman passed. She had a great mane of brown hair, wrap-around sunglasses and a deep tan. She wore tight shorts and a brief halter-top.

Bev's expression darkened as she looked the woman up and down. "Did you see that?" she said after the woman had walked out the door.

"What?" Jeanette said, straightening the magazines in her aisle.

"A stripper."

"Oh."

"How can a *strip* club open across the street from a family store?"

"They're just girls," Jeanette said, "buying make-up and stockings—"

"Stockings they *strip* off!"

Jeanette looked at her. "Keep your voice down."

"Daddy wouldn't stand for this." She uttered a braying laugh. "He'd march down to City Hall and *demand* something be done!" Bev shook her head. "Mona's husband ran off with a stripper."

"She was a *waitress*. You know that."

"She was a tramp!"

"Beverly."

Elaine Denton, the store's manager, stood at the top of Bev's aisle.

"Elaine!" Bev said, forcing a laugh. "You'll scare the life out of someone sneaking up like that."

"My office, Bev. *Now*." Elaine walked off.

Jeanette looked at Bev. Bev met her gaze and offered a wan smile. "Hold the fort."

As she moved through the store, a high ringing sound rose in Bev's ears. Her vision dimmed. These sensory hiccups were accompanied by a sense of detachment, hovering within herself, watching herself walk to the hallway next to the Customer Service counter at the rear of the store. Bev felt like a ghost lurking between walls.

Elaine's office door was open.

"Sit down," Elaine said, as though from the other side of a dream.

Bev watched herself enter.

"I've had complaints about your conduct," Elaine said. "Particularly, since the Harem opened." Her gaze softened. "I hate the Harem as much as you do, but we can't go around the store shouting our opinions about it."

Elaine paused. Then: "I'm letting you go, Bev. Effective immediately."

Bev heard herself say, "I can explain."

"No need to," Elaine said. "I heard you myself."

"This is a family store."

"When I dropped you down to part-time, that was your second chance," Elaine said. "I'm sorry."

Bev watched herself rise from the chair. Heard herself say, "I've been here three years." Elaine said nothing. Bev walked to the door. The ringing in her ears grew louder. Her vision clouded, casting the hall, the store—everything—in a soft, surreal light. She heard a voice.

*Bevy.*

A voice that frightened and soothed her. Daddy's voice. *Bevy, you stood up for what's right.*

Bev moved through the store to the doors. Jeanette watched her go past, saying nothing.

## Four

Adam leaned against The Blood Demon pinball machine watching Randy work the paddles. He couldn't remember which of his friends decided that the "retro"-ness of pinball was cooler than video games. It was a game from another time, that was for sure. A time when people entertained themselves by switching the light off and on in a room.

Lights flashed, bells rang. The score galloped ever higher.

Finally, the silver ball rolled down a gutter. Game Over. One thousand points shy of a free game.

"Fuck!" Randy spat, slapping the side of the machine. He glared at Adam. "Get the fuck off the machine, I can't see my ball up there!"

Adam shrugged and leaned against the machine behind him.

It was late afternoon and the Fantasy Lounge Arcade was empty except for Randy and Adam, and a couple of old guys shooting pool in the back. Randy slipped another quarter into the machine and pulled the plunger. Adam watched the door for their friends.

Weeks before school ended, his mother nagged him every day about finding a summer job. He was used to her bitching, but she usually bitched at his father or Stephanie. However, by late June when school finally let out, she was looking for a fight with anyone who was around.

Adam watched Randy's ball bouncing off the bumpers. He felt tired. For some reason, lately, sleep came with difficulty, and was restless, often filled with nightmares. He kept busy through the day, wearing himself out with his friends, but when he lay down at night, he felt so *up*. Tense.

"Yeah motherfucker?" Randy cackled at the Blood Demon.

Adam thought about Grandpa—his mother's father—who died five years before. Grandpa always came to mind when Adam's mother got that weird look in her eyes, and that pleading, screeching tone in her voice. When she spent half the day pissing everyone off and the other half trying to win everybody back.

"Fucking devil prick," Randy muttered as the ball rolled down the gutter.

Adam wondered what he and his friends would do this evening. He wondered if they would swim at Sue Maglen's. The image of Sue in a bikini faded before it took hold. His thoughts veered to when he was ten, circling over memories of Grandpa. The stroke. Coming home from school one day and finding Grandpa in his bedroom.

"Just for a little while," Adam's mother said.

Before the first week of Grandpa's stay had ended, the house was filled with the reek of shit and piss. The stench reached into every corner of the house no matter how his mother cleaned.

His dad worked days and stayed out most evenings. Grandpa refused to be helped in the bathroom by Adam's mother. So, the old bastard pissed and shit the bed.

*My bed*, Adam thought.

He wondered why he was thinking about any of this anyway. An image rose from a few weeks ago: Mom outside at one in the morning mowing the lawn. Adam lay in bed listening to the mower's drone, too embarrassed, too frightened to go outside. Recalling that wild, disconnected look in his Mom's eyes. Exactly what he had seen in his grandfather's eyes.

*Crazy.*

"You gonna give it up?" Randy shouted at the machine. "Devil fucker!"

Grandpa lived with them for a month. Adam slept on the couch in the basement, sneaking into his own room each morning to get clothes, choking on Grandpa's stench whenever he opened the door.

But that wasn't the worst.

The basement couch was below his room. Night after night, Adam awoke to the sounds of Grandpa whispering and laughing, like he was talking to somebody. Some nights, the old man woke the house with a sudden shriek.

*Like he lost every one of his fucking marbles.*

The old man always went back to sleep, but there was no sleep for Adam, who lay in the dank dark basement, listening to his own shallow breathing. Then came the morning Adam woke to his mother's shrieks—when she went into his bedroom and found Grandpa dead.

A commotion of voices entered the arcade.

Les and Mitch came up to the pinball machine. Les' jacket bulged. "How's Balls of Steel doing?" he said, clapping Randy on the shoulder.

"Fuck off."

"What's with the jacket?" Adam said.

Les revealed a bottle of Thunderbird wine hidden within.

"Where'd you get that?"

"My brother bought it. You jerk-offs owe me five bucks each."

"Where're we gonna drink it?" Adam said.

"Sue's," Mitch said. "Maybe get us all laid."

"All right," Les said.

"Whore!" Randy shouted as his final ball rolled down the gutter. He looked at the guys, pretended to punch Les where the bottle bulged through his jacket, and said, "Let's get the fuck out of here."

## *Five*

It was a quiet afternoon at Randham City Downs. Races from across North America played over the closed circuit TVs hanging from ceiling mounts throughout the place. Races at the Downs didn't start for another few weeks, but the Winner's Circle Tavern was open. Martin Sayer ordered a beer. It was his day off.

He looked at the handful of hardcores bent over their racing forms. He took a table facing the door and placed a hand on his pocket. Felt the roll of bills. Last night was big, My Gal Sal at eight-to-one. Martin normally bet to place, but for some reason laid down a hundred on My Gal Sal to win, and she had—an eight hundred dollar windfall. After months of hit-and-miss luck, last night proved Martin could dig himself out of his current negative cash-flow situation.

He took out his cigarettes and reached into his pocket for matches. Not there. Tried his breast pocket. Nothing. He snagged a book of matches from the ceramic bowl on the bar. Lit his smoke and opened the day's racing form.

*Luck just may hold today*, he thought, musing over his narrow escape from Bev earlier.

*I was sure she was on the early shift*, Martin thought, blowing smoke. He'd gone home around noon after spending the night at his friend's place. He needed a change of clothes. He had just pulled on his pants when he heard the back door open, and the dog's paws clicking across the kitchen floor.

Then the voice: "Martin?"

He put on his shirt, grabbed his wallet and keys and darted out of the bedroom. Bev stood in the living room, glowering. "Where were you last night?"

Martin breezed past her, smiling, saying, "Out for a few beers. Gotta run—got some errands."

He stepped into his shoes at the back door and kept on going.

"Martin?" Bev shouted as the door swung shut.

*I'll pay for that one*, Martin thought, but couldn't help smiling.

Not for the first time the voice of his friend, Jack, spoke in his mind, *Why don't you get out of there altogether, Marty? Bev's driving you batshit, the kids are grown . . . well, Stephanie is at least.*

"I don't want a divorce," Martin explained. To which Jack would snicker, "What, you love her too much?" Easy for Jack to joke, being twice divorced and veteran of more relationships than he could count.

Martin dragged on his cigarette. He thought about Jack and his one room apartment, his alimony, his kids—being raised by his ex-wives' boyfriends—whom he saw once or twice a month. Times he offered his free advice Martin would say, "Divorce is too much hassle. Bev'll never get my house or my paycheck. No goddamned way."

At least Martin had the win from last night to buoy him. He was on days the rest of this week and next, and wondered if he would chance going home tonight.

*Probably give Jack a call*, Martin thought.

Jack also drove for the RCT. He was on afternoons this week, and would doubtless end up here after work. Martin said nothing about the eight hundred dollars last night. A man kept that sort of good news to himself.

He rubbed his eyes and thought about the days when he and Bev started dating. Seemed like centuries ago. Their early years were reasonably pleasant. Soon after their marriage, Bev quit her job. Stephanie was born a year later. Martin came and went as he pleased, while Bev cared for Stephanie, taking her shopping, out for walks in Colonial Park, visiting friends.

He looked at his watch. The guy he came to meet was running late.

Bev became pregnant again when Stephanie was seven. Martin was thunderstruck by the news. It was a hard pregnancy: morning sickness like days-long hangovers, wild squalls of temper. And a glare came into Bev's eyes that said to Martin in no uncertain terms, *You did this to me, you bastard!*

Following a very rough night, Adam was born, healthy, pink, and screaming. When Bev and the baby finally came home, that smoldering look never left her eyes. Even when she smiled for family photos, something in Bev's gaze always made Martin uneasy.

Following Adam's birth, her seismic shifts of mood continued. Martin knew the months after childbirth were not easy for a woman, but following Stephanie's birth Bev settled into a routine that kept her busy, and seemed to make her happy. After Adam's birth, Bev was so agitated. She argued with Martin over such mundane things as him leaving a coffee mug in the sink. One evening, when he forgot to come home right after work to take her grocery shopping, Bev hurled a dinner plate at him.

Soon after Adam's first birthday, Martin convinced Bev to see the family doctor. The GP referred her to another doctor. The word "psychiatrist" was never mentioned. Following a battery of tests, and some counseling sessions, the second doctor telephoned Martin.

"Chemical imbalance?" Martin repeated to himself, frowning, after hearing what the doctor had to say. "Like she's not getting enough nutrients or something?"

Then the words "manic depression" were used.

Medication was prescribed, and it had seemed to help. As life around the house settled down, Martin still often skipped dinner with the family, even slept at friends' homes a few times a month. The accusatory glare never left Bev's eyes.

Martin lit another cigarette and swallowed the last of his beer. He approached the bar for another. Reaching into his pocket, he gripped the eight hundred dollars, hoping it would cheer him, distract him from thinking about Bev, but it was no use. He returned to the table, and pondered his family until he came to Bev's breakdown five years ago.

It had been a hard time all the way around. Bev no longer sat home waiting for Martin, but went out looking for him. She surprised him a few times at the Downs, and at his other haunts—even along his bus route—haranguing him each time.

Martin was in such a tailspin that he began using vacation time to sleep off the hangovers. One morning, he rolled off Jack's couch, having no idea which day it was. Glancing through the morning newspaper, he saw his father-in-law's obituary. There was a moment where Martin sobered, thought to go home, and help with the funeral arrangements, but after closing the newspaper, he opened a beer instead.

Martin went home two days after his father-in-law's burial. In the meantime, there had been more letters and telephone calls from bill collectors. There were also the funeral costs, which Bev's brother and sister refused to share. Neither attended the funeral. The moment Martin entered the house the argument began with a teacup shattering against the wall above his head.

Transfixed by his reverie, Martin didn't see Louis until he pulled up a chair.

The balding ex-boxer was in his late forties and made his living collecting for a local businessman who made loans to people who couldn't go to banks.

"So Marty," Louis said.

Rather than setting two fifty-dollar bills on the table, Martin counted out ten fifties. "Here's the whole shot."

Louis took the money. "It's good that you had this. Some people were starting to worry."

"Nothing to worry about."

"See you around," Louis said and walked out.

Martin bought another beer, then returned to the table to pick his winners.