

# Twelve years later . . .

## Fourteen

Sometimes it's as though the gods permit an imp to lodge in a man's body and take root there like the embryo of an evil child. This is how it was for David Kennesey.

It had happened without any fuss, one Saturday during the previous fall. He didn't even notice it at the time. For no reason at all, he'd felt like getting out of the house by himself and went for a drive in the country. He parked at the side of a rural road and let the tangy smell of burning leaves fill him with nostalgia. A red Fiero whipped down the highway toward him, and, as it shot past, he had a glimpse of the driver—a woman. At seventy miles an hour she was little more than a white blur, but David's imagination made her a beauty.

It was as small a thing as that.

Within an hour he'd forgotten the country road, the tangy air, the Fiero, the woman at the wheel. He was back at his house going over a contract that had to be ready on Monday.

But in the months that followed he began to be a little worried about himself. He didn't mention it to his wife, Ellen, seeing no reason to worry her as well. He wasn't sick, wasn't in any kind of pain, after all. It was just that he'd gradually become aware of a mounting, unrelenting tension in the center of his body, of a perpetual tingle of anxiety in his genitals. By midwinter he'd become almost unbearably nervous. Things at the edge of his field of vision seemed to be in constant, furtive movement. When he was working—or trying to work—the softest greeting would startle him like a gunshot.

Without mentioning it to Ellen, he took his symptoms to their doctor, who told him all the things he expected to hear, and prescribed a tranquilizer; although he hated to think of himself as one of those people whose well-being comes out of a bottle, David stuck with the pills for a month and then didn't bother to renew the prescription, since they weren't doing any good anyway. He had his eyes checked, got new glasses with a minutely changed prescription, and developed a maddening tic below his left eye. His bowels seemed to turn food of any kind to gas. On his forty-second birthday in the first week in May, he wondered what the symptoms of a nervous breakdown are like.

Then the very next morning a sultry wind from the Gulf brought a false spring to northern Indiana, and the imp stirred and delivered itself of a kick that left David Kennesey in no doubt about what had been growing inside him. At that moment he was standing in an upstairs bedroom in front of a mirror, slowly busy with a necktie. A breeze was flowing in through a window that hadn't been opened since November, and it was as though enlightenment flowed in with it. The tic below his eye vanished as he understood—and instantly accepted—what he was going to do.

He was going to give the mold of his life a twist and shatter it completely.

He sighed so deeply it was as if all breath were leaving his body. *This*, he thought, *is how a patient must feel on being told it isn't cancer after all.*

Their task forgotten, his hands fell heavily to his side. He stared into the mirror, and his eyes met the eyes of a stranger. Was this actually the way he looked to others? The solemn square face—handsome perhaps—thick dark hair, and wide, full mouth were vaguely familiar. But when had his eyes acquired that black, empty look? Not exactly empty. Haunted? They were the eyes of a man he'd expect to meet on death row. Was it really possible that this had become his face?

Suddenly the outline of his life shimmered like a mirage and twisted itself into an entirely new shape in his mind, and he nearly laughed out loud.

"Of course," he whispered triumphantly. "Of course!" And he meant by this: *Of course I've betrayed myself. I was sure I wouldn't, but of course I have. For comforts, for pleasant companionship, for acceptance, for respectability, for security. For the sake of appearing to be a sensible, mature fellow. I thought I could get away with it, but of course I didn't. No one can.*

It didn't matter now. The betrayal was over. By nightfall he would be behind the wheel of his Volvo with all he would ever need from this life in a single suitcase. It was going to be a nightmarish day, an agonizing day. There were other lives to be shattered along with his own, because other lives had been molded against his. Three others would share in the common disaster, but he would defer all guilt until later. This was the way it had to be.

Because it was time to resume the abandoned search. The search for a road. A certain road.

## Twenty-Three

Driving at seventy miles an hour, it had taken David twenty minutes to outdistance Runnell, to escape the uncanny feeling that the town might still reach out and snatch him back. Then he turned onto southbound 31 and, knowing he was safe at last, eased his speed down to the limit.

After a few minutes he felt a thrill building on the back of his neck and shook his head to kill it.

*No feelings, he told himself. Not tonight. No remorse, no guilt. No relief, no exultation. Nothing till tomorrow.*

And so he drove like a robot, watching familiar landmarks slide by and thinking, "I'll never see that again. . . ." The glow of the sunset melted away as he swept around Indianapolis and left the last of the landmarks behind. From this moment on, it would all be new.

*Not yet, he reminded himself. No feelings yet.*

He turned on the radio and let the country singers whine at him about their heartaches for a while, then, realizing he was punishing himself, turned it off.

He had dinner at a steak house in Terre Haute, then went on to Vandalia, where he found a motel with a cocktail lounge. He checked in, dumped his suitcase in the room, washed his face, and went to the bar. A few salesman were trading jokes and lies at the tables. A few local cowboys were guffawing at one end of the bar. David sat down at the other end, ordered a double bourbon, and listened to a jukeboxful of Willie Nelson's sorrows, feeling nothing.

That night he dreamed of Soshal—short for Antisocial—a big, fat gray cat they'd had for many years and lost to a careless driver the summer before. A haughty creature, she'd felt degraded by her human associations and hated to be held by anyone. In the dream, set in the bedroom at home, David had perversely picked her up, plunked her down on the bed on her back, and started jumbling the fur of her belly—an activity that particularly infuriated her. She struggled to get out from under his hand, but he held her down, pretending she was really enjoying herself. Finally she got away, scrambled off the bed, and stood up on her hind legs, trembling with rage over her confinement. Then David saw that it wasn't really Soshal at all, it was a fur-covered boy. The boy picked up

something from the floor and, glaring furiously, flung it at David's head. The boy was not a figure of Tim but of David—of the wild side of himself that he had held imprisoned for so long.

When he awoke, he found he'd willed himself another day without feelings. He wasn't free yet; the band that held him to Runnell hadn't been stretched far enough to break. He thought another five hundred miles might do it.

Meanwhile he no longer had to keep reminding himself: he was so completely numb that he wondered if emotion would ever return. Sitting in the motel dining room, he felt insubstantial, ghostly, and was mildly surprised when the waitress acknowledged his existence by bringing him a breakfast menu.

It was like that the rest of the day, as he shot westward across Missouri and two-thirds of Kansas to Hays, where he repeated the previous night's routine exactly. Dulled by a couple of drinks, he wondered if Ellen had remembered the appointment he'd made to have the tires on her car rotated. Good tires, those were; a little over their budget, but they'd gotten a good price on them. He'd have to remember to remind her about it when he—

He smiled, having caught himself preparing for his routine away-from-home phone call.

*Hi! How was your day?*

*Did you remember to get the tires rotated?*

*How's Tim? Still campaigning to spend the summer at that wilderness-survival camp in the Catskills?*

Of course he would be. The brochure he'd written away for made it look genuinely testing, even a bit dangerous, and this worried Ellen, though she didn't like to admit it. She preferred to argue that it was in some mysterious way "out of character" for Tim to be scaling rocks and camping out, and therefore not to be considered. So far, David had stayed out of the controversy, giving the subtle impression he agreed with her. But eventually Tim would back her into a corner and she'd pass the buck to David, expecting him to play the heavy. She'd smoulder for a while when he pulled the rug out from under her and said . . .

He was like a reformed smoker reaching for a package of cigarettes that wasn't there.

Before he went to bed he opened the windows wide, and at four in the morning a gale roaring down off the continental divide plucked him up out of sleep. Standing at the window with the wind gusting in his face, he felt the prison doors rumbling open, and the hair rose off the back of his neck. Without turning on the lights,

he gathered up his things, threw them in the car, and climbed behind the wheel. At a touch, the headlights pierced the darkness like a probe into a hidden universe.

For the next twenty minutes he blundered through the streets of Hays like a fly at the window. With the power of two hundred horses waiting to be released beneath his foot, he couldn't find the way out—or the way out he was looking for. He could have gotten back on the expressway, but this wasn't a night to be spent in a herd of flatulent sixteen-wheelers. Finally, after passing it half a dozen times, he found it: a county road heading west.

He burst out of the city, thinking nothing now. Only feeling.

He was on a journey into the past and was drunk on an infusion of remembered youth, freedom, and mystery.