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Opening extract from
Blink and Caution

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Part 1

Chapter 1

Look up at the Plaza Regent, Blink, in the shivery morning light. Count the floors—take your pick.

You're wearing the Blessed Breakfast Uniform: the Adidas, sparkly white; the tan Gap cargos; the yellow Banana Republic polo; the red cotton hooded full-zip. Lifted, all of it, from a gym locker at Jarvis Collegiate, where the posh children drift down from Rosedale on shining bikes or are disgorged from BMWs. You picked a boy about your size. You followed him to school one day, which was against the rules. It's never hard to find a locker room; your nose shows you the way. These fine clothes of young master Rosedale were doused with Eternity when first you put them on, though that fragrance has been lost with repeated wear.

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The BBU lifts you up. You are no street punk now. Just look at your fine self: your hair plastered down, your hands clean. Curl your fingers up, boy, so they don't see the nails, ragged from scratching out an existence in this anxious city on the edge of winter. You're uptown and hungry. Farther uptown than you have ever ventured before, driven to this new hunting ground. The edge of winter, the edge of the world. The brink of something. Because that's what edges are.

Wear the uniform like you own it, Blink. Walk like you mean it. No gazing at the ground as though there's a dime there with your name on it. Nothing in this whole wide world has your name on it.

Shoulders back now, so that the lobby guys say, *Good morning, sir*, like you just stepped out for a morning walk to get your appetite up to speed. He's opening the door for you, the tall fella in the long black coat with the red stripes on the shoulders and the little red monkey hat. Smile nice now, Blink, but not so much that you look like the monkey holding the door.

There's another one inside, with cheeks so shiny pink you'd swear his mama just scrubbed them with a toothbrush. He tips his hat like you're a king, and you acknowledge him with your chin, as if you'd say, *Good morning*, right back at him if you weren't so busy being rich.

You're on your way, Blink, you clever monkey, you.

You've played this breakfast game for a month or so, but it only ever lasts a few days. The smiles soon dim; the *good mornings* wither; then some suit strides your way wearing his good-bye face, and out you fly through the revolving door, quick as a wink.

But not this day, Blink. You're good to go.

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Just don't hurry and, Christ, don't gawk like you've never seen the inside of a hotel before.

But, oh, look at this lobby, will you? Drink it in. You want to skate across it, so shiny wide. Look at those urns with the exotic plants stuck in them and those chairs just sitting around on the thick carpet discussing important matters. Keep the jitters pressed way down in your empty belly. Stroll like you're heading up to room . . . pick a number—with your left hand holding on to an imagined key.

No one asks. No one cares. In the Blessed BU, you are a *guest*.

The elevator doors shine like they've been through the car wash.

Ding.

There's a camera in this thing, but resist the urge to wave. Look steady at your reflection in the golden door; comb back that sandy-brown hair sprung loose over your brow. Convince those brown-as-hot-tea eyes to calm themselves. You're here to eat—that's all. A boy's got to eat.

Blink. Blink. Blink. A blink for every floor.

Ding.

The carpet is like the floor of an enchanted glade, as if the sun has somehow found its way into this windowless place and seeps down the walls in thin streams. Little green bags hang from every morning doorknob, with a newspaper inside, like it's Christmas. But you aren't here for the news, my friend.

Do you remember the fairy tales Granda told you? Enchanted glades can be a problem. This one here is not as wide as the Westin, or as long as the Sheraton, where you could see trouble

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coming a mile away. It feels more like you have stolen your way into someone's house.

You round the corner, and—ah!—a black tray with domes on it like some tiny silver city sits outside a sleeping doorway. There's a wilted carnation and a bottle lying on its side. What your stepdaddy calls a dead soldier.

What have we here? Half a gnawed pork chop, mashed potatoes with a cigarette sticking out the top like a chimney on an igloo. Hell, you can do better than this.

There—two doors down. See it, boyo?

You feel the luck oozing up from those one-size-too-small track shoes. You're just full of fairy dust, Blink. It comes on like that sometimes, the good feeling on the heels of the bad. Someone might even fall in love with a boy like you on a day this lucky.

Then you hear your stepdaddy's voice, and you wilt like last night's carnation. You shake him out of your head. You hang on to that sunny disposition, boy. You hang on tight.

Kneel silently before tray number two, like it is a prayerful thing. And, yes! Your prayers are answered. Scrambled egg, hardly touched, a couple of sausages, home fries, and—*jiggle, jiggle*—coffee still hot in the thermos. Amen.

Then the crash.

You're up off that floor like some wild thing on the Discovery Channel, eyes looking every which way, claws out, listening to . . . nothing. Nothing. You brush your knees off, like you might've picked up some enchantment, kneeling there, sniffing at the tray. You listen closely. There's talk somewhere behind a door. Not this one, the next.

But no one comes out. There's just you and this

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seven-a-empty hallway. Your breath returns to normal.

Then — *thump* — something big falls over. Something real.

What are you waiting for, child? The next shoe to drop? An invitation to the party?

You're stiff with un-motion. But you're not brain-dead, are you? There's no shouting. No one's calling anyone a liar. No one's saying, *Why, you no-good thieving—I oughta . . .* There's no slap.

Everything you expect as a side dish to Crash and Thump — there's none of it. The Captain's listening. Down inside you in his cabin in the hold of you. For a full ticking minute there, you feel him stir in his sleep. Captain Panic. Hold him down. You're good. You can do this.

Somebody had a bad night is all. That's what it is up there, up the hall in room 16-whatever. Somebody stumbling around looking for his dick. Pick up the tray, nice and quick and quiet, and find the little room. There's always the little room with the ice machine and the soda machine, a place where a boy can eat in peace. First thing in the morning, who's going to need ice? And there it is right across the hall from the room of strange noises: 1616.

You perch the tray on the ice machine and go straight for the sausage, but before you get it halfway to your hungry mouth, you see out the side of your eye the napkin. The napkin from hell. It's all scrunched up; white linen on the outside, but inside — what *is* that? Mucus? Yellow streaked with blood. Jesus, but that's disgusting!

Your throat just bunches up at the sight of it. You want to throw up, though there's nothing in you to heave. You close your eyes — they're twitching like nobody's business.

Open them. Blink. Look straight at that sausage, eye to eye.

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Forget the damn napkin. Oh, sure, and while you're at it, try not to think of this guy sneezing all over his breakfast. . . .

You put the fork down. Can't do it. What was that about your lucky day? You lean against the wall, exhausted from the act of holding yourself together. You got off at the wrong floor, my son—that's all. The wrongest floor of all. You don't know that yet, but you're never far from the feeling.

Shake it off, Blink. Shake it off.

Better? Good. Maybe the seventeenth? It's not like there's anywhere else you were heading today. No big appointments.

Forget about what happened at the Sheraton—put it out of your mind. That was yesterday. That's all over. Yes, one of them got a hand on you, but there's not much of you to grab, is there, and you can twist and turn when you need to—the dance of flight when the jig is up. And the thing is, you've got a day's worth of grazing to catch up on to put something on those bones of yours.

Oh, there's this fire in you that gets blown out so easy but flickers right back up again. That's my boy! Just leave the tray on the ice machine. There are more sausages in the world.

You open the door of the little room, and the door of 1616 clicks open like a mirror image directly across the hall. You step backward—fall backward—like you've been hit, fall into the low rumbling of the ice making, but you don't quite let go of the door, because something in you says that letting go is going to make more noise than holding on.

So there you are. And you hear what happens. And you see some of it, too. Three men: the big one, the wiry one, the little tough one. You name them: the Moon for the cratered roundness of his face; the Snake for the rattle coiling up his forearm;

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the Littlest Hulk for his green eyes and a chest that threatens to pop the buttons of his denim shirt. Not one of them belongs here. They are no more Plaza Regent than you are the Gap. They are the Three Billy Goats Gruff coming out of the room of Crash and Thump.

The Moon rolls plastic gloves off his hands—the kind they wear at Subway so they don’t have to touch your Santa Fe chicken. They’re all in plastic gloves. They wait in the almost-silent morning hallway with the news hanging from every door and music that never comes to an end floating down from the ceiling. What are they waiting for?

And what are you waiting for, your hand frozen to the door? In the knife-blade of your vision, there is only the Littlest Hulk left now, leaning against the yellow wall, flexing his plastic fingers. “Come on,” he grumbles, his voice all edgy with nuisance. “Come on,” he calls back into the room. He holds the door open with a ragged black-sneakered foot.

“Watch it, Tank,” grumbles the Moon.

“Yes, massah,” mutters Tank, rolling his eyes.

Then the one they’re waiting for appears. No Billy Goat, this one. He’s in a shirt like a new snowdrift and gray trousers that might be cut from silk. There are tassels on his shiny black shoes and a shiny black briefcase with a gold combination lock, grasped in his right hand. There’s a clean scent coming off him. He’s got a trim beard and hair laced with silver. There’s a bit of belly on him, like he eats regularly but takes that belly to the gym.

His type sails by you down on Bay Street all the time, like their eyes don’t even register the cap in your hand. His type strides across hotel lobbies, with the future tucked tightly under their arms. He stands there filling your narrow vision, and you

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take in the coolness of this man with his eyes the color of water off the coast of some place people sail to in a yacht.

Has he forgotten something?

No. He shuts the door. He sails out of your sight, sweeping his hand through his hair so that his wristwatch flashes gold against skin he must have had room service iron during the night.

“Ready?” says the Moon.

“Ready,” says the Suit.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” says the Snake.

Tank just says, “Ready, massah,” under his breath with this scowl on his halfway-to-a-monster face, like he’s been ready for twelve hours or something.

And you, Blink, in there with the ice machine, not breathing for fear of being sniffed out, snuffed out—are you ready? You cannot let go of that door now. So are you prepared for what comes next? Because you just stumbled into this thing, and you will need a thicker skin than the Blessed Breakfast Uniform to get to the end of it.