

CHAPTER 2

I wish I still smoked. Some occasions just seem to go better when I inhale deadly toxins. Occasions such as opening Joanie's monthly letter. But I gave up tobacco seven years ago, so I had to resort to other self-inflicted pain. Exercise.

I did forty-five minutes on the bike, managed 114 sit-ups, then hit the shower, slowly edging the hot water from invigorating to excruciating. I switched to cold just before my back started to blister.

I was out of coffee, but there was half a pot of Juan Valdez's finest still on the counter from yesterday. I poured a cup and nuked it. It tasted like Juan's donkey's finest, but at seven in the morning, I'll take my caffeine any way I can get it.

I poured myself a bowl of Cheerios. Andre heard me chewing and showed up before I swallowed my first mouthful. "We're giving out numbers this morning," I told him. "I'm One. You're Two. Wait your turn."

Andre does not grasp the finer points of math, but he got my gist and sprawled out on the floor, waiting patiently for his number to be called.

I propped the envelope against the cereal box. On the front was my name in Joanie's girly-girl handwriting. Plus the number six. Only she didn't write the number. There were just hash marks. Like an inmate counting days.

I sat there staring at the envelope and spooning up my Cheerios. Andre remained a polite two feet away, both eyes riveted on the spoon. "Explain something to me," I said to him. "How come the Cheerios commercials always show happy Moms with perky breasts, Dads who seem to be on the right career path, and teenage kids with no substance abuse problems? What about real families like us? A middle-aged widower and his Cheerios-loving dog?"

Andre shifted positions and started licking his dick. "You keep doing that at the breakfast table," I told him, "and we'll never wind up on television."

I always put in too much milk, so I grabbed another fistful of cereal, to establish a better oats-to-milk ratio in the bowl. I still wasn't ready to open the letter, so I read the box and was delighted to find that Cheerios may reduce my cholesterol if I make them part of my heart-healthy diet. I decided not to order a Cheerios T-shirt for only \$4.99 and wondered why they had to print "Limit 4 T-shirts per household." Are there actually households that need more than four? And if so, why would General Mills deprive them?

I left an inch of milk and about two dozen floaters in the bowl and set it down on the floor next to Andre. He stopped gratifying himself sexually and immediately dove into the heart-healthier choice.

I waited for him to finish so I could pick up the bowl, otherwise Rosa, my cleaning lady, would find it on the floor and

have to go to church to ask God to forgive me for feeding the dog out of my dead wife's good dishes.

Andre finished his Cheerios and went back to his dick. I put the bowl in the sink, went back to the bedroom, and plopped down on the big stuffed chair. I used Joanie's best cake knife to open the envelope. *Dios mio*; pray for me, Rosa.

Dearest Mike,

Are these letters driving you crazy? Tough shit. I've never been dying before, and I'm trying to figure this out as I go along. It serves you right for marrying a firstborn, perfectionist, Gemini control freak.

Assuming you're following my orders and reading these on schedule (if you don't I'll come back and haunt you) it's been six months. Hopefully Rosa is still coming, or by now there are 180 pair of dirty socks and underwear piled up on the bedroom floor.

I wrote the first five letters when I was between chemo sessions. Today I'm vomiting between paragraphs, so bear with me.

I'm sad for you. The hardest part of this whole ordeal is not that I'm dying (although believe me that sucks big time). It's trying to imagine you without me.

How can I not be there every morning when you roll over all shaggy, scruffy, and if I'm lucky, horny. How can I not be there on Sunday nights at Gino's to split a sausage and pineapple pizza and a bottle of dago red? How can I not be with you? How can you be—how can you exist—without me?

I don't know how many more letters I've got left in

me, but I'll write #7 tomorrow. Just to whet your appetite, I promise to reveal the biggest secret I ever kept from you. No cheating. You can't open it for another month.

Michael, my sweet lover, I know these messages from your dear departed wife must be like getting greeting cards from the Surreal Section of the Hallmark store. But I can't stop writing. I've accepted the fact that I can't hold onto my own life. I just can't let go of being part of yours.

I will love you for eternity. Give Big Jim and Andre big wet kisses for me.

Joanie

I closed my eyes and let it soak in. Then I read the letter again. I was about to read it for the third time when the annoying little voice that lives rent-free inside my head told me to put the fucking letter away now.

I try not to argue with the voice. I extricated myself from the sagging green chair as gracefully as one can extricate 180 pounds from anything.

I walked over to Joanie's dressing table, and picked up the double-sided silver picture frame she gave me for our first anniversary. On the left side of the frame was our wedding picture with her handwritten inscription below. *"To my darling Mike, We've only just begun. Love, Joanie"*

On the opposite side was the identical picture, but through the miracle of Photoshop, Joanie had digitally aged us fifty years. My hair was silver and thinning, but at least she gave me hair. I was thirty pounds heavier, and my face was lined with crags and crevices.

Joanie was even harder on herself, thickening out her

middle, bluing her beautiful strawberry blonde hair, and adding liberal amounts of wrinkles and liver spots to her glowing skin. But she didn't change her eyes. There were crow's feet on the outside, but inside they were still the color I told her was Cavu Blue. My father flies a Piper Warrior on the weekends, and CAVU is pilot talk for a sky that has 'Ceiling And Visibility Unlimited.' To me nothing is bluer.

"I resent the fact that you think I can't function without Rosa cleaning up after me," I said to the left side of the frame. "For your information, I was recently honored by *Good Housekeeping* as one of the only men on the planet who has actually mastered the art of picking up his own dirty socks and underwear. And you thought I couldn't live without you."

Andre paddled in. Andre, just for the record, is a six-year-old black Standard French Poodle. Not the kind of dog you'd expect to be living with a cop. But this dog has instincts like Sherlock Holmes and better communication skills than a kennel full of movie Lassies.

He cocked his big curly head and gave me his most serious man-to-man look, which I clearly understood to say, "Hey, Lomax, I heard you talking, and now I see that it's just you and the picture of your dead wife. I'm starting to worry about you, pal."

I half-put the frame back down on the dressing table, then pulled it back to my lips, pressed my face to the glass, and set it back down. Andre, realizing that this was a private moment and that there was nothing edible in it for him, toddled off back to the living room.

The phone rang. It was my partner, Terry Biggs.

"Hey, Mike, we got a live one." A 'live one' was Terry's standard lame joke for a homicide victim.

“Ask me if the vic was a man or a woman,” he said. Terry is a wannabe stand-up comic, but he’s never sure he’s going to get the straight line, so he helps you serve it up to him. I was in no mood to resist.

“Okay, Terry, who bought it? A man or a woman?”

“A rabbit,” he answered, hoping to get a bigger reaction from me than I was capable of giving. “Actually a guy in a Rambo Rabbit suit. It happened out at Lamaar’s Familyland.”

“Familyland?” I said. “Is no place sacred?”

“I guess the scumbags are branching out. More work for you and me,” Terry said. “I’ll pick you up in fifteen.”

I hung up. The letter was still in my other hand. There was a wooden box on top of Joanie’s dressing table. I had found it gift wrapped at the bottom of my shirt drawer a few days after the funeral.

A brass plaque on top was engraved *Mike and Joan... till death us do part*. That’s where I found the letters. I put Number Six back in the box. There were still three more to be opened.

I picked up my gun and my shield and had one more go at the picture. “This is not easy reading, Joanie,” I said. “Don’t be surprised if I come home tonight and flush all these fucking letters down the toilet.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” said the annoying little voice inside my head who hasn’t paid a day’s rent in forty-two years.