

Chapter 1

My mother died on the second Tuesday of October, at 3:14 p.m., to be exact. For the previous ten days she'd lain abed in the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. From her sixth-floor window I could look down Brookline Avenue toward Kenmore Square and the lights above Fenway Park. I took some solace in the fact that she died with such a view of the city, but the truth is the last day she was so out of it, she didn't know where she was--the nurse called it last-stage dementia, as though it were some saving grace.

But I had my doubts. Can a seventy-five-year-old woman go from perfectly lucid to drooling stupefaction in less than twenty minutes? I asked the nurse what they had given my mother while I was down in the cafeteria. She said nothing. No painkillers? Nothing--nothing that would bring this on so quickly, so completely. The nurse, a beefy woman with a pink Irish face that almost undermined the steel of her blue eyes, fingered the cross around her neck and suggested that perhaps it was the hand of providence. We were standing out in the fluorescent white corridor, and I stared back at her until she left for her nurses' station.

Petra Mouzakis was sitting on the long bench wedged between two laundry bins, listening to our conversation. She'd been there on the sixth floor all morning. I want to say lurking, but that would suggest that the woman tried to blend in, to conceal herself. That simply wasn't the case. Petra was, like myself, a journalist, and she was the kind that rarely hides. To be fair, she was a working journalist; I was not--had hardly written a word in over a year.

Petra got up from the bench, swinging her sleek dark hair over one shoulder, and walked toward me. She wore black leggings beneath a loose white blouse that hung down over her hips. "Your mother had a visitor."

"When?"

"While you were down in the cafeteria."

"Who?"

"A man." Her large eyes were so dark they seemed incapable of admitting light, even the fluorescent kind. Something admirable in that. "I only caught a glimpse of him as I came out of the women's room down the hall. I think it was your father."

"My father? We haven't seen him in--in years. Are you sure?"

She touched the side of her head with a long hand and nodded. Her nails were green.

"You know what my father looks like?"

"That's why I've been here," she said. "To ask your mother about him. She wanted to tell me things about him, but it was a slow process. She kept going back, skipping around in time. The sequence of events was jumbled."

"In my family they usually are."

"But she wanted to tell me. She wanted to get it out--at last, I think"

"Deathbed confession."

Petra glanced away, embarrassed, as she fingered the thin silver chain that hung about her graceful neck.

"That your brand of journalism?" I asked.

"You used to write for the *Beacon*. You know what it takes to get a story."

"The *Boston Beacon* I wrote for was a very different thing--it was a different time."

Something in her jaw shifted, firmed up. "I know, you wrote for the first *Beacon*--when it was this renegade alternative paper." Petra was in her late thirties, about ten years younger than I was--and this was starting to feel pointless.

"The paper should have stayed folded," I said. "Somebody bought the name and now it's just a lightweight designer rag meant to give boomers flashbacks. Anybody who could really write went to the *Globe*. Or New York. Or Washington."

"Except you," she said.

"Maybe that's because I can't write."

"Maybe," she said, and now she looked me right in the eye. "Though I thought some of your stuff in the *Beacon* was better than that book of yours."

"You a writer or an editor?"

"It was a struggle to finish the book."

"Or maybe a critic?"

She folded her arms and said, "*All right*. I've been looking for your father for years--on and off."

"Have you? And why would you do that?"

"Probably for the same reasons you have," she said. I didn't answer. I started to turn to go back into my mother's room. "That's what she told me," Petra said. "You've been looking for him for years--even when you didn't know it,

that's what you've been doing. I think it hurt her that she couldn't help you more. I think she was trying to protect you."

I didn't turn around but said, "You've gotten *all* you're going to get out of her." I entered the room and closed the door. Beyond my mother's bed, the window framed a view of the Citgo sign above Kenmore Square and the lights of Fenway Park on a gray fall day. My name is Samuel Xavier Adams. I think. For some time, most of my adult life, I've suspected that little about my family could be stated with certainty. I believe I was born in New York City, and something about my mother's eyes tells me that that fact at least is solid. My father, John Samuel Adams, has been an employee of the United States government since he enlisted in the navy at the beginning of World War II. Exactly what he has done for the government since the end of the war I'm not certain. In fact, he has never actually admitted being a government employee, not directly--it's always been one of the many tacit understandings we supposedly shared. There have been times when my best hunch was that he worked for the FBI, the CIA (and its predecessor, OSS), various branches of military intelligence, and, at one point, a little-publicized federal agency known as SOS, Secret Operations Section. The branch names may change and shift, but I know that since the end of the war he has worked in government (as opposed to *for* the government), though at times I suspect he worked freelance *for* the Mafia (as opposed to *in* the Mafia).

There have been times when I doubted that the man I thought was my father was really my father. Some of the evidence that I've gathered over the years suggests that the real John Samuel Adams died a long time ago--perhaps in combat, though even that is not certain--and that the man I've considered my father from childhood was really some kind of substitute. But despite the weight of that evidence, I've always resisted such a wild possibility. Why? Because of my mother's eyes, my mother's voice--ever since I was young there was something in them when she spoke of my father that suggested that the man she called Jack was indeed my father.

As she lay on her hospital bed, I could clearly see her scalp through her thin white hair. Her face, usually flushed--an Irish flush much like that of the nurse who attended her--was slack and pale. Her eyes were opened, staring at the ceiling, but they didn't appear to comprehend anything.

"Mom?" I waited and there was no movement, no response. "*Ma.*"

Nothing.

I sat down by the window. And looked out at Boston. When I think of my mother, I often see her as she was in a photograph that was taken shortly after she was married and, I assume, about a year before I was born. It's a black-and-white photo taken sometime in 1948. Fall or perhaps winter. She's sitting on a couch wearing a finely cut suit with padded shoulders. The wide-brimmed hat shades one eye and around her neck hangs her mother's mink, its little dark eyes seeming to stare out at the camera. Her lipstick is dark, a deep red, no doubt, and she's holding a cigarette in her right hand. Her smile is wide, her eyes are bright, her figure is stunning. She's twenty-six years old. None of the lines of worry have yet etched their way into that face. She's a South Boston girl who's moved to New York City with her new husband, an ex-navy officer with a job in the government. Has there been a more optimistic time in America's history? I once asked her who took the photograph and she said, "Oh, your father took that, in our apartment, the one in the city before we moved out to Lake Success." Since I first saw that photo, I've wanted to be able to somehow beam back to that moment when the camera flashed. Wanted to look around the living room, to smell her perfume, to listen to the rustle of such clothes (she wore not only stockings but gloves), to hear the ice in their Scotches, to smell the smoke of their filterless Chesterfields, lit by a Zippo that had a distinct ring and click every time my father flipped the top open (a sound I have associated with him since early childhood).

There's another photograph taken, I think, about the same time, before either of their children was born. My mother and father are both sitting in a semicircular booth in an Italian restaurant. The tablecloth is white, their hands are poised over ashtrays, their drinks are full, and she leans against his chest. She's wearing a different outfit, this time a print dress, and without her hat her long hair is draped over her right shoulder. She had what used to be called a plait. It's dark in the black-and-white photo, but I know that then her hair was a deep red. My father is wearing a double-breasted suit with a silk tie and a matching handkerchief. It's one of the few photos I've seen of him--all or most were taken during that brief optimistic time, after the war and before they started a family. Apparently taken by the restaurant's photographer (because the photo came in a cardboard frame that said *Giovanni's Grotto* in the corner), this portrait is unique for two reasons: It's one of only a few photographs I've ever seen where my father, who was then about to turn thirty, wasn't in military uniform, and he's grinning. Not smiling. Grinning. Both of them, grinning for the photographer in Giovanni's, somewhere in New York City. Staring out at that fine Boston drizzle, I wondered if it was possible, if my father had really slipped into my mother's hospital room a few hours before she died. I had gone down to the cafeteria for coffee--at her insistence, as usual. Since she'd been admitted to Dana Farber ten days earlier, I'd spent most of every day in her room; but she would insist that I go out and eat, take a break from my vigil. Always she was worried that I was hungry, and she'd tell me to go to a restaurant and get a decent meal. I found the food in the

cafeteria quite good and reasonably priced, though a few times when I returned to her room, I made up elaborate descriptions of the clam chowder that preceded the baked haddock. If nothing else, my mother was always content to talk about food.

My guess is that my father had been somewhere on the sixth floor of Dana Farber for some time. He would have been there long enough to determine our routine--how long I stayed in her room, how long I was gone when I took the elevator down to the first floor. He was not a man to leave much to chance, and a chance encounter with his son, his only surviving child, after eluding me for years, was not something that he would allow. Not if it would interfere with his intentions. Or his work, which was what my mother always called it: *work*. When he went away, it was always to work. No wonder I developed such an aversion to the concept.

When he saw me take the elevator, he probably waited a minute to determine the movement of the nurses and floor staff; then, walking slowly but without hesitation, he went down the fluorescent white corridor, stepped into my mother's room, and closed the door behind him. He would not be dressed in a double-breasted suit cut in the forties fashion. His short white hair would ring his scalp, the dome on top shining as though polished, and his clothes would be intentionally inconspicuous: dark slacks, a solid shirt or sweater, and a fall jacket, gray or perhaps forest green. The one thing that would not be different would be his wire-frame glasses, which had varied little ever since that photograph, taken nearly fifty years ago in Giovanni's Grotto. The glasses, the delicacy and frailty of them, were almost a trademark. When they weren't on his face, they were in his shirt pocket. He cleaned them often, carefully, always with a special cloth designed not to scratch the lenses.

I wondered if the sight of my father would have frightened my mother. I think not. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she expected to see him. Perhaps it was part of her insistence that I leave the room periodically, knowing that only then would my father take the opportunity to enter her room and stand next to the bed, cleaning his glasses. I was having trouble imagining what they would say to each other, two people who had spent so much of their married life apart, now, half a century after the shrimp scampi at Giovanni's Grotto. With my mother so near death, was it possible in one conversation to clear everything up, to make amends, to express fears and doubts and, certainly, regrets?

I don't know.

Maybe Petra was right. My father wasn't there to talk at all, but to make sure that my mother would talk no more. About him. About his work. Maybe my father was responsible for the fact that when I returned to my mother's room twenty minutes later she was gone--still alive but oblivious. Uncomprehending. Brain dead.

"Mom," I said, leaning down over her. Her eyes were different and her mouth was slack. "Mom? You all right?" She seemed to be trying to look through my forehead at the ceiling above me. "*Mom*." But there was nothing there, no response.

I wondered what he would have done--a pill, or maybe some injection. Something that would quickly drain all awareness, all memory from her mind. And I wondered if he could actually do it, pull the plug, so to speak. To his wife, the mother of his children.

If it was necessary, if it was essential to protect what we always referred to as his *work*, then, yes, I knew that my father could have done it.