CHAPTER 1

Something Is Terribly Wrong

The first one to file a missing person report on Robert Leroy Seaman was Julie Dumbleton. Monday afternoons, Bob always met Julie's daughter, Jenna, age thirteen, at the Put One in the Upper Deck batting cage in Northville, Michigan, a few miles from his home in Farmington Hills, an affluent suburb about fifteen miles from Detroit. Since leaving his highly paid job as a vice president of engineering at Borg Warner, Bob had bought a part share—with his longtime acquaintance Rick Cox—in an old Ford factory known as the Waterwheel Building in Northville, which housed the Upper Deck.

The Upper Deck was a kind of fantasy business for Bob: not your usual run-down batting-cage operation with a couple of rusty old machines cranking out balls. This one boasted state-of-the-art machines set to shoot out seven different kinds of pitches, forming a semicircle around the batter. Bob had hired a mural painter to recreate the stands at Tiger Stadium on the walls surrounding the batting area—right down to the faces on the fans and a score on the scoreboard meant to recreate the 1968 World Series game indicating that the St. Louis Cardinals, his beloved home team, were leading the Detroit Tigers by four runs.

The Upper Deck was at best only marginally profitable, but the business had never been about making a lot of money for Bob, and his 3 P.M. after-school get-togethers with Jenna Dumbleton were off the clock. Although at thirteen Jenna was younger than most of the other players on the elite Compuware team Bob coached, she was a star pitcher, and as Bob's particular favorite, she got to work with him, solo, three times a week. Afternoons, when he pitched for her, they'd talk about baseball and sometimes not about baseball. He told her corny jokes, or they'd count the pitches he threw in Spanish. If she'd had a bad day at school, she'd tell him about it.

"Bob loved Jenna. He never missed catching for her," said her mother, Julie. "So when he didn't show up that day, I knew something was wrong."

There were a few more reasons why Julie felt anxious. In the seven years since Julie's husband, Dick, had first shown up at the Upper Deck with their son, Jake, for a round of batting practice, Bob had become like a member of her family. For a while there, Julie had helped out in the office; on weekends Bob and Dick tackled home improvement projects together and Bob tinkered, with Jake, on Bob's precious old cars.

"Mr. Seaman knew everything there was about engines," Jake said. "Before I met him, I didn't even know what torque was."

Bob had a fleet of vehicles in varying states of repair, but the pride of his collection were a red Ferrari and two classic Mustangs: an orange 1969 Boss and a blue '69 Shelby, whose value, now that he'd fixed it up, stood at well over $100,000. Every August he took it out for an event that represented a high point of the year for car collectors in the Detroit area and beyond: the Woodward Avenue Dream Cruise. All up and down Woodward Avenue, from 8 Mile Road to 14 Mile Road, crowds gathered for an entire weekend to watch the finest vehicles Detroit ever produced glide past, as the men who'd restored them (they were always men) waved and took in the respect of their fellow automobile lovers. Few cars in the Dream Cruise, if any, were more coveted than a Shelby.

For Bob, though, nothing was as important as baseball and, now, softball. In those early days when Dick used to bring the kids down to the Upper Deck after work, Bob had coached Jake only, but after six-year-old Jenna demanded a chance at bat, he'd gotten interested in working with her too, particularly after it became clear she had a lot of talent, a powerful arm, a passion for softball equal to that of her brother, and the kind of nerve essential for a pitcher.

Her father bought her a batting-cage discount card, as he had for Jake; that was the beginning. Pretty soon, Bob was suggesting that the Dumbletons put Jenna on the Northville girls' fastpitch softball team, the eleven and unders. Dick, ever protective, was worried she wouldn't be good enough and might get hurt or feel rejected. Bob—always the more aggressive of the two men, the brash, risk-taking cowboy—said Jenna was as good as any of those girls and better than most. Pretty soon he was coaching the team himself, with Jenna pitching, and she was a star.

All his life Bob had been a baseball man, but now, with his own sons grown and his days on the Little League bench over, he'd discovered an affection for fastpitch, and to his surprise, though he still worked out with Jake and tried never to miss his games, Bob found he liked coaching the girls. They listened to you. They played their hearts out. They were a little more emotional than the boys, for sure, but Bob was not one to be thrown by tears and outbursts. Nothing the Dumbletons ever saw, on the field or off, had ever shaken Bob's calm demeanor much, they said, and the other parents on the team agreed.

Girls' softball was not a passion Bob Seaman shared with his wife of thirty-two years, Nancy—and in fact, the opposite was true. Where the Dumbletons were pretty much inseparable, Bob and Nancy seldom spent time together. Now and then she'd go to a Tigers game with Bob, but she took no interest in a team of young girls. In the early days of the friendship, Dick and Julie had taken in a Tigers game with Bob and Nancy, and once or twice they'd had dinner together. For a long time now, the friendship had been about just the three of them. Nancy Seaman didn't like the Dumbletons, and they knew it.

Many nights, after practice, Bob and the Dumbletons shared pizza, and after games or tournaments Bob could spend hours going over the fine points of the game, analyzing the performance of his players.

"You've never seen a person that could go on so long about a single play," said Dick, "and make it interesting. He cared about every single one of those girls and noticed every single little thing."

One thing Bob didn't dwell on was his marriage to Nancy, the mother of his sons, Jeff and Greg. But Julie and Dick both knew that it wasn't good.

"He never wanted to go home," said Julie. "When he did, he tried to keep out of Nancy's way. That last year, he'd been living in the basement."

In fact, Bob had told Julie he'd been thinking about getting a divorce, and had recently consulted with an attorney. For a long time, what kept him from doing it, he said, was his reluctance to shake up his son Greg's world, but Greg was off at college now—Purdue—and about to graduate. And anyway, Bob's relationship with Greg had become so bad over the last year that the only words his son spoke to him now were angry ones. Although he'd paid for the expensive Purdue tuition, Bob wasn't invited to his son's graduation.

All in all, Bob told Julie that the only reasons to stay in the marriage now were his substantial assets (cars, house, boat, retirement funds) and the knowledge that a divorce from Nancy would mean losing half of them. For a long time, that prospect had been sufficiently compelling to keep Bob from moving forward with a divorce, but circumstances were changing. Not only was Greg graduating, but the situation with Nancy had become increasingly intolerable, to the point where the two communicated now almost exclusively through the exchange of angry notes—Nancy's, on school stationery left on the kitchen counter, Bob's written on Post-its he stuck on cabinets and appliances around the house. And they communicated with actions—or inaction—too. For months, a standoff had been going on in which neither one had carried out the trash, which had accumulated to the point of covering an entire wall of their three-car garage, a stinking mountain.

Things had to change, and it seemed finally that they would. Sometime in the winter of that year, a couple of events had occurred that were bringing Bob and Nancy closer to the edge. First had come the sudden death, in late December, of Nancy's mother, Lenore, with whom she'd always been close. Sometime in January, she had made a confession to her son Jeff and his wife, Becka: Bob was beating her, she said. She rolled up the sleeve of her blouse and showed them a bruise.

Becka, whose own parents had an abusive relationship, up until their divorce, urged Nancy to get out of the marriage. Not long after this, she and Jeff (along with Greg and his girlfriend, Kristin, and Nancy's father, Eugene) had accompanied Nancy on an inspection of condos in the area, with the thought that she might buy one for herself; sometime in late January, she had put down $10,000 on a unit in the King's Crossing development a few miles from where both Nancy's father and Jeff and Becka lived.

At the time she signed the papers, Nancy had instructed them all to keep the condo purchase secret from Bob, on the theory that if he found out what she'd done "he'd kill me." Although Nancy's father, Eugene D'Onofrio, was hardly a man of means, he'd given her money for the down payment, and she arranged to have the condo papers sent to her at school.

In February, Bob Seaman had received a call from the Compuware Softball Association, saying that it had received an anonymous complaint about him, suggesting improprieties with players. Believing that the letter must have been written by his wife, Bob had confronted Nancy about it, but she had denied authorship of the letter. The softball association, after studying the complaint, had determined it to be baseless and had not pursued any action against Bob.

In March, papers had arrived at the Seaman home from the condominium association, concerning Nancy's purchase of the unit at King's Crossing. Bob had chosen not to reveal to Nancy that he knew about the condo purchase, though he and Julie Dumbleton had driven downriver, to King's Crossing to see the place. He had received the discovery of the purchase with a certain sense of relief, Julie said, having been told by Nancy in the past that she would never divorce him.

Around this same time—and largely in response to the secret condo purchase and the anonymous letter to the softball association—Bob had stopped paying the mortgage on their home.

"He didn't see the point anymore of paying for a house, when he was living in the basement and she was putting all the bills on his charge card," said Julie.

In early April, Bob had flown to St. Louis to spend time with his father, Ward, who was having surgery. In early May—telling nobody but the Dumbletons—he took off again, this time for Arizona, to see his brother Dennis. This was the first such visit he had ever made, and it was over the course of the week the two spent together, with Dennis's wife, Robin, that Bob disclosed for the first time the extent of his alienation from Nancy and the trouble that had been going on with Greg.

"It really hurt Bob that Greg didn't invite him to his Purdue graduation," Dennis said. "But he was still hoping Greg might change his mind at the last minute. He had some hope he could repair that relationship. Where with Nancy, he knew it was over."

Bob told Dennis about his discovery that Nancy had secretly put a down payment on a condominium, and about the anonymous letter

to the softball association. He told Dennis what Nancy had said, after he raised the subject of divorce not long before: "You'll never get the Shelby."

To a man like Bob Seaman, who loved his Mustangs more than almost anything in the world, those words had been devastating.

That week in Arizona, Dennis told his brother some important information. Nancy didn't have the kind of assets Bob did, but ever since she'd gone back to school and gotten her teaching certificate seven or eight years earlier, she'd been pulling in around $48,000 a year as a fourth-grade teacher.

"So I mentioned to him how, if they got a divorce, he'd be entitled to half of everything she had," Dennis said. "Same as she'd be entitled to half of what was his. That was news to him. He was planning to tell her that when he got home. Not because the money or the condo was such a big value to him, but for the principle of the thing. It would have made her crazy, hearing that."

Bob told Dennis and Robin another story that week: of a night not long before when Nancy had come down to the basement with a bowl of ice cream for him—a highly unusual event in the lives of a couple who barely spoke to one another. According to Dennis, Bob told him (as he had told Julie and several other friends) that the ice cream had tasted funny and burned his throat, so he'd stopped eating it, and that the next morning, when he went upstairs to the kitchen, he'd looked for the container and had been surprised to discover that despite the longtime standoff regarding trash at their household, the ice cream container had been disposed of.

In Bob's view, his wife had been trying to poison him. Somewhat surprisingly, to Dennis, Bob had dealt with the situation simply by making the decision to eat no more meals at his house, except for takeout food he had bought himself.

It was over the course of this visit with Dennis, Robin, and their two teenage children that Bob had finally come to a point of resolution, Dennis said. To some people it might have seemed the conclusion was long overdue: assets or no assets, it was time to divorce Nancy.

Dennis and Robin took Bob to the airport on Saturday evening, May 8, the night before Mother's Day.

"He wasn't usually the type for a lot of hugging, but that day he kept holding on to me even after I started to let go," said Robin.

"I lost you once," he said, referring to the many years in which the brothers had barely seen each other, as part of Bob's effort not to rock the boat with Nancy. "I'm not letting it happen anymore."

"I kept telling Bob, 'Why are you going back?'" Dennis said. "'Don't go back to your house. Go get a motel room, or go stay at the Dumbletons while you look for an apartment.' He told us could take care of himself."

Robin had a bad feeling about the idea of Bob returning to his house on Briarwood Court, but she still joked with him. "Now that you're going to be single, you'd better stop wearing those white socks and black shoes."

Nancy wasn't home that Saturday night, when Bob returned from Arizona. She'd been celebrating Mother's Day weekend with Jeff and Becka, and had stayed over at their house.

Julie saw Bob briefly that Sunday—Mother's Day—at a ball game in which Jenna was serving as umpire. They had parted with the understanding that the next day, Monday, Bob would see Jenna at the Upper Deck for pitching practice, as always.

When Bob didn't show up that Monday, Julie's anxiety about her friend intensified. Later that day, when Dick got home from work, the two of them drove past Bob and Nancy's house on Briarwood. Bob's Explorer was in the driveway, but he still wasn't answering his cell phone.

"So I called the police," said Julie. "Then I called Dennis."

Back at the Dumbletons' house, Dick and Julie's son, Jake, was upset about Bob. A quiet boy for whom teenage rebelliousness never went past coming home a few minutes after curfew on Saturday nights, Jake looked up to Bob and viewed him as a second father. Jake worshipped Bob, in part perhaps because Bob offered a somewhat looser, more free-spirited style compared to that of his parents. For example, Bob had told Jake that for his eighteenth birthday, he was taking him to a strip club—and though that was not the kind of thing his parents would ever do, and not really something Jake would have felt comfortable with either, there was something great about having an adult in his life who'd make an offer like that.

That Bob had gone a whole day without calling his family felt to Jake like a really bad sign.

"I'm going over there," he told his parents on Monday afternoon.

"Not alone, you aren't," they said. Julie and Dick Dumbleton were more protective of their children than most parents. They were not about to let their son go alone to the Seaman home. So Dick said he'd accompany his son.

As the two approached the house on Briarwood Court, they saw lights on in the garage and the basement. No longer welcome guests when Nancy was around, they knocked on the front door. She answered. She told Dick she had no idea where Bob was, and closed the door. As Dick and Jake drove away, they saw the lights go out in the garage.

The next morning, with Jake increasingly disturbed and no word from Bob, Julie let Jake stay home from school. The two drove to the Longacre Elementary School, where they observed Nancy Seaman's Ford Explorer in the parking lot. Then they drove again to the Seaman residence, where Bob's Explorer remained in the driveway. They walked the property for a few minutes, but finding nothing, left. Julie called Rick Cox, who told her she should get on with her life and let Jeff Seaman handle the matter.

Believing now that something was terribly wrong, Julie went to the office at the Upper Deck, where she'd helped out for the last couple of years.

"I just knew I needed to get some things out of there," she said.

She packed up a bunch of framed photographs she'd kept there of her daughter, Jenna. The thought came to her—in her state of building anxiety over her friend's whereabouts—that she should also retrieve, from the office safe, copies of several letters Nancy had written to Bob in the last couple of years, which he had shown to Julie and kept in a folder labeled "Nancy Crap File."

Now Julie, who had been given the combination by Bob, removed the file from the office and brought it home. "I just had this feeling that if I left it there," she said, "someone might come and take it."