FIRST CHAPTER

1.

It was long before the end of it all that Russell Pearce accepted the fact that he had become part of the story. It was a big story. It was a small story. He should've had some inkling of the difficulty he would have keeping a journalist's idealistic intentions of remaining objective in a story that was born of his own actions that summer night. But it all happened so fast he hardly had time for it to register before it had sucked him in, and it was too late. He couldn't undo it, or unhear, or unsee, or unsmell it once the whole experience hit his brain.

He already understood before that night that learning something new carried with it a responsibility: either to absorb or reject, or to act or not to act, on that new knowledge. There's no way to escape that. Ignoring it wasn't avoidance; it was actually a choice *not* to absorb or reject something. And how he got that new knowledge also affected how he dealt with the responsibility of having it.

It was the second week of June. In Austin that can be the beginning of the hot, sultry days of summer. Or, in a lucky year, it can simply be Spring, when the days are fresh and temperate, the restaurants and taverns put out their sidewalk tables and open their shady courtyards. Those are days when the hike and bike trails along the

banks of the Colorado River that runs through the city's center fill with people jogging or walking and talking, and the river itself is dotted with canoes and paddle boarders. That's when the city swings into a lovely season, and everyone embraces it.

But this wasn't a lucky year, and Spring wasn't like that. The hot sultry days of Summer had already arrived.

A month earlier Maret had flown to San Francisco to stay with her parents for a while. The "a while" was deliberately vague. When she left, it was an uneasy departure. For the first time in a dozen years of marriage, their relationship was in serious trouble. He didn't know if this was the beginning of the end or just a temporary break from the tension between them that had become unbearable for her and driven her away. But he did know that her departure crushed him, and he knew that it was all his fault.

Nearly three years earlier he left a job he'd had for seven years as a reporter for the Houston Tribune covering politics at the state capital in Austin. During that time he uncovered a series of political scandals that had gradually turned him into a much-respected investigative journalist. Wanting to continue that evolution in his career, he pitched another investigative idea but his editors turn it down. They subsequently turned down two more investigative stories over the period of a year, and Russ grew increasingly frustrated. Eventually, after many long conversations with Maret, he decided to resign from the paper and go freelance.

But after a year of successes, his projects hit a slow spell, and then began to dry up altogether. This went on for months, and no matter what he tried, nothing got traction. His leads sputtered out, and nothing developed. His ambition and

confidence in his talents began to look like clichéd hubris. Maret was working a steady job and keeping them floating. He wasn't bringing in a dime.

Eventually his frustration with his situation and himself festered into constant irritation. He was easily annoyed, even infuriated. It infected their marriage and nothing Maret did, no amount of patience, talking, and trying to work it out was enough to assuage his sour discontent. A kind word never left his mouth.

Finally when she couldn't even talk to him anymore without him coming back at her in anger, they had a monumental clash. She packed up and flew back to San Francisco. Advance, the national advertising agency she worked for in Austin, was still letting a lot of their people work from home, so it was easy for her to set up in her own room at her parents' home in Pacific Heights. And if she was ever needed at the office, she could go to the agency's Bay area offices downtown.

Mortified that his own self-absorbed bad temper had driven her away, he brooded for sleepless days and nights before calling her. She refused to talk to him for several weeks. Then finally she did. They began talking every few days, then every other day, stiff awkward conversations at first. But he was determined to make amends. Over time he began to convince her that his contrition was genuine, that he knew what he'd done and why, and that he was dealing with it. It wasn't easy, for either of them, but things were getting better.

At the time she left, he was working on several stories simultaneously. When one stalled out, he picked up another. Two of the stories were heavily dependent on source cooperation and were turning out to be long hauls. The third one, which required a lot of research, seemed like it could be endless.

The grim truth was, it seemed that all of his projects were nearly dead. Frustrated and at loose ends, he decided to make one more trip out to Solito in the lake and Hill Country west of Austin to see a key source on his oldest incubating story. If this guy didn't come up with something substantive this time, Russ would have to call the story a no go, and walk away from it.

As it turned out, the trip was a game changer, but not in the way he hoped it would be. He knew that now. Hindsight. That perfect vision in the perfect world of Second Thoughts. The guy he went to see lived in a pretentiously impressive villa perched on a cliff above Lake Travis. The trip didn't pay off.

At dusk, Russ pulled out of the gates of the estate and headed back toward Austin on Mission Drive. The narrow, twisting highway, like the villa he just left, was balanced on the high cliffs above the lake for several miles as it wound its way to the main highway back to Austin. Mission Drive was actually the old original route from Highway 71 to the village of Solito where an old Spanish mission gave the riverside community its name. But over the decades as Austin's population soared and spilled out into the Hill Country toward the lakes several big tech companies built their headquarters in the area to get away from Austin's rising real estate prices. To accommodate this growth a straighter and more direct route was built from Highway 71 to the lakes, bypassing Mission Drive. Parkway was now the main highway route and Mission Drive was now considered an out-of-the-way, but beautifully scenic tourist diversion.

Russ was pissed. The guy had just reneged on nearly four months of leading Russ to believe he had access to information that would break open a hell of a story.

But instead of coming through as promised, he just folded, making it clear that he was done with it and wouldn't talk to Russ again. He left empty handed. Nada. Smoldering, he drove along wondering what in the hell he was going to do now, fighting depression, then beating himself up for feeling it.

Why the hell couldn't he get his hands on a good story? He needed *something* that had genuine substance and depth. An inside story that needed it's hidden truth revealed.

His phone rang and he was so preoccupied that he answered it without even looking to see who it was.

"Hey, Russ," Maret said. "How are things going there?"

"Oh—," surprised, he cleared his throat. "Moving along, you know. *Poco a poco*," he said vaguely. He didn't want to tell her what had just happened. Their conversations in the last few weeks had given him hope that she might be considering coming home soon. He would wait to tell her what had just happened after he had more time to think it through himself. But it seemed like the end of his freelancing, and they would have to talk about that.

"What are you doing?" she asked. She sounded upbeat.

"Oh. Well, I'm actually on my way back from Solito. I went out there to see if I could drag something out of my source on the Farren story."

"And?"

"One more visit," he lied. "And then I think I'll know."

"Well," she said, "I'll keep my fingers crossed for you. I'm just calling to tell you I'll be flying back to Austin the day after tomorrow."

“What? Really? That’s . . . great!”

“There’s a reason, Russ. Advance is starting a big campaign for a new client, and they want me to head it up. It’ll be a promotion. But they want me in Austin, and they want me back in the office.”

“That’s fantastic!” he said, genuinely thrilled. “Congratulations! You more than deserve it.”

“Well, thanks. I’m pretty excited about it.”

“When will you be flying in. Maybe I’ll—”

“Russ, just a second. One thing . . . about, about us, I don’t want us to pick up where we left off. I don’t mean the fighting, although for sure we can’t do that, but, before all that. The, the intimacy. Not, not right now. Let’s just live together . . . or, if you’d rather I’ll get an apartment—”

She said something else, but he didn’t hear it.

God. He couldn’t think.

He was approaching the Solito overlook, an observation point with a large stone shelter and tile roof that sat on the cliffs along the river, providing a stunning view of the sprawling valley across the river far below, and to one side the Solito Mission and the village.

His Pathfinder slowed without him being aware of doing it and he pulled off to the side of the road in front of the overlook and stopped. She was still talking, but he didn’t hear what she was saying until there was a long silence. Then she was saying, “Russ. Russ. Say something.” Her voice was kind, almost apologetic. She knew him well enough to imagine what was happening.

He said, “No, I understand. I do.” He did, and he didn’t. And he didn’t know how to keep that out of his voice. “No, stay. Don’t move out, please. I’ll arrange separate beds—rooms, separate rooms—something . . . whatever you want, however you want that to work.”

“Let’s just talk about it when I get there,” she said, hearing the anxiety in his voice. Then she told him her flight information, and added, “And also, I’ll need to make a payment on one of our credit cards. I was going over our budget and I think it’ll have to be mine. That brake overhaul on my Honda we had to do just before I came out here put us in too deep on my card. I’ve got to pay it down. So we’ll have to go easy on your card for the next month or two. I’m going to have to shuffle things around a little to buy us some time. Just watch it, okay.”

That gave him a sick, sinking feeling even though both of them had seen it coming. Losing any hope at all that the Farren story might come through for him was the proverbial last straw. He was going to have to do something else.

The truth was, Maret had tolerated his freelance career longer than he should’ve asked her to. All to her credit. He just couldn’t do it to her anymore and live with himself. All of this burst through his thoughts in an instant. He couldn’t think of any way out of it. There were no longshots left, no Hail Marys, or plan Bs or even Cs.

They talked more practicalities, almost as an escape from the emotional; he told her he had finished replacing the rotted threshold on the back door, and the repairman had finally come and fixed the dishwasher. Then he heard Maret’s mom tell her they needed to get going or they would be late for their reservations at their favorite restaurant.

After an awkward goodbye, she disconnected.

He turned off the engine and sat there in the dark. God, how close was he to losing her? Was this only the beginning of the end of it. How could he have let it get this far without realizing what he was doing? Yes he knew he had been an asshole and it drove her away. And yes, it was a seriously stupid move on his part that he had persisted so long in his self-indulgent misery to the point that she just couldn't take it anymore. But, but to the point of completely shattering their marriage? How could he *not* have seen he was doing that!

He got out of the car, and walked around to the shelter and stepped inside. Facing away from the faint, distant city-glow of Austin, he looked west across the river valley beyond the lakes where the sky was clear and shimmery with stars. And it was silent except for a ripple of nightjars along the cliffs above the river.

And then he heard the distant whine of a fast moving car on the road ahead. He turned to look just as headlights popped into view around the bend on the far side of the valley in front of him. Even at a glance he could tell the car was traveling at a screaming speed, which shocked him considering the coiling roadway, and the continuous precipice that followed the outside shoulder for miles.

Suddenly the headlights of a second car burst around the outside of the bend, hammering at the same insane velocity. Then both hurtled along the cliffside straightaway in front of him and disappeared into the next bend to his left.