

**Excerpt:**

## PART ONE



### The Widowers' Club and its Gifts

This I believed, I would never forget. The first time my corporation's CEO, Mr. Archibald Ulger III, master manipulator of markets, requested my presence alongside my fellow widowers, I was offered —bribed—to attempt suicide before him.

All I had to do was jump through a pane of glass. A leap, a falling man. Eighty-seven stories down, and a certain death—one of only a skeletal handful of life's fleeting guarantees. These were our instructions, all seven of us. Our path to enlightenment.

"You have before you approximately 78.33 feet," he told us, "a great enough distance to reach your top speeds, dear widowers, allowing for more than enough inertia to break through the glass and plunge," he paused, signaling our drop with the silent freefall of his right arm, a single diminutive finger representing each of us, "to your deaths. The runways are cleared and the Manhattan sidewalks are thirsty—rest assured, they will be gracious. New York is the best city in which to die. You have my congratulations in advance."

He stood with his back to us, Mr. Ulger did. As he delivered his haunted proposition, I could see his right hand clasped firmly at the wrist by his left as he peered out said glass, out at the panoramic view of the spiking Manhattan skyline, the egg yolk sun setting over New Jersey, oozing color across the horizon as if stabbed and running. The sprinkling of office lights—diminished in recent years—were spread like a pox upon the city's aging and weathered face, while, far below, the exasperated yellow traffic remained insistent in its sluggishness. I saw all this and the filthy sidewalks thinning like the air at this height, outside these floor-to-ceiling windows.

When Mr. Ulger turned to look us over, I laid eyes upon him in the flesh for the first time. I had seen him only on TV, in black-and-white photos in paperback books, in newspapers, and on the cover of several magazines—in fact, it had always been my dream to get him to sign my copy of *TIME* with his photo looking dramatically off into the distance. He was disappointing in his appearance, as are most great men. He looked to be in his mid-forties, a typical former-boy-genius-turned asset-wizard, if such a person may be dubbed typical, and dressed the part. He wore a finely tailored midnight blue suit equivalent in price to my car (marked down after several years of brutal and ill-advised use), a gaudy gold watch so rare and relished I couldn't even attempt a guess at its make and cost, gold cufflinks, gold wedding band, silk tie, and shoes I presumed to be hand crafted in the remotest of areas of an ever-bloating globe. But I wanted more than this. This was to be expected. I wanted eccentricities and oddities, the peculiarities of a detached and privileged life.

And they were there. After searching hard enough, I found them in the random actions of his right hand.

The hand was noticeably smaller than its counterpart, a pale imitation, as if it were never a hand to begin with. It appeared to be drained of blood, shriveled in its death, although it was clear that it was not a fake or prosthetic. The gaunt fingers never ceased writhing. The hand roamed in pockets and out, behind his back, scratching his thick neck hard enough to leave marks—thin red lines. The left kept it in check as much as possible, constantly clutching it, calming its spastic activity, parent and child.

“Not all seven of you will meet your fates, of course. Not today,” he went on. “Only one, if any, will die this evening—outside occurrences notwithstanding; I cannot promise you won’t be pushed off the subway platform this evening, your body mangled in the filth of the tracks, your blood licked clean by the rats long after your corpse had been collected and removed, or mugged for drug money or plastered by a speeding and reckless cab or shot by a stray bullet in some gang initiation, but I can assure you, to fall from this height is a much better death, grander. Let the city swallow you up; let it finish its job. Depart this existence on your own terms.”

Listening to his slick voice—my first opinion on hearing him speak was that his throat must be lined with sterling silver (suck on those spoons long enough and they liquefy)—we were standing where we were told to, evenly spaced apart, each man lined up with an individual pane of glass and plenty of running room.

“Of the seven panes of glass before the seven of you, only one is not shatterproof. The rest, like the one before me ...” He reached beneath his desk with his left hand, pulled out a handgun and, without any hesitation, fired at the window. Instinctively, I dropped to my knees, hands atop my head, pushing it to my chest for protection. I never looked to see how the others reacted; I was too scared, too confused. Though I owned a gun, it was the first time I heard one go off. After the firearm was lowered, I returned to my feet and noticed the bullet had been absorbed by the window in a small, motherly hole.

“Unbreakable,” Mr. Ulger said. “Six of you have absolutely nothing to fear. The glass will not give, and you will go on living. But how?” He snorted. His shaking right hand reached for the punctured glass and fingered the captured bullet like an inverted nipple. He spoke to us while staring out at the sprawling city, the handgun, smoking, hanging from his left hand. “To shed all fear, to know what lies past the end; what does it mean for us, what does it beckon? The welcomed return of the brute, perhaps? A total unburdening? Complete and utter freedom? I am just learning myself.” Licking his lips, he turned back to us, returning his handgun to its rightful place beneath his desk. “I believe I can help you. Like me, you are widowers.” He stared hard at us—through us—as if searching for fragments of himself in our shattered psyches. He never once summoned the widows who worked for him, only widowers, and, in a company of hundreds, we seemed to appear like weeds. “But unlike me, you remain incomplete, fragile

and lost men, lost in a muddled middle; I see it, I smell it, you reek of decay and despair, and I feel I must intervene. Not one of you has moved on. You are wandering aimlessly amid the constant chatter of white noise. You serve no larger purpose—I do not fool myself into believing your loyalty lies with this company. Not yet. What have we ever done for you, really? Time’s arrow has pierced you and drags you limply forward, to nothing. So why not reconnect with your lost loves then, or at least risk it here today? Jump. Either way you will end your suffering right here and now. For, you see, if you evade death, the reward ...” He grinned here, very briefly, like a blink of the lips, before shifting into a seriousness far beyond death. “And I promise you this.” Then he repeated these words, each its own powerful sentence, driving every syllable into our heads like nails. “It will change everything you know. I do not hand out stuffed animals; I am no mere carnival barker. I am a man with access to your dreams. Past recipients of my gifts have been none other than Hanley Middleton, Mario Marano, Bert Coolgrass, Rudyard Ply, Theo Shinberg. Widowers just like yourselves, no better. Before they received their prizes they were your smudged mirrors, men at the ends of their ropes. And look at them now. Visionaries. There should be no greater need of initiative. Your motivation is in these names.”

And he was right. Those men had become living legends, stars far outside my own stunted limitations. I knew two of them (mere acquaintances) before their wives died and they were summoned with the same letter to the same room in which I then stood. They possessed nothing I didn’t, exhibited no enviable traits, no random displays of genius. To my discernible eye, their minds were no greater, their personalities no more engaging, their faces just as blank, their hearts just as removed. They were me in a different body. Yet, afterwards, I couldn’t keep up. They became abstract. Without ever mentioning what took place on the eighty-seventh floor, they accelerated through the company seemingly overnight, accumulating their millions, jet-setting the world, their meager pasts forgotten. They were the envy of us all. I always wondered how they did it. And now I knew. Mr. Ulger was offering me the same chance at such success.

“Now, those of you who are returning members know I’m not going to impose this upon any of you. No one will be forced to die; I’m not that cruel.” He laughed at this, a charitable chuckle that betrayed the statement. “My gun is away. You all will remain employed afterward. There is no threat here; you need not participate if you so choose. However, with the game about to begin, I must inform you there is only room for one champion today, and so you must act quickly. The game ends at the first touch of glass, whether it breaks or not. All it takes is one of you. The rest need not even budge. And so I implore you all: abandon your thoughts, become the beast. You must not let one of your competitors beat you to the prize. Show me passion, show me the lust for change, the spark of revolution, for this is no trivial reward. I offer you a way out, a new life!”

He ambled to the center of the room, directly in front of his gargantuan mahogany desk, and faced us. It was time.

“Widowers, are you ready? Which one of you has what it takes? Which one of you is ready to evolve?” He looked us over, smirking, then raised his left arm. At his side, his warped right hand twitched in glee. “Such a champion may begin his run ... now.” At the drop of his hand, we, the widowers, glanced back and forth at one another with wide and distraught eyes, searching for further explanation and comfort. No one made a move, our bodies rigid over the sparkling city. Instead, we excreted involuntary groans of frustration and confusion—a depleted platoon agonizingly awaiting further combat. Sweat formed upon our brows in thick and clammy globs; there was quivering, loss of color. One of us doubled over, clutching his stomach as if in incredible pain. I glanced toward the exit. Mr. Ulger wouldn’t stop smiling. That grin, the sadistic pleasure he took in our suffering. Another widower was tear soaked, shouting, “I can’t! I can’t!” over and over again.

But, oh how I know he wanted to, how I know they all wanted to. Because I wanted to, and they were just like me. We needed this opportunity. A way out of our lives, a sure way past the pain. Mr. Ulger was our masochistic genie; he had the power to grant our every wish. We just had to run and survive. A leap of faith.

My heart was a screaming battering ram against my sternum. My knees buckled, my body swayed as if I was slammed with a shock wave of radiation, and I pictured my brain somersaulting within my skull. I held my head still, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath even though my lungs hurt and my chest was tight. The odds are in our favor, I thought. Just run. Go for it before someone else does. But I couldn’t take a single step forward. There was always that chance, however slim. A certain death.

A moment or two later, one man, perhaps computing his own odds, started to run. I felt instant regret and anger. But not even a quarter of the way there, he abruptly stopped and began screaming and punching his thighs. His tongue was held captive behind bars of saliva clinging to his widespread and agonized lips. A desperate and sad man. I saw the watchful eyes of the other widowers and, between each blink of terror, there was grim satisfaction. There was still a chance for them to act after all; all was not yet lost.

Mr. Ulger was still smiling while the most courageous of us faltered in a brazen attempt at ... what? We were heading for the unknown. Our emotions were swarming like so many startled bees. We just needed more time; we had to think this through, but there was no clock, just the unpredictable fuses of the men at our sides. We were racing against wills.

Mr. Ulger didn’t urge us on or inform us of any time limit; he didn’t shift his weight in impatience, he didn’t move an inch. He continued to do nothing but smile. Keeping his roaming right hand in place with the strong clench of his left, he simply waited for a victor to emerge from a septet of stammering white men in ill-fitted suits. Perhaps, as his constant grin implied, it was just a game to him, a lonely and bored man of ridiculous wealth placing bets with himself.

Did he know which pane of glass would break? He had to. The building was an extension of himself. When the glass broke, the crash would linger in his ears longest of all. Of course he knew.

But perhaps none of the panes would break. Maybe he just wanted to see one of us take a risk, a test of courage. We would never have to know the truth. Or maybe they all would break, every single pane; maybe he just wanted to see one of us die for his own amusement.

No, he didn't seem to be a trickster of any kind. For him, there was no need. He was all-powerful. Such cheap manipulation was beneath him. If he said it, it must be true: one pane will break.

I don't know if we hesitated for minutes or just mere seconds in our perverted race, my fellow widowers and I, but at some point I realized, regardless of the chaos taking place in that penthouse, Mr. Ulger's eyes, wherever they may have roamed, constantly gravitated back to me. Even in his peripheral, he watched me. And I knew what he wanted to see: he wanted to see me run. It was a tell, a flaw. My window was the weakened glass. It was my death that awaited. His eyes gave it away. But, if I ran, would I still win, like he said? Would I move on to something better? Perpetual paradise?

I was a recent widower then, not even a year, the youngest of the group. Gwen's death was still so fresh; it lived in a glaze behind my eyes, stuck there, always present. I relived it every day, and every day it was different. She suffered a thousand deaths, and each one ate the weight from my body like scavenger birds. The day she was taken from me ... I could always sense it but never see it. Although I was there, cradling her in my arms, her death tormented me in its mystery.

Everything I knew I was told by a parade of police, reporters, and doctors, although it wasn't much. Sometime during the incident, it was revealed, I suffered a blow to my head, inducing retrograde amnesia. The hours surrounding the event had become a complete blank space in my history, a black hole upon my brain. I only knew she died and died violently.

I was informed that all appropriate actions and procedures were meticulously followed, but that the killer remained at large. I was questioned relentlessly about this, at times leading me to believe I might even be a suspect, which they denied over and over, claiming there had been similar murders in and around the city, for which I had alibis. But nothing ever gelled together. The pieces remained scattered in my head. Whatever evidence they had was undeniably slight, but they feigned optimism regardless, vowing to catch this murderer at all costs. It was only a matter of time, they said, although I'm still waiting. They told me it was probably better for my mental health that I remained in the dark, but if I were to remember anything I should call them immediately.

But I didn't remember, I fabricated. Awake or asleep, I lived those moments over and over in my head, each time experiencing something new, building memories like drywall and knocking them back down.

They were horrific, a constant torture played out hundreds of different ways, by hundreds of different psychotic men, always with the same harrowing conclusion. I surprised myself with my imagination, the ugly depths in which I could dwell. It was a sickness for which I had no remedy. The effects were noticeable. I couldn't eat; I couldn't sleep. But still I refused to stop. I searched for one final connection to my wife. I needed a memory that fit, that stuck, something that would allow me to move on and alleviate the crushing guilt of not being strong enough for her. In not remembering what happened, it was as if I never lived through it and that I shamed her in my escape from reality. I owed Gwen my suffering, and I couldn't get it right.

Staring out the window, the Hudson River a snake of a shimmer in the distance, I thought it might be time. Why not jump? I deserved an ugly death. Take my chances and, if I read Mr. Ulger correctly, then so be it. I'd be reunited with my love. I'd be at peace. And if not, I'd stop my bleeding with money. An enlightened millionaire or a dead man.

I took a step forward, and I saw Mr. Ulger's smile broaden. The logic was there. It told me to close my eyes and run and jump, and in the end I might have done it—yet one more alternate history. But my boy stopped me, my baby boy. I'd like to believe it was Nick, not even a year old and more in his grandmother's care than mine, who kept me from running across the room and through the glass, and not my fear. To me, he was his mother—my final connection to her—and as battered as I was at the time, as difficult as it was for me to get out of bed each morning, as bleak as my world was, that connection meant I couldn't jump. It wasn't my fear that held me back or my relentless pursuit of Gwen's killer; it was love. I have to believe that. I *have* to believe that.

With Mr. Ulger's sole attention fixed on my ungainly frame, I took a step back. The disappointment crawled across his face in a series of twitches. I wasn't going anywhere.