Chapter I

The Braycott Arms was a stain on the character of the city of Portland, a blight on its inhabitants, and a repository for criminality, both aggressively active and relatively passive, the latter frequently due only to the temporary requirements of a parole board. It had always been thus, even beyond recall. The Braycott was one of a number of railroad hotels that had sprung up in the vicinity of Union Station, now departed these sixty years, of which only the Inn at St John and the Braycott survived. But while the former was comfortable, hospitable, and carefully maintained, the Braycott catered to those who were less than particular about their surroundings, and valued the company of rough men and rougher women over clean sheets and a peaceful night's sleep.

There was something almost admirable in the Braycott's commitment to anarchy and disrepute, a commitment that seemed to have been passed down from owner to owner along with the deeds and keys. The hotel first opened its doors on July 25, 1888, just one month after Union Station itself. By then Maine's embrace of Prohibition, which had commenced nearly seventy years before the passage of the Volstead Act, was tightening. The sale of alcohol was illegal in the state, which drove the business underground – literally, in the case of the Braycott Arms, whose principal developer, Normand Braycott, had the foresight to devise a bar in the basement, albeit one omitted from the official plans. Bribes rendered it largely immune from raids, except for cosmetic purposes, although a two-hundred-foot tunnel behind the keg storage bay was kept clear in case of real emergencies, with a point of egress in a Braycott-owned property on the other side of Park Avenue. Decades later, when the rest of the United States followed Maine's lead in attempting to dry out its population by

force, the Braycott's tunnel and bar became a staging point for the rumrunners bringing liquor into Portland Harbor, where the bottles would be concealed in boxes of Moxie soda, later to become the state's official soft drink, possibly in part for services rendered to its populace during Prohibition.

The Braycott's decline commenced after the repeal of the Volstead Act. In common with many such downturns, it was gradual at first, but accelerated rapidly. So regular were the fights, the beatings, and the knifings in its bar, that it was proposed, not entirely in jest, that the police should consider opening a substation there just to save money on gas. Eventually, after a commercial salesman was gutted in 1972 in an argument over a hat, and a woman was subsequently shot dead in a disagreement concerning the same commercial salesman – and, by extension, the same hat – the Braycott lost its bar license, and the basement den closed its doors to drinkers, never to reopen.

By then Bobby Wadlin was a year old, the youngest of three boys whose father, Eldon, was the most recent owner of the Braycott. Bobby, like his brothers, was born in the hotel, and knew every dusty corner of it, each crack in the walls and hole in the floor, each nightingale board and treacherous, squealing door hinge. When his brothers finally moved out, Bobby stayed on to assist his father and mother with running the place. He became the official face of the Braycott, a permanent presence behind the front desk, and consequently was with both of his parents when they died in situ: his father first, followed by Bobby's mother six months after, each of them passing away in the bedroom of their private apartment on the top floor of the hotel. The Braycott did not close its doors following the demise of either party, and Bobby Wadlin was absent from his desk only for the duration of the funeral services and burials.

But following the death of Wadlin *mère*, rumors spread that the hotel, much to the relief of the city fathers, was to be sold and demolished. The former was true while the latter was not. The Braycott was disposed of, but this was, in effect, a piece of legal chicanery that transferred its assets to a private company

controlled, in all but name, by the Wadlin brothers and a sole sister-in-law. Bobby became an employee of said company, and the profits were split equally four ways, although thanks to a good accountant and a succession of crooked contractors, the Braycott appeared barely to operate in the black.

Yet Bobby had little interest in the finances of the Braycott beyond its day-to-day operation. Oh, he was no fool about money, and could have cited income and expenditure on demand, to the nearest dollar, but liquidity had value for him only as a means of keeping the Braycott secure. He would have worked at the Braycott for next to nothing, just so long as he was permitted to remain within its precincts and had sufficient funds both to feed himself and support his addiction to old westerns in every medium. He had turned the rooms behind the front desk into his private living quarters, the walls lined with shelves containing westerns on videocassette, DVD, Blu-ray, and even LaserDisc, although he no longer owned a functioning player. He possessed full collections of the works of Louis L'Amour, Luke Short, John H. Reese, and Nelson Nye, as well as partial sets of almost a hundred other writers, some of which he kept in room 13, which he used as a library and storage facility, many guests, no matter how hardened by life, being reluctant to check into a room with *13* on its door.

Bobby, though, had no truck with superstitions of that stripe, or any other. He'd lost count of the number of people who'd asked him if the Braycott Arms was haunted, given its long and ignominious history. Certainly no small number of occupants had died in the place, including his parents, the victims of the hat feud, and assorted drunks who had variously broken their necks on the stairs, choked on vomit, or, in one case, mistaken a window for a door and plummeted four stories to the ground. (Bobby had heard tales of drunks who'd fallen from great heights and survived thanks to alcohol-induced relaxation of the limbs, but relaxed limbs didn't count for much if one landed on one's head.) None of them, as far as Bobby was aware, had chosen to spend their afterlife in the environs of the Braycott, which

was, he felt, their loss. When he died, Bobby hoped to be permitted to spend eternity in his beloved hotel or some celestial version of it, there to watch *The Virginian* and *The Rifleman* on endless loops.

After all, it was the little things that kept a man sane.

Chapter II

In the hallways of the Braycott, no clocks ticked. The orientation of the building, combined with the grime on the hall windows, meant that sunlight had only a modest effect on the state of illumination, and at night the weak bulbs made barely any difference. The hotel, therefore, existed in a permanently crepuscular state, like many of its inhabitants. Bobby rarely troubled the corridors after dark – to be honest, he rarely troubled them in daytime either – except when someone exceeded the permissible noise levels, refused to leave on the agreed date, took ill, or expired. Bobby's post was by the door, next to his television, where he sometimes spent the entire night. When he slept, he did so only for a few hours. He had never been a big sleeper, and the lack of proper rest did not appear to affect his mood or personality, both of which continued to leave much to be desired.

The housekeepers monitored the state of the rooms, and informed Bobby of breakages, stains that might be regarded as unacceptable even by the Braycott's lax standards, and furniture and appliances that had reached the end of their long usefulness. Such items were then replaced from the stock that Bobby kept in the basement, the inventory sourced from thrift stores, flea markets, yard sales, and the homes of the recently deceased, during Bobby's sporadic forays into the outside world. During these singular periods of absence, front desk duties were assumed by a woman named Abigail Stackpole, of whom the kindest thing to be said was that she might have been a handsome woman when she was alive. Abigail Stackpole was a desiccated body of uncertain years, and it was whispered that she and Bobby Wadlin were, or had once been, an item, despite a difference in age numbered in decades. It was to Abigail, and Abigail alone, that Bobby Wadlin was willing

to entrust the Braycott in his absence, and she was one of only a handful of individuals with a full set of keys to the hotel.

If Bobby Wadlin was not a particularly warm human being, neither was he unduly cruel. He did not tolerate bums in his establishment, because a bum was a man who made a habit of not paying his bills – which Bobby viewed as both dishonorable and prejudicial to the efficient running of a business – but he was prepared to make allowances for those who had fallen, in passing, on hard times, even if such concessions seldom extended for longer than forty-eight hours. The Braycott had a handful of long-term residents, toward a couple of whom Bobby exhibited a degree of patience and protectiveness that might, in the hotel's dim light, have been mistaken for something approaching affection. But while he loved his hotel, he was under no illusions about the quality either of the institution or the preponderance of its guests. Taking up persistent residence at the Braycott was akin to permanent occupancy of a cemetery: it was a sign that your life had come to an end. The Braycott was one step above the street, and two steps from the grave.

Bobby also had his own peculiar code of chivalry, derived in part from his close study of westerns. He did not regard the Braycott as a suitable venue for unaccompanied ladies, and did his best to send any who arrived at its door in the direction of more appropriate lodgings. He did welcome some female guests, because to do otherwise would have been against the law, but he favored those who looked like they could handle themselves, preferably women who boasted more tattoos than the Sixth Fleet, at least once he had ascertained that they were not prostitutes. This Bobby did by bluntly informing women suspected of commercially sexual tendencies that he didn't allow hookers in his hotel. If they were offended, then they shouldn't have been trying to check in at the Braycott to begin with. Otherwise, they could take it on the chin or, if they were hookers, find somewhere else for their hotbed needs. Children, meanwhile, were not permitted under any circumstances. The Braycott was no place for children, and Bobby didn't care for them anyway, blithely informing anyone

who would listen that, while he didn't hate kids, he'd never been able to eat a whole one.

Which was why Bobby was surprised and annoyed to be woken from a doze shortly after 2 a.m. by the ringing of the internal phone, followed by the voice of Phil Hardiman in 22 complaining that a child was running up and down the hallway outside his door. Hardiman had recently been released from Maine State Prison after serving four years for a class A drug felony, and Bobby was quite certain he would soon be returning to MSP for another four years at least, because Bobby knew a lifelong loser when he saw one. Now it appeared that Phil Hardiman was getting high on his own supply, or even someone else's; this, or he was enduring the kind of dreams that required some regulated form of pharmaceutical intervention to bring them to an end, in which case he needed to square matters with his parole officer, and fast.

'We don't have any kids staying in the hotel, Mr Hardiman,' said Bobby. 'We don't permit them.'

'And I'm telling you,' said Hardiman, 'that someone has snuck a kid into this shithole, whether you permit it or not. I can hear her, for Christ's sake! Up and down, up and down, and laughing all the while. She's driving me fucking crazy.'

'What does she look like?' said Bobby. 'I mean, is she real young or—'

Hardiman didn't answer immediately.

'I don't know what she looks like,' he said finally. 'When I go into the hallway, she hides.'

'She hides?'

'What are you, a fucking echo? Yes, she hides.'

'Hides where?'

The Braycott's halls contained ten rooms on each level above the first floor, as well as one storage closet to which only the cleaners had the key, and which was kept locked under pain of immediate dismissal, because Bobby didn't want any of the guests selling his stock of towels, toilet rolls, bleach, and soap in order to buy bottles of Mr Boston Wild Cherry Flavored Brandy. (Someone had once spilled a bottle of the same in 24, and the

smell still pervaded it.) In other words, short of the stairwell or the elevator shaft, there wasn't really anywhere for a child to go.

'If I knew where she was hiding,' said Hardiman, 'I wouldn't be asking you to come find her, would I?'

'Did you check the stairs and the elevator shaft?'

'Yes, I did check the stairs and the elevator shaft, but it's cold and I only got my drawers on. Now, are you going to come and sort this kid out or aren't you?'

Bobby didn't believe there was any way a child could have been smuggled into the Braycott. While the hotel had a back door, it was kept locked. This was obviously a code violation, but Bobby's patrons couldn't be trusted not to sneak buddies, women, men, or farm animals up to their rooms. Furthermore, if a fire did start at the front of the hotel, Bobby would be available to open the door at the back, and if there was a fire at the back, Bobby would make sure everyone got out the front. There was access to the fire escape from every hallway window, and most of them opened. It wasn't rocket science.

'Are you listening to me, numbnuts? Hey!'

Hardiman's voice, which seemed to have gone up an octave, brought Bobby back to the issue at hand.

'I'll come up and take a look,' he said, 'but nobody else has complained.'

Only one other room on Hardiman's floor was currently occupied. The two men in residence were not the kind to have a kid in their room. If they did, even Bobby – no fan of the law – would have summoned the police immediately, because it would have boded no good for the child in question.

'If someone has sneaked a kid in somehow, I'll sort it out,' he said. 'But I still think you're mistaken.'

'Just get it done,' said Hardiman. 'I need to sleep. I got business to conduct in the morning.'

Sure you do, thought Bobby. *Maybe I should call ahead to Warren, tell them to have your usual cell ready*.

Hardiman hung up. Bobby found a flashlight, just in case he had to go poking in any unlit corners, of which the Braycott boasted an abundance, and left his sanctuary. This required him to unlock

the security door and step out from behind his protective plexiglass shield. As was inevitable in a business, differences of opinion sometimes arose with customers. Since the nature of any number of the Braycott's guests tended toward the abrasive, it was best to maintain a line of separation from them.

Bobby peered into the elevator, but it was empty and hadn't moved from the first floor since the last guest had returned shortly before midnight. As a precaution, Bobby disabled it with his key and took the stairs to the fourth floor, giving the second and third floors a once-over along the way. He could hear snoring from at least one room, music playing from another, and one side of a telephone argument from a third, but the hallways themselves were empty. Even at night, a certain element of noise was part and parcel of the Braycott's ambience, but few guests ever made a fuss about it. Bobby knew this was because anyone who had spent time in stir grew used to sleeping with the accompaniment of clamor, and often struggled to rest soundly without it. If there really was a kid in the building, that might explain why Hardiman had been woken: it wasn't so much the disturbance as the fact that it was so incongruous, a sound unfamiliar from prison.

But Bobby remained convinced that Hardiman was imagining things.

He reached the fourth floor. Hardiman's room was at the far end, close to the north window. The other guests on that floor currently occupied room 29, over by the south window. They had registered as Lyle Pantuff and Gilman Veale, and paid in cash for three nights, of which this was the first. They'd requested a room with two beds, which probably meant they weren't queer, although one could never be sure. Bobby Wadlin didn't have any problem with gays so long as they kept their paws off him. He might not have been a conventionally handsome man, but he had something. He was pretty sure of it.

Pantuff and Veale, on the other hand, were grown-up versions of the shitheads who had made Bobby's school days a misery. Pantuff, the older of the two, had a reddish-blond bowl cut that ended just above the ears, with the rest shaved close. Combined with the dark sockets of his eyes, and thick pink lips fixed in a

joyless grin, as though the nerves had been damaged during botched surgery, he resembled a clown, but not one at whom a sane person might have been inclined to laugh. Bobby Wadlin was used to dealing with men who had done time, and Pantuff had that vibe about him. But experience had also taught Bobby to categorize ex-cons according to their likely offences – the thieves, the pushers, the grifters, the killers – and the years had only heightened his acumen. He figured Pantuff for, if not a sex criminal, then a criminal who liked to sweeten his jobs with sex. If you woke to Lyle Pantuff burgling your home, someone was likely to get raped.

Veale was younger and darker, like he might have some Black in him from back down the line, Bobby guessed. He looked more normal than his associate, although next to Pantuff a visiting alien would have blended into the scenery, but if you examined Veale's face more closely, the eyes were gray and insensate. Pantuff brimmed with malevolence, but at least it was energy, an animus. Veale's gaze, by contrast, was entirely without luster, so that his soul might have been excised by God at birth along with any interest in ordinary humanity. Persons like Veale, Bobby thought, had probably tended the ovens at Auschwitz. Their lives were a constant exploration of depths of cruelty in order to evoke a feeble emotional response deep inside them, as a scientist might increase the voltage on a dead animal until a muscle spasmed.

Bobby padded softly to their room and listened at the door, but could hear no sound from within. If they were sleeping, they were sleeping quietly, like the dead. If there was a child with them, it, too, was now silent; but as Bobby had already decided, these were not men to harbor children in their hotel room, or not for long. He left Pantuff and Veale to their rest and began moving from door to door, investigating each empty unit for signs of a child, and finding, as anticipated, none. He proceeded to do the same with the remaining two floors – exploring unoccupied rooms, pressing his ear to the doors of those with guests – before concluding that Phil Hardiman had indeed been mistaken, which confirmed for Bobby that it would be best if Hardiman stopped taking drugs, began taking them,

or altered the dosage of whatever he was on, because the status quo just wasn't cutting it for him.

Bobby returned to the front desk. He thought about calling Hardiman's room to inform him that the inspection had proved inconclusive at best, but decided to let sleeping users lie. With luck, Hardiman would have forgotten about the whole palaver by morning, but on the off chance that he wasn't aurally hallucinating, and one of the guests had managed to introduce a child into the Braycott Arms, Bobby would instruct housekeeping to keep an eye out for evidence of unauthorized occupancy.

By now Bobby was fully awake and feeling resentful about it. He might not have slept much as a matter of course, but he both needed and enjoyed the little rest he did get, and Phil Hardiman and his fancies looked set to have deprived Bobby of it for one night. Still, he wasn't defeated. He heated a saucepan of milk, opened a box of Lorna Doones, cranked up his old VHS player, and inserted the expanded widescreen edition of Lawrence Kasdan's *Wyatt Earp*. Bobby figured if that didn't put him to sleep, nothing would.