

CHAPTER ONE

MR. ANONYMOUS

As I sit here deep in meditation, my mind is anything but still. I envision a silhouette of a powerful man puffing a cigar. Its ember glows orange, pulses like the heartbeat of the vision itself. I fixate on the smoke as it ascends into the heavens. Hypnotized, my mind is awash with questions that have plagued me for years. I ask myself, who is this anonymous figure? I am intrigued by the essence of the smoke. I sense it is leading me to something. Oh, how powerful this vision is!

This figure is no ordinary phantom of my imagination. His presence feels so real and profound. The smoke between us moves and bends, shaping itself in fleeting forms that dissolve before I can fully comprehend them. I close my eyes. His essence persists, burned into the fabric of my mind. He seems to beckon me toward something vast and unknowable, something just beyond my reach. I feel power in this man I refer to as Mr. Anonymous, although I have no idea who or what he truly is.

My attempts to describe him feel futile, as though I am trying to capture the wind. How do you describe something that exists on the fringes of reality? He has no origin, at least none that I can uncover. No name, no voice. No one else senses him yet to me, his presence is undeniable. He appears in my life at pivotal moments, as if drawn by some unseen thread that binds us.

Sometimes he is merely a vision, a fleeting image that vanishes as quickly as it arrives. Other times I sense him in the real world, or at least I think I do. He is often there but never close enough to touch. The smoke surrounding him feels alive, a symbol of something greater, a bridge between the known and the unknown, the tangible and the intangible. It obscures as much as it reveals but guides me toward the truth I can not yet grasp.

I have tried to talk to him, though my words always feel swallowed by the smoke. He never responds, never acknowledges my presence in a way that I can interpret, but his silence speaks volumes. It is as though he is waiting, testing me, urging me to look deeper.

The first time I encountered him, I was on the verge of giving up. My life unraveled faster than I could piece it back together. I was at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics in the psychiatry department, my mind a whirlwind of fear and confusion. The psychiatrists were kind, voices soft as they asked me questions about my thoughts and behavior. But I was barely present in the room with them. My mind was elsewhere, consumed by a vision that felt more real than the sterile walls surrounded me.

The first doctor asked me to describe what I was experiencing. The words spilled from my mouth before I had time to think. I envision Geronimo, I said, my voice trembling with conviction. He's puffing a cigar. I didn't know why I called him that. Perhaps it was the strength he exuded, the quiet defiance that reminded me of the legendary warrior. Or perhaps it was simply my mind grasping for a name, a way to make sense of the inexplicable. Whatever the reason, the name felt right in that moment. He was Geronimo, a powerful figure, a mystery, a

presence that both frightened and comforted me.

As the weeks passed, the image of Geronimo began to shift. His features grew less distinct. His identity no longer tied to any one figure or culture. What remained was the essence of the man, a silhouette, faceless, yet full of power. The smoke too seemed to change. Its movements more deliberate, guided me toward a deeper truth.

Sometimes I would lay awake in my hospital bed, watching the air shimmer in the dim light, and imagine His return rolling in on a light, slow tide of smoke. I would whisper to the darkness in prayer, "What are you trying to tell me?" The silence that followed felt sacred, as if something unseen were listening.

I began to wonder if he was not a person at all, but a manifestation of the potential within me. Was he a symbol of my struggles, my fears, or perhaps my potential? The questions only multiplied, and with them came a new sense of purpose. He was leading me somewhere, I thought, but where? And why me?

Each time I closed my eyes, I sensed him—the faint glow of that ember that pulses in the background of my mind. It became a rhythm I could not escape, a kind of spiritual heartbeat. Sometimes I imagined the smoke rising in slow spirals like a prayer carried upward toward something greater. Perhaps the smoke itself was a message I thought. Maybe it wasn't about the man at all but the mind is a maze when it's fractured.

In moments of clarity, I doubted everything I saw. I wondered if the vision was simply the byproduct of a tired brain that tried to make sense of chaos. Yet deep down, I couldn't shake the conviction that something sacred was happening. That which I was seeing was pointing me toward

a higher power, one I did not yet understand.

There were nights when the vision came with such force that it stole my breath. I would wake in the hospital room, drenched in sweat, the air thick with the imagined scent of cigar smoke. The figure would appear at the edge of my thoughts, indistinct and timeless. My pulse would race as I whispered, "I sense you, but where are you?" There was never an answer, only stillness.

Over time, I began to draw comfort from it. It was like a companion, an ancient guide leading me through the corridors of my own mind.

The doctors would ask me about hallucinations, and I'd nod, but deep down, I did not see it that way. This was not madness; this was a mystery.

Eventually I started noticing patterns each time I was on the edge of despair, when my thoughts turned dark and my hope began to flicker, that presence would return. Always slow, patient, and deliberate, it would rise like a memory, pulling my focus upward.

I remember one night vividly. I sat by the small hospital window, staring out at the snowflakes that moved under the orange glow of a street light. My reflection in the window looked pale and worn, eyes hollowed by sleepless nights. As I exhaled, my breath fogged the glass, and for a moment, I saw it again - that faint outline of that man. The cigar glowing, the smoke curling around him like a halo, and inside my head, a whisper, "*Follow the smoke.*"

That phrase embedded itself into me. It became more than an image. It became a mantra. In the years that followed, whenever I lost my way, I would repeat those three words silently: "*Follow the smoke.*" It reminded me to stay curious, to seek meaning in the madness, to believe

what clouded my mind might also guide it.

I did not understand. What I could not yet allow myself to consider was that this presence might not be something to solve, diagnose, or defeat. It might be something to endure, something to walk alongside. The smoke did not rush me. It did not demand answers. It lingered, patient as if I knew I would one day need time to catch up to myself.

Even now, as I reflect on these early moments, I can still sense him hovering just beyond my awareness. The smoke never fully clears. It hangs around watchfully, but no longer threateningly. I no longer ask him to speak. I no longer demand meaning from every movement, every curl of air. Instead, I sit with the uncertainty and let it breathe.

Was Mr. Anonymous the beginning of my descent, or was he the first sign that something greater was already reaching for me long before I knew how to reach back? The question did not fade when I left the hospital. It followed me quietly, settling into the corners of my days and nights. Sometimes it surfaced when I least expected it. Sometimes it surfaced while driving, while showering, while staring at nothing in particular. Other times it lay dormant only to return with greater weight as if to remind me that unanswered questions do not disappear simply because we wish them to.

There were moments when I tried to convince myself that Mr. Anonymous was nothing more than a symptom, a trick of a fractured mind trying desperately to impose meaning where there was none. I rehearsed this explanation the way one rehearses a speech meant to sound convincing. This is an illness, I told myself. This is chemistry. Misfiring signals, brain under siege.

But even as I said the words, something inside me resisted them, not

violently, just quietly, as if another part of me was listening and withholding agreement. The smoke, too, refused to be dismissed so easily. It didn't appear constantly, nor did it announce itself with drama. It came in fragments, in half-memories, in fleeting sensations. I might catch it in the corner of my eye or feel it in the pause between one thought and the next. Always subtle, always restrained.

I began to notice that Mr. Anonymous never arrived during chaos. He did not appear when my thoughts were racing or when fear had taken over. He came only in stillness, in quiet moments, in spaces where the noise receded enough for something else to emerge. That, more than anything, unsettled me.

If this were mere madness, wouldn't it be louder? Wouldn't it demand attention? Force itself forward? Clamor for dominance? Instead, this presence waited. It observed. It lingered without urgency, as though it had all the time in the world and perhaps knew that I did not.

I wondered, not for the first time, whether I had been mistaking control for truth my entire life. Whether my desperate need to understand, define, and explain had blinded me to something that could only be approached indirectly. Smoke, after all, cannot be seized. The harder you try to grab it, the faster it slips away.

In those early days, I began to realize how uncomfortable uncertainty made me. I wanted clarity. I wanted answers that could be boxed, labeled, and stored away neatly. But Mr. Anonymous offered none of that. He offered presence without explanation, direction without a map.

There were nights when I lay awake replaying the vision in my mind, slowing it down frame by frame. The silhouette, the cigar, the ember glowing steadily, never flaring, never fading. I search for meaning in its

restraint. Why a cigar? I ask myself. Why smoke and not fire? Fire destroys, smoke lingers. That distinction stayed with me.

The smoke is faith itself, uncertain, intangible, but alive with purpose. Even now, as I sit in quiet meditation, I can feel it moving through me. The faint hum of something divine. Invisible but undeniable. It has become my compass. It reminds me that there is order within the chaos, a light within the fog. Sometimes, I still sense the man with the cigar, my silent companion, my shadow prophet. His outline is softer now, his face still hidden. If anything, he reassures me that I'm still on the path. I don't know if he is real in the way we define reality or if he exists only in the architecture of my mind, but perhaps that's the point. Perhaps faith doesn't need to be proven; it only needs to be followed. I close my eyes again, the room grows still, and somewhere deep within I sense the quiet curl of smoke rising toward something eternal.

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Chapter Two

Early Shadows

As far back as I can remember, I always felt less than, smaller somehow, like I didn't quite belong in the world that other kids seemed to move through so easily. They laughed and played with the kind of freedom I could never find inside myself. I was weighed down even then by something I couldn't name.

I grew up with an alcoholic father, and for the most part, I was afraid of him. Though he never raised a hand to me, his presence alone carried a heaviness that filled the house, thick and unpredictable, drifting in

from somewhere unseen. When he came home late at night, home felt darker. It carried with it sounds of arguments, tension in the air, a quiet dread that settled into every corner of our small home.

My mother was the savior of our family. She was the steady force that held everything together, often at great cost to herself. She managed the household, shielded us from the worst of the chaos, and absorbed pain so the rest of us wouldn't have to. Her loyalty to my father was unwavering. Even when it demanded more strength than anyone should have to give. She believed deeply in commitment and endurance, in keeping the family intact, no matter the personal sacrifice.

Looking back now, I see how much of herself she gave away in the process. How her own needs were quietly set aside so that ours could come first. At the time, I only knew that she made me feel safe when everything else felt uncertain. Today, I understand that her love was not effortless. It was deliberate, relentless, and costly.

She wasn't just my mother. She was the emotional backbone of our family. And without her, I don't know how any of us would have survived those years.

It was at this time that my thoughts came in fragments, scattered and disorganized. Sometimes they spun so fast I couldn't keep up with them. I remember I tried to explain something simple to my sisters and lost track halfway through. The words tangled in my mouth until I gave up. To organize my thoughts felt like an attempt to hold wind in my hands. It slipped through my fingers no matter how hard I tried to contain it.

At night, the fears came with intensity. The dark seemed thicker, more alive. Monsters were no longer confined to imagination. They felt closer now, as if they had learned my name. I would lie in bed staring at

the ceiling, listening for creaks in the house, convinced something was moving just beyond my door. On those nights, I would slip quietly into my sisters' room, asking if I could sleep beside them. We'd rub each other's backs until sleep finally came, a small ritual of comfort that felt like survival.

There were moments when the house finally went quiet and the lights went out, I'd stare out the window and look up at the stars whispering to God, "If you're real, please help me. Please take away the fear, the loneliness, the confusion, and the sadness." But the stars did not answer. The pale gray clouds that filled the night sky never parted. They hung there, silent and still, holding their secrets close. I remember wondering if maybe God lived inside that smoke somewhere, at watch but He refused to reveal Himself.

I felt I could never live up to my father's expectations. He carried himself like a man who had missed his own dreams and was determined that his children wouldn't miss theirs. But his voice was sharp, and his disappointment was a shadow that seemed to follow me everywhere. I became hyper-aware of his moods. Reading the tone of his footsteps, the sound of his sighs to guess whether he would be angry or numb when he walked through the door. I was aware of his drinking at an early age, though I didn't understand it then. I only knew that sometimes he was funny and kind, and that other times he was distant, lost, unreachable. When the nights grew long and the shouts began, I would lie awake, listen, heart pounding, wondering how one man could hold so much anger and sadness at the same time.

It was in the fourth grade that my world first began to feel unsteady. My teacher, a kind but concerned woman with sharp eyes behind round

glasses, pulled my parents aside one evening. She highly recommended that I see the school psychologist. I did not fully understand what it meant, but I knew it was not good. Grades were not like the other kids, and I couldn't seem to make sense of the words on the page. They floated, tangled, and danced in ways I couldn't untangle. Soon after, I found myself in a special reading class. There were three of us, two other students who seemed as lost as I felt. We sat at a small table, our books spread open before us. Our teacher was patient, but my mind often drifted. Outside the window, the world seemed to stretch infinitely, calling to me with its mysteries and promises of escape. I would stare at the swaying trees, imagine other lives, other possibilities.

As I look back now, I know I was not just daydreaming. I was retreating. I was a sad, withdrawn boy who struggled to pay attention to anything that didn't feel like an escape from the life I was living. My father refused to let me see the school psychologist. He told my mother there was nothing wrong with me. He just needs to toughen up I remember hearing him say. Those words lodged themselves deep inside me. I began to believe that weakness was the worst thing a person could show, so I hid mine.

I continued to daydream about myself as an actor, a singer, a dancer, an athlete. I would imagine performing on stage, lights shining down, applause filling the air. I could almost hear it. In those moments, I wasn't the quiet, uncertain boy in the back of the classroom. I was someone else. Someone confident and free.

Music became one of the few places where things made sense. A melody could reach me in ways language could not. Certain songs brought tears without explanation, stirring something deep and

unnamed. I couldn't understand why sound could move me so completely, only that it did. Music felt like a companion, one that didn't demand clarity or speed, only presence.

Despite my imagination, I never developed much confidence. I liked girls but couldn't bring myself to talk to them. I was too shy, too afraid of rejection. I'd watch from afar, invent whole conversations in my head that never happened in real life. I wanted to be seen but I was terrified of being known.

By the sixth grade, my world changed abruptly and violently. During a game of recessed baseball, a careless swing of a bat struck me square between the eyes. The pain was blinding. A white-hot burst that dropped me to the ground. I remember spending one hour in the principal's office on a couch. Because my parents couldn't be reached, I was finally transported to the hospital.

When I got to the hospital, the room smelled of antiseptic and something metallic. My forehead throbbed. I reached up and felt the swelling between my eyes, a large knot, tender and hot. I stared at the ceiling tiles, traced their uneven edges as a nurse adjusted the light. Everything felt distant, muffled, unreal.

I didn't know it then, but these early shadows were already shaping the path ahead, not as a warning, not as a prophecy, but as the earliest signs of a mind that would one day struggle fiercely, search relentlessly, and question everything it encountered.

I could feel the early shadows of my life give way to a new kind of unease, one that would follow me into adolescence and beyond. What began as whispers of fear and fragments of self-doubt would soon grow sharper, louder, shaping the very foundation of who I believed myself to

be. These small cracks in my childhood would widen over time, leading me toward the struggles, obsessions, and unraveling that waited just ahead. Though I could not see it then, the smoke that once drifted quietly through my early years was already gathering, preparing to thicken and rise as I stepped into the next chapter of my life.

Chapter Three

Broken Rhythms

At age 11, I had my first taste of alcohol. I was sick with a very nasty cough and flu symptoms. My grandmother decided to give me a small hot toddy to relieve my symptoms. All I remember is that it had whiskey, honey, and something else in it which I don't remember. The drink burned like fire but the warmth that followed was unlike anything I'd felt before. After ten minutes of this, I told my grandmother I wanted another one. She firmly said no and I immediately got pissed off. I claimed I still didn't feel good, but that was just a lie. I wanted to get one more to increase the buzz I had. Had anyone known anything about alcoholism at that time, I might have been spared several years.

At age 16, I discovered booze in a different way. My first real drink burned the same way that hot toddy had, but this time the burn was familiar, and the calm that followed even more so. My thoughts slowed, and for a brief moment, I felt whole and anchored. It was as if the cloud inside me had finally cleared, but that peace did not last.

What began as weekends with friends quickly turned much darker. I drank to disappear, to escape the heaviness that followed me everywhere. Parties blurred into the morning, I couldn't remember. I became an expert at pretending I was fine, I'd smile, joke, and keep up appearances, while inside the sadness grew thicker.

Sometimes I would wake up and stare at the ceiling, trying to remember what I'd said, who I had hurt, or how I had gotten home. My stomach churned and my mouth was dry. But what frightened me most wasn't the hangover. It was the emptiness that came after. The laughter, the noise, the escape gone, replaced by a silence that roared in my head.

High school was supposed to be the beginning of a doorway into who I might become, but for me, it felt like a maze without an exit. The rhythm of those years was broken before it began. My concentration had slipped away somewhere between childhood and adolescence, and I couldn't seem to get it back. Homework piled up, and no matter how hard I tried, the words refused to settle in my mind. I'd sit at my desk for a half hour, stare at the same page, read the same sentence until it blurred. My teachers said I was bright but lazy. They didn't understand how heavy my thoughts had become, how impossible it was to focus when the world inside me kept changing shape.

Depression crept in quietly, like fog seeping under a door. It didn't announce itself; it just arrived one morning and never left. I couldn't name it then, but I felt it - the dull ache that made even getting out of bed feel like a negotiation. Some days, I'd pull the covers over my head, listen to the muffled sounds of the house (my father's footsteps, the clatter of dishes, my mother humming in the kitchen), and feel an unexplainable sadness press on my chest.

At school, I wore my laughter like armor. I told jokes, joined in on conversations I didn't care about, and laughed a little too loudly to hide the tremble underneath. I wanted so badly to be long, but there was always that whisper in the back of my mind reminding me that I didn't. When I took my ACT exam, the results confirmed what I already feared.

That I was not smart enough, that something in me was broken. My composite score was a dismal 14. I remember I stared at the number in disbelief, felt the same old shame rise in my throat. I told myself I'd never measure up, that no college would want me, that single scores seemed to define everything I thought was wrong with me.

Age 20, my drinking was no longer innocent. It was deliberate, necessary, a means of survival. I would go out with friends and while they drank to have fun, I drank to feel normal. There was a hollow space inside me that nothing else could fill. Nights blurred into weeks and I lost track of how many times I swore I'd stop, that I would straighten out my life. But the bottle was always there, patient and persuasive with a whisper that I could control it next time. I was restless and lonely, trapped between who I was and who I wanted to be. The fear of failure had become my constant companion, and alcohol was the only thing that dulled its voice.

There were moments, even in the chaos, when I could almost hear a deeper rhythm trying to cut through the noise. A faint, steady pulse beneath the confusion. Maybe it was hope, or maybe it was larger, some kind of call that refused to die out.

I decided to try and rebuild my life through education. College seemed like a second chance, a place to prove myself that I wasn't dumb. I applied to a small community college in Iowa Falls first, terrified that I wouldn't be accepted. When the acceptance letter came, I held it like a lifeline. I told myself this time would be different. I bought new notebooks, promised to stay sober, and imagined myself walking through those doors as a different person. At first, it worked. I kept my head down and studied hard. My hands shook in class from withdrawal,

but I pushed through, pretended it was nerves. Started to feel the faint glow of accomplishment when I turned in assignments on time and understood a lecture. For the first time in years, I began to believe I could do *something* right.

Still, the pressure never left. Every quiz, every paper felt like a test of my worth as a person. The ghosts of the ACT score, the failed attempts, the self-doubt, they followed me everywhere. I'd lie awake at night, thinking, "Don't screw this up again. Don't prove them right." And sometimes, when the weight grew too heavy, I would slip one drink to relax, one night to celebrate a good grade. Then another and another. It was a fragile balance between hope and self-destruction, ambition, and despair.

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Somewhere in that struggle, a small part of me began to fight back. I didn't know it then, but those nights of quiet study, the long walks across campus, the moments when I chose not to drink, they were the first signs that I still wanted to live.

Eventually, I transferred to the University of Iowa, believing I had finally built enough strength to handle it, but almost immediately my anxiety became unmanageable. I couldn't ride buses or get on elevators without panic clawing at my chest. I couldn't walk into the football stadium without feeling like I was going to faint or vomit. My grades began to crumble, and my drinking spiraled out of control.

Eventually I decided to try college one last time. I enrolled at Hawkeye Community College, not because it sounded impressive, but because it felt possible. There were no fantasies attached to it, only a need to prove something fundamental to myself. This was the final time I would test the question that had followed me for years. Was I actually capable or had I been fooling myself all along?

I worked harder than I ever had. Concentration didn't come easily, but I fought for it anyway. I sat with discomfort instead of running from it. When my mind drifted, I brought it back. When anxiety whispered that I wasn't smart enough, I stayed seated and kept reading. I spent long evenings buried in textbooks, not chasing perfection but chasing understanding. For once, I wasn't trying to escape who I was. I was trying to meet myself honestly.

There were moments when the old doubts resurfaced, when frustration tightened in my chest, and the familiar urge to quit crept in. But something had changed. I no longer believed that struggles meant failure. I began to see effort itself as evidence, proof that intelligence wasn't a fixed trait bestowed on others, but something forged through persistence. Each completed assignment felt like a small reclamation of ground I'd surrendered years earlier.

When graduation came, the truth arrived quietly, but unmistakably. I finished at the top of my class with a 4.0 GPA and received presidential honors. Sitting there, listening to my name called, I didn't feel triumphant. I felt grounded. The accomplishment didn't erase my past or cure what still lingered inside me, but it settled something deeply personal. I was not stupid. I had never been. I had simply been fighting battles no one else could see.

One evening, my parents sat me down at the kitchen table. My mother's eyes were tired but steady. My father said little. The decision was made. I was going to treatment. Hazelden, Center City, Minnesota. The name alone carried a strange weight. The drive there felt endless. I rolled the window down slightly and felt the spring air press against my face, cool and damp with the scent of earth and rain. Fields stretched out on either side of the highway, soft green shoots beginning to rise through the soil. The world looked alive again, as if it were there to remind me that renewal was still possible.

Inside the treatment center, time seemed to dissolve. The halls smelled faintly of disinfectant and coffee. Counselors spoke softly about surrender, higher powers, and letting go. I did not understand all of it but I listened. I wrote down their words like they were scripture:

Let go

Accept help

Surrender control

In group sessions, we sat in a circle of folding chairs. Some cried, some confessed, and others stared at the floor. When my turn came, my voice shook. I admitted that I didn't want to believe that I couldn't stop on my own. For a while, I believed recovery was possible. I read the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, nodded in meetings, and prayed when I thought no one was looking. Sometimes late at night, I would stand by the window of my room and watch the smoke from my breath curl into the cold air. It reminded me of something eternal, something I couldn't quite define. Maybe that was hope, and maybe it was grace.

But when I was discharged, reality hit me like a cold wave. The world outside had not changed; the same bars stood on the corners, the same

loneliness waited. I relapsed, then again, each time the fall felt steeper. Guilt became my shadow, a whisper that I was weak, that I'd never get it right. How could a habit that once made me feel alive now make me feel like dying? I'd ask myself that question over and over, staring at the bottom of another empty glass.

I returned to Hazelden once more broken and desperate. This time I promised myself it would be different. I tried harder, listened longer, prayed more sincerely. But deep down I knew that if I didn't find something beyond myself, something stronger, something real, I would not survive.

As I look back on these years: fragile, frantic, full of searching, I can feel the next chapter gathering at the edges of my life like a rising wind. Recovery, relapse, hope, despair. Every moment felt like a step toward a life I could not yet see. It waited in the shadows, just beyond my understanding, as the broken rhythms of my youth echoed into adulthood. A single question rose inside me like smoke twisting toward an unseen sky: "What if everything I had been running from was leading me somewhere I was meant to go?"

Chapter Four

Kansas City Here I Come

The morning I left Iowa for Kansas City, a thin veil of haze drifted through the town, curling into the pale sky like a whisper of the unknown. It clung to the streets and rooftops, softening the edges of everything familiar. I packed my car with more hope than certainty, telling myself once again that a change in geography might be enough to heal what felt broken inside me. I had told myself this story before, repeated it like a mantra each time life began to feel too heavy. Still I

believed it, or maybe I needed to believe it, the way a man believes in a road simply because it stretches forward.

Before Kansas City, my path had already begun to narrow towards the race track. I started at Waterloo Greyhound track as a lead-out walking the dogs to the starting gate. It was simple work, physical and repetitive, but there was something grounding about it. The dogs vibrated with nervous energy, muscles taut beneath my hands, eyes locked forward with singular purpose. And beside them, I felt absorbed into their focus, their readiness. There was no room for doubt in these moments - only movement, timing, and trust. For reasons I could not yet articulate, that kind of order made sense to me.

From Waterloo, I moved on to Sioux City to work at SODRAC Park as a paddock judge and chart writer, the responsibility was greater, the pace faster, and the margin for error thinner. I learned to read races the way some people read faces, patterns, tendencies, and small tales that revealed larger truths. I liked the precision of it. The rules, the structure, the accountability. The work demanded clarity, and in return, it gave me something rare: focus. For the first time in a long while, my mind felt useful, directed.

It was through the racing world that I heard about an opening in Kansas City. A colleague mentioned a position that sounded almost unreal. Racing secretary at a new track called the Woodlands. The title alone carried weight. It wasn't just a job, it felt like a threshold. I told myself this opportunity might be the ticket to stability, maybe even happiness. Something inside me whispered that this was more than chance, more than timing, that maybe this was who I was supposed to become, if I could just hold it together long enough.

Kansas City announced itself the moment I arrived. Traffic surged like a living thing, horns and engines blending into a relentless pulse that vibrated through my chest. Buildings rose higher than anything back home. I felt small and alive at the same time, invigorated by the scale of it all. Somewhere in that noise, beneath me, to chaos and momentum, I sensed him again, Mr. Anonymous. His presence was faint but unmistakable, as if he'd been waiting at the city limits, cigar already lit.

The Woodlands was everything I imagined and more.

The first night I witnessed a live race there, I stood frozen as the lid popped open. The dogs exploded from the box like streaks of lightning, paws pounding the sand, bodies moving in perfect, desperate unison. The sound was thunderous, the crowd roaring. The track alive beneath my feet. In that instant, something ignited deep inside me: fascination, connection, maybe even destiny. I didn't just love the sport. I felt claimed by it, as if I had stepped into a world that had been quietly calling my name for years.

As racing secretary, my days became long and demanding. I organized entries, maintained meticulous records, and built races with careful attention to balance and fairness. I served as a liaison between the kennels and track administration, navigating personalities, expectations, and pressure from every direction. The responsibility was immense, but I thrived under it. There was satisfaction in knowing that order depended on me, that the integrity of the races rested in part in my hands. For once, I belonged somewhere. For once, I was good at something that mattered.

The hours were relentless, 65-70 hours a week, as we prepared for

the grand opening. The track had its own rhythm, fast, hypnotic, unforgiving. Days blurring to nights, coffee cups stacked up beside paperwork. I learned its language quickly, absorbed its culture, and let it shape my days and nights. Watching races, reviewing charts, adjusting entries - it all merged into a single, consuming focus that left little room for anything else.

One afternoon, the general manager tapped me on the shoulder, a simple gesture that carried weight. He had a cigar in his mouth, unlit but unmistakable, held with the casual authority of someone who belonged wherever he stood. The cigar caught my attention in a way I didn't fully understand. It wasn't just an accessory; it felt symbolic, almost ceremonial, as if it marked rank or initiation. I had earned respect here, I felt it in the way people spoke to me, in the trust they placed in my judgment, in the sense of purpose that was intoxicating.

Yet, as I began to succeed professionally, something inside me quietly shifted. The same smoke that once felt like guidance now blurred at the edges of my certainty. I didn't recognize it then. I was too busy building a life, too busy convincing myself that I had finally arrived.

Cigars became part of the landscape held by executives, by owners, by men who moved through the track with confidence and command. Each time I caught the scent, I felt a subtle tightening in my chest, a flicker of recognition that I brushed aside.

The track at night was a different place entirely without the crowds, without the announcer's voice cutting through the air. It felt stripped down to its bones. The grand stand loomed like a silhouette, rows of empty seats holding the ghost of earlier noise. My footsteps echoed longer than they should have. Each one reminded me how alone I was.

Once the lights dimmed.

I would walk the perimeter slowly, hands in my pockets, replaying the day in my head: entries, adjustments, conversations, decisions, everything I'd done right. Everything I might have missed. The work didn't end when the races were over. It followed me, looping through my thoughts until even silence felt busy.

Sometimes I'd stop near the rail and look out over the track itself, smooth and untouched now as if nothing had ever happened there. It struck me how quickly intensity vanished, how something that had felt electric just hours earlier could disappear without a trace. I wondered, not for the first time, how much of my own sense of purpose depended on the noise, the movement, the validation. It was during those moments that I noticed the cigars most.

Not lit. Not always. Sometimes just held. Sometimes crushed out in an ashtray near an office door. They lingered in the air long after the men who smoked them had gone home. The scent was faint but unmistakable, curling through the quiet like a signature. I couldn't explain why it affected me the way it did. It wasn't unpleasant, it was commanding.

A cigar didn't rush, it didn't flicker like a cigarette. It burned slowly, deliberately, as if it expected the world to wait. I began to associate it with authority, with decisions made behind closed doors, with power that didn't need to explain itself. Men who smoked cigars didn't ask permission. They occupied space.

Standing there alone, I found myself wondering what it meant to belong among them. Whether proximity to that kind of power changed you. Whether breathing it in night after night left a residue you didn't

notice until it was already part of you.

That was when the presence returned. Not sharply, not dramatically. Just a feeling as if someone else were standing nearby watching the same empty track, considering the same questions. I didn't see him. I didn't hear him. But I felt a familiar stillness that always accompanied Mr. Anonymous, the sense that something was being observed rather than controlled. The distinction mattered even then.

The cigars represented command. The smoke represented something else entirely. One was about influence. The other was about endurance.

I didn't know it then, but I wasn't just watching the races unfold on the track. I was entering one of my own, drawn forward by speed, certainty, and the quiet promise of power. So the question wasn't whether I would win or lose. It was whether I would recognize the finish line when I crossed it, or if I would mistake the smoke for the way out.

Chapter Five

The Descent

It did not begin with a collapse. It began with momentum. At Kansas City, after the long hours and the intoxicating sense of purpose, my life seemed to be accelerating without rest. I told myself this is what ambition felt like, what responsibility demanded.

I felt alert in a way that was almost exhilarating, as if my mind were running ahead of my body, scouting territory before I arrived.

There was no single moment where things went wrong. There was only the sense that everything was moving faster than I could slow down. The pace felt righteous at first. I told myself that exhaustion was simply the cost of relevance, that responsibility demanded sacrifice. I wore fatigue like proof that I mattered. Even when my body lagged, my

mind refused to slow. Thoughts arrived in clusters, overlapping and insistent, each one demanding attention before the last had finished forming. I began to mistake acceleration for clarity. The faster my mind moved, the more convinced I became that I was seeing truths others couldn't or wouldn't. Pauses felt dangerous. Silence felt like a trap. If I stopped thinking, even briefly, something vital might slip past me unnoticed.

Looking back, I can see how restlessness hardened into vigilance, how vigilance became suspicion. But at the time, it felt like survival, like standing watch while others slept. I wasn't unraveling, I was staying ahead.

At the track, the days blurred together. Paperwork, calls, schedules, compliance. I took pride in knowing more than I was supposed to in understanding systems that others accepted without question. That was my strength, and so I believed. But there was an undercurrent to the work, something unspoken that hummed beneath routine. Conversation stopped when I entered rooms. People chose their words carefully. The silence around certain topics felt intentional. Then came my boss. He was an older man, seasoned and respected, someone who had spent decades navigating the racing world. When I learned he was under investigation by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation for selling a Kennel booking contract—something explicitly illegal—the ground shifted beneath me. The KBI questioned me more than once. Each time I told the truth, I knew nothing. But knowledge didn't feel like the point; presence did. Proximity did.

My boss grew visibly frightened. His composure eroded. One day he looked me directly in the eyes and asked if I would meet him in a

cornfield and shoot him. There was no humor in it. No exaggeration. He was serious. I remember the weight of that moment, the way the air seemed to thicken around us. People do not make requests like that unless they believe something far worse is coming.

After that, the warnings began to surface more clearly. "They mess with people's lives," he told me. He explained that the people above us didn't want pencil pushers, educated people who ask questions, who noticed patterns, who understood systems too well. They wanted loyalty, not intelligence. Compliance, not curiosity. Then he said something that lodged itself permanently in my mind. "Everyone has a weakness, and all of us are expendable." I heard it as a statement of fact, a warning disguised as wisdom.

After that conversation, I watched my boss more closely. His movements were smaller and tighter, he avoided eye-contact in hallways, his laughter once easy sounded forced, and every time the phone rang his shoulders stiffened. Fear had hollowed him out from the inside. I replayed the cornfield request again and again, trying to understand the psychology of a man who believed death was preferable to whatever consequences awaited him. He wasn't melodramatic. He was calculating, as if choosing the manner of his end was the last control he had left. That realization terrified me because if someone seasoned, insulated, and experienced was that afraid, then what chance did I have? I had asked questions. I had noticed patterns. I had been present during moments I wasn't supposed to witness.

Once that thought took hold, it was impossible to shake. I began cataloging my own vulnerabilities the way he must have cataloged his. Weakness, leverage, points of pressure. The idea that everyone has a

weakness no longer felt philosophical, it felt procedural, like an instruction manual I was never meant to read.

Not long after, the co-owner of the facility arrived. He was 6'9", broad-shouldered, commanding without effort. He walked into the racing department with a monstrous cigar clenched between his teeth. The room changed when he entered, attention drawn, voices lowered. When he shook my hand his grip was firm, deliberate, his voice was calm, resonant, and controlled. He wanted to know what was going on. He wanted to meet me. As he spoke, cigar smoke curled around his words, slow and deliberate, as if it carried intention of its own. I couldn't stop staring at it. The smoke didn't feel incidental. It felt symbolic—authority made visible, power that did not need to announce itself. Was this Mr. Anonymous?

The question didn't frighten me at first. It intrigued me, branded me with his presence. Then the messages began. Not all at once, not dramatically. Subtly.

A headline in the newspaper caught my eye: A story about people gathering downtown wearing Basta T-shirts. Basta, Italian for "enough." The article framed it as a protest, a moment of civic frustration. But to me, it read like a signal. Enough of what? Enough of me? Enough of what I was uncovering? Once the idea formed, it refused to let go.

The messages intensified. Songs didn't just resonate, they responded. Lyrics shifted meaning mid-chorus, aligning themselves with thoughts I hadn't yet finished articulating. I began to hear certain songs as if they were coming directly from my future wife, intimate and reassuring, as though she already knew me and was trying to reach me across time. Other songs felt like coded instructions, alternating between comfort

and warning, love and danger. A line about love became a promise. A line about loss became a threat. I rewound tracks repeatedly, convinced I'd missed something crucial for the first time.

Television felt even more invasive. Commercials interrupted shows at moments that mirrored my internal dialogue with unsettling precision. I became convinced that Ted Turner, the owner of CNN, was sending me messages of hope through the broadcasts, quietly assuring me that I would be taken care of and that powerful people were watching over me. The sense of reassurance felt real and calming, as if protection had been arranged behind the scenes. A slogan about security aired just as I questioned my safety. An advertisement about control appeared after a surge of panic. It felt deliberate, orchestrated, as though my reactions were being monitored and adjusted in real-time.

Fear stopped being episodic. It became ambient, a constant hum beneath every moment. I walked through the city feeling exposed, convinced my thoughts were no longer private. I checked reflections in the windows, faces in crowds, movements behind me. Every ordinary interaction carried a way to potential consequence. I didn't feel confused, I felt terrorized. And terror, once normalized, reshapes reality until danger feels like the default state of being.

Sleep became nearly impossible. When I did sleep, it was shallow and fractured. My thoughts raced even when my body was still. At night, I lay awake listening to the city breathe, convinced I was being watched, monitored, and evaluated. Every sound felt layered, with messages beneath messages and meanings beneath meanings.

At the National Greyhound Association's semiannual auction and board meetings, the sense of inevitability intensified. The event opened

with a documentary chronicling the origins of greyhound racing. I watched casually at first until the narrator's voice dropped. "The early history of dog racing," he said, "was tied closely to organized crime. The mafia's influence shaped much of the industry's foundation." The room felt suddenly smaller. An older gentleman sitting beside me, someone I respected deeply, someone who had been racing since the beginning, chuckled and said, "Bullshit. Don't believe everything you hear." But I couldn't dismiss it. The timing was too precise. The information, too, aligned with everything else I was experiencing. Once the idea took hold, it spread rapidly, linking itself to every unexplained silence, every warning, every look. The framework completed itself. The Mafia wasn't just history. It was present and invisible.

What frightened me most wasn't the possibility that I was wrong. It was the possibility that I was right. That beneath the surface of ordinary life existed a framework of power that rewarded silence and punished awareness. That institutions designed to protect could just as easily contain. I felt myself slipping from the world I had known into one governed by implication and subtext. Trust became impossible because certainty demanded vigilance. Every attempt to relax felt irresponsible, even dangerous. I believed that if I let my guard down, even briefly, something irreversible would happen.

Mr. Anonymous no longer felt like a question; he felt like a constant, an embodiment of authority that didn't need explanation. The cigar burned steadily in my imagination, producing smoke that neither accused nor comforted. It simply existed, watching and waiting.

Human resources became another note in the pattern. The personnel director asked me how I knew the mayor of Kansas City. Her tone was

curious. It was probing. When I explained that the mayor's daughter was married to my best friend, she paused. Then she told me that the mayor's son was schizophrenic. I had already known this. She then told me that a former Kansas City Chiefs linebacker named Jim Lynch, #51, a Pro Bowl player, had committed suicide. The coincidence terrified me. Same name, same city, same profession of strength. It felt like insinuation, like a suggestion without words, a narrative being placed in front of me, daring me to step into it.

By then, fear had transformed into terror. I felt hunted, not physically, but existentially, as if my very awareness had made me a liability.

The descent wasn't sudden; it was cumulative, layered, each realization stacked atop the last until the weight became unbearable. By the end, I no longer knew whether I was uncovering something forbidden or losing the last place where I was safe. And if power had found me, what was it preparing me for?

Chapter Six

The first Fall

The Return Home

Coming home from Kansas City didn't feel like retreat. It felt strategic. I believed I was stepping away from the center of something dangerous, something that had begun to close in on me. By the time I crossed the familiar roads back into my hometown, I was already certain that what had happened to me wasn't random, medical, or internal. It had a source, a cause, and that cause had a name: the Mafia.

I didn't arrive at this conclusion impulsively; it assembled itself piece by piece, the way a case file comes together. Documents, warnings,

behaviors, silences. The racetrack had exposed me to a world that didn't operate by the rules. Most people believed in power moved quietly; there decisions were made without explanation. People quit their positions without ceremony; fear wasn't discussed but it was understood.

By the time I came home, I was convinced my illness hadn't originated inside me at all. It had been induced, pressured, triggered by forces that didn't want educated people asking questions. People like me, pencil pushers, observers, men who noticed patterns.

The paranoia didn't feel paranoid, it felt like awareness. Around this time, a friend from my hometown came over to visit me. She had a friend whom I was introduced to casually. Her last name was unmistakably Italian, and later that same day, she confided in me that her father was a shady character and was probably involved with the Mafia. To me, this didn't feel like coincidence. It felt like yet another confirmation quietly reinforcing what I already believed.

At home, nothing restored me the way I expected to. The house looked the same, but it didn't feel safe anymore. Familiar rooms no longer offered refuge. They felt compromised, as if the danger I had escaped had followed me back, invisible but intact. I kept replaying conversations from Kansas City, reexamining every warning my boss had ever given me. Every look, every half-finished sentence.

I began to see my symptoms not as failure but as fallout. The pressure hadn't broken me instantly. It had seeped in slowly, like poison disguised as routine. The race track had been the epicenter. Everything radiated outward from there: fear, silence, implication. By the time I returned home, the illness had already taken shape. I wasn't searching

for meaning. I was tracing damage. And once I accepted that, the question stopped being "What's wrong with me?" and became "What was done to me?"

The Roses and the Illusion of Purpose

The roses were not a mistake. They were a mission. I woke up one morning with absolute clarity. I needed to buy roses. Not a few, not a bouquet. A hundred dollars' worth in every color available. The thought arrived fully formed, complete with urgency and meaning. It wasn't indulgent. It was necessary. I believed the roses were a countermeasure.

If corruption thrived on fear, secrecy, and control, then beauty, generosity, and visibility were acts of resistance. Giving roses to anyone who felt like restoring balance, a way to push back against what had been done to me, against what I believed was being done to the world, quietly, systematically.

The flower shop was overwhelming in the best way. Color everywhere, red, yellow, white, pink, each one vibrating with life. The smell of wet stems and earth grounded me. I watched the florist work with practiced hands, trimming, wrapping, assembling order out of chaos. It felt symbolic, reassuring.

I didn't have the money. That fact barely mattered. Left to get my mom's credit card calm and resolved. This wasn't theft, this was borrowing for a cause that would justify itself later. When I returned, I asked if I could fill out an application. It felt important, essential that I anchor myself to the moment in some official way.

On the references line, I wrote without hesitation: Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, Fred Wagner. At the time, the list made perfect sense. These were people aligned with truth, healing, and integrity. People who

would understand what I was doing and why. Fred's later silence didn't register as rejection. I interpreted it as caution, protection.

Walking out with the roses, I felt both exposed and empowered. I imagined eyes on me everywhere, but instead of fear, I felt purpose. The illusion of purpose was intoxicating. It made the chaos feel directed and justified.

Fear Without a Name

The fear didn't arrive with a warning. It didn't announce itself with a single thought or image. It settled into my body first, tightening my chest, shortening my breath, sharpening my senses. I became alert to everything: sounds, movements, changes in tone. Nothing felt neutral anymore. I didn't know what I was afraid of, I only knew that something was wrong. That was the worst part.

Fear without a name can't be argued with. It doesn't respond to reassurance or logic. It expands into every available space.

I replayed conversations repeatedly, searching for hidden meanings. I watched people's faces for signs of deception or recognition. Ordinary noises—doors closing, cars passing, phones ringing—felt loaded with significance. What do they want from me? How far does this go? Who else knows? I couldn't explain this fear to anyone without sounding unhinged, so I didn't try. Silence felt safer. Containment felt necessary. I began to understand how people disappear into themselves, not because they want to, but because language fails them.

IV The First Hospitalization - Fear, Paranoia, and Programming

When my father said we were going to the hospital, I didn't resist. That surprised me. I had always imagined I would fight that moment,

that I would argue or explain or refuse. Instead, I felt a strange sense of inevitability. If the mafia was involved, then institutions would be involved too. Hospitals weren't neutral. They were systems, and systems had agendas.

The drive passed in silence. Street lights blurred past the windows. My father's hands stayed steady on the steering wheel. I studied them, grounding myself in their familiarity while my mind raced ahead anticipating what was coming.

Inside the hospital, time stopped behaving normally. Time stretched unnaturally, minutes felt elastic, expanding and contracting without warning. Every sound seemed amplified: the shuffle of shoes, the click of a pin, the distant murmur of voices behind closed doors.

I studied the walls, the ceiling tiles, the arrangement of chairs. Convinced that the environment itself was designed to unsettle. Nothing here felt accidental. Even the pauses between questions felt calculated, as though silence itself was part of the process.

I watched the staff carefully searching for inconsistencies who avoided eye contact who lingered too long who spoke too gently. Kindness felt suspicious, efficiency felt threatening. I wondered how many people had sat in this same room believing the same thing: that they were being evaluated not for help but for containment.

Then the intake process began: clipboards, questions, check-marks. Each answer I gave felt like data being collected, not help being offered. When the nurse handed me the cup of liquid, Certainty washed over me. "This is poison," I thought. I didn't panic. I accepted it. I believed this was how they ended problems like me: quietly, legally, without resistance. I looked at my parents and told them I loved them, meaning

it as goodbye. I had finally stopped fighting.

When I drank it, the effect was immediate and disorienting. The fear dissolved almost instantly, my body relaxed, my mind slowed, and then I started laughing uncontrollably. The sudden shift felt artificial, engineered. Proof that the liquid wasn't benign. I believed they were programming me.

Inside the ward doors locked behind me with finality. My belongings were taken, my autonomy disappeared. No one was cruel, but kindness didn't equal trust. I felt documented, categorized, processed.

Inside the Ward

The ward had its own rhythm. Lights dimmed at certain hours. Meals arrived on schedule. Medication was administered without negotiation. I oscillated between heavy sedation and moments of extreme clarity. At times, I could barely lift my head. At others, my senses sharpened so intensely that I could describe every object in a room with photographic precision.

I watched staff closely. I listened to how they spoke to each other. I paid attention to who entered and exited rooms. Nothing felt random. Everything felt orchestrated.

I was certain the ward wasn't just about treatment. It was about containment, about control, about reshaping thought patterns that threatened larger systems. Mr. Anonymous hovered at the edge of my awareness throughout it all. The cigar was present, though unlit. No smoke yet, just the implication of it. Authority without explanation, power without apology.

VI. Negative Association Disorder

At some point, I needed language. What I was experiencing refused

to stay chaotic; it demanded structure. So I gave it one. I called it **Negative Association Disorder**, and the name felt precise, clinical, and undeniable. It meant that everything I saw, heard, or encountered attached itself to danger. Nothing arrived as neutral anymore; every stimulus carried consequence.

A sound wasn't just a sound; it was a warning. A glance wasn't casual; it was evaluative. A coincidence wasn't a coincidence at all; it was confirmation.

One afternoon in the Ward's small common area, I noticed a puzzle on a low table. The box read "Head Games" in bold jagged lettering. I froze. The title didn't feel accidental. It felt accusatory. "Head Games." That's what they were doing to me: messing with my thoughts, rearranging pieces, scrambling perception.

The image on the box, distorted faces overlapping one another, seemed like a cruel metaphor. I stood there staring at it far longer than necessary, convinced it had been placed there deliberately: a signal, a taunt, a reminder that my mind was the battle field.

Later that evening someone turned on the radio in the day room and the song "Head Games" by Foreigner drifted through the speakers. The opening guitar riff tightened my chest. Daylight, all right. The lyrics felt pointed, invasive. I wasn't just hearing music; I was being addressed. The chorus repeated its self-like confirmation: "Head games, you and me, baby." It wasn't random; it was commentary. Someone was acknowledging what was happening inside my skull. I felt exposed, as if the walls themselves were narrating my unraveling. These associations didn't stop there. They multiplied.

My mind worked tirelessly, linking one thing to the next, weaving

meaning through every detail, whether I wanted it or not. The exhaustion was profound. I couldn't rest because rest required trust, and trust no longer felt rational. Staying alert felt like survival.

I tried to explain this to the doctors. I told them I wasn't hearing voices or seeing things that weren't there. I was interpreting everything correctly, too correctly. The problem wasn't hallucination; it was association. I was connecting the dots faster than anyone else could follow. They nodded politely, wrote notes, and asked follow-up questions. Their calm felt rehearsed, their curiosity felt superficial. I didn't believe they truly understood what I was describing. How could they? They weren't inside it.

Negative association disorder explained why kindness felt suspicious, why silence felt ominous, why even reassurance carried weight. My brain had become a machine that refused to stop assigning meaning. And once meaning attached itself to fear, it didn't let go easily.

I worried that this wasn't temporary, that once the mind learned to operate this way, it couldn't unlearn it, that I had crossed a threshold beyond which neutrality no longer existed. That thought frightened me more than anything else.

The RICO Act - Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations

Somewhere in the middle of all this, I learned about the **RICO** Act. The realization hit me with force. This wasn't some obscure law buried in legal textbooks. It was proof. Proof that organizations existed precisely to conceal corruption, to operate behind layers of legitimacy, to influence lives while remaining invisible. The government had written laws to address them because they were real. That mattered.

The structure of the law itself re-enforced my certainty that **RICO**

wasn't written for lone criminals. It was designed for systems, for organizations that hide behind legitimacy, operating through layers and insulating themselves from accountability. That mattered deeply to me. It meant corruption didn't need to announce itself; it could masquerade as business policy or procedure.

I read about how RICO cases were built, patterns of behavior, implied coordination, indirect influence. No single act needed to prove intent. The pattern was the proof. That understanding fused seamlessly with my experience. The race track, the contracts, the fear-driven compliance, the unspoken rules. Even the hospital fit the model. I believed RICO explained not just criminal enterprises, but how power protected itself when exposed. Once I saw it this way, it no longer felt distant or theoretical. It felt personal. It felt like documentation of the very machinery I believed had turned against me. I believed my situation fit perfectly within that framework.

VIII: After Discharge: Fragile Ground

Leaving the hospital didn't feel like freedom. It felt conditional. My family was relieved. I could see it in their faces, hear it in their voices. They wanted to believe the worst was over. I wanted to believe it too. But relief didn't arrive the way it was supposed to. Instead, everything felt thinner, more delicate, as if the world might crack if I leaned on it too hard.

Home no longer functioned as a reset. It felt monitored, not externally but internally. I measured my thoughts, I watched my reactions, I questioned my own certainty, while still believing deeply in the framework I constructed.

I wasn't afraid all the time anymore, but when fear returned, it came

without warning—a comment, a news story, a look, anything could trigger it. My footing never felt secure.

Mr. Anonymous remained with me, though he stayed at a distance. The cigar was still there in my mind, unlit, patient. No smoke yet, but the promise of it. The idea that something enduring waits beyond the chaos, observing rather than intervening.

I felt suspended between worlds, not fully ill, not fully well, not safe, but not in immediate danger either, just fragile.

It took time to admit what had happened. This wasn't stress, it wasn't exhaustion, it wasn't a bad stretch or a temporary unraveling. This was the first fall, the moment my mind crossed into territory I hadn't known existed and couldn't immediately retreat from.

I grieved the version of myself who believed awareness alone could protect him. Who thought insight equaled immunity? That version of me didn't survive intact, but something else did. I was still here, breathing, thinking, questioning.

Even inside fear, even inside fracture, there was endurance. The mind had bent, but it had not broken completely. And though I didn't yet know what recovery would look like, or if it was even possible, I knew one thing with certainty: I had survived myself.

Mr. Anonymous lingered at the edge of my thoughts, no longer threatening, not yet guiding, just present, waiting. As I stood there, uncertain and changed, two questions pressed forward, impossible to ignore.

If this was the first fall, what would the next rise demand of me?
How much of myself would I have to lose or surrender to reach it?

Chapter Seven

The Bipolar Experience

Part 1

The word "bipolar" did not arrive in my life like a verdict. It drifted in slowly, almost politely, as if it were a suggestion rather than a diagnosis. The doctor mentioned it in passing. A pamphlet explained it with arrows and loops. Someone spoke about cycles, manic, depressive, stable, as if those words could contain what I had been living through. I stared at those diagrams and felt something tighten in my chest.

Part of me recognized myself immediately. Another part recoiled. The word felt both explanatory and insulting at the same time. It offered structure, but it also flattened the experience into something clinical, something manageable, something that could be charted and medicated. What I had been feeling didn't feel like a disorder. It felt like depth, like sensitivity taken to its natural extreme. Still, I couldn't deny the pattern once I started looking.

There was always a rise. It didn't announce itself dramatically. It crept in through energy first, waking up earlier than usual, mind already moving before my feet touched the floor. Thoughts lined up eagerly as if they had been waiting all night for permission to begin. Sleep felt unnecessary. Food felt secondary. Conversation felt effortless.

I remember mornings when the world felt newly assembled, as if someone had cleaned the lens through which I saw everything. Colors were brighter, music cut deeper, and words landed with precision. I didn't feel euphoric in a cartoonish way. I felt right-aligned, awake in a way I suspected most people never experienced.

The laughter came next. It would rise suddenly without warning,

bubbling up from somewhere below thought. Sometimes it was triggered by something mildly amusing. Other times it arrived for no reason at all. I'd laugh at the rhythm of a sentence, the shape of an idea, the absurdity of being alive. It wasn't mockery or hysteria. It felt pure, joy spilling over its container.

People noticed. Some laughed with me. Others looked confused. I barely registered their reactions. I was too busy living inside the momentum. During these periods, energy felt like truth. The faster my mind moved, the more convinced I became that I was seen clearly. Slowing down felt irresponsible. Pauses felt dangerous. I told myself that hesitation was how people missed their purpose. That doubt was a luxury reserved for those who hadn't glimpsed what I had. And I had glimpsed something, I was sure of it.

The sense of importance didn't arrive as arrogance. It arrived as responsibility. A quiet but firm understanding that I had been shaped for something larger than myself. That my sensitivity, my suffering, my intelligence, and my ability to connect disparate ideas weren't accidents. They were preparations. I didn't think of myself as better than others. I thought of myself as positioned like someone standing at the intersection of meaning and action, tasked with translating one into the other.

Ideas expanded effortlessly. Problems that had lingered unresolved for decades suddenly felt solvable. Political corruption, moral decay, even historical wounds like the JFK assassination seemed to rearrange themselves under my scrutiny, aligning into patterns that felt obvious once seen. I wasn't guessing; I wasn't speculating. I knew. Certainty was intoxicating. I spoke with authority because I felt authorized.

Conversations took on a different tone. People listened more closely or maybe I simply noticed it more. Either way, the feedback loop tightened. Confidence fed clarity. Clarity fed conviction.

My mind refused to rest. Ideas sparked faster than I could complete them. I started projects impulsively. Business concepts, organizational plans, creative ventures, each one feeling essential in the moment. I bought books and magazines in stacks, certain that knowledge was the missing piece that would bring everything into focus. But finishing anything felt impossible. As soon as one idea slowed, another took its place. Motion mattered more than completion.

My hygiene suffered not out of neglect but because it felt irrelevant. My body became secondary to the work my mind was doing. Still, I believed I was ascending.

The crash always came later, but in those elevated moments before gravity reclaimed me, I truly believed I had stepped into the most authentic version of myself. That this wasn't illness, it was access. And that whatever pain followed was simply the cost of touching something real.

Part II

The elevation didn't simply lift my mood, it reorganized my values. What mattered shifted quietly at first. Practical concerns slipped into the background, replaced by urgency and moral weight. Decisions weren't measured by consequence anymore, but by alignment. If something felt right, it was right. Doubt felt unnecessary, even obstructive.

Generosity intensified. It wasn't just about giving money. It was about correcting imbalance. I believe suffering existed because too many

people hoarded resources, withheld compassion, or failed to recognize spiritual opportunity when it appeared. I felt compelled to intervene. Churches felt like safe conduits for goodness, places where money transformed into hope. Charities represented the order in a broken world. Each donation felt like obedience rather than choice.

I didn't hesitate, I didn't look back. When my bank account finally emptied, it didn't feel like loss, it felt like proof. Proof that I wasn't attached to material things. Proof that I trusted something larger than myself to replenish what I had released. I remember thinking, "If I mean to continue this work, provision will find me."

At the same time, my appearance grew bolder. The flamboyant shirts became brighter, the jackets louder. I liked the way color announced presence before I spoke. It felt intentional, almost symbolic, as if I were signaling openness, creativity, and courage. People noticed, some complimented me, others looked unsure. Their reactions didn't discourage me; they confirmed that I was visible. Visibility mattered.

I began to believe that being seen wasn't vanity, it was responsibility. If I was meant to influence, guide, or awaken others, hiding would be a form of betrayal. I convinced myself that subtlety was overrated, that truth demanded expression. As my confidence expanded, so did my interpretations.

Conversation gained layers:

A tilt of the head

A pause between words

A look held a second too long

Each carried meaning. I didn't feel confused by these interpretations. I felt gifted as though my mind had tuned into frequencies others

overlooked.

I bought books constantly. Psychology, spirituality, politics, leadership. Magazines stacked up on tables and counters. I believed that somewhere in those pages was the missing synthesis. The final insight that would pull everything together. Reading became acquisition rather than absorption.

Gambling slipped in quietly. At first, it felt harmless, a test of intuition, a game of pattern recognition. But soon it carried the same rush as everything else: risk, anticipation, certainty. Losses didn't discourage me, they felt temporary.

My hygiene suffered, without registering as concern. Showers felt like interruptions, meals felt negotiable, physical maintenance faded beneath mental urgency. Somewhere beneath all of this, the cracks widened.

The first sign wasn't sadness; it was agitation, a restless edge beneath the confidence, a tightening that made it hard to sit still. The laughter grew sharper, less grounded. I noticed people watching me more closely now, not with curiosity but with concern.

That's when the shame began creeping in, not all at once, in flashes. A comment remembered later. A glance reinterpreted. I'd replay conversations in my head and feel a twist of doubt. Did I talk too much? Did that make sense? Did I go too far? The confidence didn't vanish immediately. It flickered. And in the flicker, fear appeared. Fear of collapse. Fear of exposure. Fear that the meaning I'd been living inside might dissolve if examined too closely.

The descent didn't announce itself with drama; it arrived as fatigue, as hesitation, as moments where certainty no longer held. I'd wake up

and feel slower, heavier, less certain of what the day required of me. The mission blurred, the urgency dulled, and then came the self-questioning. I looked back at the money I'd given away, the projects I'd started and abandoned, and the things I'd said with such authority, and felt heat rise in my face, embarrassed, confused, and regret. How had I been so sure?

The laughter stopped. In its place came silence, thick, heavy, unforgiving. My thoughts, once rapid and expansive, turned inward and critical. Every memory replayed with new scrutiny. The same mind that once connected meaning everywhere now connected shame—just as efficiently.

I began monitoring myself obsessively. Every word, every reaction, every impulse. I tried to stay balanced, to live in the middle ground. But the middle never lasted. I could feel the cycle tightening, preparing to repeat.

Relationships strained further. Some people distanced themselves quietly. Others asked careful questions, unsure which version of me they were speaking to. I felt isolated even when surrounded by people who cared.

And then there were the medications. They softened the extremes, but they also muted me. Emotions dulled, joy flattened. Tears stayed trapped behind something chemical and heavy. I mourned the loss of intensity even as I feared its return. I didn't know who I was supposed to be without the fire. Was stability emptiness? Was calm just another kind of loss?

By the end of this phrase, I understood something I hadn't before. The elevation wasn't just a mood, it was a worldview. And when it

collapsed, it took meaning with it. I stood there, exhausted, ashamed, uncertain, aware that something had shifted permanently. The fire hadn't gone out, but it was no longer under my control.

Part III

The crash didn't arrive with drama. It settled. It felt like gravity reasserting itself after a long, exhilarating suspension. One morning I woke up and the urgency was gone. The clarity that once felt razor-sharp now felt distant, dulled as if I were viewing my own thoughts through frosted glass. The world hadn't changed, but my access to it had.

Energy drained first, then confidence, then meaning. I tried to summon the certainty I'd lived inside for weeks, but it wouldn't come. Ideas that once felt essential now seemed fragile, half-formed, and almost embarrassing. The projects I'd begun sat unfinished, accusing me silently from the notebooks, folders, scraps of paper, and each abandoned plan felt like evidence of failure. Shame crept in where conviction once lived.

I replayed conversations obsessively. The things I had said with authority now echoed with discomfort. Had I sounded foolish, arrogant, or unstable? I wondered how others had perceived me, whether they'd seen brilliance or simply excess. The uncertainty gnawed at me.

The laughter didn't return, in its place was a heavy quiet that pressed in on my chest. I felt slower, heavier, disconnected from the ease that once carried me. Simple tasks required effort. Decisions felt paralyzing. I hesitated constantly, afraid that any action might be another mistake. This was the other side of the cycle.

Where elevation felt expansive, the descent felt contracting. My

world narrowed. Thoughts turned inward and critical. Confidence collapsed into self-doubt, so complete it felt physical. I questioned not just my choices, but my perception itself. How can I trust my mind if it swings like this? I asked myself again and again.

The worst part wasn't sadness; it was confusion. I couldn't reconcile the person I'd been during the elevation with the person I was becoming now. They felt like strangers sharing the same body, one fearless and driven, the other hesitant and ashamed. I wondered which one was real or if neither was.

Treatment entered my life more forcefully during this period.

Medications were adjusted

Dosages changed

Names were added, subtracted, replaced

I took them because I was told to, because I wanted relief, because I didn't know what else to do. The effects came gradually, then all at once.

Emotions flattened. Not just the painful ones, the good ones too. Joy softened into something distant. Anger dulled. Sadness became muted, as if it were happening behind a wall I couldn't quite reach. I tried to cry once and couldn't. The tears stayed trapped somewhere inside, inaccessible. That frightened me more than the elevation ever had.

I began to wonder what was being treated and what was being erased? Was the goal stability or silence? Safety or compliance? I missed intensity even as I feared it. The fire had burned me but had also warmed me. Now I felt cold. I struggled to explain this to anyone. How do you tell someone you missed the part of yourself that nearly destroyed you? How do you grieve something that was both gift and curse? I worried that without the intensity I was hollow, that treatment

had preserved my body at the expense of my soul.

Relationships remained strained. Some people treated me cautiously now, as if afraid of triggering something. Others spoke to me with reassurance that felt rehearsed. I felt reduced, observed, managed. I wanted to be understood, not monitored. At the same time, I couldn't deny the exhaustion. Living inside the swings had taken a toll:

The constant vigilance

The endless self-analysis

The fear of another rise or another collapse

It wore me down. I was tired of managing myself, tired of questioning every impulse, tired of being afraid of my own mind.

The bipolar experience wasn't just about moods. It was about identity erosion. Who was I without certainty, without intensity, without purpose blazing so brightly it demanded obedience? I feared that stability meant mediocrity, that calm was just another word for absence. I didn't want to be dulled into someone unrecognizable, and yet I couldn't go back.

The cycles had shown me something undeniable: Left unchecked, the elevation would always demand a price. The higher it climbed, the harder the fall. Meaning gained too quickly dissolved just as fast. Conviction without grounding turned brittle. I began to see the rhythm more clearly now, not as a moral failing or spiritual trial, but as a force with its own momentum. The cycle didn't care about intention. It didn't respond to insight alone. Awareness wasn't enough to stop it. That realization humbled me.

I stopped trying to outrun the swings and started trying to survive them. I learned to sit with uncertainty instead of filling it with conclusions. I learned to pause. Even when pausing felt like suffocation,

I learned slowly that restraint might be a form of wisdom.

Mr. Anonymous remained present through all of this, not loudly, not dramatically. He didn't intervene or instruct. He simply observed. The cigar stayed unlit, no smoke yet, just a suggestion of it. The promise that something endured beyond my oscillations, authority without urgency, presence without pressure.

I sensed that whatever came next would require a different kind of strength. The bipolar experience had stripped me of illusion and replaced it with vulnerability. It had expanded me, emptied me, and left me standing in the aftermath, unsure of who I was supposed to become.

As this chapter of my life closed, I understood something essential: the fire was not gone, it was changing. And whatever lay ahead would test not just my capacity for intensity but my ability to discern meaning without being consumed by it. The ground beneath me still felt unstable, but now instead of racing toward certainty, I stood still, aware that the next chapter would not be about elevation or collapse alone but about something far more dangerous: fracture.

Chapter Eight

The watching

PART I

I remember the day I met President George W. Bush as clearly as if it were preserved under glass. I had been at the small airport in Waterloo, Iowa, walking around the terminal exit when I overheard someone mention that Bush was campaigning just outside, near the edge of the property. The energy shifted immediately. People began moving in clusters, drawn toward the commotion. I followed, not quite sure why, just curious enough to see for myself.

As I rounded the corner toward the crowd, I saw him standing behind a chain-link fence, shaking hands and waving. The scene felt strangely intimate for something so public. Then unexpectedly he looked directly at me and gestured with his hand, "You, come on up here," he called. For a moment I hesitated, wondering if I had imagined it, but he waved again, smiling, and I stepped closer to the fence. He reached out and took my hand through the metal grid. I felt the firmness of his grip, the practiced warmth, in a brief exchange that followed. I realized I had forgotten to introduce myself.

He leaned in slightly and asked, "What's your name, Jim?" I replied, feeling oddly small and awkward. "Jim who?" he asked, smiling. I gave him my last name and we exchanged a few words I could no longer recall precisely, something about the campaign, about Iowa, about the importance of the moment. It lasted no more than a minute, but before he turned to the next person he looked at me and said, "If this fence were not separating us, I would give you a big hug."

I giggled, actually giggled, caught off guard by the intimacy of the remark. I wished him well and stepped back into the crowd, heart racing in a way I didn't fully understand.

Not long after the encounter, something inside me shifted. The image of him behind that fence lingered: the idea of power separated by wire. I began to think about what it must feel like to stand on the other side of authority, protected, elevated, unreachable.

Then the thought came, persistent and unsettling: I wanted him to explain and experience what I was experiencing, not as punishment, not out of anger, but for understanding. I wanted the President of the United States to feel the terror that wrapped around my thoughts at

night, the paranoia that tightened my chest, the smallness that comes from believing unseen forces are larger than you. I wanted him to know what it meant to live beneath power instead of behind it.

Headlines aligned with my fears too neatly. If I'd spent the night thinking about collapse, of institutions, of order, of stability, the word "collapse" would appear the next morning in bold letters on a screen. If I worried about surveillance or intelligence agencies, the crawl at the bottom of the news would mention monitoring, cyber briefings, or national security. It felt synchronized, like really itself was responding to my thoughts in real time.

I began to feel like I was living inside two dimensions: The visible world, the one everyone agreed upon without question: stoplights, kosher receipts, casual conversations, weather forecasts. The coded world beneath it, heavy with implication and timing, loaded with signals that only I seemed to notice.

I would sit in public places and look at people's faces, trying to see if anyone else was reacting the way I was. No one flinched, no one froze when a phrase landed, and no one looked around as if the air had shifted. Why can't anyone else see this? I would think.

That question turned inward quickly. If no one else can see it, what did that mean about me? The thought that followed was both frightening and intoxicating. Am I chosen to notice this? It didn't feel arrogant. It felt isolating. If I wasn't chosen then what was happening? Why did the world feel layered, like there were subtitles running beneath reality?

The computer messages intensified the feeling. One afternoon while scrolling online, I saw the words "Destiny" and "Suffering". They weren't flashing or dramatic, just plain text, but the impact was immediate. My

chest tightened. "Destiny" and "Suffering". It felt like someone had labeled my life in two words. It felt accurate, heavy, but accurate.

Another time I saw. Keep going. You're getting close. Close to what? The question echoed in my mind for days: close to revelation, close to exposure, close to initiation, close to death. The ambiguity made it more powerful. It felt like I was approaching something invisible, a threshold, some moment that would change everything.

The word that began to repeat. Something irreversible was happening. I couldn't pinpoint what it was but I could feel it like a switch had flipped inside my brain that could never be flipped back.

Even when I tried to dismiss it, my body reacted before my reasoning could catch up. My thoughts were faster, sharper. My senses felt heightened, like my brain was running at a higher voltage. That heightened state felt like awareness at first; then it began to feel like strain.

At some point the fear of being watched shifted into something else. It stopped feeling like surveillance and started feeling like evaluation. That difference mattered. Surveillance implied danger. Evaluation implied potential. I began to feel measured, tested, studied, not as a threat but as someone being prepared. The idea surfaced quietly one night: You are the chosen one.

It didn't feel heroic, it felt heavy. I remember lying in the dark, staring at the ceiling, the room faintly lit by streetlight, and feeling anger more than pride. If I was chosen why wasn't I given a choice? Why was I drafted into something cosmic without consent? The thought didn't inflate me; it burdened me.

The logic assembled itself slowly. If I could see the coded world, then

I was meant to navigate it. If I was meant to navigate it then maybe I was meant to lead within it. That's when the Godfather narrative began to form, not as a criminal fantasy but as a redemption arc. If corruption controlled money and power then someone would have to infiltrate that system and redirect it.

I was not going to hurt people. I wasn't going to exploit anyone. I would use influence for good: hospitals, rehabilitation centers, spiritual treatment programs for the gifted and misunderstood.

Mr. Anonymous returned to my imagination again and again during this time. A silhouette in a dimly lit room, cigar ember glowing steadily. He never rushed. He never panicked. He exhaled slowly, smoke curling upward in deliberate spirals.

The cigar symbolized quiet authority, patience, control. Smoke became the perfect metaphor for what I was experiencing, visible yet intangible. It existed between worlds just as I felt I did.

Then the Go Daddy commercials started hitting differently after a while. At first it was just background noise: bright colors, fast edits, catchy taglines. But once the coded world took over, nothing felt like background anymore. Every phrase had weight. Every repetition felt intentional. "Go Daddy." The word stopped sounding like branding and started sounding like instruction. It wasn't just a website company anymore. It was a directive. Go. Daddy.

I started sitting up straighter when the commercials came on. My body reacted before my mind could slow it down. It felt like someone was nudging me through the screen.

"You're not done. You're not too late. You still have a role."

It had always bothered me quietly that I had not become a father in

the traditional sense. That door felt closed. Time had moved forward in ways I couldn't rewind but now inside the coded framework that regret began to reshape itself into something purposeful. Maybe I wasn't meant to be a conventional dad. Maybe I was meant to be a godfather.

That word carried weight in two directions. There was the criminal connotation, yes, but there was also the spiritual one: protector, sponsor, guide. Someone who stands between vulnerability and harm.

The commercials seemed to appear at suspiciously perfect times. If I had been thinking about legacy, one would pop up. If I had been wondering what my role was supposed to be, there it was again: Go Daddy.

It started to feel like preparation, not for business, for guardianship. I began imagining a house filled with kids who didn't fit easily into the world: sensitive kids, intense kids, creative kids whose minds ran hot like mine did. Kids who needed someone who understood what it felt like to see too much and feel too much.

Perhaps I would adopt them, mentor them, protect them. I wouldn't just be a father. I would be a godfather of youth. The word "go" in the commercial felt urgent, active, move forward, step into it, stop hesitating, and the word "daddy" felt stabilizing, rooted, protective. Together they formed a command that felt personal. Go became what you're supposed to be.

In the coded world it didn't matter that the advertisement was about domains and websites. It mattered that the phrase aligned with the narrative forming inside me. That alignment felt too precise to dismiss. "This isn't random." I would think. It fit too neatly with the grooming narrative. If I was being shaped for influence, then part of that influence

would be stewardship, protecting the vulnerable, building something that lasted beyond me.

The Godfather identity and the Father identity started blending in my mind. Not crime, not power for its own sake, but structure, protection, responsibility. There was something strangely comforting about that. Amid all the chaos of coded headlines and political tone shifts and spiritual intensity, the idea of becoming a protector felt grounding. It gave the chaos direction.

But even there, underneath the comfort was a familiar undercurrent of pressure. If I was being told to "go" then I was already behind. If I was meant to be "daddy" in a spiritual sense, then I had responsibility I hadn't yet stepped into.

The commercial wasn't just marketing anymore. It was assignment and the more it replayed the more it reinforced the idea that the grooming wasn't about dominance. It was about guardianship, about stepping into a role that felt larger than life I had been living. But once again the question hovered quietly beneath it all. Was this revelation or was I building meaning out of repetition? I didn't know. I only knew that every time that phrase came on the screen, my heart reacted before my head did and in that world reaction felt like confirmation.

Church intensified everything when the crucifixion was mentioned. I sobbed uncontrollably. At one point I felt Jesus' pain and suffering. Suffering didn't feel like punishment; it felt like assignment. If sacrifice had meaning in the spiritual story, then perhaps my suffering had meaning too.

"World leadership should be spiritual." I thought repeatedly. "Secular power is blind without divine accountability." The sentence looped

through my mind as if it were scripture. I wanted leaders to feel what I felt, not out of revenge but out of understanding. And yet beneath the ground narrative, loneliness deepened. If I was chosen why did I feel so isolated? If I was being prepared why did it feel like unraveling? If every message was meant for me, what would happen when they stopped?

The coded world felt alive but I was the only one standing inside it and that was the most frightening part of all.

PART II

Once the idea of being chosen settled in, everything began arranging itself around it. The watching no longer felt random. The patterns no longer felt accidental. They felt instructional, like I was being trained through symbolism instead of direct conversation.

The Iowa Hawkeyes entered the picture during one of those ordinary sports updates in the hospital common room. The television was mounted high in a corner, muted at first, with captions scrolling along the bottom. When the Iowa Hawkeyes were mentioned, something inside me tightened and then expanded all at once. It didn't feel like School of Pride. It felt strategic. That's part of it.

I became convinced I was going to motivate the Hawkeyes to a national championship. Not through coaching, not through contact, but spiritually. If I endured enough suffering, if I carried enough weight, that resilience would transfer. It would ripple outward. It would strengthen them in ways no one could explain. Victory would be proof. Not just of athletic skill, but of spiritual alignment.

When they won people would sense it. They wouldn't understand how; they wouldn't know why, but they would feel that something deeper had shifted. The mission expanded from there.

When I met psychiatrist Barb K. in Iowa City during intake, I felt like I was stepping into a different layer of the story. She walked into the room calm, steady, composed, beautiful in a way that wasn't flashy, grounded. For a moment the noise inside my head softened. " 'You're the cutest psychiatrist I've ever met.' I told her without thinking. The words just came out. I wasn't trying to charm her. It felt like a reflex, an instinct to anchor myself to something human and warm."

She smiled lightly and said, "You're not too bad yourself." That sentence stayed with me longer than it should have. It felt like recognition, like confirmation that I wasn't completely lost.

At the second meeting I noticed her engagement ring. It caught the light as she moved her hand while speaking. In the coded world that ring wasn't just jewelry. It was symbolism, marriage, alignment, future.

My mind stitched together a narrative immediately. If I was chosen for something significant, my partner would be chosen too. Someone intelligent. Someone grounded in medicine. Someone who could understand the spiritual-psychological intersection I believed I was living inside. The engagement ring didn't discourage me; it suggested timing, not yet but eventually.

I also began explaining to her what I intended to build: not a traditional psychiatric hospital, a treatment center for individuals with spiritual disorders and mental health issues, not just medication and stabilization. Enhancement.

I believed many of the mentally ill had extraordinary talents, musical ability that bordered on genius, artistic insight, emotional depth, intuition that looked like instability to some but felt like sensitivity to me. Problem wasn't their talent. The problem was that no one knew how

to hold it safely.

In my treatment center we would cultivate those gifts:

Music rooms lined with instruments

Recording studios

Art spaces flooded with light

Structured spiritual practice alongside therapeutic support

Counselors trained in both psychology and theology

We wouldn't suppress imagination; we would refine it.

The vision became vivid. I could see the Gallagher-Bluedorn Center filled with people. A packed auditorium. Former patients standing backstage. Hands trembling not from anxiety, but anticipation. The lights would dim. The curtain would rise. The first notes of "Are You Ready for a Miracle?" would fill the room. The crowd would stand not in pity but in awe, healing through performance, redemption through visibility. Politicians sitting in the front rows, forced to confront what they had misunderstood about mental illness. Agencies recognizing that the people they labeled unstable were actually carrying extraordinary gifts. It all felt coherent, structured, purposeful.

I had started communicating with psychics and I believe they were aligning with my doctors spiritually, not literally texting each other, not openly collaborating, but exchanging understanding on another level. Information was passing invisibly about my readiness, my path, my progression. When a psychic said, "You're on a path," it didn't feel vague; it felt specific. When they said, "You have strong energy," it felt like documentation. Confirmation. Each conversation strengthened the narrative that I wasn't unraveling, I was transforming.

The possession question returned after I watched a television

program about exorcisms. The scenes were dramatic: body shaking, priests commanding spirits to leave, voices deepening and twisting unnaturally. I found myself thinking, "Why is possession always evil?" Why can't someone be overtaken by good? Why can't someone be filled with something righteous so intensely that it overwhelms their nervous system?

What if the shaking, the racing thoughts, the heightened perception weren't illness, what if they were expansion? The question felt revolutionary. Maybe I wasn't being attacked. Maybe I was being inhabited.

The psych ward intensified those thoughts. One of the nurses looked exactly like my sister; at least that's how it felt in the moment. The resemblance struck me so forcefully that I stopped mid-step: same posture, same facial structure, same energy. My heart leapt into my throat. They sent her; I thought it felt deliberate. Then slowly, painfully, I realized it wasn't her. The certainty collapsing into doubt was destabilizing. If I could be that sure and that wrong at the same time, what did that mean?

The Hitler allusion was even more intense. The first time I met the psychiatrist my brain seized onto the image immediately. The mustache, the posture, the authority. My mind stamped him with a label before I could intervene. Adolf Hitler. It wasn't metaphorical. It felt literal. Antichrist. Test. Judgment.

My heart pounded so hard I could hear in my ears. I thought this had to be intentional symbolism. If I was being tested spiritually, of course the figure would appear as the ultimate image of authority corrupted. He spoke calmly, clinically, professionally but I was listening beneath his

words. Was he measuring me? Was he recording more than symptoms? Was he part of the grooming process?

The ward lights hummed overhead, fluorescent and relentless. The air smelled sterile. Every footstep echoed. Everything felt staged and yet beneath all of it there was still this expanding sense of mission. If I endured this, if I survived it, I would emerge refined, stronger, more prepared. The loneliness grew sharper during this time. Because if I was chosen, why did I feel isolated? If I was being groomed for power, why was I sitting in a hospital gown under buzzing lights? If I was destined for something large why did no one explicitly say so?

Mr. Anonymous returned in my imagination often during these nights. Dim room, leather chair, cigar ember glowing softly in the dark. He never explained anything. He simply watched, exhaled, and let the smoke curl into the air between us. That calmness felt like instruction: endure, observe, don't panic. Power doesn't panic but endurance without clarity becomes exhaustion and exhaustion slowly erodes certainty. Still the narrative held. I was chosen. I was being prepared. I was being shaped for something larger than this moment even if I didn't fully understand it yet.

PART III

I couldn't remember what it felt like to watch the news casually, to see a commercial without analyzing its timing, to hear a political speech without dissecting tone. It was like my brain had shifted into a higher processing speed and couldn't throttle back down. Faster pattern recognition, greater sensitivity, less stability. I tried once to deliberately ignore a headline that aligned with my thoughts. I told myself it's just language, it's coincidence. But my body reacted before my logic could

finish: a rush of adrenaline, a tightening in my throat. You can't unsee this; that was the terrifying part. Even doubt became part of the narrative. If I questioned the grooming, that was part of the test. If I felt anger about not choosing it, this was part of the shaping. It was alright and that airtight quality is what made it so convincing.

The Godfather vision became less glamorous and more heavy. I imagine sitting at a table, not in violence but in responsibility, redirecting resources, protecting people who couldn't protect themselves, building that treatment center with intention, music rooms filled with people who had once been sedated into silence. Artists whose intensity had been misdiagnosed as instability. Spiritual counselors working alongside therapists. It all felt cohesive but cohesion doesn't erase isolation because here's what kept cracking through the surface.

If I were truly being groomed for something larger wouldn't there be clarity instead of confusion? Wouldn't there be grounding instead of this constant sense of drifting?

Mr. Anonymous never answered these questions. He just kept smoking. The cigar became more symbolic over time: fire at one end, smoke rising. Eventually ash, even power, burns down to residue. I would imagine the ember going out. What happens when the smoke stops? The question started haunting me because the entire coded world depended on momentum, on interpretation, on signals reinforcing the narrative. What if they stopped? What if the headlines flattened back into ordinary? What if the commercials stopped aligning? What would that mean if I failed the test? Or would it mean there was never a test? That thought cracked something inside me because if the grooming narrative required constant interpretation to survive, then maybe I was

the one sustaining it.

And that possibility felt more frightening than being chosen. If I was sustaining it then it could collapse and if it collapsed, who would I be without it? Just a man in a hospital room under fluorescent lights, just someone whose mind had run too hot for too long.

That's when the anger softened into something else: grief. Grief for the version of myself that used to experience the world without decoding it. Grief for the simplicity I couldn't seem to return to. Irreversible. That word again. I didn't know whether I was being shaped for greatness or unraveling under pressure. I didn't know whether Mr. Anonymous represented power or projection. I didn't know whether sacrifice was symbolic or dangerous thinking. I only knew that the intensity had changed me and that the scariest part wasn't being chosen: it was not knowing whether I had chosen the narrative.

If I were truly being groomed, why did it feel like erosion instead of elevation? If I were meant for power, why did I feel fragile? As if something irreversible had already happened inside my mind. What would be left when the smoke finally cleared? I understand this is for your memoir *The Man Beneath the Hat*. Below is a cleaned version of Chapters 1–8 with repeated sentences and paragraphs removed or condensed, preserving your voice and the cigar/incense/smoke motifs. After each chapter I list what I removed or condensed and why. If you'd like deletions shown inline (tracked-change style) instead of the cleaned text, tell me and I'll provide that.

CHAPTER ONE

MR. ANONYMOUS

As I sit here deep in meditation, my mind is anything but still. I envision a silhouette of a powerful man puffing a cigar. Its ember glows orange, pulses like the heartbeat of the vision itself. I fixate on the smoke as it ascends into the heavens. Hypnotized, my mind is awash with questions that have plagued me for years. Who is this anonymous figure? The essence of the smoke intrigues me; I sense it is leading me to something.

This figure is no ordinary phantom. His presence feels real and profound. The smoke between us moves and bends, shaping fleeting forms that dissolve before I can fully comprehend them. I close my eyes. His essence persists, burned into the fabric of my mind. He seems to beckon me toward something vast and unknowable, something just beyond my reach. I call him Mr. Anonymous, though I have no idea who or what he truly is.

Describing him feels futile, like trying to capture wind. No name, no voice, no origin I can find. He appears at pivotal moments, drawn by some unseen thread that binds us. Sometimes merely a vision; sometimes I sense him in the world, always distant, never close enough to touch. The smoke around him feels alive — a bridge between the known and the unknown, obscuring as much as it reveals but guiding me toward a truth I cannot yet grasp.

I have tried to speak to him; my words are swallowed by the smoke. He never replies, but his silence speaks. It is as if he is waiting, testing

me, urging me to look deeper.

The first time I encountered him I was on the verge of giving up, at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, my mind a whirlwind of fear and confusion. When the doctor asked what I was seeing, the words spilled out: I envision Geronimo. He's puffing a cigar. I didn't know why I called him that — perhaps the quiet defiance, perhaps my mind grasping for a name. Over the weeks that image shifted into a faceless silhouette: a man and the smoke that seemed to guide me.

Some nights the vision came with such force it stole my breath. I would wake drenched in sweat, the air thick with the imagined scent of cigar smoke. Always the slender glow of the ember in the background of my mind — a rhythm I could not escape. Sometimes I imagined the smoke rising in slow spirals like a prayer. Perhaps the smoke itself was a message: faith uncertain and intangible but alive with purpose.

I began to notice patterns. Whenever I teetered on despair, when hope flickered, that presence returned — slow, patient, deliberate, pulling my focus upward. Once, staring out a hospital window at snow lit by an orange streetlamp, my breath fogged the glass and I saw the outline again. The cigar glowing, the smoke curling like a halo, and a whisper inside: "Follow the smoke." The phrase became a mantra: stay curious, seek meaning in the madness, believe that what clouds my mind might also guide it.

In moments of clarity I doubted everything. Was this a tired brain

imposing meaning on chaos? Yet something inside resisted the easy explanation. The smoke did not rush me or demand answers. It lingered, patient — presence without map. He never arrived during chaos; only in stillness, in quiet moments where noise receded enough for something else to emerge. That unsettled me. If this were mere madness, wouldn't it be louder?

Why a cigar? Why smoke and not fire? Fire destroys; smoke lingers. Smoke holds shape briefly, then dissolves. It became my compass — uncertain and intangible but alive with purpose. Sometimes I still sense the man with the cigar, my silent companion, my shadow prophet. His outline is softer now, his face hidden. I don't know whether he is real in the way we define reality or whether he exists inside the architecture of my mind. Perhaps faith doesn't need to be proven; it only needs to be followed. I close my eyes and sense the quiet curl of smoke rising toward something eternal.

Was Mr. Anonymous the beginning of my descent, or the first sign that something greater was reaching for me long before I knew how to reach back?

Notes on edits to Chapter One

- Removed repeated lines about the smoke as a spiritual heartbeat and similar restatements of the mantra to avoid redundancy.
- Condensed multiple paragraphs that reiterated how the figure appears (vision vs. sensed in the real world).
- Kept and slightly tightened all key motifs: cigar ember, smoke as

bridge/compass, "Follow the smoke" mantra, Geronimo naming, and the hospital setting.

- Eliminated repeated rhetorical questions and paraphrases of doubt that recurred later in the chapter.

Chapter Two

Early Shadows

As far back as I can remember, I felt less than, like I didn't belong in the world other kids moved through easily. I grew up with an alcoholic father whose presence carried a heaviness that filled the house. He never raised a hand to me, but his moods shadowed everything. My mother was the steady force who held us together — deliberate, relentless, and costly in what she gave away to keep the family intact. I only knew then that she made me feel safe when everything else felt uncertain.

My thoughts came in fragments. Sometimes they spun so fast I couldn't keep up. I tried to explain something simple to my sisters and lost track halfway through; words tangled in my mouth. To organize my thoughts felt like holding wind. At night the dark felt alive. I would lie listening for creaks, convinced something moved just beyond my door. On those nights I slipped into my sisters' room and we rubbed each other's backs until sleep came — a small ritual of comfort.

Under the stars I whispered, "If you're real, please help me." The clouds stayed. I half-wondered if God lived inside that smoke

somewhere, watching but refusing to reveal himself.

In fourth grade my teacher recommended I see the school psychologist. I found myself in a special reading class with two other students. My mind drifted; outside the window the world stretched infinitely and called to me with possibilities. I retreated into daydreams of acting, singing, performing — places where I wasn't the quiet boy in the back. Music reached me where language could not; certain songs brought tears I couldn't name.

My father refused to let me see the psychologist. "He just needs to toughen up," I remember him saying. The words lodged inside me; I began to hide weakness. I liked girls but couldn't approach them, inventing conversations in my head instead. Then, in sixth grade, a careless swing of a bat struck me between the eyes. I spent an hour in the principal's office and then the hospital, forehead swollen, everything distant and muffled. Those early shadows were the first hints of a mind that would later struggle, search, and question almost everything.

Notes on edits to Chapter Two

- Removed repeated descriptions of parental dynamics and multiple restatements of mother's sacrifice.
- Condensed scenes about fear at night and sibling comfort to keep emotional weight while removing reiteration.
- Kept distinct events: teacher referral, special reading class, bat injury, music as refuge, father's line about toughness.
- Deleted redundant metaphors about smoke/god here where Chapter

One already established motif; retained one evocative line linking God and smoke to preserve motif without repetition.

Chapter Three

Broken Rhythms

At eleven I had my first taste of alcohol: my grandmother's hot toddy. The burn and the warmth were unforgettable. At sixteen I tasted whiskey again; the calm that followed felt like an anchor. Weekends with friends became a means to disappear. I became skilled at pretending, laughing while a silence roared inside.

High school felt like a maze. Concentration had slipped away; I stared at pages until the words blurred. Teachers called me lazy. Depression arrived quietly and stayed. I wore laughter like armor, telling jokes to hide the tremble. My ACT score — a composite 14 — confirmed the shame I carried. I told myself I would never measure up.

At twenty the drinking was deliberate. I drank to feel normal. I promised I'd stop, again and again, but the bottle whispered that I could control it next time. Still, a faint pulse of something else — a rhythm beneath the confusion — persisted.

College felt like a second chance. I started at community college in Iowa Falls, determined to prove I wasn't dumb. I studied, pushed through withdrawal tremors, and felt the small glow of accomplishment. Later, at Hawkeye Community College, I fought for concentration and

finished at the top of my class with a 4.0, presidential honors. The accomplishment didn't erase the past, but it settled something: I was not stupid. I had been fighting battles no one else could see.

My parents decided treatment was necessary. Hazelden in Minnesota felt heavy with meaning. Counselors spoke of surrender and higher powers. I read the Big Book. Sometimes late at night I watched my breath fog the cold air and thought of smoke as something eternal — hope, maybe grace. After discharge reality hit hard; I relapsed and relapsed again. Guilt shadowed me. I returned to Hazelden broken and desperate, promising it would be different. If I didn't find something beyond myself, I feared I would not survive.

Notes on edits to Chapter Three

- Cut repetitive sequences about hangovers and emptiness that appeared multiple times.
- Condensed the college-to-treatment arc to keep essential turning points (community college, Hawkeye, Hazelden) while removing repeated descriptions of relapse.
- Preserved the smoke imagery tied to hope/grace, but removed repetitive restatements.

Chapter Four

Kansas City Here I Come

A thin veil of haze drifted through town the morning I left for Kansas City. I packed the car with more hope than certainty. Before Kansas City

my path had been narrowing toward racetracks: lead-out at Waterloo, paddock judge and chart writer at SODRAC Park. The work made sense — order, timing, focus. I learned to read races as others read faces; the precision steadied me.

Through the racing world I heard about an opening as racing secretary at a new track called the Woodlands. The title felt like a threshold. Kansas City announced itself the moment I arrived: traffic, scale, a new rhythm. Somewhere in that noise I sensed Mr. Anonymous again, faint but unmistakable, cigar lit at a distance.

The first night I watched the lid pop open and the dogs explode from the box. The sound was thunder, the crowd roaring. In that instant something ignited: fascination, connection, maybe destiny. As racing secretary I organized entries, maintained meticulous records, and built races with attention to balance. For the first time in a long while, my mind felt useful and directed. The work demanded clarity, and in return it gave me focus.

The hours were relentless as we prepared for the grand opening. One afternoon the general manager tapped my shoulder; he had an unlit cigar in his mouth, an accessory that felt ceremonial. Cigars became landscape at the track — executives and owners carrying them like badges of command. I began to associate cigar smoke with authority: decisions made behind closed doors, influence without explanation. The smoke represented something else entirely from the cigars themselves. Where cigars signaled command, the smoke suggested endurance, an

intangible bridge to power.

At night the track was stripped to its bones. Empty grandstand, echoing footsteps. Walking the perimeter, I replayed the day in my head; the work followed me. Standing near the rail, I noticed how quickly intensity vanished. Something electric could disappear without a trace. I wondered how much of my sense of purpose depended on noise and validation. That was when the presence returned: a stillness that felt observed rather than controlled. I was entering a race of my own — drawn forward by speed, certainty, and the quiet promise of power. The question became whether I'd recognize the finish line or mistake the smoke for the way out.

Notes on edits to Chapter Four

- Removed repeated descriptive sentences about the track's rhythm and the daily grind that recurred later.
- Condensed cigar motif to avoid repeating identical reflections about cigars and smoke.
- Kept key scenes: arrival, first race, becoming racing secretary, the symbolic cigar/authority contrast, and reflective night-time scenes.

Chapter Five

The Descent

It did not begin with collapse; it began with momentum. After long hours at Kansas City my life accelerated. The pace felt righteous; I equated exhaustion with sacrifice and relevance. Thoughts arrived in

clusters; I mistook speed for clarity. Pauses felt dangerous.

At the track the work blurred together — paperwork, calls, schedules. There was an undercurrent: topics people avoided, conversations that stopped when I entered. Then my boss confided he was under investigation by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation for selling a kennel booking contract. The KBI questioned me more than once. He grew visibly frightened. One day he looked me in the eyes and asked if I would meet him in a cornfield and shoot him. He was serious. That moment lodged in me: if someone seasoned was that afraid, what chance did I have?

I began cataloging vulnerabilities as if they were leverage points. Not long after, the co-owner arrived — 6'9", broad-shouldered, cigar clenched in his teeth. The room changed. Cigar smoke curled around his words, deliberate as intention. I couldn't stop staring. The smoke felt symbolic — authority made visible. Was this Mr. Anonymous?

Messages began to intensify, subtly and everywhere. A protest article, lyrics that answered my thoughts, commercials that seemed to mirror my fear or offer reassurance. Television and songs took on coded meanings. Ted Turner and news broadcasts felt like signs of protection; a slogan appeared at the right moment and comforted me. Fear stopped being episodic and became ambient; my thoughts felt monitored and exposed. I checked reflections, faces, movements behind me. I felt terrorized.

At the National Greyhound Association meeting a documentary mentioned the industry's ties to organized crime. The timing aligned with everything else. Once I saw a pattern, it spread, linking unexplained silences, warnings, and looks. The Mafia moved from history into present possibility in my mind. What frightened me most was the possibility that I was right: a framework of power that rewarded silence and punished awareness. Institutions could contain as easily as protect.

Human resources chipped at the pattern. Small remarks, insinuations, and coincidences felt like suggestion. By then fear had become terror; I felt hunted existentially. The descent was cumulative, each realization stacking until the weight was unbearable. Mr. Anonymous no longer felt like a question. The cigar burned steadily in my imagination; the smoke watched and waited.

Notes on edits to Chapter Five

- Removed several repetitive media examples and multiple restatements about songs/commercials mirroring thoughts; kept representative examples to preserve the sense of paranoia without redundancy.
- Condensed boss/co-owner scenes to maintain tension and the cigar motif while shortening repeated emotional reactions.
- Kept the core argument: progressive paranoia, pattern recognition, Mafia association, ambient fear.

Chapter Six

The First Fall

The Return Home

Coming home from Kansas City felt strategic — a step away from danger. By then I believed the cause of what had happened to me had a name: the Mafia. The conclusion formed piece by piece: documents, warnings, silences. The racetrack had exposed me to a world that didn't operate by rules. People quit quietly. Fear was understood rather than spoken.

A hometown visit reinforced the pattern: a casual introduction to a woman whose family name and confession suggested ties. To me, it wasn't coincidence; it was confirmation. At home, nothing restored me. Familiar rooms felt compromised. I replayed Kansas City conversations, reexamined warnings. I began to see my symptoms as fallout from pressure that seeped in slowly.

The Roses and the Illusion of Purpose

One morning I woke with the clarity that I needed to buy roses — not a bouquet, but a hundred dollars' worth in every color. It wasn't indulgence; it felt like a mission. If corruption thrived on secrecy, then beauty and generosity could be acts of resistance. At the florist the colors and smell grounded me. I didn't have the money; I used my mother's card, not thinking of theft but of purpose. On references for a job application I wrote names like Deepak Chopra and Wayne Dyer; the

list made sense to me then.

Walking out with the roses, I felt exposed and empowered. The illusion of purpose was intoxicating. It directed chaos into meaning.

Fear Without a Name

Fear settled into my body first: tight chest, short breath, sharpened senses. I became hyper-alert to sounds and changes in tone. Ordinary noises felt loaded. Fear without a name cannot be argued with; it expands. I replayed conversations, watched faces, and kept my silence because language felt dangerous.

The First Hospitalization — Fear, Paranoia, and Programming

When my father said we were going to the hospital I did not resist. A sense of inevitability had replaced resistance. Inside the hospital time distorted; every sound amplified. I watched staff, studied walls and ceiling tiles, convinced the environment itself was designed to unsettle. Clipboards, intake questions, the cup of liquid — certainty washed over me. I thought, "This is poison." I told my parents I loved them, meaning it as goodbye. When I drank it, the effect dissolved fear almost instantly; the shift felt engineered. I believed they were programming me.

The ward locked behind me. Belongings removed, autonomy reduced. The ward had a rhythm of its own: lights, meals, medication. I oscillated between sedation and wrenching clarity. At times my senses sharpened

so much I could describe everything with precision. I watched staff closely, certain it wasn't just treatment but containment and control. Mr. Anonymous hovered at the edge of my awareness: the cigar present, unlit — authority implied.

Negative Association Disorder

I needed language to hold the chaos. I named it Negative Association Disorder: everything attached itself to danger. A sound became a warning; a glance became evaluation. In the common room I froze at a puzzle box titled "Head Games." Later Foreigner's "Head Games" played on the radio. Association multiplied until rest became impossible. I told doctors I wasn't hallucinating so much as over-associating — connecting dots too fast. They nodded, wrote notes, and I felt unseen.

RICO — A Framework

I read about the RICO Act and felt it provide structure: a law designed for organized systems, for patterns rather than single acts. The pattern model matched what I was experiencing — contracts, unspoken rules, fear-driven compliance. Once I saw it, the model felt personal.

After Discharge — Fragile Ground

Leaving the hospital felt conditional. Relief from family was real but thin. Home felt monitored internally; I measured my thoughts and questioned my certainty even as I held to the framework I'd constructed.

Fear returned unpredictably. Mr. Anonymous remained at a distance: the cigar unlit, the promise of smoke. Suspended between worlds, I grieved the version of myself who thought awareness alone could protect him. I had survived the first fall. Endurance remained.

Notes on edits to Chapter Six

- Condensed repeated hospital-ward descriptions and multiple retellings of intake experience; kept vivid sensory images and the narrative arc (inevitability, drinking, programming belief).

- Kept "Roses" scene but removed repeating justifications and multiple variations of the same introspective lines.

- Consolidated Negative Association Disorder examples (puzzle box and song) into a single, tighter segment.

- Preserved RICO reflection but removed repeated legal detail and restatements.

Chapter Seven

The Bipolar Experience

Part I

"Bipolar" entered my life not like a verdict but like a suggestion. Diagrams and cycles offered structure where my lived experience felt deeper than any label. Part of me recognized itself; another part recoiled. The word explained patterns — rise and fall — but flattened the experience into clinical categories.

The elevation crept in through energy. Mornings felt newly assembled: colors sharper, music deeper, words landing with precision. Laughter would bubble up for no reason at all. Energy felt like truth. Pauses felt dangerous. I believed I had been shaped for something larger than myself — my sensitivity, my insight, my suffering were preparations. Ideas expanded effortlessly; projects began impulsively. Motion mattered more than completion.

Part II

Elevation reorganized values. Practical concerns fell away beneath urgency and moral weight. Generosity intensified until my bank account emptied; to me losing money felt like proof of detachment. My appearance grew bolder — color announced presence. Conversation gained layers of meaning; a tilt of the head carried message. I gathered books, seeking the synthesis.

But cracks opened: agitation, restlessness, and the laughter shifted tone. Shame crept in, replaying things I had said with embarrassment. The descent arrived as fatigue and hesitation. The mission blurred. Medication entered the picture. Treatments softened extremes but also dulled joy and intensity. Tears became hard to summon. I mourned intensity even as I feared it.

Part III

The crash felt like gravity returning. Energy drained, then

confidence, then meaning. Projects sat unfinished, shame replaced conviction. The world narrowed; choices felt paralyzing. I questioned perception itself. Treatments altered me; emotions flattened — not just the worst ones, but the good ones too. Who was I without the fire that had nearly destroyed me?

I learned survival rather than escape. Pause became a form of wisdom. Mr. Anonymous remained present, not intervening but observing. The cigar remained unlit — smoke suggested but did not appear. The bipolar experience stripped illusion and left vulnerability. The fire was not gone; it had changed. Whatever came next would require new discernment: to find meaning without being consumed by it.

Notes on edits to Chapter Seven

- Removed repeated lines describing the same sensations of mania and depression; consolidated the three parts into a tighter narrative arc while preserving vivid examples.
- Kept core reflections on identity, generosity, medication effects, and the continuing presence of Mr. Anonymous.
- Removed redundant rhetorical questions and repeated metaphors about fire/smoke that already appear elsewhere.

Chapter Eight

The Watching

Part I

I remember meeting President George W. Bush at a small Waterloo airport. He waved me up to the fence, took my hand through the chain link, and joked about a hug. The image of power separated by wire lingered: the one behind it protected and elevated, unreachable.

Soon I felt the world split into two dimensions: the visible — stoplights, receipts, weather — and a coded world beneath, heavy with timing and implication. Headlines and on-screen crawls seemed to align with my thoughts; computer messages felt like labels: Destiny. Suffering. A phrase: Keep going. You're getting close. The ambiguity felt powerful. My body reacted before my head could dismiss it.

The fear of being watched morphed into a sense of being evaluated. I began to think: You are the chosen one. It was heavy, not heroic. If I was meant to navigate the coded world, maybe I was meant to lead within it. A Godfather narrative formed — not criminal, but protective: using influence for hospitals, rehabilitation centers, spiritual treatment for the gifted and misunderstood.

Mr. Anonymous returned often: silhouette, dim room, cigar ember glowing. The cigar symbolized quiet authority; the smoke was the metaphor that bridged worlds. Then a mundane thing — GoDaddy commercials — started to hit differently; the phrase "Go Daddy" felt like a directive: Go. Daddy. The commercial's repetition aligned with my internal narrative about guardianship, reshaping regret about not being a conventional father into a possible role: godfather, protector.

Church intensified the feeling; mention of the crucifixion produced sobs and a sense that suffering might be assignment. "World leadership should be spiritual," I thought, looping the idea as if it were scripture. Loneliness deepened. If I was chosen, why did it feel like unraveling?

Part II

The watching arranged the world around meaning. TV mentions of the Iowa Hawkeyes felt strategic; I believed my endurance could spiritually motivate them to victory — victory as proof of alignment. In intake I met psychiatrist Barb K., whose calm steadied me for a moment. A casual compliment led to an observation of her ring: symbolism, timing, future. If I was meant for something large, perhaps my partner would be chosen too.

I sketched a vision for a treatment center that cultivated gifts rather than suppressed them: music rooms, recording studios, art spaces, structured spiritual practice beside therapeutic support. Former patients would stand onstage, healed through performance. I talked with psychics who confirmed my path. The idea that I might be inhabited not by evil but by expansion returned after watching exorcisms on TV.

But certainty wavered. A nurse who looked like my sister reminded me how prone perception was to error. I labeled a psychiatrist with a Hitler allusion and felt the weight of symbolic tests: authority, judgment. The ward felt staged; still, the mission expanded: endure, be refined.

Part III

I couldn't watch news casually anymore. My brain decoded patterns relentlessly. I tried to ignore aligning headlines and failed; reaction came before reason. The Godfather vision lost glamour and grew heavy with responsibility. Mr. Anonymous kept smoking. I imagined the ember going out and asked, What happens when the smoke stops? If the coded world depended on constant reinforcement, perhaps I was sustaining it. The possibility that I had been the engine felt more frightening than being chosen.

Anger softened into grief — for the simplicity I couldn't return to and for the irreversible changes inside me. I didn't know whether Mr. Anonymous was power or projection, whether sacrifice was meaningful or delusion. The intensity had changed me; the scariest part was not being chosen but not knowing whether I had chosen the narrative.

Notes on edits to Chapter Eight

- Condensed repeated examples of coded-world experiences and multiple restatements about commercials and headlines.
- Kept unique, vivid scenes (meeting Bush, GoDaddy commercial, Hawkeyes belief, intake with Barb K., the Godfather vision) while shortening repeated internal commentary.
- Preserved and tightened smoke/cigar motif; removed several repeated rhetorical questions about meaning that recurred across chapters.

Overall editorial notes and suggestions

- I preserved the core motifs you requested: Mr. Anonymous, cigar/ember imagery, and smoke as incense/bridge/compass throughout the chapters.

- I removed repeated lines, duplicate reflections, and sentences that restated the same point multiple times within a chapter (the most frequent repetition was about doubt vs. sacredness, the smoke as a rhythm, and restating "I didn't know if he was real" in several forms).

- I kept intact the major scenes and turning points: hospital intake, Geronimo naming, the mantra "Follow the smoke," childhood trauma, college and Hazelden, Woodlands and the racing arc, boss/co-owner threats, the first fall and ward experience, Negative Association Disorder, RICO framing, the bipolar elevation/crash arc, and the coded/grooming narrative culminating in the watching.

- Where the same idea recurred across chapters (e.g., the smoke as compass/faith), I left one strong, well-worded instance and removed or condensed later repetitions to allow the motif to breathe and gain weight.

- If you'd like, I can:

- Provide a version with inline deletions (track-changes style) so you can see exactly what I removed.

- Run a pass to tighten sentence-level repetition (e.g., repeated sentence openings, repeated words).

- Start on Chapter 9-14 draft outlines, keeping the streamlined motifs and the narrative arcs established here.

Would you like the tracked-changes-style output showing every removed line, or is this cleaned manuscript the format you prefer?

