

STEPHEN KING



THE INSTITUTE

A NOVEL

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SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For my grandsons: Ethan, Aidan, and Ryan

And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines . . .

And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.

And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.

Judges, Chapter 16

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones . . . it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Matthew, Chapter 18

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, roughly 800,000 children are reported missing each year in the United States. Most are found. Thousands are not.

THE NIGHT KNOCKER

Half an hour after Tim Jamieson's Delta flight was scheduled to leave Tampa for the bright lights and tall buildings of New York, it was still parked at the gate. When a Delta agent and a blond woman with a security badge hanging around her neck entered the cabin, there were unhappy, premonitory murmurings from the packed residents of economy class.

"May I have your attention, please!" the Delta guy called.

"How long's the delay gonna be?" someone asked. "Don't sugarcoat it."

"The delay should be short, and the captain wants to assure you all that your flight will arrive approximately on time. We have a federal officer who needs to board, however, so we'll need someone to give up his or her seat."

A collective groan went up, and Tim saw several people unlimber their cell phones in case of trouble. There had been trouble in these situations before.

"Delta Air Lines is authorized to offer a free ticket to New York on the next outbound flight, which will be tomorrow morning at 6:45 AM—"

Another groan went up. Someone said, "Just shoot me."

The functionary continued, undeterred. "You'll be given a hotel voucher for tonight, plus four hundred dollars. It's a good deal, folks. Who wants it?"

He had no takers. The security blond said nothing, only surveyed the crowded economy-class cabin with all-seeing but somehow lifeless eyes.

"Eight hundred," the Delta guy said. "Plus the hotel voucher and the complimentary ticket."

"Guy sounds like a quiz show host," grunted a man in the row ahead of Tim's.

There were still no takers.

"Fourteen hundred?"

And still none. Tim found this interesting but not entirely surprising. It wasn't just because a six forty-five flight meant getting up before God, either. Most of his fellow economy-class passengers were family groups headed home

after visiting various Florida attractions, couples sporting beachy-keen sunburns, and beefy, red-faced, pissed-off-looking guys who probably had business in the Big Apple worth considerably more than fourteen hundred bucks.

Someone far in the back called, "Throw in a Mustang convertible and a trip to Aruba for two, and you can have both our seats!" This sally provoked laughter. It didn't sound terribly friendly.

The gate agent looked at the blond with the badge, but if he hoped for help there, he got none. She just continued her survey, nothing moving but her eyes. He sighed and said, "Sixteen hundred."

Tim Jamieson suddenly decided he wanted to get the fuck off this plane and hitchhike north. Although such an idea had never so much as crossed his mind before this moment, he found he could imagine himself doing it, and with absolute clarity. There he was, standing on Highway 301 somewhere in the middle of Hernando County with his thumb out. It was hot, the lovebugs were swarming, there was a billboard advertising some slip-and-fall attorney, "Take It on the Run" was blaring from a boombox sitting on the concrete-block step of a nearby trailer where a shirtless man was washing his car, and eventually some Farmer John would come along and give him a ride in a pickup truck with stake sides, melons in the back, and a magnetic Jesus on the dashboard. The best part wouldn't even be the cash money in his pocket. The best part would be standing out there by himself, miles from this sardine can with its warring smells of perfume, sweat, and hair spray.

The second-best part, however, would be squeezing the government tit for a few dollars more.

He stood up to his perfectly normal height (five-ten and a fraction), pushed his glasses up on his nose, and raised his hand. "Make it two thousand, sir, plus a cash refund of my ticket, and the seat is yours."

The voucher turned out to be for a cheesedog hotel located near the end of Tampa International's most heavily used runway. Tim fell asleep to the sound of airplanes, awoke to more of the same, and went down to ingest a hardboiled egg and two rubber pancakes from the complimentary breakfast buffet. Although far from a gourmet treat, Tim ate heartily, then went back to his room to wait for nine o'clock, when the banks opened.

He cashed his windfall with no trouble, because the bank knew he was coming and the check had been approved in advance; he had no intention of waiting around in the cheesedog hotel for it to clear. He took his two thousand in fifties and twenties, folded it into his left front pocket, reclaimed his duffel bag from the bank's security guard, and called an Uber to take him to Ellenton. There he paid the driver, strolled to the nearest 301-N sign, and stuck out his thumb. Fifteen minutes later he was picked up by an old guy in a Case gimme cap. There were no melons in the back of his pickup, and no stake sides, but otherwise it pretty much conformed to his vision of the previous night.

"Where you headed, friend?" the old guy asked.

"Well," Tim said, "New York, eventually. I guess."

The old guy spat a ribbon of tobacco juice out the window. "Now why would any man in his right mind want to go there?" He pronounced it *raht mahnd*.

"I don't know," Tim said, although he did; an old service buddy had told him there was plenty of private security work in the Big Apple, including some for companies that would give more weight to his experience than to the Rube Goldberg fuckup that had ended his career in Florida policing. "I'm just hoping to get to Georgia tonight. Maybe I'll like that better."

"Now you're talking," the old guy said. "Georgia ain't bad, specially if you like peaches. They gi' me the backdoor trots. You don't mind some music, do you?"

“Not at all.”

“Got to warn you, I play it loud. I’m a little on the deaf side.”

“I’m just happy to be riding.”

It was Waylon Jennings instead of REO Speedwagon, but that was okay with Tim. Waylon was followed by Shooter Jennings and Marty Stuart. The two men in the mud-streaked Dodge Ram listened and watched the highway roll. Seventy miles up the line, the old guy pulled over, gave Tim a tip of his Case cap, and wished him a real fahn day.

Tim didn’t make Georgia that night—he spent it in another cheesedog motel next to a roadside stand selling orange juice—but he got there the following day. In the town of Brunswick (where a certain kind of tasty stew had been invented), he took two weeks’ work in a recycling plant, doing it with no more forethought than he had put into deciding to give up his seat on the Delta flight out of Tampa. He didn’t need the money, but it seemed to Tim that he needed the time. He was in transition, and that didn’t happen overnight. Also, there was a bowling alley with a Denny’s right next door. Hard to beat a combo like that.