

CHAPTER 1

They told me that my name was John Sebastian. They told me that I was thirty-two years old, that Carla and I had been married for six years, that we had no children, and that we lived near Missoula, Montana.

“Ring any bells?” The doctor watched for my reactions as the policeman tried to coax my memory out of his notes. This was the third time the cop had asked the same question, and for the third time I answered, “No.”

“Doesn’t any of this seem familiar?” Detective Peterson was almost pathetically optimistic—he was convinced that my memory would come flooding back, and he was certain that his promptings would be the pliers to pull the plug.

Dr. Gordon knew better. He was the neurologist on call at the hospital when the police brought me in three days earlier—and its resident pessimist. He let me know that he had seen lots of amnesia cases, and he wanted me to understand that memory recovery could be a slow, tedious process. Sometimes, he assured me, memory never returns. That wasn’t reassuring.

For two days he probed me, and tested me, and ran me through big white machines that clicked and rattled and thumped, and tried to guess what was wrong. He couldn’t find any trauma, or chemical imbalance, or obvious brain disorder, so in the end he essentially gave up and diagnosed me as suffering from what he called *psychogenic global retrograde amnesia*. Under causation, he wrote *idiopathic*—which is doctor talk for “I don’t have a clue”—and had me wheeled down the hall to the psychiatric ward where the hospital’s shrink took over.

When the psychiatrist was convinced that he couldn’t get me to recall anything before the moment the cop found me sitting on a bench in the city park, he decided it must all be in my head and I was blocking my own memories. He concurred with the neurologist’s diagnosis and said so in eight pages of his own finely crafted conclusions. I suspect that both doctors had mixed emotions when they heard I had been claimed and they could drop me into someone else’s pocket. On one hand they were having fun playing in my head and, on the other hand, they were secretly relieved to be done with me.

“I think that’s enough for now, Detective,” said Dr. Gordon. “Let’s give Mr. Sebastian here some time to digest all this new information. A lot of details can be overwhelming to someone in his condition.” Before I could remind him that I was right here in the room with him, the doc turned to me and checked my pulse. “Why don’t you lie down and get some rest,” he said. “They tell me your wife will be here in a couple of hours, and we need some time to update your records now that we have your real name and the other info she gave us when she called.”

I had been brought into the police station three days earlier by a cop who had picked me up with what they told me was a glazed look on my face, complaining of a headache and mumbling that I didn’t know who I was. The desk sergeant had logged me in and turned me over to the missing persons division. They checked my clothes for identification or possible clues to my identity; they scanned my body for injuries, birthmarks, scars, tattoos and, while they were at

it, needle marks. All they found was a small scar on my left knee that they wrote down as *prior arthroscopic knee surgery*. Then they weighed me in at two hundred twenty pounds, measured me at six foot four, and took my picture and fingerprints.

Detective Peterson explained the procedure. “There’s this website, see...www.amnesiafinder.org...where they post the photos and general descriptions of anyone in the USA who shows up with amnesia. We’ve checked all the missing persons reports on the internet, but so far no one meeting your description has been reported missing. We’ll keep checking, and don’t you worry, ninety-five percent of the time they get a matchup within two or three days after one of these postings. We’ll find out who you are even if you can’t remember.”

They gave me a couple of aspirin for my headache—probably not a good idea if I had suffered a head injury or was having a stroke—and took me over to the hospital for evaluation. I got the distinct feeling that they could do without me. But that was OK. The police station was making me nervous, and I was ready to get out of there, too.