

# BARRY

November 2, 2018

Barry Sutton pulls over into the fire lane at the main entrance of the Poe Building, an Art Deco tower glowing white in the illumination of its exterior sconces. He climbs out of his Crown Vic, rushes across the sidewalk, and pushes through the revolving door into the lobby.

The night watchman is standing by the bank of elevators, holding one open as Barry hurries toward him, his shoes echoing off the marble.

“What floor?” Barry asks as he steps into the elevator car.

“Forty-one. When you get up there, take a right and go all the way down the hall.”

“More cops will be here in a minute. Tell them I said to hang back until I give a signal.”

The elevator races upward, belying the age of the building around it, and Barry’s ears pop after a few seconds. When the doors finally part, he moves past a sign for a law firm. There’s a light on here and there, but the floor stands mostly dark. He runs along the carpet, passing silent offices, a conference room, a break room, a library. The hallway finally opens into a reception area that’s paired with the largest office.

In the dim light, the details are all in shades of gray. A sprawling mahogany desk buried under files and paperwork. A circular table covered in notepads and mugs of cold, bitter-smelling coffee. A wet bar stocked with expensive-looking bottles of scotch. A glowing aquarium that hums on the far side of the room and contains a small shark and several tropical fish.

As Barry approaches the French doors, he silences his phone and removes his shoes. Taking the handle, he eases the door open and slips out onto the terrace.

The surrounding skyscrapers of the Upper West Side look mystical in their luminous shrouds of fog. The noise of the city is loud and close—car horns ricocheting between the buildings and distant ambulances racing toward some other tragedy. The pinnacle of the Poe Building is less than fifty feet above—a crown of glass and steel and gothic masonry.

The woman sits fifteen feet away beside an eroding gargoyle, her back to Barry, her legs dangling over the edge.

He inches closer, the wet flagstones soaking through his socks. If he can get close enough without detection, he'll drag her off the edge before she knows what—

"I smell your cologne," she says without looking back.

He stops.

She looks back at him, says, "Another step and I'm gone."

It's difficult to tell in the ambient light, but she appears to be in the vicinity of forty. She wears a dark blazer and matching skirt, and she must have been sitting out here for a while, because her hair has been flattened by the mist.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"Barry Sutton. I'm a detective in the Central Robbery Division of NYPD."

"They sent someone from the Robbery—?"

"I happened to be closest. What's your name?"

"Ann Voss Peters."

"May I call you Ann?"

"Sure."

"Is there anyone I can call for you?"

She shakes her head.

"I'm going to step over here so you don't have to keep straining your neck to look at me."

Barry moves away from her at an angle that also brings him to the parapet, eight feet down from where she's sitting. He glances once over the edge, his insides contracting.

"All right, let's hear it," she says.

"I'm sorry?"

"Aren't you here to talk me off? Give it your best shot."

He decided what he would say riding up in the elevator, recalling his suicide training. Now, squarely in the moment, he feels less confident. The only thing he's sure of is that his feet are freezing.

"I know everything feels hopeless to you in this moment, but this is just a moment, and moments pass."

Ann stares straight down the side of the building, four hundred feet to the street below, her palms flat against the stone that has been weathered by decades of acid rain. All she would have to do is push off. He suspects she's walking herself through the motions, tiptoeing up to the thought of doing it. Amassing that final head of steam.

He notices she's shivering.

"May I give you my jacket?" he asks.

"I'm pretty sure you don't want to come any closer, Detective."

"Why is that?"

"I have FMS."

Barry resists the urge to run. Of course he's heard of False Memory Syndrome, but he's never known or met someone with the affliction. Never breathed the same air. He isn't sure he should attempt to grab her now. Doesn't even want to be this close. No, fuck that. If she moves to jump, he'll try to save her, and if he contracts FMS in the process, so be it. That's the risk you take becoming a cop.

"How long have you had it?" he asks.

"One morning, about a month ago, instead of my home in Middlebury, Vermont, I was suddenly in an apartment here in the city, with a stabbing pain in my head and a terrible nosebleed. At first, I had no idea where I was. Then I remembered . . . *this* life too. Here and now, I'm single, an investment banker, I live under my maiden name. But I have . . ."—she visibly braces herself against the emotion—"memories of my other life in Vermont. I was a mother to a nine-year-old boy named Sam. I ran a landscaping business with my husband, Joe Behrman. I was Ann Behrman. We were as happy as anyone has a right to be."

"What does it feel like?" Barry asks, taking a clandestine step closer.

"What does what feel like?"

"Your false memories of this Vermont life."

"I don't just remember my wedding. I remember the fight over the design for the cake. I remember the smallest details of our home. Our son.

Every moment of his birth. His laugh. The birthmark on his left cheek. His first day of school and how he didn't want me to leave him. But when I try to picture Sam, he's in black and white. There's no color in his eyes. I tell myself they were blue. I only see black.

"All my memories from that life are in shades of gray, like film noir stills. They feel real, but they're haunted, phantom memories." She breaks down. "Everyone thinks FMS is just false memories of the big moments of your life, but what hurts so much more are the small ones. I don't just remember my husband. I remember the smell of his breath in the morning when he rolled over and faced me in bed. How every time he got up before I did to brush his teeth, I knew he'd come back to bed and try to have sex. That's the stuff that kills me. The tiniest, perfect details that make me know it happened."

"What about this life?" Barry asks. "Isn't it worth something to you?"

"Maybe some people get FMS and prefer their current memories to their false ones, but there's nothing about this life I want. I've tried, for four long weeks. I can't fake it anymore." Tears carve trails through her eyeliner. "My son never existed. Do you get that? He's just a beautiful misfire in my brain."

Barry ventures another step toward her, but she catches him this time.

"Don't come any closer."

"You are not alone."

"I am very fucking alone."

"I've only known you a few minutes, and I will be devastated if you do this. Think about the people in your life who love you. Think how they'll feel."

"I tracked Joe down," Ann says.

"Who?"

"My husband. He was living in a mansion out on Long Island. He acted like he didn't recognize me, but I know he did. He had a whole other life. He was married—I don't know to who. I don't know if he had kids. He acted like *I* was crazy."

"I'm sorry, Ann."

"This hurts too much."

"Look, I've been where you are. I've wanted to end everything. And I'm standing here right now telling you I'm glad I didn't. I'm glad I had the

strength to ride it out. This low point isn't the book of your life. It's just a chapter."

"What happened to you?"

"I lost my daughter. Life has broken my heart too."

Ann looks at the incandescent skyline. "Do you have photos of her? Do you still talk with people about her?"

"Yes."

"At least she once existed."

There is simply nothing he can say to that.

Ann looks down through her legs again. She kicks off one of her pumps. Watches it fall.

Then sends the other one plummeting after it.

"Ann, please."

"In my previous life, my false life, Joe's first wife, Franny, jumped from this building, from this ledge actually, fifteen years ago. She had clinical depression. I know he blamed himself. Before I left his house on Long Island, I told Joe I was going to jump from the Poe Building tonight, just like Franny. It sounds silly and desperate, but I hoped he'd show up here tonight and save me. Like he failed to do for her. At first, I thought you might be him, but he never wore cologne." She smiles—wistful—then adds, "I'm thirsty."

Barry glances through the French doors and the dark office, sees two patrolmen standing at the ready by the reception desk. He looks back at Ann. "Then why don't you climb down from there, and we'll walk inside together and get you a glass of water."

"Would you bring it to me out here?"

"I can't leave you."

Her hands are shaking now, and he registers a sudden resolve in her eyes.

She looks at Barry. "This isn't your fault," she says. "It was always going to end this way."

"Ann, no—"

"My son has been erased."

And with a casual grace, she eases herself off the edge.

# HELENA

October 22, 2007

Standing in the shower at six a.m., trying to wake up as the hot water sluices down her skin, Helena is struck with an intense sensation of having lived this exact moment before. It's nothing new. Déjà vu has plagued her since her twenties. Besides, there's nothing particularly special about this moment in the shower. She's wondering if Mountainside Capital has reviewed her proposal yet. It's been a week. She should've heard something by now. They should've at least called her in for a meeting if they were interested.

She brews a pot of coffee and makes her go-to breakfast—black beans, three eggs over-easy, drizzled with ketchup. Sits at the little table by the window, watching the sky fill with light over her neighborhood on the outskirts of San Jose.

She hasn't had a day to do laundry in over a month, and the floor of her bedroom is practically carpeted in dirty clothes. She digs through the piles until she finds a T-shirt and a pair of jeans she isn't totally ashamed to leave the house in.

The phone rings while she's brushing her teeth. She spits, rinses, and catches the call on the fourth ring in her bedroom.

"How's my girl?"

Her father's voice always makes her smile.

"Hey, Dad."

"I thought I'd missed you. I didn't want to bother you at the lab."

"No, it's fine, what's up?"

"Just thinking about you. Any word on your proposal?"

"Nothing yet."

“I have a really good feeling it’s going to happen.”

“I don’t know. This is a tough town. Lots of competition. Lots of really smart people looking for money.”

“But not as smart as my girl.”

She can’t take any more of her father’s belief in her. Not on a morning like this, with the specter of failure looming large, sitting in a small, filthy bedroom of a blank-walled, undecorated house where she has not brought a single person in over a year.

“How’s the weather?” she asks to change the subject.

“Snowed last night. First of the season.”

“A lot?”

“Just an inch or two. But the mountains are white.”

She can picture them—the Front Range of the Rockies, the mountains of her childhood.

“How’s Mom?”

There’s the briefest pause.

“Your mother’s doing well.”

“Dad.”

“What?”

“How’s Mom?”

She hears him exhale slowly. “We’ve had better days.”

“Is she OK?”

“Yes. She’s upstairs sleeping right now.”

“What happened?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“Last night, we played gin rummy after dinner, like we always do. And she just . . . she didn’t know the rules anymore. Sat at the kitchen table, staring at her cards, tears running down her face. We’ve been playing together for thirty years.”

She hears his hand cover the receiver.

He’s crying, a thousand miles away.

“Dad, I’m coming home.”

“No, Helena.”

“You need my help.”

“We have good support here. We’re going to the doctor this afternoon. If you want to help your mother, get your funding and build your chair.”

She doesn’t want to tell him, but the chair is still years away. *Light-years* away. It’s a dream, a mirage. At this point, all she’s trying to do is survive long enough to get a shot at finding someone who gets her vision.

Her eyes fill with tears. “You know I’m doing this for her.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

For a moment, they’re both quiet, trying to cry without the other knowing, and failing miserably. She wants nothing more than to tell him it’s going to happen, but that would be a lie.

“I’m going to call when I get home tonight,” she says.

“OK.”

“Please tell Mom I love her.”

“I will. But she already knows.”

—

Four hours later, deep in the neuroscience building in Palo Alto, Helena is examining the image of a mouse’s memory of being afraid—fluorescently illuminated neurons interconnected by a spider web of synapses—when the stranger appears in her office doorway. She looks over the top of her monitor at a man dressed in chinos and a white T-shirt, with a smile several shades too bright.

“Helena Smith?” he asks.

“Yes?”

“I’m Jee-woon Chercover. Do you have a minute to speak with me?”

“This is a secure lab. You’re not supposed to be down here.”

“I apologize for the intrusion, but I think you’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

She could ask him to leave, or call security. But he doesn’t look threatening.

“OK,” she says, and it suddenly dawns on her that this man is bearing witness to the hoarder’s dream that is her office—windowless, cramped,

painted-over cinder-block walls, everything only made more claustrophobic by the bankers' boxes stacked three feet high and two deep around her desk, filled with thousands of abstracts and articles. "Sorry about the mess. Let me get you a chair."

"I got it."

Jee-woon drags a folding chair over and takes a seat across from her, his eyes passing over the walls, which are nearly covered in high-resolution images of mouse memories and the neuronal firings of dementia and Alzheimer's patients.

"What can I do for you?" she asks.

"My employer is very taken with the memory portraiture article you published in *Neuron*."

"Does your employer have a name?"

"Well, that depends."

"On . . . ?"

"How this conversation goes."

"Why would I even have a conversation with someone when I don't know who they're speaking for?"

"Because your Stanford money runs out in six weeks."

She raises an eyebrow.

He says, "My boss pays me very well to know everything about the people he finds interesting."

"You do realize what you just said is totally creepy, right?"

Reaching into his leather satchel, Jee-woon takes out a document in a navy binder.

Her proposal.

"Of course!" she says. "You're with Mountainside Capital!"

"No. And they're not going to fund you."

"Then how did you get that?"

"It doesn't matter. No one is going to fund you."

"How do you know?"

"Because this?" He tosses her grant proposal onto the wreckage of her desk. "Is timid. It's just more of what you've been doing at Stanford the last three years. It's not big-idea enough. You're thirty-eight years old, which is like ninety in academia. One morning in the not-too-distant future, you're

going to wake up and realize your best days are behind you. That you wasted—”

“I think you should leave.”

“I don’t mean to insult you. If you don’t mind my saying, your problem is that you’re afraid to ask for what you really want.” It occurs to her that, for some reason, this stranger is trolling her. She knows she shouldn’t continue to engage, but she can’t help herself.

“And why am I afraid to ask for what I really want?”

“Because what you really want is bank-breaking. You don’t need seven figures. You need nine. Maybe ten. You need a team of coders to help you design an algorithm for complex memory cataloging and projection. The infrastructure for human trials.”

She stares at him across the desk. “I never mentioned human trials in that proposal.”

“What if I were to tell you that we will give you anything you ask for? No-limit funding. Would you be interested?”

Her heart is beating faster and faster.

*Is this how it happens?*

She thinks of the fifty-million-dollar chair she has dreamed of building since her mom started to forget life. Strangely, she never imagines it fully rendered, only as the technical drawings in the utility patent application she will one day file, entitled *Immersive Platform for Projection of Long-Term, Explicit, Episodic Memories*.

“Helena?”

“If I say yes, will you tell me who your boss is?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

He tells her.

As her jaw hits the desk, Jee-woon pulls another document out of his satchel and passes it to her over the bankers’ boxes.

“What’s this?” she asks.

“An employment and confidentiality agreement. Nonnegotiable. I think you’ll find the financial terms to be very generous.”